

## Pulling through the Apex panel, bruised 'n battered

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CONCERTED attempts to persuade members of the public to believe that the Apex evaluation is a "flawed" process must be put to rest quickly.

This is because the "informational" or, more seriously, "intellectual deficit" is now apparent in some of the arguments put forth.

To begin with, comparing the Apex (accelerated programme for excellence) decision with another form of evaluation or assessment for purposes of a fashionable league table is like comparing apples to durians.

To say that the Apex decision is flawed and, by implication, that the others are not, is in itself a flaw. There are at least three reasons.

First, the methodology selected and used by the Apex panel, which consisted of eminent educationists, academicians and professionals— nationally and internationally recognised —is very different and contrasting.

To be sure, the Apex evaluation is rigorous, intellectually honest and backed-up by face-to-face interviews and on-site validations.

The vice-chancellors of all prospective Apex universities went through an intense session of interactions with the Apex panel members, based on proposals from their respective universities. One vice-chancellor even described the session as "bloody", which is bound to happen when one deals with durians!

That was not the only "bloody" encounter. The four shortlisted universities, after the initial round, faced the Apex panel members again when they visited the campuses, armed with a wealth of information, to confirm what had been proposed and to validate some of the claims made.

The meetings with the larger cross-sections of the campus community were equally brutal so that the "truth" could be verified.

Here, the vice-chancellors were not involved, making the assessment transparent and independent. Allegedly, this time the durian metaphor was even more apt. Many more were hurt as no amount of apple-polishing worked in distracting the Apex panel from carrying out its mission.

It was when all these gruelling processes were completed that the panel members deliberated on their decisions. The findings were then presented to the Minister of Higher Education and later the cabinet for concurrence and approval.

Needless to say, there were already queries raised then, often no less by the alumni of the universities involved. Blessed is the university that has more alumni in higher and more powerful positions.

Being professionals as they are, and in no small measure guided by the unanimous and consensus decision reportedly taken by all the Apex panel members, the final recommendation was later announced by Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin on Sept 3.

Universiti Sains Malaysia had been granted apex status.

Thus, should there be any flaw that would mar the good name of the Apex panel, and thus the ministry and the cabinet, as claimed by some ill-informed bystanders, it would have been addressed.

Credit must be given to the meticulous work done by the Apex panel members who lived up to the mission entrusted to them.

Second, to date none of the assessments carried out on local public universities, be it nationally or internationally, came close to what the Apex panel did in terms of intensity and integrity. None, except one.

Others are a far cry, carried out by arm-chair organisations through surveys and correspondence, often out-sourced to commercial companies. No face-to-face interviews, much less, any on-site validation.

In short, they were nowhere the same level of the "durian" methodology that the Apex panel opted for. Hence, if the Apex decision is condemned to be flawed, imagine what the "non-durian" (apple) type of surveys would be, where academics generally are "intellectually dishonest".

For instance, one such unsolicited survey even characterised all Malaysian Chinese and Indian students in our public universities as foreign students and gave high marks for this. Such is the level of intellectual dishonesty, we later came to know. How many more of such silly interpretations there are, is anyone's guess. Still, that is of no concern to some who intend to benefit from it.

Be that as it may, do not stretch it further by making inappropriate suggestions and comparisons that merely expose one's intellectual deficiency.

Third, it would be of interest for Malaysians to know that when a similar "durian" and Apex-like exercise was undertaken for the designation of research (-intensive) universities, it was interesting to note that the universities were stacked almost the same way as Apex has it, in particular the first and the last (fourth) positions. More than just a coincidence, it serves to confirm that the Apex decision is indeed professional and consistent.

Although this is best done by the related ministry or department, in view of the damaging innuendos put forward, let this be a quick clarification.

As for the USM community, the hard work has already begun, since failure is not an option for us.

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