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## **Developing Competent Leaders in Malaysian Higher Education:**

### **An Interview with the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Malaya, Y. Bhg. Datuk Rafiah Salim**

*By Shukran Abdul Rahman and Munir Shuib*



*Y. Bhg. Datuk Rafiah Salim*

To compete with the best in the world, and hence be recognised as world class, universities must establish a strong academic reputation. University leaders must therefore ensure that their institutions uphold the academic tradition to "publish or perish" and pursue excellence in teaching, learning and research.

It is primarily for this reason that the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) has launched its National Higher Education Strategic Plan and the corresponding National Higher Education Action Plan 2007-2010. The action plan is an initiative

of the Malaysian government in the pursuit of excellence and improving quality in all aspects with the objective to lift Malaysian higher education to new heights.

For the initiative to succeed in bringing the country to the forefront of world academia, especially in the international playing field, the vice-chancellor of each university must lead their institution to play its part in materialising the plans.

In an interview with IPPTN, the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Malaya, Y. Bhg. Datuk Rafiah Salim shares her views

about the National Higher Education Strategic Plan with particular reference to leadership.

Datuk Rafiah believes that the plan is comprehensive embodying a clear vision and providing clear directions towards attaining Quality Higher Education in Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs). The plan serves as a detailed guideline for all stakeholders in the pursuit to make Malaysian HEIs stand tall together with other world higher education providers. She commends the government for its efforts to date, especially on its emphasis on leadership and the attention given to empowerment and issues of accountability.

**“A leader makes or breaks an organisation. If you don’t have the right leadership, your organisation will collapse”.**

Having a grand plan is one thing; implementing it is another. For Datuk Rafiah, how the plan is to be implemented must be addressed and monitored. “A fish rots from the head”, she notes. “A leader makes or breaks an organisation. If you don’t have the right leadership, your organisation will collapse”, she adds. Effective leadership, in other words, is fundamental to strategic higher education outcomes.

Therefore, the development of academic leadership should be given priority by the government. Emphasis must be on identifying potential academic administrators, and to training officials of HEIs to acquire the necessary qualities and competencies of good leaders.

Many countries have established training centres for academic leadership. Such centres have been instrumental in producing competent professionals who have brought excellence to their academic institutions, and positive impacts to their country. At the home front, an academy for academic leadership has just been established in the form *Akademi Kepimpinan Pendidikan Tinggi* (AKePT).

Lauding the idea of establishing such a centre, Datuk Rafiah, who had been actively involved in various leadership organisations, thinks that an academy to train academics to take leadership and managerial roles would help produce more competent officials in mobilising Malaysian tertiary education towards the desired goals”. Although the move for such a centre is timely, a comprehensive strategy is imperative for the centre to be effective. This includes devising programmes which would ultimately bring about the kind of leadership at HEIs as envisaged by the National Higher Education Strategic Plan.

For Datuk Rafiah, among the first step which AKePT should take is to establish a competency model of leaders or senior officials of HEIs. This involves the identification of essential knowledge, critical skills, desirable values and behaviours and other required abilities of HEI officials. The competency model would serve as an important reference for many HEI’s related responsibilities. The next step is for AKePT to design a leadership programme based on that competency model. In addition, the academy should conduct scenario planning and lead change management programmes.

Such programmes as those mentioned above, according to Datuk Rafiah, will enable AKePT to develop leaders who have the required merit and are prepared and competent in leading and managing academic institutions, equipping them with the required knowledge, skills, abilities and other leadership traits.

**... among the first step which AKePT should take is to establish a competency model of leaders or senior officials of HEIs. This involves the identification of essential knowledge, critical skills, desirable values and behaviours and other required abilities of HEI officials.**

Another equally important issue to address is the appointment of AKePT leadership, who must also possess certain competencies. The leader of AKePT must be a professional who is capable, competent, respected by academics, trusted by their colleagues and peers, and should be the role model of academic leaders. They are also role models for vice-chancellors, deans and academic administrators.

Datuk Rafiah believes that a leader of an institution plays a pivotal role in the progress or the decline of performance of the institution. For that, she believes, the incumbents for strategic posts must be judiciously selected through proper recruitment and selection processes. To ensure that the HEIs administration is filled with suitable candidates, the best brains from all sources should be recruited, instead of restricting the pools to a limited territory.

**The leader of AKePT must be a professional who is capable, competent, respected by academics, trusted by their colleagues and peers, and should be the role model of academic leaders.**

As she puts it:

“Currently we are not allowing ourselves to getting the best – why can’t we advertise globally? Why can’t we head hunt? Why do we restrict ourselves to just our shores? As long as we use the system being used today, it limits our chances of getting the best people. If you are looking for talent, the best way is to advertise or head hunt”.

In addition to the issue of university leadership appointment, the implementation of the strategic plan, according to Datuk Rafiah, faces a number of major challenges. The biggest one, she stresses, concerns autonomy. Autonomy, she notes, is something that is simple as a concept but highly complex in reality. Even though as laid out in the plan, universities are granted

autonomy by what she terms “the power that be”, she maintains that there may be a certain degree of resistance by that “power” to allow that autonomy to be exercised by the universities.

On the other side of the coin, there is a related challenge of exercising the given autonomy by university leaders. University leaders, she notes, must have the capacities and capabilities to exercise the given autonomy. Autonomy is associated with the empowerment granted to HEIs to decide on academic related affairs, which must be practised with full professionalism. To her, it is imperative that autonomy is practised by competent leaders, substantiated by accountability and enthusiasm to bring about the desired improvements.

A further challenge is financial constraints. The government, she acknowledges, spends a huge amount of money on education. However, she sees that the money is spread too thinly. As a result, universities are forced to “make do with what they have” and compromise on various pertinent aspects such as the quality of academics and investments on infrastructure.

**“... Currently we are not allowing ourselves to getting the best – why can’t we advertise globally? Why can’t we head hunt? Why do we restrict ourselves to just our shores?...”**

It is clear that in order to successfully achieve the objectives set forth by MoHE in the strategic plan, university leaders have a lot to grapple with. An exceptionally high level of competency including innovation and creativity, professionalism and accountability among the leaders are certainly needed in order to effectively translate the plan into reality.