The Star

‘Make M’sia global edu hub’

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Budget 2025 must reflect a more substantial financial commitment to higher education in support of Malaysia’s transition to a high-income economy through sustainable digital development, says Vice-Chancellors’ Council for Private Universities chairman Prof Mushtak Al-Atabi.

Prof Mushtak, who is also Heriot-Watt University Malaysia provost and chief executive officer, said such investment creates a positive cycle of economic benefits by enhancing human capital, driving productivity and competitiveness, attracting foreign investments, supporting economic diversification, and promoting social equity, all of which collectively contribute to robust and sustainable growth in Malaysia’s GDP.

In addition, a well-funded higher education system is essential to achieving the nation’s goal of establishing Malaysia as a globally recognised educational hub. This, he added, will help us attract more international students and compete effectively on the global stage.

“In Budget 2024, higher education received an allocation of RM16.3bil, which is an increase from the previous year’s allocation of RM15.3bil.

“While this is commendable, there is scope for further improvement given the current global economic landscape,” he said, while calling for incentives to welcome more international students to Malaysia for tertiary education.



Prof Mushtak

This, he said, would solidify Malaysia’s position as a global tertiary education hub and nurture globally competitive, highly skilled individuals, and have a positive impact on the country’s GDP.

Prof Mushtak also called for funding specifically designated for research and blue-sky thinking to encourage fresh ideas that can drive development.

Greater use of technology in education, he added, is equally important.

“Incorporating digital learning tools can help prepare students for a technology-driven future.

“These tools will also reduce the burden on lecturers, freeing them to focus their efforts on other important areas, such as connecting better with their students, managing assessments more efficiently, and offering a more personalised learning experience,” he added.

Stressing on the need to make education more inclusive, Prof Mushtak said funds should be allocated to enhance higher education institutions (HEIs) so that a neurodiverse population can be nurtured.

“This will ensure that students with disabilities have equal opportunities for socialisation and access to academic progress equal to their neurotypical peers,” he explained.

Budget 2025, he said, must establish a unified approach and benchmarks for the quality of education offered, along with providing incentives to encourage universities to secure global rankings.

“The quality of education varies significantly between institutions.

“While some Malaysian universities are gaining international recognition, the majority still struggle to achieve global rankings,” he said, adding that this can affect the employability of graduates on the international stage and reduce the country’s attractiveness as a destination for international students.



Elajsolan

Agreeing, National Association of Private Educational Institutions (Napei) president Assoc Prof Elajsolan Mohan said the 2025 budget should prioritise quality assurance and global recognition.“Invest in initiatives that help private universities gain international accreditation and recognition, elevating Malaysia’s standing as an education hub.

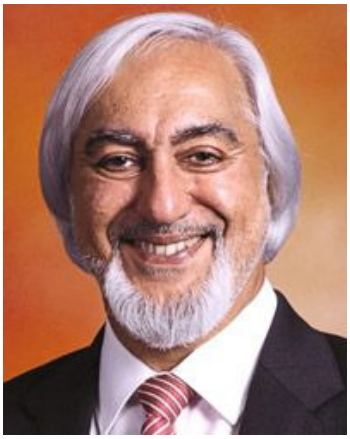
“This approach would support Malaysia’s goal of becoming a global destination for higher education while ensuring inclusivity and quality in the private sector,” he said, adding that tax incentives are crucial to encourage research and development collaborations between private universities and the industry, fostering innovation in key sectors like technology and healthcare.

He said targeted incentives for private institutions to offer more scholarships, especially for low income and disadvantaged students, could make higher education more accessible.

Prof Mushtak said HEIs should also be incentivised to promote the adoption of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) among their students as this drives economic growth through technological advancements.

Students who demonstrate exceptional achievements, he said, should be recognised and rewarded by the government, which, in turn, will encourage others to consider STEM as a field of study.

“And, to make Malaysia a centre of excellence for learning, teaching, and research in artificial intelligence (AI), we need to develop an extensive strategy that includes initiatives that support innovation, finance AI infrastructure, and encourage cooperation between the government, commercial sectors, and academia,” he added.



Parmjit

Finally, initiatives for leadership skills training are needed to develop and sustain a strong talent pool, bolster the knowledge economy, and propel the nation forward, he said.

“An increasing number of multinational corporations are opting to establish a presence in Malaysia, attracting foreign investments.

“As a result, there will be job creation and a demand for leaders who can tackle future challenges and thrive in a competitive marketplace,” Prof Mushtak said.

Its president Datuk Parmjit Singh said the Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities (Mapcu) is looking forward to a Budget that widens access to affordable higher education for Malaysians while ensuring that the shortage of skills in critical areas, particularly in engineering and technology, are addressed.Budget 2025 is set to be presented on Oct 18.

This would mark the third budget tabled by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who also serves as Finance Minister, since assuming office after the 15th General Election in 2022.

What students want

I hope to see the government allocating funds to offer free hostel accommodation for underprivileged university students. This is to ensure they have a safe place to live. Eligibility should be based on income and enrolment in financial aid programmes. This support would ease the financial burden on these students, helping them focus on their studies and personal growth, and giving them a better chance to succeed and escape

poverty. I would also suggest the government help students join the gig economy, which offers flexible earning opportunities that fit their studies. They could provide funds to cover things like getting a Public Service Vehicle (PSV) license or buying vehicles.



- Amir Nur Rashid Lizam, 23, Universiti Teknologi Mara

To give young people a formal platform to influence national policies, the government ought to think about launching a National Youth Policy Review. Youth voice matters, particularly in a world that is changing quickly. The adoption of young voices in significant national decisions would be ensured if we have a structured review process. I also hope to see more transportation modalities to be covered besides the FlySiswa programme. The government can guarantee more fair access to transport for all students, especially those in remote areas, by expanding FlySiswa to include these services. I also hope for the continuation of the eBeliaRahmah programme, which provides Malaysian adolescents and full-time students RM200 in eWallet credit. I hope that the RM400mil allocation for this initiative in the last budget can be continued or increased in the coming one, as it was a much-needed initiative. At a time of rising costs, this programme offers crucial financial relief to students. Apart from this, it's critical that the government focus more on individuals with disabilities, whether they're college students or members of the public. It's important to promote understanding in society in addition to providing resources and ensuring accessibility. Allocating funds to increase the number of programmes designed to foster empathy for people with disabilities is one way to accomplish this.



- Syahril Ahmad Sofian, 22, Universiti Utara Malaysia

In Malaysia, there is a strong focus on supporting B40 students through university admission and financial aid. However, it’s also important to also expand financial funding for the M40 group to help with study costs. Final-year students need assistance in funding because their capstone projects can be expensive. They may require purchasing materials, software, or equipment, with some projects involving collaboration with industries which can add to the expenses. This requires extra funds to ensure that their projects keep up with technological advancements and educational standards. Additionally, Master’s and PhD students are often seen as working professionals, leading to the misconception that they don’t need financial support to fund their postgraduate studies. I would like to see more emphasis given to address these issues and to improve the quality of education.



- Damia Farwieza Muhammad Harith Zakwan Tang Abdullah, 21, Universiti Putra Malaysia