RI universities cannot compete internationally

Jadi bahan renungan dan perbaikan kita bersama


By: Fuad Rakhman, Yogyakarta

Universities in Indonesia are having difficulties matching the world’s prominent universities and even Asia’s best.

None of our universities are on the list of the 100 best Asian universities in 2013, according to Times Higher Education, while Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia have institutions on the list. Despite the abundant resources spent by the government on improving the quality of education, it seems our “best universities” cannot even be the best (or even close to the best) in ASEAN, let alone in Asia or globally. Here are some problems we face in improving our higher education system.

First, the best people do not become lecturers. All parents, if they had the choice, would pick the best people to teach their children. It is widely accepted that the quality of education systems cannot exceed the quality of teachers.

However, the best students have no desire to become lecturers. They usually go to large multinational companies, which compete aggressively to recruit our best graduates. Some companies provide scholarships to top students, with the agreement that the students must work for the companies following graduation.
On the contrary, our universities do not usually have clear recruitment strategies and procedures. University officials are mostly very passive and not very creative when it comes to recruiting new lecturers. Faculty staff do not bother to attract talented candidates or seriously look at selecting the best students who could become excellent teachers.

Second, there is no financial security for lecturers. The main salary of a lecturer is insignificant compared to those with similar education levels who work in other industries. Low salaries make university lecturer positions unattractive to the country’s best and brightest.

There are many great Indonesian PhD holders who have opted to teach in universities abroad, earning much more than they would have done working in Indonesian universities. Unfortunately, we cannot expect them to return to Indonesia to strengthen our educational systems for many reasons, one being the amount of salary involved.

Further, faculty members resort to other sources of income to survive. The side jobs include teaching in other universities, becoming consultants, establishing a business and public speaking. These side jobs have significantly distracted our lecturers from their commitment to the quality of higher education.

As a result, being a lecturer is a full-time job only on paper. Some are even willing to cancel classes for these side jobs, especially if the jobs provide significant monetary incentives. Further, many offices of lecturers are vacant most of the time. This would never happen in good universities with established governing systems.

Therefore, if the Education and Culture Ministry has difficulties finding ways to absorb the 20 percent budget from the government, it might start thinking about increasing the salaries of university lecturers.

Third, reward and punishment systems are ineffective. University lecturers are perceived as the most valuable assets to the academic institutions. In fact, some argue the lecturers are the university itself, as most decisions concerning the
institution are made by lecturers. However, these so called “assets” can be classified into three groups: Operating assets, non-operating assets and troubled assets.

Many faculty members are great teachers, productive researchers and effective administrators (operating assets), while some of them are ineffective in their main assignments (non-operating assets), and there are usually a few who create chronic problems for the institution and who are persistent in their bad behavior (troubled assets).

Ideally, the operating assets are rewarded, the non-operating assets are warned or further trained and the troubled assets are “liquidated”. Unfortunately, what sometimes happens is that the institution punishes the high performing (usually young) lecturers by giving them more assignments (with no financial incentives), while the university does not have the authority to warn misbehaving, or fire troubled lecturers.

Fourth, there is too much teaching and not enough research. To promote research, world-class universities usually limit teaching loads to three or fewer courses per semester for their faculty. Some lecturers hired to conduct research will teach even fewer classes.

College deans are pure administrators and they do not usually teach, while department heads might teach one class per semester. Their income is not dependent upon how many classes they teach as they receive a fixed salary, and the teaching load is agreed during the hiring process.

Yet in Indonesia, many lecturers are severely overloaded as they might teach more than 10 classes per semester — with financial incentives for teaching more classes. Even deans, department heads and other officials sometimes teach many classes. Thus, it is difficult for a lecturer to control his teaching quality and to find time for research.

What usually happens is that our lecturers will co-author studies with their students
and shift the research workload to the students. In good universities, most lecturers co-author with other lecturers. This difference in research partnerships definitely affects the quality of research.

Even lecturers in a so-called “teaching university” abroad do not usually teach more than five classes per semester.

A university in Indonesia wanting to declare itself a “research university” should limit the teaching load of its faculty members to provide space for research. We need to establish a compensation system to reduce the teaching load without lowering the income, and a system that fosters research.

The writer is a lecturer at the School of Economics and Business, Gadjah Mada University (UGM) in Yogyakarta. He has lectured in the US and the Middle East.