FUTURE STEPS

Despite the harsh conditions and realities faculty members experience, those who remain often do enjoy teaching and working with students. This appears to be their main reason for staying. However, such personal feelings of satisfaction seem insufficient to motivate the next generation of university instructors to prepare to enter the profession. What they need is to be provided with basic working conditions and salaries that they can live on, so they can fully dedicate themselves to teaching, research, producing knowledge, and preparing well-qualified specialists for the future development of the country. Tajik universities and the government need to work on establishing adequate policies and opportunities to enable prospective candidates to regain the status of valued professionals within academe, a condition for allowing their institutions to participate in the growing global educational competition to create a knowledge society. ∎

Making the Gap Year a Reality: Six Issues for Consideration

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A "gap year" refers to an experimental period of travel, work, or other personal and professional development opportunities. It is typically taken before students commence their postsecondary education. Students can undertake a gap year domestically or abroad, the latter having greater appeal among participants. The concept is more familiar for students in the United States and the United Kingdom, with a lucrative industry built in support of the students' pursuits.

Malaysia will incorporate a gap year as part of its undergraduate curriculum. Idris Jusoh, the minister of higher education, made that announcement during his New Year address on January 12, 2017. Starting in 2017, undergraduates from eight public universities are given the option to take a year off during their studies. They can take part in industrial training, pursue their interests in the arts, or work on volunteering projects. The intention is for the students to gain exposure, discover their potential, and develop intellectually. Their gap year experience would also enable them to be more adept in a highly competitive job market.

This article lists six pertinent issues, before the gap year option enters its inaugural implementation phase in the coming 2017/2018 academic term.

ISSUE #1: AWARENESS

The gap year is a new concept and has never been implemented before. If the minister's policy statement is taken literally, Malaysia's version of a gap year will be different than the norm. It must be clearly defined and communicated to the undergraduates. Students should also be convinced of the merits in undertaking a gap year, and the different ways in achieving memorable and impactful gap year experiences.

Parents play a significant role in the undergraduates' decision-making processes. They are accustomed to the conventional pathway of studying and getting employed upon graduation. It will take a while before they can accept the alternative notion of their children taking time off from education to "see the world." Universities should reach out to parents, particularly during orientation, to introduce and obtain parental buy-in.

ISSUE #2: TIMING

As students are expected to take a gap year during their study period, some clarification on timing is required. Should it be done in the second year of study, when students have completed their fundamental courses? Can it be done in the students' third year of study, when they have identified their desired specialization and are more mature in their demeanor? Alternatively, can a student break the gap year duration into two, and sandwich the gap periods in their second and third years of study?

ISSUE #3: DESIGN

Based on the minister's statement, students can work, volunteer, or deepen their knowledge in particular fields during their gap year. Should the students pick only one of the three, or are they allowed to toggle between the options? Student A might choose to work in a company for the full duration of his/her gap year, while student B may prefer to volunteer in a community project for the first six months, before proceeding with a six-month internship in a company. Faculty members and academic advisors should be given clear guidelines before they advise their charges on the best gap-year design to take on.

ISSUE #4: INCENTIVIZING PARTICIPATION

Taking time out for a gap year can be a costly affair. Sub-

ject to terms and conditions set by funding bodies, students may have to temporarily suspend their scholarships or study loans during their time off. Can universities provide scholarships or stipends that would partially support the students' financial needs during their sabbatical?

If the gap year is an elective option, there might only be a brave few who step up to the challenge. How might universities reward the students for their effort? Can the students' gap year experience, for instance, be translated into course credits, which would help them fulfill graduation requirements? The universities should consider setting up incentives to encourage a greater number of students to take up a gap year during their studies.

Issue #5: Alignment with Existing Programs

Volunteering programs abroad with a university's international partners can complement existing plans for a gap year. It would be a good way to increase the number of domestic students participating in outbound student mobility. As such, the gap year should be integrated with the university's existing internationalization strategy. The faculties, academic management office, and international office have to coordinate their efforts and work together so that the gap year becomes an institutionwide internationalization activity.

In recent years, students have been exposed to basic know-how on entrepreneurship, and are required to carry out minientrepreneurial projects as part of their learning. The Malaysian government has even gone one step further, by providing fee waivers to students who wish to set up companies during their studies. Are the students allowed to set up companies and work on their business ventures during their gap year?

Malaysia will incorporate a gap year as part of its undergraduate curriculum.

Issue #6: Stakeholder Engagement and Monitoring

Universities have to have clear strategy on engaging their internal and external stakeholders. It is clear that implementation necessitates the participation of several key stakeholders. Community leaders provide input on the appropriate projects to be carried out, becoming enablers for the students' community-based pursuits. The university career office has to revisit existing skills development modules in order to help students prepare for their gap year.

Industry players should understand the concept of gap year, and be committed to providing enriching work experience for students. Additionally, clear mechanisms of monitoring and evaluation have to be established in order to ascertain effectiveness of implementation.

These issues aside, the ministry's effort in introducing a gap year policy should be lauded. The idea is exciting, and one that could work—provided there is adequate information, clear communication, and good guidelines for those involved. In the long run, it might be a good way to address graduate employability of students from public universities, who are purported to be behind their peers from the private universities in terms of "soft skills" required for employment. ∎

Is There a Benefit to Importing a Branch Campus? Research Capacity in Abu Dhabi

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Many local and national governments, driven by desires to become more economically competitive, seek to develop their local research capacity. There are a variety of approaches undertaken to advance this interest. Some seek to build the capacity of existing institutions, while others are pursuing new strategies, such as building new domestic institutions or importing international branch campuses (IBCs) of research-productive institutions.

Few governments have expansive enough resources to undertake multiple approaches to building research capacity. The few that do, provide opportunity to compare the results of multiple approaches. One such location is Abu Dhabi, the largest, most populous, and wealthiest emirate in United Arab Emirates (UAE). It is the location of more than 20, mostly private, higher education institutions,