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After much speculation, the country's first apex university was finally named this week.

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ALTHOUGH there have been other ratings and rankings exercises, the one that really mattered was the accelerated programme for excellence (apex). The country's four research universities were the frontrunners and it was no surprise when all four made the short list. However, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) was the sole institution selected.

Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin said that the university with apex status has the greatest potential among Malaysian universities to be of world-class standard.

In last year's *Times Higher Education-QS World University Rankings*, Universiti Malaya (UM) was the highest ranked Malaysian university at 246, followed by USM (307), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (309) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (364).

Mohamed Khaled says quantitative and qualitative criteria were used to select USM, and that that the selection committee evaluated each university's state of readiness, transformation plan and preparedness for change.

"After a thorough evaluation, the committee decided that only one university truly met all the criteria, namely USM," he says, adding that the Cabinet had agreed to USM being given the apex status on Aug 27.



The ministry's Programme Management Office (PMO) chief executive officer, Prof Datuk Dr Sahol Hamid Abu Bakar, says the decision does not mean that USM has achieved the status, only that the university has the most potential to achieve it.

"This whole apex programme has been my 'baby' as I am very

concerned that many of our top students go overseas and often do not return to serve at home," he shares.

Having an apex university, he adds, means that at least some of the nation's best minds will be retained locally. The apex forms one of the important initiatives under the National Higher Education Strategic Plan launched by the Prime Minister

last year.

According to the action plan, which was released at the same time, apex universities will be given the autonomy to put in place the best in terms of leaders, faculty, students and facilities.

Big expectations

Since a large sum of money will be poured into ensuring USM attains greater heights, it is only fair that the public understands how it was selected.

Selection committee chairman Prof Emeritus Datuk Dr Mohamad Zawawi Ismail says universities — both public and private — were invited to submit their proposals.

Nine institutions namely UM, UKM, UPM, USM, International Islamic University Malaysia, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Petronas and Universiti Tenaga Nasional eventually did so.

Dr Mohamad Zawawi, who is former Universiti Malaysia Sarawak vice-chancellor, says the committee paid special attention to the institutions' strategic intent and transformation plans.

Once UM, UKM, UPM and USM were short-listed, visits were made to the institutions where discussions were held with senior staff, academics, students and staff associations to understand the prevailing campus "climate" and factors related to the proposed plans.

"Apex is about accelerated change. It is not about business as usual but business unusual. We seek new and exciting ideas," says Dr Mohamad Zawawi.

But that was not all. Prof Sahol Hamid says the committee also looked at actual world class university initiatives from other countries such as Germany and China.

Eventually it was modelled on the German Universities Excellence Initiative. Two German



DR MOHAMAD ZAWAWI: It is not about business as usual but business unusual.



PROF DZULKIFLI: The on-site validation visits give the apex more credibility and reliability.

experts were in the country to assist the apex selection committee.

USM vice-chancellor Prof Tan Sri Dzulkipli Abdul Razak, adds that the validation exercise, particularly the on-site visits, is what makes the apex evaluation distinct from other surveys, including the ones done by *Times Higher Education-QS World University Rankings* (which don't make on-site visits).

"It gives the apex more credibility and reliability this way."

At the same time, Prof Dzulkipli emphasises that USM has been working on its own transformation plan, which was put in place over the last six years, based on future demands.

"We started with the 'healthy campus' concept before moving on to the 'university in a garden' concept. We subsequently adopted the 'research university' concept.

"These then snowballed into a transformation plan that matched what the government was looking for when it announced that universities were invited to send in proposals for apex status," he says.

USM's plan is named *Transforming Higher Education for a Sustainable Tomorrow*.

In terms of funding, Prof Dzulkipli says USM has requested for an additional RM830mil over the next five years (from 2009 to 2013) to transform into an apex university.

peak

Former USM senior academic administrator Datuk Sharom Ahmat believes the university can meet the challenge of transforming into an apex university if it works towards it.

"No one university in the country is able to meet all the conditions of what an apex university must contain at the moment," he says, referring to the key elements of best leaders, faculty, students and facilities as stated in the action plan.

The next step

Many were surprised by Mohamed Khaled's announcement as they believed that by virtue of its history, status and higher ranking, UM would be the natural choice.

UM was the only public higher education institution to obtain a five-star rating in the Rating System for Malaysian Higher Education Institutions 2007.

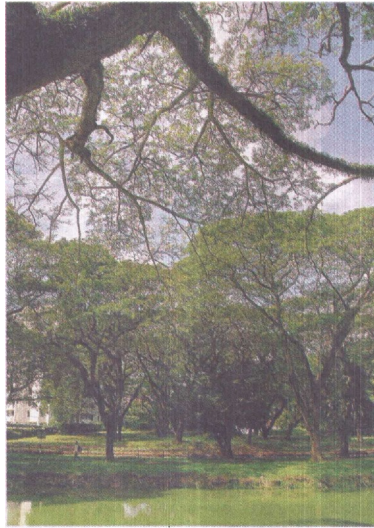
Transparency International Malaysia president Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam, who is a UM alumnus, expressed disappointment that the university did not get the apex status.

"I cannot understand where UM fell short in terms of quality and standards. As one of the thousands of graduates, we would be appreciative of some more transparency and accountability in the assessment process," he adds.

When asked why UM was not selected, Mohamed Khaled, a UM graduate himself had said: "It's not about selecting the oldest university but choosing one with a doable plan that can help us transform our higher education." Dr Mohamad Zawawi, however, believes the committee has made the "right choice" although those universities not chosen may be unhappy.

UKM vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Sharifah Hapsah Syed Hasan Shahabudin believes USM deserved to be selected for apex status.

"I know they have been seriously working



USM in Penang is known for its lush green surroundings.

on their plan for a number of years, including doing scenario planning. They are ready for change. Together with a committed and stable leadership and a good team, I am sure they will carry it through," she says.

On the next step, Mohamed Khaled, says USM needs to draw up a roadmap for transformation with a performance assessment index.

"It also needs to set several goals to achieve in the next five years," he says.

Prof Dzulkifli adds that USM will seek to establish cutting edge research and development facilities next year. "This will potentially quantum leap the performance and visibility of USM as a new global player," he adds.

What others say ...

As for UKM, we will continue to execute the plans we have put in place. We realise change is not easy and this is something we need to cultivate. We will persevere towards our goals and show results despite the odds.

Prof Datuk Dr Sharifah Hapsah Syed Hasan Shahabudin
UKM vice-chancellor

I would like to congratulate USM for being chosen as an apex university. We at UPM will continue to follow closely our transformation plan to achieve excellence as well as generate wealth

through the new agricultural industry.
Prof Datuk Dr Nik Mustapha Raja Abdullah
UPM vice-chancellor

Congratulations to USM. I wish them the best of luck.

Based on our track record of transforming UM into the top-ranked local university within two years, we are disappointed not to be chosen. We will continue with our transformation plan, with or without apex status.

Datuk Rafiah Salim
UM vice-chancellor

Apex university selection committee members:

1. Prof Emeritus Datuk Dr Mohamad Zawawi Ismail (chairman)
2. Prof Dr Azman Awang
3. Tan Sri Dr Wan Zahid Mohd Noordin
4. Dr Sabine Behrenbeck (Germany)
5. Tan Sri Dr Abu Hassan Othman
6. Dr Inka Spang-Grau (Germany)
7. Prof Emeritus Tan Sri Gajaraj Dhanarajan
8. Datuk Dr Ahmad Zaidee Laidin
9. Datuk Zarinah Anwar
10. Prof Emeritus Datuk K J Ratnam
11. Dr Hena Mukherjee
12. Higher Education Department director-general
13. Abdullah Abd Hamid
14. Dr Parmjit Singh
15. Prof Emeritus Datuk K J Ratnam
16. Polytechnic and Community College Department director-general
17. Dr Hena Mukherjee
18. National Higher Education Fund Corporation chief executive.
19. Dr Parmjit Singh
20. Prof Emeritus Datuk K J Ratnam
21. Planning and Research Division secretary