

COMMENT

Studying the effects of student poverty

TOUGH: We have not found a way to help students make ends meet

THE issue of student poverty has become a hot topic in the last few weeks, prompted by a survey of 25,632 students by student group Muslim Volunteer Malaysia (MVM). Claims that students are starving have caused alarm among parents, academics and university managers.

To be fair to MVM, their survey did not make claims of student starvation, as their president Muhammad Jantan has clarified. The survey was to highlight rising costs of living for students, not to sensationalise the problem. According to their survey, 74 per cent of students had times when they did not have enough money to eat. Ninety-six per cent said that the economic situation was a burden, and 97 per cent said they needed assistance from MVM.

On face value, this is unsurprising. Students have always been short of money, and even 25 years ago, when I was an undergraduate, money was tight. It is also not surprising that students are feeling the pinch. Almost everyone, especially those on low and fixed incomes, is in the same situation. Nonetheless, we must never trivialise these is-

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sues, because they are always important, and MVM should be congratulated, not criticised, for highlighting these concerns.

If the problem itself is not surprising, then what is surprising is that, after so many years, we have not found a solution to help students make ends meet.

The nature of the problem is understood. Students are short of funds when they enter university. They often have no savings to draw on and grants and scholarships are too small and loans are difficult to repay. Most of the money they have is eaten up by fees, especially in private universities, and the balance is spread thinly.

An added problem is that many students haven't been taught financial planning at home or school, and there is a lack of information about sources of support and how to access them. This makes it difficult for many students to transition from the protection of their parents to a world where they have to pay their own way and manage their accounts.

Appropriately, Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh, has made a personal commitment to ensure that no students go hungry. His ministry has also asked struggling students to seek help from them and the university authorities.

Many vice-chancellors have also responded with news of cash funds or discounted food programmes to help students in need. There are various other sources of help, including

the National Higher Education Fund, student cards, zakat, charitable funds and endowments.

Welfare support in this form often amounts to little more than emergency handouts, which are an important, but not a systemic solution.

Alternatives are needed. For example, Universiti Malaysia Pahang Vice-Chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Daing Nasir Ibrahim has highlighted the Working Students' Scheme, and opportunities for students to run businesses on campus or work part time outside the university.

Jobs on campus often pay up to RM10 per hour, which is around 60 per cent more than the pro rata minimum wage, but the number of hours remains an issue.

To earn the minimum wage of RM1,000 per month, students would need to work five hours per day. Lecture time and university regulations often prohibit this and may need to be reviewed.

On-campus jobs can also be hard to find. A public university has around 20,000 students. If just 20 per cent needed on-campus work, then, 4,000 job openings would have to be made available. This is challenging and would have to be complemented by off-campus work, too.

This is an area where university-industry links can be extended from vacation-based internships to employment during semester time, which balances study and work. Student businesses should also be en-

couraged within the university schedule to balance study with real-world start-up experience.

Banks have a role to play here, since support for students in times of need creates loyal and long-term customers in times of prosperity. So far, targeted student products from banks are thin on the ground in Malaysia, and this is a lost opportunity for both sides.

It would also be interesting if universities established free markets on campus, where goods and services are exchanged without payment. These have proved so successful in other areas that they deserve attention in universities.

A mixed strategy is needed to solve these issues and higher education would benefit from a study into student poverty and the mechanisms to address it. Solutions drawing on Malaysian frameworks can be complemented by international experience and by new ideas from inside and outside the university system.

The joy of being at university should never be ruined by lack of cash.

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The joy of being at university should never be ruined by lack of cash.



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