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PM maps out plan for world-class varsities

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PUTRAJAYA: After starting the process of revamping the school system, the government is embarking on a radical move to improve tertiary education.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi spelled out three measures to help public universities achieve world-class standard.

This is also expected to serve as a catalyst to turn Malaysia into one of the world's education hubs.

Abdullah said with immediate effect, all public universities would be given autonomy to decide on certain matters and apex universities — to be identified from the existing 23 public universities — would even be allowed to recruit their own faculty and students. Only the best students will be admitted into the apex universities.

Also, audit assessment committees — comprising experts — will be established to evaluate and rate academic achievements in higher institutions of learning.

Abdullah made the announcement when launching the "Strategic Plan For Higher Education: Laying The Foundation Beyond 2020" at the Putrajaya International Convention Centre yesterday. It was attended by more than 3,000 people, including Higher Education Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein and Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Mohd

Sidek Hassan.

Abdullah said: "The government hopes that by being given greater autonomy, the universities can act faster to grab the opportunities brought about by changes taking place in academic, economic, social and other areas."

Abdullah wants to see the universities' governing bodies using their new power to bring about major changes.

"For instance, I hope they will adopt innovative funding mechanisms to expand their financial resources and not rely solely on the government. It is also my hope that collaborations between public universities and industries will further bolster research activities, leading to commercialisation of research products."

He reminded them that the autonomy came with responsibility and accountability.

"I want to stress that quality and academic excellence must remain the guiding principles of every decision made by a university's governing body."

Abdullah said the second move entailed the establishment of an audit assessment committee to evaluate academic achievements in higher institutes of learning.

"The ministry (Higher Education) will implement this system to ensure that education quality remains at a satisfactory level and is never compromised.

"For integrity and transparency, committee members will comprise experts and not ministry officials."

The government will use findings of the evaluation for rating of universities and institutions.

"I hope everybody can accept this step as a constructive move to push our universities to achieve world-class standard."

The third move, he said, was to identify apex universities to serve as models of how public universities should be.

"We will identify these apex universities — the best of the best among our local universities.

"At these universities, academic quality, management, teaching and research will be given emphasis.

"A competitive academic situation will be created.

"In terms of administration, the management will be given wider autonomous power compared with other universities. Its governing body can choose to appoint its own administrators, faculty deans and students based on certain criteria to be laid down by the ministry.

"For example, only the best students will be chosen to enter this university and the selection will be from all races. The enrolment must reflect our plural society. Twenty per cent of the enrolment will be made up of foreign students."

Abdullah added that only individuals, including foreigners, who had been recognised as experts in their own fields, would be appointed as apex university administrators, lecturers or deans.

"The ministry has given its commitment that an apex university

could be set up within 12 months," Abdullah said, turning to look at Mustapa. "Can this be done?" he asked. Mustapa nodded in agreement.

Abdullah went on to express the hope that at least one apex university could be set up by 2011.

The prime minister said: "Self-governance, teaching, learning and research are critical aspects that must always be looked into to ensure the foundation which we will lay down can result in the development of quality human capital and workforce for the nation.

"We want to see the best academics or thought leaders helming the institutions or universities. In a nation where meritocracy and performance is the priority, we want quality graduates so that they can secure jobs easily, even in international companies."

Mustapa said the strategic plan would complement and complete the national education blueprint launched by Abdullah a few months ago.

The seven thrusts of the plan encompass wider access to higher education, improving teaching and learning methods, strengthening of research and innovation, strengthening of institutions of higher education, enhancing internationalisation to turn Malaysia into a leading education hub, promotion of lifelong learning and strengthening of the ministry's delivery system.

There are more than 800,000 students in public and private universities in the country.