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Small can be beautiful, too

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Though there are proposals to merge small private colleges, big institutions do not always equal quality education

THERE appears to be much concern about what to do with the 500-odd Private Higher Educational Institutions (PHEI) in Malaysia.

There are proposals to reduce the number through mergers and acquisitions. Presumably the rationale is that many of the PHEI are small and offer poor quality education. By implication, the assumption is that one has to be big to offer good education.

But is this true? Do big colleges offer better education? Is there a place for small colleges in our education system? Is small beautiful? It is my contention that not enough thought has gone into this issue.

I will argue that big is not necessarily better. Sure, the big colleges have better physical facilities, such as

world-class education.

People who run the colleges call themselves doctors, professors, professor emeritus and vice chancellors when they are just administrators. Certainly, many of the big colleges may not be the model to emulate.

Often the big colleges have to make decisions where the profit motive supersedes educational priorities.

One can think of many examples. Merging classes to cut cost, admitting underqualified students to increase fee revenue, passing students to maintain high academic records, enrolling international students who can hardly speak English and underpaying lecturers and loading them with courses to reduce expenses.

To a large extent this is unavoidable, given the profit motive behind big colleges



A library at a private higher educational institution. Small colleges have a place beside their big brothers

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physical facilities, such as classrooms, labs, cafeteria, student lounges, gyms and parking lots, for example.

They offer more programmes and have more students, including those from other countries. Student enrolment is built through local and foreign recruitment agents. Some have offshore campuses. They provide a fun environment that attracts students.

But they also have a big bureaucracy to support the edifice they have created. The facilities, the frills and the bureaucracy cost money which is passed on to students in the form of high fees. The big colleges compete in the "education industry" for profits and market share. Education is reduced to a business.

I am not saying that big colleges do not provide quality education. Many of them do. What I am saying is that they are not custodians of quality education.

One can argue that their size, cost and quest for profit make it difficult for them to pursue legitimate educational goals.

There is always a need for trade-offs between education and profits. In their pursuit to maximise profits, many make outrageous claims such as providing

incentive behind big colleges and the huge investments they continue to pump into their institutions. Foreign partners provide some checks on the excesses but they too are constrained by their own financial objectives when operating overseas.

The big colleges are proprietary in nature and some are listed on the stock market. They are accountable to shareholders for profits and returns. Given this scenario, do they really provide a role model for private education? I believe the small colleges provide an alternative that needs consideration.

I do not mean to say that the small colleges are free from the dysfunctions associated with big colleges. Sure, they also cut corners here and there to survive, but they are not subjected to the same financial pressures as the big colleges. They are not accountable to shareholders for financial performance.

Small colleges have a great capacity for creativity. This is born out of necessity. To survive, they have to find creative solutions to problems. They have to be close to students and find ways to provide them value. They look for teachers who can deliver in the classroom, not academics or researchers who can't teach. They

provide a no-frills education, but, by and large, an education that meets the expectations and needs of students.

It is wrong to assume that small colleges cannot provide quality education. In the 1980s PJ Community College had an American degree programme that was highly respected, both here and in the United States. Yet the college was located above Thrifty Supermarket in Petaling Jaya.

It had some of the best teachers then and many of its students transferred to excellent universities in the US and subsequently completed graduate studies, including PhDs. This small college had collaborations with over 200 overseas universities.

Small colleges can perform and deliver quality education and, importantly, at lower cost. The tuition fee charged by PJ Community College was one of the lowest in the market then.

Big colleges charge high fees. They have to in order to finance the accompaniments they provide and receive an adequate returns on investments.

Not all students and parents can afford the high fees. Study loans have to be

repaid later. It is here that the small colleges provide an alternative. They offer an education that gives value for money to many students to whom the big colleges are simply too expensive.

Also, many of the small colleges are owned and run by educational entrepreneurs who have spent a good part of their lives teaching. They have a passion for education and, in many cases, it is a labour of love rather than the search for profits.

Ultimately, trying to convert small colleges into big colleges through mergers and acquisitions may not be healthy. In the first instance, mergers and acquisitions are unlikely to work. There is no real reason for big players to acquire small colleges.

Small colleges have nothing unique to offer them in terms of programmes or growth potential. Big colleges prefer to grow organically. A merger between small colleges is also difficult because it means one party has to surrender its college registration. Colleges in negotiation are often reluctant to do this.

Secondly, for a viable and dynamic private education system, it may be better to have a diversity of institutions catering for the different needs and expectations in the

community.

Many students are best served by small colleges in strategic locations providing courses and programmes they want at affordable fees.

A one-mould approach to private education modelled on big colleges may not be the right strategy. It is best to encourage a variety of institutions from home tuition centres to universities. We should have more faith in the market forces to weed out those who do not meet students' needs.

Rather than thinking of mergers and acquisitions, the authorities should acknowledge the important role small colleges play and consider how they can best help small colleges become more effective.

One of the solutions lies in removing some of the rigidities of the current laws and policies governing private education.

Small colleges can be strengthened if they are allowed to share facilities with the larger colleges, including public and private universities. The present regulations do not facilitate collaborations of this nature.

There are many underutilised facilities in institutions of higher learning.

Small colleges can be given access to these facilities, such as lecture theatres, labs, libraries and playing fields.

This calls for a new approach based on sharing rather than duplication of amenities, more collaboration rather than competition. Small colleges should be facilitated to develop a network of academic collaborations with local public and private universities.

There is also a need for greater flexibility in defining academic programmes and their delivery depending on the objectives and needs of students. For example, the delivery mode for working students will have to be different, and the admission and other criteria for assessment cannot be the same.

The notion that there is one best way to provide education is misplaced. Equally false is the idea that big in education means better. Small can be beautiful and great. Small colleges have a place beside their big brothers.

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