

## **Letter to the Minister of Higher Education**

**Dear YB Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin,**

### **CREATING A NEW NARRATIVE OF STUDENT DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

1.0 Higher education sector is going through such a great challenge with the developments taking place in the world. With the impact of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, climate change and then followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the world of education needs to change and adapt rapidly. Universities and institutions of higher learning are in dire need of a holistic transformation and changes especially in the aspect of Student Affairs.

2.0 Based on the observation, when universities plan changes and transformation, the Student Affairs sometimes do not get the attention and emphasis it deserves. Emphasis is often given to the academic, teaching and learning aspects. Not only that, many also see Student Affairs from a negative dimension concentrating only on the welfare and activities of students. This situation raises questions to the need to rebrand and give a new perspective or narrative to Student Affairs.

3.0 In line with the development of the world and the passage of time, Student Affairs needs to be rebranded as something more comprehensive beyond the aspect of providing services alone. Recognizing this, several institutions and universities have already taken the initial move to change Student Affairs to other names such as Student Development Division, Student Development and Campus Lifestyle, Student Development and Experience and Student Development and Community Engagement. Along with these changes, the role of the Student Affairs Division must be given a more comprehensive function and role in line with the need for a more holistic Student Development.

4.0 Criticism of the Student Affairs framework is nothing new. Bloland, Stamatakos and Rogers through a monograph entitled Reform in Student Affairs: A Critique of Student Development criticized the theory and model of Student Affairs by stating that it was inefficient and inadequate including neglecting some important aspects of higher education such as mission, goals and the role of the university and its relationship with society. This monograph suggests a new direction for Student Affairs by emphasizing the core principles and values of higher education and emphasizing the contribution of student development in addition to the usual services provided.

5.0 In the Malaysian context, Student Affairs is also often criticized not only by academics and students but also the general public. The general perception sees Student Affairs as the office that stifles or controls student activism. Some consider that apart from the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (Act 30), the Student Affairs division is one of the main causes of the weakness of critical culture, innovation and creativity among students. The role of student affairs is understood in a narrow context concentrating on organizing and managing student activities including controlling the financial aspects and program approval.

6.0 The general understanding of student affairs that only has supportive roles in an institution of higher learning also needs to be corrected. Student Affairs must refer to the holistic development of students and involve the entire institution and not just focus on the academic aspect alone. Student affairs must be involved in the formulation of policies, policies including curriculum development and review where information and information about students can be utilized and provided more accurately. Student affairs should be considered equivalent or equally important to the role of academic and other divisions in shaping students. Indeed students spend their time in co-curricular activities, associations and life in residential colleges. All of these are very significant for shaping their character and building their soft skills.

### **From Student Affairs to Students Development**

7.0 The philosophy of students development is not only about engaging the students but what is more important empowering them. Rather than providing services and taking care the welfare of students, student affairs must also concern about their activism. In other words, student affair is no longer the same and it requires major changes. Moreover, student affairs or *Hal Ehwal Pelajar* carries negative connotation and perception from students and public. Since the introduction of Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (Act 30), student affairs have been seen as an agent to the government to restrict and control the students. Some students are even skeptical about student affairs considering it as a body to take disciplinary action against students rather than solving their problems. To reflect this change and the need to create a new narrative of Student empowerment and activism, this paper suggest to rebrand student affairs to **Student Development**. This is also in line with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) that aspires university to nurture six holistic students attributes namely ethics, spirituality, leadership skills, national identity, language proficiency, thinking skills and knowledge.

8.0 Unlike student affairs, student development refers to more holistic framework of students' empowerment and activism. Student development addresses holistic and integrated framework of nurturing and moulding students to become balanced and harmonious person. As part of Student Developments, the right approach of activism enables the students to think critically and responsibly and able to voice their rights and concern to certain issues and at the same time come up with useful solutions to problems. Student Development will positively influence and bring change to the existing framework of Student Affairs.

9.0 Considering the historical, cultural, religious and overall background of Student Development in Malaysia, we must have our own philosophical framework. National Philosophy of Education puts Education as an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. The UNESCO in 1996 through its International Commission on Education for the 21st century has introduced four pillars of education consist of learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. On top of that, Student Development must play its roles to operationalise the three main functions of the university namely intellectual, educational and social. The intellectual function can be accomplished through students research and discourse, the educational function can be delivered through

the cultivation of new ideas, knowledge, and mind-set among students; and the social functions, involving the training of new professionals, equipping them with competencies that enable them to meet the needs of various stakeholders and community (UNESCO, 1991).

10. Furthermore, Student Development shall provide students with more learning and campus life experience, widen their horizons and exposure; and encourages them to learn and think with open mind and respect others. Student Development must support the university in enriching and sharpening knowledge, competencies, skills and these include but not restricted to, leadership, life skills, talents and oratory skills and necessary competencies that are deemed essential in ensuring that all graduates are well rounded and prepared to venture into post-university life upon completion of their academic.

11. Unlike the typical narrative of Student Affairs in which concern on Student Satisfaction, the new narrative of Student Development refers to the concept of *al-Saadah* (happiness) and *Sejahtera*. The concept of happiness here covers both profound happiness in this world and the hereafter while *Sejahtera* refers to balance, harmony, holistic and sustainable way of life. Dean, A. and Gibbs, P. (2015) in their study on Student satisfaction or happiness affirms that it is important for the university to offer new way of looking at the student experience through concept of happiness.

12. We have entered the knowledge age where technologies and globalisation including pandemic change business, media, political structures, culture, lifestyle and education. A relevant education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires more concentration on the element of humanisation and internalisation of values. If we are to ensure that education in the 21st century remains relevant and catalyst for enabling the acquisition of powerful learning and at the same time uphold the element of humanisation, we must be ready for the reorientation and reconceptualization of the existing framework and approach of education. Indeed, with these great challenges we have no option other than to think differently, creatively, strategically, and boldly about how best to achieve our aim of producing balanced and harmonious graduates. This is the right time for us to rethink and strategize our central aim, objectives, framework and overall approaches of Student Development.

With these thoughts, let me wish you good luck and my *doa* for your transformative leadership in higher education in Malaysia.

With Immense Hope

**Zulkifli Hasan**  
([www.zulkiflihasan.com](http://www.zulkiflihasan.com))