Perspectives from the academic leadership camp (IV) of the AIMST University, Malaysia

Sir,

The demand for higher education in biomedical sciences is rapidly growing due to the increasing number of youngsters, their parents, and mature students (employed individuals) realizing the importance of the higher education and continued learning programmes. This awareness has collaterally increased demand for higher education and skill-enhancing short educational programmes. To meet this increasing demand, higher education institutions (HEIs) are reviewing their “strategy canvases” and several new HEIs are being established in most countries, especially where education sector is open for the foreign direct investment.

To critically address the current trends and challenges in higher education industry, universities must maintain the quality of their various degree programmes and also achieve excellence and sustainable growth by adapting innovative approaches. To develop and implement the innovative programmes in the university in-line with the current trends, the effective and efficient leadership at all levels within each university is necessary. To achieve this, the AIMST University recently organized an academic leadership camp (IV). The main objective of this workshop was to discuss various issues important for the university to assure that all “academic staff-in-leadership-role” are aware
of the current academic challenges, facts, and trends in the education industry. Forty four academic staffs from seven faculties and six departments of the university, senior management team members, and three observers from partner institutions participated in this workshop. The key essence among the various issues discussed in the workshop is highlighted here.

Traditionally, the universities are treated as the “knowledge centers”. However, knowledge has become ubiquitous in the era of World Wide Web, and anybody can have rapid access to the current information in any topic of his or her interest. Concurring on this, in his the opening-talk Dr. Premkumar (AIMST University) highlighted that change is inevitable, and universities need to build more responsive, intelligent and demand-driven higher education supply-chain. The universities are going to become the“centers of experience”rather than “knowledge centers”, and to deal with the challenges posed by knowledge explosion, universities need to work on their “strategy maps.” Universities need to have a full-control on the intersection of supply and demand to deliver an exemplary student experience without inadvertently allowing university expenditure to swell. However, only limited numbers of universities are able to adjust supply to declining demand in specific disciplines. Surprisingly many universities are unable to show bottom-line improvements that are directly related to better use of the available capital (human, information, and organizational). Universities must also build new innovative programmes in response to the demands of market (demand driven), to increase the employability of the graduates.

Dr. Premkumar made a very interesting remark on: Should we make programmes available based on what we design? Or should we design programmes based on the anticipated market demand that is determined by the needs and wants of the industry? The first question reflects the push approach, which is the most conventional. “Push” planning is generally supply driven; it is a successful approach when universities have their own market share and control over demand for programmes. The participants were made aware of the fact that the universities selling more common-place programmes and failing to incorporate industry-demand based data into the equation can result in many problems - including high program obsolescence, negative impact on employability, high holding cost of faculty, and eventually no returns. In contrast, the advantages of the “pull” approach include the speed to market, higher service levels, lower carrying costs of faculty and increased accuracy rate of success. In order to have a successful “pull” planning, it must be based on the true demand. By pulling faculties into its network via university partnership can help universities to be successful in adopting the “pull” strategy in program offerings. The point of entry where market (industry) comes to interact with HEIs for a specific study programme is depicted in the proposed “push and pull model” in Figure 1.

By highlighting the importance of “pull” approach, the Dr. Premkumar urged the “academic staff-in-leadership-role” to change. If we do not change, the education industry and students taste and preference will push us (university) down. Hence, universities in general and private universities in particular need to show more sensitivity to the changing educational landscape (market). To justify it, educational expenses in various countries were debated. For instance, students in Australia, United Kingdom (UK), United States of America (USA), and even in Europe pay substantial fees for their education in comparison to their counterparts in Asia. Hence, students (and parents) from these nations are likely to consider leading universities of the Asia for their education. It is in-line with the buying behavior or purchasing power of the customers. Therefore, the Asian universities can and should consider developing “tailor-made programmes” to attract students from Australia, Europe, UK, and USA.

The demand for tailor-made medical and non-medical educational programmes is likely to increase; because, the mature students (earning individuals or adult learners) are ready to spend on their own education to learn the additional skills through short-term programmes or vocational programmes. In addition, the unemployed individuals are also looking for skill-enhancing short courses; hence, universities do need to re-canvas their strategies to fit the market demand. The speaker argued that the decline in revenues of parents, unemployment of parents, less ability of intergenerational transfer (as parents or older people from family are hit by budget consolidation), increasing tuition fees, and overall willingness to invest in higher education are important factors that brings in the qualitative changes in the student population.

The sound financial condition is very important to the universities. In fact, it is the backbone of every university. In some of the countries (for instance, India), government pays the salaries of the university staff, which alleviates the enormous financial burden of the private universities. However, in Malaysia, private universities are required to take care of their own financial needs. In this line, the importance of looking for new revenues, competing more for research funding, putting-in-efforts to raise more corporate funding, and sensibly increasing tuition fee of various degree program were highlighted as necessary to achieve sustainable growth. The potential nonacademic means depicted in Table 1 may be considered to generate
By taking advantage of the globalization, Australia has pioneered opening of university campuses in various countries. Speaker highlighted that the World Wide Web has made the world smaller, and each university has got an opportunity to expand its business globally. Budget cuts and the global financial crisis have forced universities to seek an alternative to the traditional face-to-face model of education. As a result of which, the online education has increased dramatically as a stand-alone program and also as a part of a blended approach. In the globalized education ecosystem, the developing and emerging economies are subsidizing other countries including the rich nations by educating many in their education system and then losing them at the end (country’s brain drain). However, for a better experience and exposure “global mobility” of students and staff is essential.

To cope with the current trends in the higher education industry, education providers will need to: develop a better understanding of student’s needs and behaviors; canvas the marketing strategies to attract students and develop new platforms for innovation; find new approaches to improve teaching and learning outcomes; reduce costs and ensure efficient allocation of funding resources; improve infrastructure and facilities, and develop better governance standards and IT systems in order to meet new performance criteria and compliance requirements. Speaker highlighted that in the changing scenario, universities will need to make increased investments in support services, especially in cloud computing, distance learning, mobile services etc to keep in pace with the student’s demand.

Dr. Aruljoethy (AIMST University) highlighted that university’s success does not depend merely on availability of resources, but it depends more on vision, better programmes and compatible strategies. While highlighting expectations of a new generation students, Dr. Baidi (AIMST University) highlighted that it is not necessary to have a bell-shape curve at the end of evaluation of students for the courses offered. The performance of the students is important, not "A" or "A+" grades; but, unfortunately, our system wants “A” or “A+” grades on documents. However, to make sure that students are comfortable, the need of “One Stop Centre” for students was highlighted.

In summary, universities need to use innovative approaches to bring in more responsive, intelligent and demand-driven programmes ready for adoption by considering the needs of plug-and-play generation, and mature students. The reliable partnerships are important for universities to expand globally, and to implement programmes that are driven by student needs. These goals can be achieved with limited resources if innovation is adopted and implemented wisely. However, to keep academic programmes fee affordable, universities do need to identify additional streams for revenue generation. The insights from this workshop presented here may be useful for academicians.

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