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Balance research and teaching in varsities

Letter from Kwan Jin Yao

THE plan by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to expand university pathways is well-intentioned and very important.

And as our educators and administrators study ways to do this, they should also pay heed to the research-teaching conundrum that has plagued our universities and introduce adjustments to address these perennial concerns.

In recent times, varsities such as the National University of Singapore and the Nanyang Technological University have premised their publicity efforts almost solely upon their performance in various ranking exercises and on having world-class research faculties.

Unfortunately, these have not only obscured the significance of developing good teaching pedagogies or frameworks, but have also overshadowed the need to mould undergraduates beyond their academic dimensions.

Already, the disproportionate attention given to research endeavours has given rise to anecdotal sentiments about a supposed drop in the quality of teaching.

The conflict between research and teaching is certainly not limited to Singapore.

In the United States, it was noted that while the research university model has enhanced postgraduate courses and heightened these schools' stature through writings and publications, undergraduates tended to be at the losing end.

Lowering teaching loads for tenure-track faculty meant that inexperienced graduate students, some who struggle to communicate fluently in English, taught more.

Learning outcomes may be compromised inadvertently, since externalities from research do not necessarily benefit across the board.

With these shifting paradigms, changing the status quo would help our universities stay ahead internationally.

In the immediate future, it would be constructive for the MOE to create viable feedback channels such as focus group discussions, qualitative sessions, et cetera, for undergraduates to convey their research-teaching concerns.

Quantitative surveys, through representative student bodies, would also give the authorities a gauge of the present challenges and those aspects that require greater attention.

On a broader scale, Singapore could possibly emulate France's plan to form clusters from various institutions of higher learning, reported in "Building bridges, finding niches" (Oct 29), such that research and teaching colleges are made distinct, without compromising quality.

In this sense, parents and prospective students could then make more informed decisions on the most suitable type of education track and model.

Such customisation and specialisation would allow them to grasp that there are various comparative advantages and would lead to higher productivity.

It is crucial to have clarity; if unhappiness over the research angle is allowed to manifest, the ramifications might be detrimental in the long run.

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