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## Establishing APEX University: "Business as Unusual"

### An Interview with Professor Emeritus Dato' Dr. Mohamad Zawawi Ismail, APEX University Selection Committee Chairman

*By Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan Abdullah and Munir Shuib*



Prof. Emeritus Dato' Dr. Mohamad Zawawi Ismail

For Higher Education in Malaysia September 2008 would be best remembered for the announcement of the first APEX University. So much anticipation, so much drama and so much suspense as everybody eagerly waited for the announcement by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). But when Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) was chosen as the university, many wondered how and why, the oldest and premier university in the country, Universiti Malaya, was not selected. Many articles were written and many discourses were undertaken on the above issues. IPPTN spoke to Professor Emeritus Dato' Dr. Mohamad Zawawi Ismail, who led the APEX University selection committee appointed by MoHE, to get his views on APEX University, the selection process involved and why USM was selected and the challenges that await USM.

APEX University initially seemed vague, with different quarters having different perceptions and perspectives of what an APEX University should be and function as. Initially, the APEX University 'was'

understood as a crowning glory for one university and that the chosen university will take the lead in the future development of higher education. But as Zawawi explains, "During our first committee meeting, we deliberated on the purposes and objectives of APEX initiative. It was important to us that the proposed APEX initiative will have a long term positive impact on our higher education. Would APEX create different classes of universities, for example? It would be different if the committee is merely to select only one university for the APEX title. We could simply decide on some criteria and put the issue to vote. We thought that APEX must represent a long-term strategy and not just a contest. And therefore APEX should be more of a programme of initiatives".

APEX now stands for Accelerated Programme for Excellence. As Zawawi recalled, "In changing the idea of APEX from a title to that of a programme, I spent one weekend thinking of how to resolve the issue. I could not use another term as the word "apex" was already declared. I look at acronyms. Well, for the letters P and EX it was obviously easy to derive. 'A' took more than a while".

The APEX programme is about supporting our higher education to reach new levels of excellence. It began by the exercise of selecting one or more of our public or private universities to be given support for accelerated development. The chosen university(-ies) will pave the way for others to follow.

When asked if the selection committee ever thought of coming up with a new university rather than selecting an existing university, Zawawi elucidates that the committee proposed three tracks of initiatives. The first track is *Institutional Development* that emphasises on the transformation of universities to achieve accelerated development. The second track is to support *Centres of Excellence* for accelerated growth and become world class. This is to ensure that other universities not selected for the first track to excel in selected fields. The final track is *Green Field Development*, which is basically an alternative route to developing a world class university from scratch as has been done by a number of countries.

**“When asked about what the committee saw in USM’s Transformation Plan, his candid reply was “there was a sense of excitement!” and that “USM was well prepared”.”**

Nevertheless, the committee at that time was also very concerned with the issues of change and readiness of an institution to embrace the task of becoming world class. Hence, the state of readiness as one important criterion for selection. Obviously, the decision to select a university for the programme was admittedly not an easy one. But by focusing on the issues of change and the state of readiness - one important criterion for selection, their task of selecting a university was purposeful and meaningful. In the process two private institutions - Universiti Teknologi Petronas (UTP) and Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN) and four public universities - Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Universiti Malaya (UM) - were short-listed. “We were hoping to select more than one university for the first track”.

The second criterion was the Transformation Plan itself which each university was invited to submit. The Transformation Plan provides ideas as to how they will bring about change. “We asked universities to also write a theme for their transformation plan which could provide a clue to their thinking and approach”. Some themes summarise well their transformation plans while some bears no relevance. Finally, we wanted to see how really prepared they are to execute the plans. Hence our visits to the campus and our interviews with the various members of the campus community”.

When asked about what the committee saw in USM’s Transformation Plan, his candid reply was “there was a sense of excitement!” and that “USM was well prepared”. He explains that the committee “saw a synergy of thoughts, ideas and themes, sustained ability and imagination”. This synergy is the single most aspect or strength that Zawawi personally liked about USM. “It is the coherency in terms of ideas that we could easily relate to and the kind of leadership USM has right now. This was the feeling of each and everyone in the committee, admits Zawawi.

However, the committee singles out one aspect that USM can (and should) greatly improve on - leadership at the second level of administration. He observes, “We could see very clearly the gap between the first and second level. As academicians we could be good in our areas but not necessarily good in leadership”, clearly implying that there are problems in getting across messages from top leadership to the second level in executing a plan.

So what are the chances of USM realising the Malaysian dream of having a real world class university, one that is acknowledged by peers and international academic communities? Zawawi replies, “We have the confidence that USM can do it, but there is always a fear. Ours (the Malaysian setting) is not an ideal environment to exert change. So long as universities are part of some misguided political agenda then it is not going to be easy to have the kind of change we are looking for. Change can happen only if we have the right notion about academic freedom and about institutional autonomy”.

So, where does the selection committee go from here? Zawawi hopes that the committee can still contribute and address the implementation issues and also the other proposed tracks. He also hopes that the APEX programme will remain and that universities will be part of the institutional transformation initiative in the near future. And on how USM can succeed as an APEX university, he elaborates:

“We, the committee, do not want to get involved in the micro planning and management meetings but it will be useful if there is an open dialogue especially at this time where USM needs other inputs in order to make sure that its plan is doable. There are many issues to contend with e.g finance and legal. USM should also visit other universities to see what others have done. We would expect the process of institutional change to be very bold - new norms and new forms. The university should review their people to make sure the right people are in the right job.”

There is no doubt that USM still has a long way to go to prove itself worthy of the APEX status especially in the eyes of its competitors. Failure is definitely not an option. The university requires gargantuan efforts, undivided commitment, monumental sacrifice and the ability to think out of the box by its staff at all levels to realise the dream. As Zawawi puts it “we don’t want to hear, *‘We can’t do it because we are bound by the Universities and Colleges Act.’*” USM and the relevant agencies should find effective ways and measures of overcoming that.