

The rating game

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THE long-awaited Rating System for Malaysian Higher Education 2009 (Setara) rating has been released and 18 higher education institutions have achieved Tier Five or "Excellent" status.

Scoring 70% - 79.9% in the rating exercise, seven of the "excellent" institutions were public universities while private providers made up the rest.

Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin announced the results on Monday and said that no institution had made it to Tier Six - the highest tier that carries an "Outstanding" tag.

However, sources in the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) - Setara's custodian - said that one or two public universities and a foreign branch campus came close.

An additional 25 institutions - 14 private and 11 public - were classified as Tier Four or "Very Good" institutions while four private university colleges fell under Tier Three or "Good" status.

No institutions were classified in Tier Two (Satisfactory) or Tier One (Weak).

As this was the first time private education providers were being rated alongside their more established public counterparts, Mohamed Khaled said that teaching and learning was a significant instrument in the exercise but this would change in future exercises.

"We will fine-tune the rating's instruments and other things like research and the service a university provides will be considered in the years to come," he said.

"Then, we would have to place universities in different clusters when this happens as you cannot use the criteria of a research university to evaluate comprehensive and technical universities."

Mohamed Khaled added that 11 institutions were not included in the rating.

"They are new institutions which lack final-year students or are yet to produce graduates; institutions that do not offer their own degree programmes or do not offer conventional learning," he said.

Involving 58 universities and university colleges, Setara 2009 is seen as an improvement to the inaugural exercise in 2007 that involved Malaysia's 20 public universities.

Although the universities were not ranked, statistics have a way of attracting public attention and some felt that the fact there were more private institutions than public universities in Tier Five was a cause for concern.

Addressing this, ministry director-general Prof Radin Umar Radin Sohadi said that the public should not read too much into this and the results reflected the distribution of public and private institutions in the country.

"There are only 20 public universities but many more private institutions," he said. "The results reflect the state of the national higher education landscape and there are no major shocks."

"One must not read too much into this and it is a mistake to

Public and private universities have been rated together for the first time in a carrot and stick move by the Higher Education Ministry.

Tier Five: Excellent universities in the Setara 2009 exercise

Code	Institution
B	Curtin University of Technology Sarawak Campus
A	International Islamic University Malaysia
B	International Medical University
B	Management and Science University
B	Monash University Sunway Campus
B	Sunway University College
B	Swinburne University of Technology Sarawak Campus
B	Taylor's University College
B	The University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus
A	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
B	Universiti Kuala Lumpur
A	Universiti Malaya
B	Multimedia University
A	Universiti Putra Malaysia
A	Universiti Sains Malaysia
A	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia
A	Universiti Teknologi Mara
B	Universiti Teknologi Petronas

Note: A = public institution, B = private institution
Source: Higher Education Ministry

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say that public universities were outperformed.

"However, the public can feel confident as many institutions - especially some private providers - have matured a lot in the last five to 10 years and they have done well in Setara."

Prof Radin Umar said that Setara was the ministry's *modus operandi* to set minimum standards in place and no institution should dip below Tier Three.

He was quick to add that Setara would be fine-tuned in the future and more criteria would be added to add accuracy and validity to the rating.

"Whatever the outcome, we admit that Setara is not perfect and we will make the necessary refinements," he said.

"The Teaching and Learning component received more weight this time round as it is the business of every institution and we wanted to be fair to private providers who were participating in Setara for the first time," he added.

Prof Radin Umar confirmed that research and development, as well as innovation would be factored in future editions of Setara.

Supervised by an independent committee that was selected by the MQA, this year's Setara was based on 25 criteria, captured through 82 indicators covering three generic dimensions of input, process and output to access the quality of teaching and learning.

The input dimension addressed talent, resources and governance; the process dimension focused on curriculum; and the output dimension on the quality of graduates.

The committee was headed by Universiti Sains Malaysia's Prof Muhamad Jantan and comprised six experts from public and private institutions.

The instruments used in last year's exercise were improvements from the last Setara exercise that

was carried out in 2007 through a series of workshops, consultation sessions with stakeholders and peer reviews, culminating in a trial run at two local universities.

The instruments were also compared with the best practices employed by the Higher Education Funding Council of England and Denise Chalmer's research on the Teaching and Learning Quality Indicators in Australian Universities.

Feedback was also sought from three Indonesian and 31 Thai universities.

Apart from giving education providers a clear picture of their standing, the Setara results would be used as a base to improve higher education policies.

Mohamed Khaled confirmed that incentives would be handed out to top performing institutions while non-performing ones could be dished with disincentives.

The 18 Tier Five or "Excellent" institutions will receive incentives like being able to enrol local and foreign government sponsored students, have access to government grants and have a free hand in determining their postgraduate student intake.

Additionally, they would be eligible to apply for research university status.

"Only institutions in Tier Five can apply for research university status," Mohamed Khaled in a press conference.

"Those in Tier Four can apply for full-fledged university status. They will still receive sponsored students but not foreign ones."

Mohamed Khaled added that Tier Five private institutions would enjoy exemptions from the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act 1996.

These included exemption from applying for teaching permits for lecturers, the independence to determine the salary of foreign

lecturers, exemption from ministerial screening and permission to enrol foreign students and the liberty to set their course fees.

"The Setara rating allows students to decide what is value for money," continued Mohamed Khaled.

He added that the incentives were subject to change in order to prevent any abuse of privileges.

Under Setara, institutions in Tier Three would not be able to accept sponsored students or introduce any new programmes as their immediate priority was to improve their teaching and learning.

The ministry would also re-look the university or university college status of any institution in Tier One or Tier Two.

When unveiling the 10th Malaysia Plan, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak announced that Government funding for public universities will depend on a university's performance in Setara.

Responding to this, Universiti Malaya (UM) vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Ghauth Jasmon said that he was happy to know that UM was amongst those placed in Tier Five.

"Presently, UM is the highest ranking Malaysian university - 180th in the Times Higher Education (THE) rankings - and we are happy that this is reflected in the Setara rating."

"It is also a positive development with regard to obtaining grants as what UM needs is more funding to break into the top 100 in the THE rankings."

"The funding will be used for critical fields like biomedical sciences, physics and nanotechnology." Senior management officials of private institutions were equally supportive.

"We are elated at having achieved Tier Five status, which is testimony to the exceptional teaching and learning at Curtin Sarawak," said its pro vice-chancellor and chief executive Prof Ian Kerr.

"It reaffirms Curtin's reputation as a leading higher education institution in Malaysia."

Taylor's University College vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Hassan Said said that it was an achievement for Taylor's to be on par with Malaysia's premier institutions.

"The incentives we will receive like additional sponsored students and research funding is a good move and we welcome it."

Prof Hassan also pointed out that the presence of many private providers in Tier Five and Tier Four showed the maturity of Malaysia's higher education scene.

Sunway University College executive director Elizabeth Lee said that Sunway had always supported the move to rate private institutions and the rating showed that private providers could match the top public universities in teaching and learning.

"The incentives like access to grants are most welcome and we look forward to receiving full-fledged university status soon," she said.