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# Obviously, UM will be The One

BY official dictate, not by peer review or public acclaim, we will have a premier university.

The Higher Education Ministry will seek the nod from the cabinet when it picks a university, out of 23 public and 32 private universities and colleges, for its Accelerated Programme for Excellence (Apex), aimed at making the institution globally top-ranked.

It is reverse engineering of sorts. First, we identify the premier university, then it will have to work hard to eventually prove that we were justified in our selection by becoming a premier institution of learning.

It would be presumption on my part, of course, and I could be proven wrong, but logic would suggest that the choice would not be a surprise. By virtue of its history and its place in our society, the century-old University of Malaya should be the obvious pick.

It also helps that the cabinet is littered with its alumni.

UM is also the highest-ranked local university, tied at number 246 globally with University of Stockholm, in the much controversial, some would say, Times Higher Education-QS World University Rankings 2007.

Universiti Sains Malaysia is at 307, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia 309; and Universiti Putra Malaysia 364. The rest of our universities do not make the top global 400.

Given the number of universities in the world, including the thousands in developed nations, our four universities are not that bad.

But, of course, that would be subscribing to the "glass is half full" philosophy, and we cannot have that.

I was told, though I am not sure if it was ever true, or if it were true whether it is still



practised, that the robes used by UM graduates were shared with graduates from the University of Hong Kong, and the National University of Singapore. It also used to participate, but apparently not any more, in a triennial game with the two universities.

But things have changed. UM has fallen from grace since (it was 89th in 2004), especially when compared with the two others — NUS was ranked 33rd and UHK 18th last year. Thus, the challenge ahead for UM.

But given the criteria used by the survey, and the relaxation allowed for the Apex university, I was told that UM, if chosen, could easily revamp its position to be in the top 200 almost immediately.

An Apex university can have a higher number of foreign students and teaching staff.

It could tighten its requirements that research done by its community be published and get cited more often. These are criteria that weigh heavily in determining the ranking.

However, I would like to argue that the quest for ranking notwithstanding, our premier university must reserve more places for Malaysians than foreigners, especially since places are tough to come by.

But the greatest challenge for our premier university would be to make itself the destination of choice. Students and parents must see it as something desirable and the culmination of an educational pursuit. They must believe that it is good.

Unfortunately, we are shooting ourselves in the foot in this area.

The government for one is giving mixed signals in both its policies and pronouncements. While understandable, sending top scorers abroad is not helping our perception of local universities. Similarly, making a big deal of hiring Ivy Leaguers or Oxbridge graduates do not help, too.

Our liberal policy that allows the setting up of private universities and their tie-ups with institutions abroad have also made foreign degrees easily accessible.

Thus, the paradox of our current predicament. Our established public universities have the best facilities and get the best students, but they are desired less than a private university offering a foreign degree, even if they were from institutions ranked way off the chart, or with dubious credentials.

I have interviewed a graduate of a foreign university, with a diploma to boot, who had never left our shores.

Our premier university should stand head and shoulders above the 50 plus other universities. Students should fight to want to get into it, and it should also fight to get the best students by offering scholarships and awards. It must also be allowed to decide on its curricula and whom it should hire to teach, and pay them their worth.

At the same time, it must reduce the number admitted and bring its undergraduate population to no more than, say, 10,000 at any one time.

It is, of course, politically incorrect to fight for elitism but I suppose we, like most other nations, must.

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