

## New realities, new goals

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THE University of Malaya celebrates its centennial anniversary this year. This is significant not only for Malaysia's oldest university but also for the country's higher education, which is older than the history of independent Malaya-Malaysia.

Just as it turned 100, UM became one of two local universities listed among the top 200 world's best, according to the reputable *The Times*' Higher Education Supplement (THES) 2004.



The other is Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), the second oldest university in Malaysia which, at 35 years old, is distinctly among the youngest to be listed.

Among Asian universities, UM is ranked 13th and USM 15th, compared to the 32nd and 57th ranking by the Asiaweek magazine (now defunct) in 2000. This is certainly a vast improvement in a short period of four years.

The question now on everybody's mind & of course what will happen next.

Already targets have been set for UM to be among the top 50 as expressed by the Prime Minister in his speech at UM's 100th anniversary celebrations last week.

Of course, this sentiment is not limited only to UM, but is shared by all institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, public or private. After all, it is in tandem with the clarion call of *cemerlang, gemilang dan terbilang* (excellence, glory, distinction) which the Prime Minister espoused.

Universities in neighbouring countries too have similar ambitions. Following the listing, UM and USM have been receiving a large number of study-tours.

This is only on the surface, as each country is seriously working for a respectable position in the rankings.

For example, Japan has transformed its universities into being more flexible.

Their academic and administrative staff are no longer part of the civil services.

This is to give them enough flexibility to compete, although many Japanese universities such as Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka have being highly ranked by THES.

So, too, in the case of Indonesia where none of the universities made the THES listing.

Of late, however, the relevant Indonesian ministry has taken similar bold steps to emulate the Japanese in liberalising six of its top universities.

They have been granted full autonomy to enhance competition, creativity and commitment.

The plan is to liberalise all of the universities in Indonesia by 2010.

In this regard, a study in Australia (where six of its universities featured highly in THES) recently made categorical statement on the need to such flexibility.

It noted: "Demands for more entrepreneurial, risk-seeking academic behaviour is often stifled by bureaucratic structures that reinforces status differences and the respective boundaries between management and employees.

"An obvious strategy in counteracting this situation is the recognition that university leadership is fundamentally different to, but just as critical to competitive sustainability, as is management.

"More attention needs to be paid to the 'creation of ideas and the motivation and celebration of people' in universities rather than the current management focus of controlling resources and things."

This finding is pertinent in relation to how university leadership in Malaysia has changed over the years.

In fact, there are those who would vouch that we had what it takes to be "great" as is the case of UM.

But at some stage we lost it as academic independence in local universities gradually eroded away. Scholarship is relegated to the back burner as the system becomes increasingly regulated.

Hence, by a stroke, universities an extension of the civil service — bureaucracy and all — such that the university leadership could no longer be differentiated as an academic imperative.

In other words, unlike before, universities are now placed firmly under the "focus of controlling resources and things".

A current case in point is the regulation to seek permission from the central authorities for scholarly and academic activities abroad. Such practices do not square well with the norms internationally.

As the rector of United Nations University, a UN Under-secretary and the then president of the International Association of Universities, noted:

"The reality is that the universities have become far too complex for detailed government involvement in the regular management and administration of the universities.

"Indeed, over the last 10 years, even in state universities, the tendency to become both more independent and more entrepreneurial has become more marked."

This remark was made by Prof van Ginkel in his paper *Re-thinking the University for the 21st Century* at the International Barcelona Conference in Higher Education: The Social Commitment of Universities, in October.

The conference attracted was attended by at least 10 Nobel Laureates worldwide who unanimously agreed with his assessment.

Malaysia too, must do similar rethinking so that its universities are poised to compete globally.

In this way there is every chance that UM could make the top 50 target as suggested, what with the Prime Minister's called to revolutionise education system.

This is of course contingent to what well-respected educationist Tan Sri Murad Mohamad Noor observed in the *Sunday Interview* column with the *New Sunday Times* (June 12).

He accurately described that we have "an old shirt with a lot of patches. Even so, at the end of the day you still have an old shirt with new patches."

What he is advocating is to have a new shirt, but cautioned against "simplistic" solution.

Indeed today, we have one patch too many such that we are losing not only the texture of the shirt, its colour, and feel, but also the function of the shirt — the very fabric that holds academia together.

To put it simply, we need a new shirt—which would be the best gift yet to mark the 100 years of higher education in Malaysia.

On this hopeful note, we wish our UM colleagues a happy 100th Anniversary.

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