Audit the auditing system

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Comment

New Sunday Times - 03/14/2010

THE audit rounds are here for local tertiary institutions and will be carried out by a number of independent teams appointed by the Higher Education Ministry.

This time it involves the public and private sectors in order to enforce only one standard in Malaysia.

Auditing is necessary to ensure that universities are on track in the pursuit of their vision and mission, in line with the National Higher Education Strategic Plan.

It is also to allow them to self-accredit as part of granting greater autonomy to the institutions in order to achieve the desired goals -- once it is clear what these are.

It is essential that universities be given the flexibility to execute the "how" without any interference from outsiders who may attempt to dictate or micromanage the implementation.

The exercise should also be outcome- and performance-based, where accountability is fully observed and transparent.

As stated in the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX), introduced and implemented by the Ministry, acceleration is of vital importance to tertiary institutions.

Acceleration invariably means that speed is crucial and the practice of "business unusual" -- as opposed to "business as usual" -- must be the norm rather than the exception.

In trying to arrive at transformational changes, we have to "challenge the status quo!"
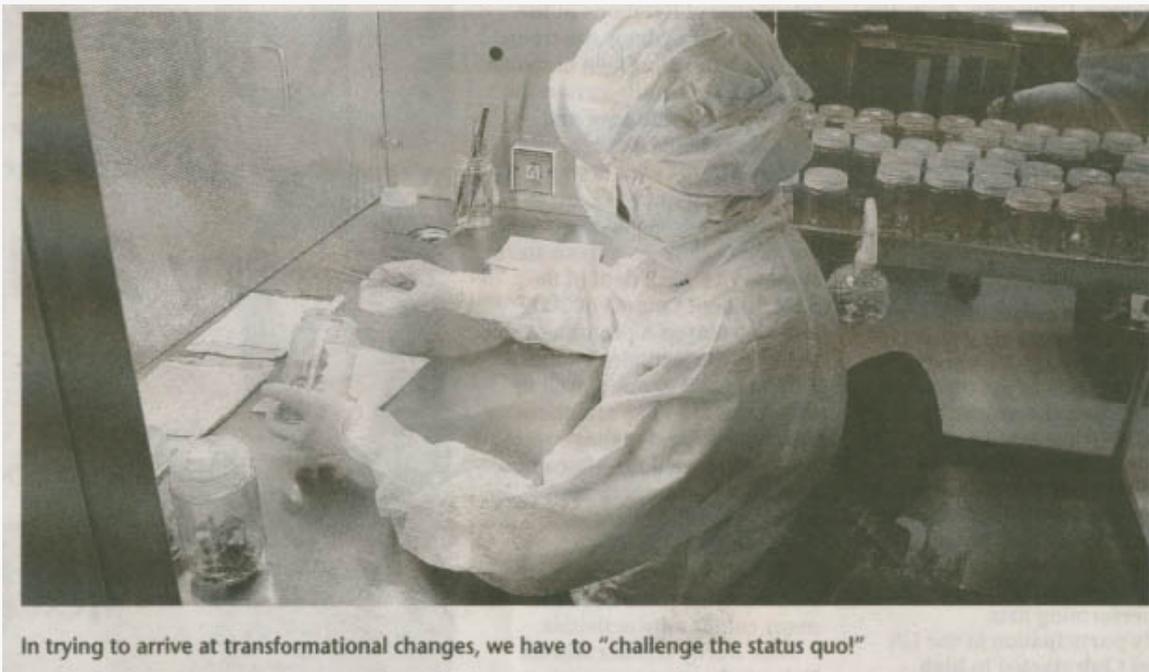
In the words of the Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Mohd Sidek Hassan: "challenge the status quo!" -- especially in trying to arrive at transformational changes; where bureaucratic procedures of "business as usual" must be removed.

Otherwise, it becomes purely a matter of "power play" and gamesmanship that the fast-changing academic world can do without!

University of Sheffield Professor of Information and Organisation Stuart Macdonald recently commented eloquently in Financial Times with respect to the so-called academic assessment.

Through his research work, he found that "papers are published to be counted rather than read".

Macdonald finds that in academic assessment, "game playing is rife".

He noted that the purported competition for a slot in a top-notch journal based on peer review is not without its flaws, especially "when the rejection rates top 90 per cent".

His findings suggest that the selection process is "little better than random".

"Most papers are rejected without ever seeing a referee. The survivors tend to be papers from old hands," he claimed.

This allegedly leaves thousands of papers for refereeing by academic peers in the hands of journal alumni who act as referees, and whose loyalties are more to the journals rather than scholarship.

"These referees see themselves as part of the editorial team -- gatekeepers blackballing those who does not fit."

To conform, authors are forced to play safe and deliver what is required to "satisfy a referee" -- a gatekeeping role viewed as a necessary "evil" to promote par excellence.

Typically, academics have little option but to publish a certain number of papers for assessment, and this must involve top journals only, as an indication of excellence.

These journals carry what is known as "impact factor" (IF) -- computed through the frequency a journal is quoted or cited by others.

The logic is simple: the higher the citation, the higher the IF. If you are regularly cited, then you are regarded as the so-called expert in the published area of discipline.

Already some universities are rigidly adopting this in the belief that it is a "true" measure of excellence! Little do they realise that this system is far from perfect!

Macdonald observed that the system is open to manipulation as "editors often make citing lots of the journal's own papers a condition of acceptance".

The aim is to publish only the most likely to be cited papers to simultaneously boost the IF of the journal.

Consequently, "citability" leads to "clubability" dominated by the same few authors for the top journals, tied to some database or are sponsors-driven commercially.

Self-citing, co-citing and group-citing to boost IF become rampant often bordering on academic integrity and ethics.

This is implied by the motto "publish or perish". So while "papers were once cited less with age, now they are cited for eternity," lamented Macdonald.

In similar ways, auditors can be the "gatekeepers" controlled by their own checklist of excellence.

There is little room for flexibility and new ideas -- a clear signal that it does not tolerate innovative approaches.

The preference is for the conventional business as usual bureaucratic processes. Instead of "publish or perish", it is "comply or else!"

Moreover, those who created the system (sanctioned by the powers that be) are trained to believe that this is the one-size-fits-all solution to every imaginable process and transaction.

Total -- often mindless -- compliance is a must.

Audits, by inference, are more about form rather than substance.

If that is so, the time has come to audit the auditing system so that it is no longer about power play and gamemanship!

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