

Malaysia's elusive quest for world-class university ranking

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MALAYSIA'S National Higher Education Strategic Plan targeted three research universities to be among the top 100 world-class universities. A world-class university epitomises excellence, provides a preeminence of educational opportunity for aspiring students and drives the nation towards a high-quality knowledge-society, growth and economic prosperity.

Academic freedom and autonomy provide the universities and the academic community the freedom of inquiry, research, teaching and expression; the vital ingredients to perform their professional obligations, maintain standards and develop a knowledge culture. Deputy Minister of Higher Education Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah pointed out that Malaysian universities are devoid of most of these crucial ingredients to become world-class institutions (*The Malay Mail*, Feb 6, 2012).

In practice though a gap exists between the ideals of academic freedom and autonomy, they still provide universities a secular and vibrant social space.

Autonomy empowers research universities to efficiently and effectively utilise their resources to drive for excellence through the infusion of outstanding scholar-leaders, academics and students from across the globe. Johns Hopkins University was founded "with a mission of supporting the world's great scholars in their efforts to advance knowledge for the betterment of mankind".

Autonomy has not made universities oblivious to the ongoing and ever-ending changes in the outside world. They have responded to them with responsibility. Their continuing research and teaching in agriculture, sciences, engineering, medicine, technology, economics, humanities and social sciences, arts and music are converted into diverse forms of new knowledge, culture and skills for the development and prosperity of their countries and the global economy.

To achieve high-income status, Malaysia's research universities have to innovate, integrate, transmit and apply knowledge to drive competition, growth and prosperity. The former president of Harvard Derek Bok in his seminal book *Universities in the Market Place* points out that universities are the main source of highly trained specialists, expert knowledge and scientific advance for the growth and prosperity of nations. Do Malaysia's research universities have the key ingredients to propel the country from its middle-income trap to an advanced knowledge-economy and high-income nation by 2020?

The leading ranking exercises of universities the Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) and the Times QS World University Ranking (THE-QS), although arguably controversial in their methodologies, have yet gained considerable international legitimacy. Ranking has made universities more transparent, accountable and open to official and public scrutiny. In the ARWU in 2012, the Universiti

Malaya ranked 156, while way down were Universiti Sains Malaysia, the country's first Apex (Accelerated Program of Excellence) University 326, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia 261 and Universiti Putra Malaysia 360. In the ARWU Asian ranking nine of the fifteen public universities dropped back compared to 2011. In the latest THE-QS World Rankings, no Malaysian university featured in the top 100.

The New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced in 1971 followed by the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) and the Constitutional (Amendment) Bill took unilateral political control of Malaysia's higher education policy, its development and outcome. The system was underpinned by an affirmative action policy directed to produce and increasingly supply bumiputera graduates to restructure the identification of race with economic function and to meet the perceived needs of the country's public and private sector of manpower. To facilitate the implementation and execution of the state

directed policies the university leadership was entrusted in politically acceptable candidates. Student admission was changed from a meritocratic and need-based system to an ethnic and quota-based system. The policies synchronised and steered the universities as servants of the state.

With limited autonomy six have been upgraded as research universities. The notion being freedom from state control will enable them to become centres of excellence within a given time-frame.

Professor Wan Abdul Manan from Universiti Sains Malaysia in a paper *The Malaysian National Higher Education Action Plan: Redefining Autonomy and Academic Freedom under the APEX Experiment* points out that the government's concept of autonomy granted to the Apex Universities as 'moot'. He says governance is vested in the university's Board of Directors and the vice-chancellor is appointed at their behest. This he says makes a mockery of university autonomy as autonomy should be within the sphere of the

academic community. Even a quasi-utopian autonomous space without political constraints and pressure, can spur positive thinking among the concerned academic community and enhance the delivery of vital ingredients to create a knowledge culture.

To support research and innovation, universities have to have a critical size but not a vast number of world-renowned and well-trained faculty, state-of-the-art facilities, liberal funding and continuous pool of bright and talented students. Research universities are expensive to run and maintain and no government can afford to equip all universities with state-of-art facilities nor replenish them to keep pace with the rapid changes in science and technology. Otherwise, the universities will be trapped in low-tech teaching and research in a fast moving high-tech world.

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