

Meritocracy key to bridging NUS-UM gap, says Karpal

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By Koh Jun Lin

Malaysian universities will not be able to catch up with its Singaporean counterparts as long as it does not practice meritocracy, said DAP chairperson Karpal Singh.

"If that is not lacking (meritocracy), then I think the other things will fall in place. We must strive for meritocracy, competition and so many things," he said.

NONE Karpal (right) himself had graduated from the National University of Singapore (NUS) law school, class of 1967/68, about five years after it broke off from being a Universiti Malaya (UM) campus to become its own university.

He was commenting on the disparity in the world rankings between the two institutions, with NUS on the 24th place, and as Asia's best public university, while UM dropped to 167th place.

Karpal also told Malaysiakini that the key to the performance of Singaporean universities is that they have better facilities than Malaysian universities, and have the ability to attract quality teaching staff.

"And to top it off, (its classes) are in English. The English language is the international language and I think that is one of the reasons why NUS is one of the best in the world," he said.

Culture of sycophancy

Former UM student leader Hishamuddin Rais echoed Karpal's views, saying that the university's performance started to degrade when its culture of learning was replaced by a culture of sycophancy and affirmative action in favour of bumiputeras.

"As a result, there is no longer a meritocracy. It has become a privilege. It is no longer on merits, it is no longer on the best brains.

NONE "It is on the best skin - the colour of the skin," he said, adding that this is not unique to UM but is pervasive in other Malaysian universities.

Hishamuddin (right) added that UM had sacked its "best minds" such as prominent economist KS Jomo and then sociology professor Syed Husin Ali, leaving the

university with the "second and third best".

In the annual Quacquarelli Symonds' World University Rankings 2013/2014 released yesterday, none of Malaysia's universities managed to clinch a position in the top 100, out of 800 universities ranked.

Instead, it reported that all but one of Malaysia's public universities - Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) - had worsened, although UM remains as Malaysia's top university.

Meanwhile, the same report said NUS is now Asia's best university after outdoing the previous top Asian university, the University of Hong Kong.

In contrast, Hishamuddin said that when he was the UM students union's secretary-general for the 1973/74 term, UM was a world-renown research university especially in the area of engineering, agriculture and tropical medicine.

The history student was also the union's president-elect for the 1974/75 term, but was forced to flee abroad after the government cracked down on student protests in December 1974 following the Baling protest.

Another factor in UM's decline, he added, was that the amendment of the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) in 1974, which prevented students from organising themselves and have to rely on the Student Affairs Department's consent and resources instead.

He said in the 1970s, UM students, academic staff, and administrative staff each had their own union. The students union in particular, held regular discussions with the academic staff union and had its own financial resources to operate autonomously and provide student services such as cooperatives and buses.

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