

LEARNING CURVE **PERSPECTIVE**
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Restructuring Oxford University for the 21st century

IT is hard to picture an institution, which is more than 800 years old, undergoing drastic reforms — more so when it is an academic body, generally considered a bulwark of conservatism.

It is even more surprising when it involves the prestigious University of Oxford, as revealed in an illuminating lecture by Professor Roger Goodman on the theme, How University of Oxford Restructured for the 21st Century. The talk was organised by the Higher Education Leadership Academy, Ministry of Education.

Goodman traced what he aptly termed an “experiment” that started in 2000 to remain “competitive”. The experiment took place against the background of ongoing changes in the United Kingdom education landscape as indicated by the change in name, from the Department of Education (as it was called in the mid-1960s) to the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills in 2007, and in 2009, to the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills. Education has been somewhat subsumed into a broader market-oriented model to support the

economy as a tool of the government. This is a far cry from a university that was totally independent and autonomous from the government in the early days.

Goodman mentioned the “Salamanca phenomenon” that continues to worry Oxford University, citing the experience of Salamanca University, Spain that lost its standing as one of the oldest and finest European universities as time passed by. By the end of the 17th century, Wikipedia noted that “the quality of academics in Spanish universities declined... the frequency of the awarding of degrees dropped, the range of studies shrank, and there was a sharp decline in the number of its students. The centuries-old European-wide prestige of Salamanca declined.” This seemed to be one of the reasons why former Oxford University vice-chancellor Sir Peter North conducted a review, resulting in *The North Report*.

In all, Goodman’s lecture echoed well with the Second Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh’s opening remarks, notably the need for a different framework of thinking to move Malaysian universities

which he optimistically described as “soaring upwards”. Some of the key messages based on the Oxford experiment include the need for a tertiary institution to show value by organising itself in a way that is more productive to impact on nation-building. This is done by decentralising almost the entire university processes to the departmental level, especially in financial matters. It will then lead to other changes as the department pursues excellence at its own pace, with almost no hindrance. Though decentralisation as a strategy is nothing new, Oxford University has taken it to the far end such that it did away with the “senate” — traditionally the highest academic body in a university. In other words, every department is empowered to make decisions — even on academic matters — based on what is best for it. This allows for greater flexibility because it is very much in touch with the reality on the ground. Previously, it was too far divorced from the centre, ending up in many sclerotic outcomes that hampered progress.

In short, this also means that the department is free to source the

best services, not necessarily limited to those offered by the university only. The net impact of this move is to further boost the entire organisation. On the other hand, the university will levy charges for the use of various assets including space, forcing the department to make prudent financial decisions.

When all is said and done, the Oxford experiment sounded very much like what its counterparts across the Atlantic have been doing especially more recently, namely the hiring of more administrative staff vis-à-vis academicians, increasing the number of short-term staff, a bias towards research (as income earner) at the expense of teaching (seen more as an expenditure), and the creation of elitist institutions rather than “egalitarian” ones, similar to the days of education as a public good.

This was sadly confirmed when Goodman was asked if Oxford University is now playing American football rather than English soccer. Goodman reluctantly replied in the affirmative, thoroughly aware of the wide-ranging implication: the loss of diversity (a valued dimension in education) of global

higher education systems. Instead, the university is moving towards a more homogeneous model — the dreaded “one-size-fits-all”. The Oxford legacy will be sorely missed! To make matters worse, Goodman casually (perhaps unintentionally) linked it to the force of “neoliberal ideology of austerity”. In such a move, Oxford places virtually no emphasis on university-community engagement, which the late Sir David Watson, Professor of Higher Education and Principal of Green Templeton College at Oxford University, considered the “founding” purpose of higher education.

In a nutshell, while Oxford has convinced us that institutional changes can take place regardless of stature and “heritage”, it also raises doubts as to the reason why and where it should be heading, without betraying the “founding” purpose of higher education for humanity as Watson aptly reminded.

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