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A good year

Malaysian universities improved considerably in the THE-QS World University Rankings 2008 after last year's steep slide.

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and **KAREN CHAPMAN**

THERE was good news for Malaysian public universities this year in the *Times Higher Education* (THE)-QS World University Rankings 2008.

Although none made it to the top 200, four out of five improved on their positions, namely Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM).

Only Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) which, ironically, attained apex (accelerated programme for excellence) status this year, went down in the rankings.

USM dropped by six places to 313 in the list, while UM maintained its position as the highest-ranked local university for the second year when it improved by 16 positions to 240.

UKM and UTM rose a whopping 59 places to attain the 250 and 356 spots, respectively. UPM also rose a credible 44 places to reach 320 in the rankings.

Expert views

A member of the THE-QS University Ranking Advisory Board, Prof Datuk Dr Hashim Yaacob, congratulated Malaysian universities on their good showing.

"I think Malaysian universities have performed well. We should not get unduly agitated about the fact that no university made it to the top 200."

It is more important, says Prof Hashim, for universities to build on what they are doing, recognise the limitations of any rankings exercise and at the same time strive to improve from year to year.

Prof Hashim, who was vice-chancellor of UM when the first World University Rankings appeared in 2004, admits that there are two contrasting views on the value of rankings like the THE-QS.

"Many believe that they are a good indicator of areas in which universities are deficient in and need to improve on. Others are of the view that they are a sheer waste of time."

However, Prof Hashim, who is now vice-chancellor and president of the International University College of Nursing, says universities should accept the fact that rankings are here to stay although he admits the ranking criteria can be improved further.

He adds that rankings like THE-QS and the Shanghai Jiao Tong have increased in importance following the globalisation of higher education and the increasing demand among parents and students for comparative information.

"By 2020, three million Asian students are expected to study outside their own countries. In the United States, legislation has been passed to encourage up to one million Americans to study overseas by 2016."

Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin says many universities have been critical of the THE-QS rankings.

"Many, especially in Europe, have questioned the accuracy of their data and the validity of their findings. Some universities that do well in other rankings do badly in the THE-QS one."

It all depends on the criteria used. The THE-QS gives a lot of weighting to peer review and this is where universities like UM perform very well," he adds.

Asked how local universities can do better and attain a top 50 ranking, Prof Hashim says that the university's leadership is crucial. "There must be continuity. Universities should not change vice-chancellors too many times."

There must also be more transparency in the selection of VCs, he adds.

"The criteria must be made known and the position should be advertised and open to anyone who meets the conditions."

Asked to comment on USM's slide despite its apex status, Prof Hashim says that while the THE-QS rankings are based on present achievement, the apex status measures future potential.

"The government used different conditions to assess the universities, namely their state of readiness, preparedness for change and preparation of the transformation plan."

"If these are the conditions then the university which fulfils them would obviously win. Other factors were not considered," adds Prof Hashim.

Asked why he decided to join the advisory board, Prof Hashim says: "I know the THE-QS World University Rankings very well. Through my appointment, I hope to help Malaysian universities understand the criteria better and improve their positions."

The THE-QS World University Rankings 2008 reported that there was a big increase in the number of responses from the international academic community and employers.

A total of 6,354 academics (compared with 5,101 in 2007) and 2,339 employers (1,482 in 2007) responded to the 2008 survey.

Now in its fifth year, the rankings are conducted and compiled by QS Quacquarelli Symonds and featured in the *Times Higher Education*'s Oct 9 print edition.

Anticipating the mixed response to the survey every year, managing director of QS Nunzio Quacquarelli, said in a statement: "Rankings are contentious and QS has always argued that they should be used with caution as they cannot reflect all aspects of university excellence."

This year, there were no changes to the criterion and weighting used to measure the universities.

They are: recruiter review (10%), international faculty ratio (5%), international student ratio (5%), student faculty ratio (20%), citations per faculty (20%) and peer review (40%). As in last year, the citation data was supplied by Scopus.

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Universiti Malaya rose 16 places in the rankings and maintained its position as the highest-ranked local university. - Filepic



PROF HASHIM: The ranking criteria can be improved.