

**Universities must
make an impact**

While higher education institutions need to be global players, they should not forget their obligations locally.

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GOING by Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin's New Year address recently, the ministry seems to have plenty on the cards this year.

Themed "Think Global Act Local", the main thrust of Mohamed Khaled's speech at the Putrajaya International Convention Centre was that universities should live up to their roles within the local community while making an impact in the international arena.

But the biggest announcement made was that of five local public higher education institutions (IPTAs) officially gaining autonomy - Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM).

"Autonomy is a pre-requisite to creating a dynamic campus environment, through a university management that is more competitive, creative and flexible," said Mohamed Khaled.

After undergoing an audit process through the Code of University Good Governance and University Good Governance Index, the universities will be given autonomy in institutional governance, finance and wealth generation, human resource and academic management as well as student intake.

Amendments to the Act

Reflecting on the impending amendments to the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) 1971, Mohamed Khaled said that the changes to the Act were not a "ticket for absolute freedom".

"I have never prevented university students from being critical, but these criticisms must be channelled in a prudent and civilised manner," he said.

At the end of last year, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak announced that Section 15 of the Act would be amended to allow university students aged 18 years and above (age of majority) to join political parties.

A special committee to oversee the amendments was set up almost immediately after the Nov 24 announcement by the Prime Minister.

The committee currently includes Universiti Teknologi Mara law expert Prof Emeritus Datuk Dr Shad Saleem Faruqi, Universiti Malaya deputy vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Rohana Yusof, UKM director of ethic studies Prof Datuk Dr Shamsul Amri Baharuddin and USM lecturer Assoc Prof Dr Sivamurugan Pandian.

Just before the announcement was made, the Court of Appeal in a landmark 2-1 majority ruling decided that UKM had breached Article 10 of the Federal Constitution when it disciplined four students involved in a political campaign.

The students, better known as the "UKM Four", were punished under section 15(5)(a) of the Act by the university for being present during the campaign for the Hulu Selangor parliamentary by-election on April 24, 2010.

Keeping in line with the policy of allowing more student involvement in healthy activities within and outside the campus, Mohamed Khaled added that the ministry planned to set up the Yayasan Sukarelawan Malaysia to increase student volunteerism and create "University Ambassadors" who will help the "transformation and progress of society".

Meanwhile, potential graduate students and researchers have plenty to look forward to this year as the ministry aims to make substantial investments in scholarships and

research activities.

"In 2011, a total of 6,243 candidates received sponsorship for MyMaster while 1,391 MyPhD scholarships were handed out, amounting to RM6mil and RM18mil, respectively.

"This year, the ministry has allocated RM80mil for 8,000 MyMaster candidates, as well as RM50mil for 1,000 MyPhD places and 100 candidates for the Industry-PhD programme.

"An allocation of RM2mil will be channelled to the Malaysian Vice-Chancellors Committee (on research and innovation) for the High Impact Publication Programme," said Mohamed Khaled.

New programmes

The MyMaster, MyPhD and Industry-PhD programmes are scholarship initiatives under the ministry's MyBrain15 programme, and help qualified candidates pursue graduate study at selected local public and private higher education institutions.

The ministry is also set to provide new scholarships through the MyBrainSc this year, with the aim of producing quality academic staff in the pure science fields.

The High Impact Publication Programme on the other hand, aims to help local varsities develop suitable policies to encourage academics to publish quality research.

Mohamed Khaled added that a RM5mil RU-Research Acculturation Collaborative Effort will be introduced to kick-start research initiatives by non-research universities.

"The focus will be on universities who do not have the research university status... and research universities will act as mentors," he said.

Mohamed Khaled also said the ministry was in the process of formulating a Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TEVT) framework.

"From 2012 onwards, polytechnics will commence new programmes involving work-based learning, and the three metro polytechnics will offer professional certification programmes in partnership with identified professional bodies," he added.

Stressing the need for holistic students, Mohamed Khaled said that IPTAs should pay more attention to the idea of providing a liberal and multi-disciplinary education.

"(A liberal education) equips students with a broad knowledge encompassing global issues, including science, ethics, culture, language, and humanities, as well as in-depth study in specialised fields.

"This approach will enable students to be open-minded and look at national issues from various views and perspectives.

"A study is being conducted by a group of IPTA researchers on liberal education, and I hope the results of the study will serve as a guide to all educational institutions in the future," he said.

Later on, he lamented the dearth of student interest in the sciences, saying that the number of science stream students in secondary schools had dropped to 29%.

Describing the downward trend as "worrying", Mohamed Khaled said that more should be done to encourage bright students to take up the sciences.

"This (disinclination for science) continues to the university level ... students can't imagine having interesting and profitable careers as scientists.

"We need to impress upon students that science is the basis of innovation, and innovation is the basis of technology and economic transformation," he said.



Mohamed Khaled says that autonomy is a pre-requisite to creating a dynamic campus environment,