APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014): a USM Initiative

Ooi Keat Gin
School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia

I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience. I know no way of judging of the future but by the past.

Edward Gibbon (1737-1794)

*U*niversiti Sains Malaysia (USM) became the first institution of higher learning to be inducted in Malaysia's Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) in early September 2008 (Simrit and Chapman, 2008). With APEX the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) is expecting USM to be in the world's top 100 universities by 2013, and among the elite 50 by 2020.

It is imperative that USM's metamorphosis is documented, analysed, and evaluated. To this end the APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014) is entrusted with this task to offer an impartial and scholarly record, analysis and evaluation. This paper outlines the activities undertaken since the later part of 2008 and early 2009.

A "Model Experience"

AURA was initiated in the last quarter of 2008. This project seeks to offer a "model experience" of the transformation process that USM undertakes in its evolution propelled by APEX towards attaining world class status within the stipulated time frame. AURA is in line with the APEX programme in that lessons learnt from USM's experiences could then be utilised to accelerate the transformation exercise of other Malaysian universities. It is therefore imperative that AURA offers a holistic picture of USM's transformation journey and experiences therein, and more importantly, an impartial and objective scenario thereby allowing MoHE and other vested quarters to draw benefits, to be conscious of pitfalls, and to overcome shortcomings.

The AURA Team

AURA's transdiciplinary team comprised more than 30 researchers from various disciplines from the School of Educational Studies, the School of Social Sciences, the School of Management, the Graduate School of Business (GSB), and the School of Humanities, USM. AURA focuses on four key areas of concern each with its respective particular aims. All its four research groups working in tandem follow the timeline development and transformation of USM through the pre-APEX period (last quarter of 2008), APEX transformation phase (2009-2013), and the post-APEX stage (2014 and thereafter).

The *AURA-Historical Group* undertakes the documentation task of recording the chronological development of USM's APEX experiences covering significant milestones at the various stages. Working alongside is the *AURA-Governance Group* that ascertains and evaluates the changes and developments in relation to human resources, governance, service quality, as well as performance that encapsulates the readiness and capabilities of the campus community through the entire transformation process. The third group, the *AURA-Understand, Expect, Aspire (UEA) Group* seeks to identify the changes in the understanding, expectation and aspiration of the USM community as they go through the transformation experience. Meanwhile the *Bio-Psychosocial Group* monitors the bio-psychosocial changes of individuals in the campus community aimed at ascertaining the short- and long-term impact of the transformation process on the individual. Outcomes in bio-psychosocial changes are assessed and analysed in order that timely and strategic interventions are proposed and subsequent actions be taken to arrest unfavourable or even harmful consequences on the individual.

Preliminary Findings

During its initial year of research, AURA focused on the pre-APEX (last quarter of 2008) and the first year of APEX (2009). Altogether 15 papers were produced across the four research groups, two of the papers pertained to the research instruments utilised by the *AURA-Bio-Psychosocial Group*. On the whole, the research findings are encouraging.

The genesis and the subsequent announcement of USM in APEX, and the basis of USM's sustainable development agenda are covered by the *Historical Group* (Nik Haslinda et al. 2010; Ratna and Zainal, 2010). The group also detailed and evaluated the MyCSD (Continuous Student Development) programme, an initiative by USM to recognise and acknowledge the achievements of undergraduates. This is also incorporated under the *PIMPIN SISWA* module, a students' character development programme, which offers an insightful perspective into the happenings among the student community on the ground (Nazarudin et al. 2010; Rahimah et al. 2010).

The *Bio-Psychosocial Group* employs two instruments in their study. The Behavioural Management System (BeMIS) is used to assess the degree of personality change of individuals going through the transformation process of APEX (Ng et al. 2010), whilst the New Mind Maps Instrument "allows the individuals to self explore their mental health status with regards to changing work culture and expectations of the university (Rahimi et al. 2010: 1). It is hoped that untoward behaviour and/or adverse changes in mental well-being could be detected and promptly addressed.

According to a pilot study conducted by the *AURA-Understand, Expect, Aspire (UEA) Group* (Premalatha et al. 2010) the USM student community possessed high expectations and aspirations. Furthermore it was noted that both undergraduates and postgraduates have a high understanding of what APEX entails.

In examining the level of governance and internal control from the perspective of USM's management, Hasnah and Effiezal (2010: 2) from the *AURA-Governance Group* found that both governance and internal control are in place but "much improvements are needed." Noor Hazlina and Siti Rohaida (2010) found that USM academics see themselves as capable supervisors (of students), consultants (projects), and teachers (lecturing) but modest in their research and publication as well as networking. On the other hand, the university's administrative personnel in their own perception reportedly appeared to be ready and able to "fulfil the expectation as the human capital of an APEX university" (Siti Rohaida and Noor Hazlina, 2010: 13). USM students are satisfied with the quality of services by both the university's academic and administrative staff (Malliga and Ishak, 2010). Most USM academics are generally satisfied with the service quality offered by their administrative colleagues (Ishak and Malliga, 2010).

Zamri and Tajul (2010) found that USM academics performed well in publication and teaching, competitively successful as recipients of local funding, and enjoy peer recognition. They, however, are less successful in foreign grants applications, graduating postgraduates, and are not readily involved within the local community (ibid 12-13). Furthermore, faculty members possess "a strong perception that they are ready to take up the [APEX] challenge" (Tajul and Zamri, 2010a: 23). However they are only moderately satisfied with the performance of their administrative colleagues (Tajul and Zamri, 2010b: 13).

Concluding Remarks

The years 2010-2013 encapsulate the transformation process per se and the AURA Team is poised to bear witness to history in the making. AURA's documentation, objective analysis and scholarly evaluation will contribute as markers of encouragement as well as of caution in USM's journey on the APEX highway to greater achievements. As the AURA Team continues with its work, the APEX experience of USM will gradually emerge allowing the relevant quarters to take cognizance of the outcome warts and all.

References

Hasnah Haron and Effiezal Aswadi Abdul Wahab. (2010). *Governance in PTJ: Perception of top management*. APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014).

Ishak Ismail and Malliga Marimuthu. (2010). *Service quality of administrative staff in the Pre-APEX scenario: Academic staff perspective*. APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014).

Malliga Marimuthu and Ishak Ismail. (2010). *Service quality of academic and administrative staff in the Pre-APEX scenario: Students' perspective*. APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014).

Melissa Ng Lee Yen Abdullah, See Ching Mey and George Teoh. (2010). *Unveiling the personality profiles of an accelerated programme for excellence (APEX) university community: the behavioral management system (BeMIS)*. APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014).

Nazarudin Zainun, Rahimah A. Hamid, Nazru Haji Ismail and Khairul Eruwan Abd Halim. (2010). *Continuous student development – MyCSD: A USM's initiative to acknowledge students' achievements*. APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014).

Nik Haslinda Nik Hussain et al. (2010). *Historical background and chronology of usm in the context of APEX University*. Working paper APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014).

Noor Hazlina Ahmad and Siti Rohaida Mohamed Zainal. (2010). *Key competencies and self-assessed performance of the academic staff: the Pre-APEX scenario.* APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014).

Premalatha Karupiah, Intan Hashimah Mohd. Hashim and Norzarina Mohd. Zaharim. (2010). *Understanding expectation and aspiration of the APEX status in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM): a pilot study.* APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014).

Rahimah Haji A. Hamid, Nazarudin Zainun, Nazru Haji Ismail, and Khairul Eruwan Abdul Halim. (2010). *The development of PIMPIM SISWA module*. APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014).

Rahimi Che Aman, See Ching Mey, Azlinda Azman, and Abdul Rashid Mohamad. (2010). *New-mind maps: an interactive self inventory for the community of an accelerated programme for excellence (APEX) university*. APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014).

Ratna Roshida Ab. Razak and Zainal Abidin Sanusi. (2010). *In search of a university for a sustainable society: The APEX initiative and USM's strategies*. APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014).

Simrit Kaur and Chapman, Kare. (2008). USM gets APEX status. *The Star Online*, 4 September 2008.

Siti Rohaida Mohamed Zainal and Noor Hazlina Ahmad. (2010). *Pre-APEX: Competencies of the administrative staff in a higher education institution*. APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014).

Tajul Ariffin Masron and Zamri Ahmad. (2010a). *Key intangible performances of academic staff@USM: Contribution to university and community*. APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014).

Tajul Ariffin Masron and Zamri Ahmad. (2010b). *Performance of administrative staff @USM: a Pre-APEX scenario*. APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014).

Zamri Ahmad and Tajul Ariffin Masron. (2010). *A study of Pre-APEX performance of USM academic staff*. APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014).