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Setting national education standards

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RECOGNISING the importance of higher education, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, in his foreword to the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), said education has been key to Malaysia's rapid development as it has provided citizens with the knowledge, skills and competencies that have propelled the nation's growth and prosperity.

However, he warned that if the country is to achieve its goal of becoming a developed nation by 2020, there is a need to increase both access and quality of higher education within Malaysia.

In line with the Government's initiatives to make Malaysia a regional higher education hub, the Higher Education Ministry too has identified pivotal focus areas to support these efforts, such as defining clear criteria for institutional excellence that will ensure the standards of tertiary education.

Tasked to implement a basis for quality assurance of higher education and set the reference point for the criteria and standards for national qualifications, the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) first introduced the Rating for Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia (SETARA) in 2007.

Measurement criteria

Since SETARA's launch, three subsequent ratings have been released – the most recent and currently used rating was published in 2013.

This rating exercise, which is targeted at students, parents, teachers and academic society, measures the quality of teaching and learning at the undergraduate level in participating universities and university colleges around the country.

SETARA rates each institution based on three generic domains:

- **Input** – Addressing faculty and student talent, physical and financial resources and

governance

- **Process** – Focusing on aspects related to the quality of curriculum

- **Output** – Measuring graduate satisfaction and the quality of graduates based on information, such as marketability, graduate attributes and employers' feedback

These institutions are then classified into six different tiers – Tier 1: Weak, Tier 2: Satisfactory, Tier 3: Good, Tier 4: Very Good, Tier 5: Excellent and Tier 6: Outstanding.

Current ratings

Out of the 53 higher learning institutions that participated in SETARA'13, 42 institutions were awarded a Tier 5 rating while the remaining institutions received a Tier 4 rating.

This marked an improvement from SETARA'11 as seven institutions were reclassified from Tier 4 to Tier 5 and the only university previously rated Tier 3 was reclassified to Tier 4.

Prof Dr Mohd Zamri Yusoff, deputy vice-chancellor of student affairs, alumni and management at Universiti Tenaga Nasional, believes SETARA offers the opportunity for every university to gauge its respective education standards and therefore build on their current ratings.

Although all institutions received either a Very Good or Excellent rating, the absence of Outstanding-rated institutions signals the need for all Malaysian universities to identify their weak areas and enhance their teaching methods, processes, management, academic programme, curriculum content, and teaching and learning experience.

Special course recognition

In addition to SETARA, the Discipline-Based Rating System (D-SETARA) was developed to rate the quality level of teaching and

learning of specific clusters of disciplines at the undergraduate level.

Focusing on the four discipline clusters of engineering, health sciences, hospitality and tourism, and medicine, dentistry and pharmacy, the D-SETARA rating was awarded based on team meetings, stakeholders consultation, data collection and verification, analysis and report writing between MQA and the participating institutions.

The current D-SETARA ratings include 25 institutions participating in the discipline of engineering, 15 in medicine, dentistry and pharmacy, 14 in health sciences and seven in hospitality and tourism.

Each of these institutions was awarded a Tier 3: Good rating or higher for their respective courses.

Only one institution – Taylor's

University – has a Tier 6: Outstanding status for its hospitality and tourism courses.

Significance for all stakeholders

Speaking on the importance of raising the quality and standards of local education, MQA chief executive officer Datuk Prof Dr Rujhan Mustafa said, "With increasing costs and global access and competitiveness, students, parents, employers and funders demand to be assured of quality outcomes of higher education."

"Indeed the demand has gone beyond fulfilling threshold minimum requirements and to exceed them. It is critical for institutions to make quality and standards institutionalised and routinised components of their provision."

According to the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), between 1990 and 2010, the enrolment in higher learning institutions in Malaysia rose significantly with intakes for

bachelor's and postgraduate degrees multiplying sixfold and tenfold respectively.

Behind only to Singapore and Thailand, the high number of enrolments also places Malaysia as one of the main centres for postgraduate tertiary education in South-East Asia.

Thanks to the implementation of the SETARA rating, prospective students, both local and international, who are looking to further their studies are now able to compare the quality of various universities on an unbiased and equal platform – thus not only

cementing Malaysia's place as a leading education destination but also driving the possibility of creating a new generation of knowledgeable and skilled professionals who will lead Malaysia to become a developed country by 2020.