

“Is Universiti Sains Malaysia Ready or Mere Wishful Thinking”

Universiti Sains Malaysia and the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) 2008-2013

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On 3 September 2008 Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) was publicly inducted into the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) by Malaysia’s Minister of Higher Education Y.B. Dato’ Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin. The limelight immediately focused on USM, the nation’s second oldest university (established in 1969), not only from the 19 other public universities, and scores of private tertiary institutions but also politicians from all denominations and the general public concerned of the state of higher education in the country.

The induction of USM in APEX “does not mean,” as Dato’ Professor Ir. Dr. Sahol Hamid Abu Bakar, chief executive officer of MoHE’s Programme Management Office (PMO), reiterated “that USM has achieved the [world-class] status, only that the university has the most potential to achieve it” (Chapman & Simrit 2008). Despite the official anointment the imperative question posed is whether USM is ready or mere wishful thinking on its part. Responding to this semblance of doubt is the aim of this paper.

The Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX)

The key word of APEX is *transformation*, viz. a fast track (Accelerated) development Programme to transform institutions of higher learning to attain Excellence thereby recognised as world-class tertiary institutions. Malaysia’s timeline of excellence, monitored by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), is for a local institution to attain world-class university status in global rankings to reach the 100 listing within five years (2013), and among the top 50 by 2020.

The genesis of APEX dates back to 27 August 2007 when then Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi launched the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020 and the National Higher Education Action Plan (2007-2010). The underlying thrust of the Strategic Plan is to develop human capital through the transformation of higher education. The Action Plan implements this transformation process “focussing on institutional excellence, a robust higher education ecosystem with diverse institutional missions, and clear, coherent and aligned national policies to enable transformation” (quoted from USM, 2008: 2; MoHE, 2008). The Strategic Plan and the Action Plan are “Malaysia’s latest response to the increasing demands arising from [the] globalisation era and the internationalisation of higher education” (Morshidi, 2009: 3).

USM’s Transformation Agenda

In its *Transforming Higher Education for a Sustainable Tomorrow* (2008) presentation to the APEX Selection Committee chaired by Professor Emeritus Dato’ Dr. Mohamad Zawawi Ismail, USM delivered a seven-point summation of its laudable assets: (1) remarkable accomplishments in teaching and learning as well as research and innovation, (2) basic infrastructure, (3) multi-disciplinary research clusters, (4) one of the champions for sustainability development, (5) evolvment of a futures scenario plan “up to 2025 which features global outreach and sustainability-led programmes” (USM, 2008: v, 4). Furthermore USM showcased its local and global recognition, namely (6) “anointed [by MoHE in 2007] as one of four research universities,” and, (7) “was rated as the only ‘excellent’ (or 5-star) university in the Academic Reputation Survey conducted” by MQA in 2006. Additionally it “gained recognition as the United Nation University’s Regional Centre of Expertise (UNU-RCE) in 2005 on Education for Sustainable Development.” In its sustainability-led growth USM adopts the “Blue Ocean Strategy” (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005) allowing it “to expand [its] existing boundaries and change the rules of the game which, in turn, will render competition irrelevant” (USM, 2008: vi).

USM identified several areas for its transformation process where each of the respective areas is subjected to the “Eliminate/Reduce-Raise-Create” matrix summarised in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Transforming higher education in USM

Eliminate/ Reduce	Raise	Create
Bureaucracy	Global agenda	“People-led” local solutions
Resource gap	Autonomy	Sustainability
Talent mismatch	Accountability	
	Quality of services	
	Future relevance	

Source: After USM (2008: 20)

Since September 2008 comments and remarks, some rather unsavoury, were thrown in the public and private sphere as well as in cyberspace as to USM’s readiness and capabilities. Condemnations were rife when USM faced a technical glitch in the intake of undergraduates for the 2009/2010 Academic Session. In recollecting that episode Vice-Chancellor Professor Tan Sri Dato’ Dzulkipli Abdul Razak in his annual

address (3 February 2010) to USM's community said that "we stood alone then." Therefore is USM ready or mere wishful thinking?

USM is "Ready and Capable"

The APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014) could to some extent address the concerns of USM's readiness and capabilities. AURA started in late 2008 aimed at recording and evaluating the experiences of the USM community (academic and administrative staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students) as well as the perception and attitude of stakeholders (MoHE, industry, general public) towards USM undergoing the transformation process under APEX. In its first year of research covering the pre-APEX period and the initial year of APEX (2009), two groups of AURA researchers explored the readiness of the USM community in facing the APEX challenge.

The AURA-Understand, Expect, Aspire (UEA) Group in a pilot study that focussed on "understanding," "expectations," and "aspirations" of both the staff of the university and the student community towards USM being inducted to APEX produced encouraging outcomes. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students had high understanding, high expectation towards the university, perceived high expectation of the university, and high aspirations (Premalatha et al. 2010: 7-15). Although the findings are preliminary and the research is on-going, such initial results put USM in good stead albeit amongst the student population.

However more telling was the work undertaken by the AURA-Governance Group that addressed issues of governance, performance, competencies as well as service qualities all at the pre-APEX stage. The last mentioned relates directly to USM's intention in seeking to raise the "Quality of services" (Table 1). Tables 2-5 summarise the AURA-Governance Group's findings.

The first study looks at internal control system in the Responsibility Centre (RC) including schools, departments, centres, etc. (Hasnah & Effiezal, 2010). It comprises five dimensions: control environment, risk assessment, information and communication, control activities and monitoring. Table 2 summarises the findings showing strengths and weaknesses, notable of the latter is on the issue of "risk" ("risk assessment" refers to the identification and measurement of an event that could have an impact on the achievement of the RC's objectives) (Hasnah, 2010: 1).

The second area of concern is competencies and performance of both academic and administrative staff (Noor Hazlina & Siti Rohaida, 2010; Siti Rohaida & Noor Hazlina, 2010; Zamri & Tajul, 2010; Tajul & Zamri, 2010a; Tajul & Zamri, 2010b). Competency of academic staff is evaluated based on five dimensions, viz. teaching, supervision, research and publication, consultancy, and networking. For administrative personnel competency is on six aspects: organising, proactive and innovative, teamwork, leadership, problem solving, and technical competency. Table 3 shows a summary of the

findings.

TABLE 2 Governance at responsibility centres (RC)

Responsibility Centres (RC)	
Competency	
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management ensures that staff has the skills and experience to perform their tasks. • Strategic plans support RC's objectives. • Staff are encouraged to provide recommendations for improvement.
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of understanding of the concept of risk. • Lack of understanding of association of strategies set up by RC, procedures and action plans set by RC related to risk. • Lack of understanding of association of risk to the achievement of RC's objectives. • Lack of system to report misconduct without fear or retribution by others. • Lack of assessment and monitoring of deviation to assess non-achievable targets set. • Lack of policies to resolve conflict.

Source: Hasnah (2010: 1-2)

TABLE 3 Competency of academic and administrative staff

	Academic	Administrative Staff
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching, supervision, research and publication, consultancy and networking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organising, proactive and innovative, teamwork, leading and technical competency.
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of networking and linkages • Lack of research and publications at international level. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem solving skills.

Source: Hasnah (2010: 3)

Performance of academic staff is evaluated based on five domain namely research, publication, supervision, academic recognition, teaching, and involvement in society.

Performance of administrative staff on the other hand has two dimensions, notably (1) quality: accuracy, neatness, thoroughness, priority, concern; and, (2) quantity: workload, performance, maintenance, and delivery. The findings are shown in Table 4.

The third research concern is service quality of both academic and administrative personnel (Malliga and Ishak, 2010; Ishak and Malliga, 2010). Six criteria of measurement are utilised, viz. tangibility (appearance of the physical facilities, equipment, personnel and materials), reliability (ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately), responsiveness (willingness of staff to help customers and provide prompt service), assurance (knowledge, skill, courtesy and competency of staff to inspire trust and

confidence from customers), empathy (ability to share and understand another's emotion and feelings) and accessibility (approachability and ease of contact). A summary of the results are in Table 5.

TABLE 4 Performance of academic and administrative staff

	Academic	Administrative Staff
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High national grant, academic recognition and publications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They perform well in terms of priority, concern, maintenance and delivery.
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of involvement in society and international research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not meet the workload set and deadlines to deliver. Lack of thoroughness and low accuracy.

Source: Hasnah (2010: 3)

TABLE 5 Service quality of academic and administrative staff

	Academic	Administrative Staff
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reliability, empathy, tangibility, responsiveness and assurance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tangibility, responsiveness and assurance
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accessibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reliability Empathy Accessibility

Source: Hasnah (2010: 4)

Concluding Remarks

The research findings on the pre-APEX period of two AURA research groups – AURA-Understand, Expect, Aspire (UEA) Group, and AURA-Governance Group – have indicated some degree of readiness and capabilities. At the same time weaknesses and shortcomings relating to governance, performance and competencies, and service qualities need to be addressed. Nonetheless AURA has shown that the USM community is ready and capable to face the challenges of the implementation phase of the transformation process commencing from 2010. No one is naïve to think that the APEX journey is without bumps and obstacles, potholes and other adversities ahead, but with fortitude and steadfastness the majority of passengers (USM community) shall arrive at the designated destination with a fulfilled sense of accomplishment.

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