



MY SAY: The threat of managerialism in education

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzulkifli Abd Razak

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It has been about 900 days since the Minister of Higher Education declared Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) an Apex university in September 2008. This followed an earlier initiative launched by the then prime minister on Aug 27, 2007.

It has been an exciting time since then, but one full of trials and tribulations. After two challenging years of "laying the foundations" with sincerity, commitment and teamwork from all levels of the USM community, we have emerged triumphant. In fact, these ingredients were put in place to drive change at the university at the turn of the century.

Embedded in the foundation are deeper changes that will facilitate USM's move to the next phase of Apex growth — delivering excellence to meet the planned future needs of USM and the nation. Recently, we announced some cutting-edge outcomes in the innovations and discoveries that we made. More information will be made available after the intellectual property-related issues are sorted out in the near future. This is despite the fact that USM has yet to gain full autonomy under the 3A framework — autonomy, accountability and audit — as an Apex status university.

In other words, while most of the pieces of the puzzle for laying the foundations have fitted together rather well in the past two years, some critical pieces are still missing. And new pieces are beginning to emerge, hinting at the potential for blazing new trails, in tandem with the transformation mode that Malaysia is in right now.

For USM, this invariably includes education, especially higher education, that is epitomised in our Apex vision of "transforming higher education for a sustainable tomorrow", especially because the Apex vision shares common ground with the three core elements of the New Economic Model (NEM), in particular "sustainability" and "inclusiveness".

Moreover, while the NEM highlights the importance of raising the quality of life of the rakyat as the ultimate outcome, USM as a university with a global aspiration contextualises this in terms of human well-being or pertaining to "humanity" in general. We focus more specifically on the plight of two-thirds of the world's poor — that is, those four billion who are living on less than US\$2 a day. The university must be in effect a "humaniversity" — one with a human face as a basis of its educational *raison d'être* right from the outset.

In short, delivering excellence is not merely a numbers game devoid of meaning in human lives. As Albert Einstein famously professed, "not everything that can be counted necessarily counts; and not everything that counts can necessarily be counted". In this regard, he also reminded us: "Any intelligent fool can make things bigger and more complex. It takes a touch of genius — and a lot of courage — to move in the opposite direction." That sums up what transformation should be all about. This is where one needs to be cautious about the encroachment of "managerialism" into the universities, namely, the rigid application of managerial techniques of businesses in the running of other forms of organisation, such as universities and the civil service.

As a result, universities tend to lose their identity, diversity and ethos as they are strait-jacketed within a corporate entity, with its corporate notions. A professor of education at Bristol University, Rosemary Deem, noted in a study that academic and support staff not in management roles suggests that higher education has moved towards a "new managerialism". This refers to practices commonplace in the private sector, particularly the imposition of a management body that overrides in a tick-box fashion professional knowledge and academic collegiality. Instead, it insists on keeping tight control, driven by efficiency, external accountability and monitoring, with an emphasis on standards that can be counted.

Deem remarked: "While public sector organisations have always been combinations of markets, bureaucracies and networks, the reforms associated with new managerialism have exacerbated the contradictions they contain.

"New managerial cultures may have been grafted onto existing structures in a piecemeal fashion and since this has happened in universities, professional power is being incrementally diluted and displaced by ideological new managerialist reforms."

This seems to have been the Malaysian case for a very long time now, knowingly or otherwise, especially in the face of declining public funding and the tendency to exert pressure on the internal and external command and control culture, making it a fertile breeding ground for the imposition of managerialism.

This was implicitly acknowledged by Minister of Higher Education Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin when he called for the nurturing of a "true" academic culture in his recent annual address. Otherwise, the character and relationships in universities will be largely strained and distorted, threatening the very meaning of education and the ethos of universities as institutions of higher learning.

* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at vc@usm.my

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