

SOLUTION PROVIDER

Let academics be government's in-house consultants



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more than 3,000 professors, do we not have enough brainpower to find solutions to problems?

There are numerous public training institutions like the National Institute of Public Administration, National Institute of Land and Survey and the Judicial and Legal Training Institute. They represent the civil service-knowledge wealth in their respective fields with daily contact on research, besides teaching and training.

Imagine unlocking the explosive potential of a partnership between our universities and government agencies working hand in hand to solve perennial national problems.

We can start by assigning university professors to people-centric agencies to study their issues in-depth and offer practical solutions.

The government can save money. People can benefit from expert-based solutions. Academics can test and advance their knowledge.

As the icing on the cake, each successful case study implementation is undoubtedly prized teaching material for future lectures in universities and training

of civil servants.

Some of the persistent issues that could benefit from an academic-agency alliance are dependence on foreign labour, public safety, cross-border smuggling, drug trafficking/abuse, road safety, local authority efficiency, river pollution and juvenile delinquency.

We have in-house academic experts in all these fields. Let's systematically partner each core faculty/school of a university/institution with an agency in need of their matching expertise.

For example, in China, academics were instrumental in providing advice to the government on how to manage floods in the Yangtze River, stretching 6,300km with a basin spanning 1.8 million square kilometres.

In 1998, a disastrous flood killed more than 4,000 people and left 15 million more homeless, prompting the government to look for new solutions. In a break from the past, academics helped the government to implement nature-based solutions — restoring floodplains, increasing forest coverage and "sponge cities" — that worked wonders compared with the typical engi-

neering-based approach (stronger and higher levees). This year, the flood has not been as severe even though the rainy season lasted nearly twice as long.

So, it is a huge waste not to give our experts a chance to prove their proficiency in the field. Our professors are akin to specialist surgeons, except that they will not be able to treat patients waiting outside their doors if they are confined to within the walls of their campuses.

To pair both is immediately executable with only minimal cost to spark facilitation.

Their partnership is sustainable, given that it creates boundless win-win situations, breaks silos within the government and leads to uncharted territories of public service delivery. Best yet, their union brings to life lessons to be learnt by many generations of future academics and civil servants.

The real power of this approach comes from transforming a relationship from one that is based on payment (government-private consultant) into genuine partnership (public academics-civil servants). Agencies would be less resistant to change as they wel-

come service delivery partners compared with external consultancy, typically deemed as fault finding.

The risk of data leak/compromise can be minimised, and researchers would be allowed access to previously hard-to-get data, not to mention valuable insight into actual operational issues. Recognition replaces monetary rewards as the driving motivation for both institution and agency to develop and implement solutions successfully, together.

Ideally, pairing academics and agencies voluntarily (compared with imposed partnership) encourages sincere cooperation where both committing parties ignite openness to change, fuel creativity and burn desire to innovate.

You need two hands to clap. Our academics and public servants are like two hands from the same body.

Let's clasp them together and bring forth thunder.

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FAR and wide, our ministries or government agencies are at the forefront of problem-solving; expected to provide and carry out solutions most needed by the public at large. These require tests, engagements with stakeholders, formulating of options, finding the best solution and planning its implementation.

As time is a luxury, it is not uncommon for private consultants, some foreign-based, to be appointed for this purpose. However, one cannot help but wonder, do we not have similar know-how anywhere within the government?

For starters, why don't we give our public universities a chance? With no fewer than 20 and armed with the combined expertise of