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

BY KAREN CHAPMAN and SIMMY RAUL

culture@thesundaystar.com.my

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

Higher Education Minister Dato’ Sri 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 (THE) World University Rankings, Universiti Malaya (UM) was the highest ranked Malaysian university at 246, followed by USM at 307, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) at 364.

Mohamed Khaled says qualitative and quantitative criteria were used to select USM, and 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 Dato’ Dr Salih Hamid, said the decision does not mean that USM has achieved the status, only that the university has the most potential to achieve it.

“The apex programme has been my baby. 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 incentives 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 autonomy to get 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 Dato’ Dr Mohd Zainal Abidin Hamid says universities — both public and private — were invited to submit their proposals.

Nine institutions namely UM, UTM, UPM, International Islamic University Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Technology Malaysia, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Perak, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman and Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (Kuala Lumpur) were shortlisted.

Dr Mohd Zainal says the committee paid special attention to the institutions’ strategic intent and transformation plans.

Once UM, UTM, UPM and USM were shortlisted, visits were made to institutions where discussions were held with senior staff, academics, students and staff association 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 Mohd Zainal.

That was not all, Prof Salih Hamid says the committee also looked at actual world-class university initiatives from other countries such as Germany and China.

Eventually it was modified on the German universities Excellence Initiative. Two German universities — the University of Munich and the University of Hamburg — were given the status of excellence.

PROF OZUKU KOFI: The one-site validation visits give the apex more credibility and reliability.

Experts were at the country to assist the apex selection committee.

UM vice-chancellor Prof Tan Sri Dr Engr Abdul Razak, adds that the validation exercise, particularly the one-site visits, is what makes the apex evaluation distinct from others, as it is done by the apex themselves.

Dr Ozuku adds that the apex more credibility and reliability this way.

At the same time, Prof Dr Engr Abdul Razak emphasises that USM has been working on its own transformation plan, which was put to place over the last six years based on student 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,” he says.

“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 Dr Engr Abdul Razak says USM has requested for an additional RM800m over the next five years (from 2009 to 2013) to transform into an apex university.
Former USM senior academic administrator Datuk Shamsiah Ahmad believes the university can meet the challenge of transforming itself 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 Ranking System for Malaysian Higher Education Institutions 2003.

Transparency International Malaysia president Tan Sri Razali Ariffin, 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, said: "It’s not about selecting the oldest university but choosing one with a teaching plan that can help us train our higher education."

He said the committee of seven, which includes the university's president, vice-chancellor and deputy vice-chancellor, decided the list of seven universities.

USM vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Shafiuddin Husain Shah Abdulhadi believes USM deserved to be selected for apex status.

"I know they have been working 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," he 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 Dr Khalid adds that USM will seek to establish cutting-edge research and development facilities next year. "This will potentially quadruple the performance and visibility of USM as a new global player," he adds.

What others say...

As for USM, we will continue to execute the plans we have put in place. We realize 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 Shafiuddin Husain Shah Abdulhadi

Through the new agricultural industry, we will continue to work with all stakeholders to ensure the sustainability of the agricultural sector. We will continue to focus on our transformation plan to achieve excellence as well as generate wealth.

Prof Datuk Dr Nik Mustapha Raja Abdullah

USM vice-chancellor

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

Prof Datuk Dr Nik Mustapha Raja Abdullah

USM vice-chancellor

Apex university selection committee members:

1. Prof Dr Arman Arus
2. Prof Dr Azmi Salih
3. Prof Dato' Dr Mohd. Nazri Mohd. Nor
4. Dr Sallehah Salleh
5. Prof Datuk Dr Mohd. Nazri Mohd. Nor
6. Prof Dato' Dr Mohd. Nazri Mohd. Nor
7. Prof Datuk Dr Mohd. Nazri Mohd. Nor
8. Dr Aminuddin bin Ali
9. Prof Dr Aminuddin bin Ali
10. Dr Aminuddin bin Ali
11. Prof Dr Arman Arus
12. Prof Dr Arman Arus
13. Prof Dr Arman Arus
14. Prof Dr Arman Arus
15. Prof Dr Arman Arus
16. Prof Dr Arman Arus
17. Prof Dr Arman Arus
18. Prof Dr Arman Arus
19. Prof Dr Arman Arus
20. Prof Dr Arman Arus
21. Prof Dr Arman Arus
22. Prof Dr Arman Arus