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It's business as usual at UM



A researcher at the Plant Biotechnology Incubation Unit in UM. The university will pump more resources into its three niche research areas — tropical infectious diseases, tropical biodiversity and poverty studies

IT has been a week since Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin announced the selection of Universiti Sains Malaysia as the Apex (Accelerated Programme for Excellence) university.

But University of Malaya (UM) denizens and alumni are still reeling from the shock of the news.

Many thought that the 103-year-old institution would be the natural choice to spearhead the Apex scheme by virtue of its history, status and recent achievements in local and international tertiary institution rankings.

After all, UM is the only public tertiary institution to obtain a five-star rating in the recent Rating System for Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (or SETARA, its Malay acronym).

When UM lost to USM, many were outraged.

Some alumni demanded that the Apex selection committee be transparent in its assessment methods.

Others dug up evidence — statistics on publications and ranking — to prove that their alma mater is more deserving of the status.

Surprisingly, the one who has kept her cool is Vice Chancellor Datuk Rafiah Salim.

Instead of racking her brains for reasons to explain UM's weakness, Rafiah prefers to concentrate on its future.

"Of course, it would be good if the rest (which bid for the status) were given feedback on their shortcomings, so they could improve," she says.

Apart from UM and USM, seven other universities — International Islamic University Malaysia; Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia; Universiti Tenaga Nasional, Universiti Teknologi Petronas, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Universiti Putra Malaysia — had applied for the Apex status.

The concept was proposed in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan where universities will be divided into three categories — Apex University, Elite University and Competitive University.

The university with the Apex status is promised autonomy in finance, management, service scheme, student intake, study fees and appointment of top leadership.

Naturally, Rafiah is disappointed that UM — which was a front runner along with USM — was not chosen.

But that is no excuse for the university to undo its good work thus far, says Rafiah.

"With or without Apex status, UM will go ahead with its strategic plan," she adds.

Titled Reinforcing the Foundation for



Rafiah sees her role as bringing out the best in people

Sustained Excellence, the plan has three phases.

Phase One was carried out within the first year of Rafiah's appointment as UM's first woman vice chancellor.

It was a six-month process of revisiting UM's mission, vision and core values.

This was followed by the process of drawing up its strategic plan and maps, key success factors as well as key performance index (KPI).

Last year, UM began working on its second phase which is scheduled to complete in 2010.

"This is the implementation stage. We revealed to the Apex selection committee our current and future activities."

Under Rafiah's leadership, UM has seen a 150 per cent rise in international student intake. Some 20 per cent of its 1,500 staff population now comprise foreign nationals.

It recently introduced the Sultan Azlan Shah Fund For Student Mobility aimed at financing the living expenses of 1,250 local UM students per intake when they take part in exchange programmes at selected institutions abroad.

"We have also increased our research grants. Based on our KPI achievements, our researchers have managed to raise the amount of research grants by 300 per cent.

Recently, UM secured additional funds worth RM1.5 million from the second Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education Connect United Kingdom (PMI2) scheme for seven research projects.

UM was one of 16 local tertiary institutions which had bid for 34 joint projects worth RM7 million with universities in the United Kingdom.

PMI2 is a five-year strategy based on the success of the first PMI aimed at strengthening UK's position in promoting international education and supporting its development both in and outside of the UK.

The newly secured funds for research would help UM to pump more resources into its three niche research areas — tropical infectious diseases, tropical biodiversity and poverty studies.

"After receiving the five-star SETARA rating,

we looked at ways for UM to further spread its wings. We realise that UM cannot compete with the top schools in the world with our limited resources. So, we have to think differently."

Rafiah consulted old friend Professor Emeritus Moshe Rubinstein from the School of Engineering and Applied Science, University of California, Los Angeles in the United States.

Rubinstein, also strategist for Fortune 500 companies, flew to Malaysia recently and reviewed UM's strategic plan.

The renowned authority on problem-solving and creativity in organisations advises UM to concentrate on its strengths.

"We realised that we were already strong in the three areas mentioned earlier. We have won the Mahathir Science Award and recently the Merdeka Award. University of Malaya Medical Centre is World Health Organisation's centre for the study of dengue and Nipah virus in Asia.

And UM researchers have been studying tropical biodiversity since the days of former Vice Chancellor Royal Professor Ungku Aziz (1968-1988).

In addition, UM has lots of experience in researching poverty eradication.

"When Jeffrey Sachs (American economist and director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University) came to Malaysia, he had to redefine his definition of poverty. According to his previous definition, no Malaysians were poor," says Rafiah.

Sachs has already agreed to assist UM in this field.

"The three areas have the potential to help Malaysia contribute more to global society," Rafiah says, adding that the three fields mark the third and final stage of its strategic plan.

UM will be channelling a bigger portion of its research funds into these domains.

"The perks of Apex status would have allowed UM to do a lot more in shorter time. But we are not the Apex university; we will find other sources.

"We're confident because we have many friends in industry. Still, we have to work hard to get their support."

Last year, UM's endowment fund reached

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RM70 million. Currently, its fund is at RM30 million.

Now, more than ever, UM has to make prudent investments, says Rafiah.

"The operation budget provided by the government is not given in full; UM has had to finance many projects."

For instance, the Sultan Azlan Shah Fund and certain buildings in campus are university-funded.

"We have to be creative in our approach to getting more resources," she adds.

Many had hoped that Rafiah's appointment as Vice Chancellor two years ago would revive the varsity's glorious past. Her initiatives do not disappoint.

Rafiah says credit should also go to the university.

"I've been in the commercial world, worked as an international civil servant, and now I'm heading a university. In a university, you lead your peers instead of your subordinates. It is about influencing and motivating people. Here, my staff are the experts — not me."

Rafiah sees her role as bringing out the best in people.

"This is important for a university like UM where everyone is vocal. The free spirits here make heated discussions a norm during senate meetings."

No holds barred discussions are synonymous with UM. Alumni who studied in the 1970s recall the Speakers' Corner (located behind UM's current library) where "all shades of opinions were allowed to flourish".

Rafiah believes debates should be encouraged as sound decisions can only be made after a leader had listened to all sides of a discussion.

Strong and opinionated characters in UM may make Rafiah's job a little challenging but she would not have it any other way.

"That makes UM what it is — a colourful and vibrant institution. I hope it stays that way. I'd rather have thinking people than passive followers," she says.

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