

Forces of inertia

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Comment

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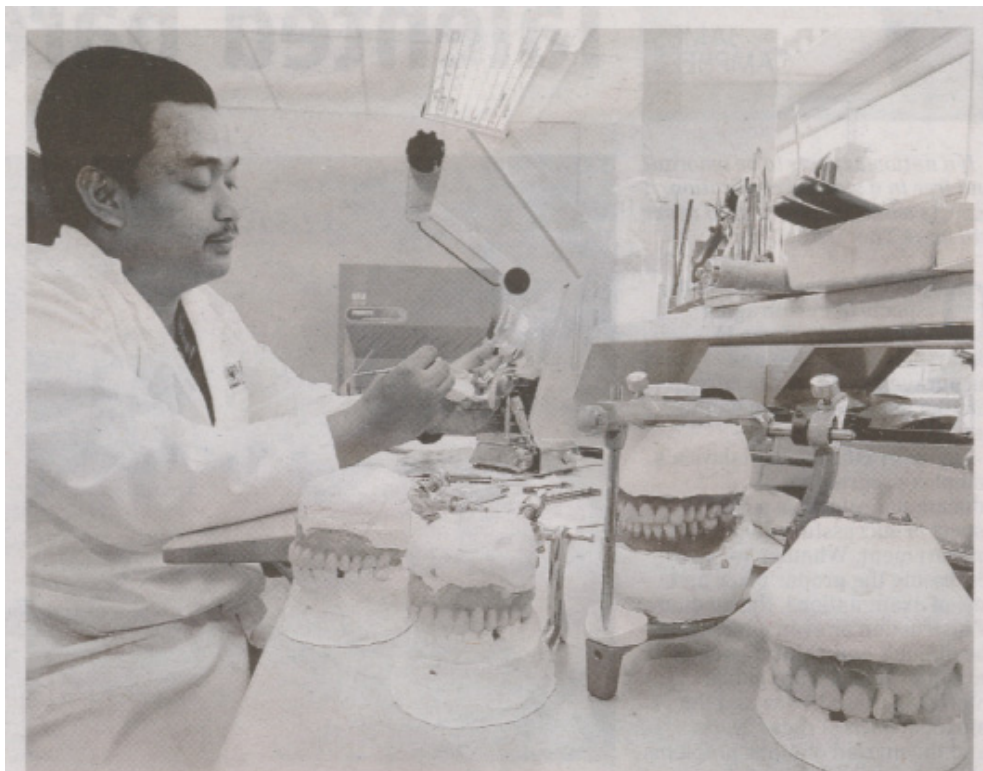
"If India is to build a stable liberal democracy, if we are to empower the vast mass of the Indian public, if we want to give ourselves a more equitable and fair society, and if we want sustainable economic growth, then our university system desperately needs to be reformed."

This is an excerpt from an editorial page of *The Times of India* (Aug 21) by Kanti Bajpai. It was posted to me by colleagues who were in India recruiting postdoctoral students.

What is interesting is if we substitute the word "India" with "Malaysia" — and the other words related to the former accordingly — in the above excerpt, it still makes perfect sense. It could easily be a paragraph from a report on the New Economic Model launched in March.

The editorial also mentions India's United Progressive Alliance government's plans to "massively expand the university system (which recognises) that the idea of a liberal, empowering, just and sustainable India depends on a vibrant, expanding higher education system". Again this sounds similar to the Malaysian case with credit due to government of the day.

This editorial entitled *Reforming India's Universities* cannot come at better time. This week marks the second year of the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) announced by Higher Education Ministry on Sept 3 in Kuala Lumpur — and next day, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) was announced as the first APEX status university.



A dental technician at Makmal Teknologi Sains Oral in USM, Kepala Batas. Deep-rooted bureaucratic mindset has put USM in a state of 'rest'

APEX is, without doubt, one of the initiatives to reform our universities — and a bold one at that. It also aims to create a "vibrant, expanding higher education" scene. USM's vision statement — Transforming Higher Education for a Sustainable Tomorrow — bodes well with a liberal, empowering, just and sustainable Malaysia.

The APEX journey so far has been exciting, though not entirely smooth. This is to be expected, of course, with so many teething problems that must be addressed on the first run. It gets tricky when conventional "wisdom" must make way for a transformational one.

But that is the nature of change; there must be risk-taking to challenge the mindset of yesteryears. It is a risk worth taking because of the entrenched bureaucratic inertia that can deal a severe blow to any attempt to

transform government, economy and, not least, education.

A candid and clear example of entrenched bureaucracy for educational transformation within the APEX framework is the issue of "autonomy". Two years since the APEX declaration, and three years after its launch in 2007, we are still in a state of "rest" — although at one point it inched a little, but the deep-rooted bureaucratic mindset effectively stopped it!

Fortunately, this is not the end of the game. Science suggests inertia can be overcome if "acted on by an outside or external force". But the force must be equal or greater to cause meaningful change. With a deep-seated bureaucracy that has curbed "autonomy" in higher education for more than four decades, the equal or greater force that must be applied needs courage and effort. Unfortunately not too many are willing to attempt this for fear of retribution.

So are we optimistic? Let me quote Pak Teh, the pen name of a well-known academic in his blog: "Last week the parliament revised the (Universities and University Colleges Act 1971), and reading from the NST, I felt we can't expect much from it... it was just another round of talks and talks for another 10 years.

"Now I am in my fifth year of contract and I don't think I will see the light of university autonomy. All I hope (is) USM, our APEX university, will move a little in the right direction."

I am afraid Pak Teh is right, unless the entrenched bureaucratic inertia dissipates somehow. Only then APEX has a fighting chance!

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