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Commentary

University budget versus students

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A vital pillar of today's society is the creation of places that bring together the finest minds of the society with intent to sustain knowledge and disseminate it to the coming generations as well as other members of society, and to nurture fresh knowledge on a global level and/or in a particular framework of time, place, and circumstance. The relationship between obtaining new knowledge (research) and distributing it (knowledge and education transmission) is extensively endorsed. Comprehensively speaking, this relationship forms the basis of the university.

Universities are entities obligated to conduct research and nurture a culture of teaching and educating in their association with the governments, businesses and other broader groups [1]. The main mission of a university is to spawn research and create graduate students. To accomplish this objective, universities should be supplied with the requisite infrastructure and intellectual settings. This includes well-resourced laboratories, libraries with access to international databases, competent technicians, and operational and administrative staff who make the university run smoothly. Universities which desire to be termed as research-oriented are expected to take part in global scientific and other academic networks as well as co-operate with institutions the world over. For instance, they are expected to offer funding for staff so that they can perform their clinical and experimental research or attend seminars. Although the universities have several funding sources, the majority are limited to funding from governments, particularly for public universities. In a few countries, funding of universities has been reduced in the past few years to keep the uneven economic environment in check. In Malaysia for example, it has been about two years since Malaysia public universities have faced a big budget cut. According to Sharma [2], 'the coming year [2017] will see almost 20% of the combined operating budgets of Malaysia's public universities get slashed, according to the 2017 budget announced on Friday 21 October 2016. It will be an even bigger cutback than the 16% drop universities suffered from the 2016 budget, which led to a public outcry.' Out of the twenty public universities, ten of them will be sustaining massive cuts ranging from 10% to over 31%" [3].

However, policy-makers should agree that students themselves are an integrated part of public universities' educational functions, and that the quality of research and teaching could be impacted if the funding source is cut. Those outside the university might not realise the extent of damage such a cut can cause. For example, the universities are unable to bring on board professional members as their faculty. They are forced to increase the size of the class and limit tutorials, depend severely on contingent staff, and reduce personnel, particularly experienced professors, thus meddling with the quality of education, which is indeed an immoral act for both the students and professors. Students are then left with no option but to pay higher tuition fees or look for an education with inferior quality. These issues drive the universities to turn into money- and production-focused entities rather than research- and education-focused institutions. In a recent published article [4], it was pointed out that the deferral of viva exams would impact the life of students. On some occasions, this deferral happens when the universities are unable to present a satisfactory token for examiners, which might prompt them to give less priority to theses reviews as against other more lucrative jobs. The immoral postgraduate supervision case cited by Yahaghi and his team [5] could turn worse if the university, with no research grant or supervisor, ask the students to bear the fees for open-access publication. The authors contend that if the economic environment is forcing the universities to take a cut on their budget, there should be an extremely astute strategy and control to preserve the quality of services they offer.

In conclusion, there is bound to be a significant risk for higher education quality and productivity if policy makers do not establish a well-planned control system to monitor the budget spending and income generating of higher educational institutes and universities before making any budget reduction. The pressure of maintaining university reputation and ranking from one side, and the cutting of the budget from the other side will provide a challenging phenomenon for university chancellors and higher-education ministry. This pressure may lead universities to ignore some of their principal aims and responsibilities toward society as a research-oriented and education-focused institute.

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