

Varsity autonomy

Now that research universities have been given more control over their own affairs, the challenge is for the institutions to rise to the occasion.



Future leaders: University students with their banner of hand prints at the National Student Assembly gathering held last year.

WHEN it was first announced in 1995 that Universiti Malaya (UM) would be corporatised, it was said that the move will enable the varsity to compete in the marketplace.

Among the other objectives of the corporatisation effort was to ensure a better working environment and curb the exodus of experienced staff to more lucrative pastures.

UM was officially corporatised in 1998, amidst controversy over the remuneration packages for staff due to the economic situation then.

But going by comments reportedly made by UM vice-chancellor Tan Sri Prof Datuk Dr Ghauth Jasmon recently, stating that the institution was plagued by "mediocrity" and has "never been good", perhaps the corporatisation controversy was for naught.

In an interview published last week, Prof Gauth was further quoted as saying that 200 out of the 2,000-odd academic staff had failed their doctorates pursued abroad since 2008, some on university scholarships, and that in the past "we were not too selective whom we brought into the university".

On Jan 26, Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin officially granted autonomy status to five public universities — UM, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM).

Speaking to reporters after the announcement, Mohamed Khaled stressed that the main focus of the autonomy status was to enable universities to excel.

"There will be no more excuses not to excel. They will not be tied down by Government rules or processes," he said.

All five varsities had undergone an audit process, which started last year with a pilot audit carried out by a team headed by UKM vice-chancellor Prof Tan Sri Dr Sharifah Hapsah Syed Hasan Shahabudin.

The team developed the Code on University Good Governance and the University Good Governance Index as instruments of measure for the final audit carried out by ministry officials.

The five research universities will have autonomy in four areas; institutional governance, finance and wealth generation, human resource

and academic management, and student admissions.

Mohamed Khaled said last year that the Government will still be involved in university affairs if only to safeguard national interests, and that the autonomy given would not lead to privatisation.

"Autonomous universities will continue to be funded to subsidise the cost of higher education and although they will be expected to raise private fees, student recruitment must be based on quality rather than their capacity to pay," he said.

Governance

Deputy Higher Education Minister Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah explains that the concept of autonomy is a constantly evolving one.

"One way of looking at it is to treat public universities like government-linked companies (GLCs), with the ministry holding the 'golden share' amongst other stakeholders — the goal is to allow universities to govern their own affairs.

He adds: "Government officials must trust the universities to manage themselves, and university staff also need to change the way they do things.

"In the spirit of receiving autonomy from the minister, it is only appropriate if vice-chancellors afford some sort of freedom to faculty deans.

"For instance, if the universities can now choose their own students for admission, perhaps faculties should be allowed to pick their students as well; for many foreign universities, students apply to the respective departments of study and not the central registrar."

Some universities have clearly expressed this desire to share the autonomous powers, as evidenced by Prof Sharifah's message to UKM staff and students.

"We will allocate a certain amount of money for staff salaries and so on and you must know how to manage your own affairs.

"The sense of responsibility, being efficient and effective must be cascaded down, if not, it becomes meaningless.

"Of course we will have training sessions on management for heads of departments, deans, deputy deans also leadership courses. We are preparing our people to face the autonomy," she was quoted as saying in a UKM news portal report.

But what of public trust in the

governance of universities?

Since the corporatisation effort, the board of directors replaced the university's council as the highest decision-making body in public universities.

The board of directors, which include the vice-chancellor and representatives from the ministry, industry and university alumni, is appointed by the minister and handles the administration of the university.

The university senate, appointed by the vice-chancellor, deals with academic matters.

Meanwhile, the minister also appoints vice-chancellors and deputy vice-chancellors based on the recommendations of a Government-appointed search committee.

Saifuddin makes a case for why the ministry still holds considerable power over universities.

"Public universities are funded by taxpayers, and so we need to play the custodian by acting on behalf of the people," he says.

"Critics may say that these positions are all 'political', but this is a question of integrity — whoever the government of the day is, they need

to maintain integrity.

"So long as we carry out our nomination and selection process in a transparent manner, I think most people will be supportive of the appointments."

Despite the noble intentions of the minister of the day, it is arguable that such a system of appointments will still be seen as lacking sufficient independence.

Financial accountability

Another major reason for the autonomy status is to allow univer-

sities the required freedom to generate their own source of revenue.

Currently, taxpayer funds still make up the lion's share of university budget income - aside from operational and developmental allocations from the Higher Education Ministry, research grants are awarded by other ministries and statutory bodies.

A cursory review of all public universities' websites reveal that only a handful of institutions have updated annual reports available for public viewing.

At the same time, studies have



Towards excellence: Mohamed Khaled looking at specimens through a microscope at UPM's Faculty of Veterinary Medicine complex in Serdang, Selangor.

indicated that our varsities frequently outperform many other government agencies and ministries when it comes to complying with financial accounting standards set by the Treasury.

What seems to be lacking then is for more universities to communicate this accountability to the public directly.

While the ministry may have tools to ensure universities make good use of public funds, it is too early to tell if a similar framework will exist for funds derived from the private sector.

As universities intensify their efforts at marketing expertise and securing grants from corporate firms, there needs to be steps taken to ensure that universities remain autonomous from commercial influence.

Global examples

Established universities overseas — including the much lauded Ivy League ones — have had considerable experience in the conflict between business interests and academic inquiry.

One famous case involved Yale University, United States (US), where the university had licensed a HIV

drug invented in its labs to biopharmaceutical company Bristol-Myers Squibb in 1988. In the year 2000 alone, the university had gained around US\$40mil (RM120mil) in royalties.

Almost 13 years later, the licensing agreement gained international limelight after Doctors Without Borders had asked the university to relax its patent rights to enable a cheaper generic version of the drug to be made available in South Africa.

Although initially unwilling to make a move, both the university and company eventually agreed to lower the cost of the drug following fierce protest from students and faculty as well as the public.

A more recent example would be the storm of public criticism faced by the London School of Economics, United Kingdom after it was found to have accepted a £1.5mil (RM7.15mil) pledge from a charity run by a son of the late Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. The institution's director Howard Davies subsequently accepted responsibility and resigned.

All the five research universities have outlined a commitment to responsible research for the greater social good in their respective action plans, and it is especially crucial now

that the internal ethical controls maintain their standards for the long-term.

As the autonomous universities are now able to take charge of managing their staff, they will find it easier to establish incentives to attract the best academics.

For student admissions, the five varsities will be allowed to directly select individuals from the pool of candidates in the Universities Admissions Unit (UPU) database.

While these measures will go far in ensuring the academic performance of the universities, the issue of graduate unemployment needs to be addressed as well.

There are now some 71,000 unemployed graduates, and Government statistics further show that the number of jobless graduates had risen even though overall unemployment had dropped. Almost one in five of the 388,000 unemployed Malaysians hold a degree or diploma.

Aside from addressing the mismatch of university courses with industry needs, a deeper question at heart is whether university graduates are being taught the basic skills useful for any job — good communication, critical thinking, and the love for life-long learning.



Towards excellence: Mohamed Khaled looking at specimens through a microscope at UPM's Faculty of Veterinary Medicine complex in Serdang, Selangor.



Looking ahead: Saifuddin says a cultural shift is needed for universities to excel.

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Additionally, in light of the re-emergence of a rather vocal student movement, as well as high-profile cases of academics being silenced for their views, the granting of autonomy to the universities appears rather ambivalent to the notion of academic freedom.

As the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) 1971 is set to be amended to give students more political freedom, it remains to be seen how the the Act will also suit the interests of university autonomy.

Saifuddin says that while the UUCA was still relevant as “a governing tool in lieu of other legal tools”, the move towards university autonomy may change the nature of the Act.

“What could possibly happen in the future is that either each university's constitution is made into an Act of its own, or the UUCA is changed to a more broad-based statute to afford these autonomous powers to institutions.

“These are long-term possibilities, but we should be thinking about them now,” he says.

He reiterates that “a cultural shift” needs to occur for meaningful change in the performance of our varsities.

“You may have a dynamic vice-chancellor, but if personnel down-the-line are resistant to change, this will naturally slow things down.

“Autonomy alone will not be sufficient for institutional excellence — it's really up to the universities now,” he says.



Student power: With universities being given autonomy, it remains to be seen if this freedom will extend to students as well.

Friends at work: Universities are expected to provide a more conducive learning environment, especially now that they have more control over their affairs.



Seeking jobs: The new status will enable varsities to react better to the changing needs of the labour market.



Valuable findings: The commercialisation of research can be useful in generating income for institutions of higher learning.