



# Harvard Gets a Girl

Last month, Harvard University got its first ever woman president. What's more interesting was the selection process. Malaysia could learn a thing or two from it.

**I**N February, Harvard University announced the appointment of a new head. Drew G Faust made history as the university's first woman president in 371 years.

When it comes to appointing women to top positions at universities, we are one up compared to Harvard. Two Malaysian universities – Universiti Malaya (UM) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) – got women as their Vice-Chancellor (VC)s less than a year ago.

While we can pride ourselves for elevating two women to the top-most executive position at our public universities, the appointment process is still in want. There is much discontent on the ground with the manner in which VCs and other top university officials are appointed.

How does it work?

To begin with, the University and University Colleges Act gives full authority to the Minister of Higher Education to appoint a public university VC. If he so desires, the minister can merrily ignore the nation's top guns in academia and appoint anyone he thinks fit.

But since last year, some welcome change has taken place. Datuk Mustapa Mohamad, the man tasked with steering ahead the nation's higher education sector, has injected a fresh approach to the selection and appointment process.

The winds of change kicked in with the appointment of UM's chief last year. Mustapa, to his credit, instituted a mechanism that detached him from the appointment process. By doing so, he

avoided micro-managing the process, deftly deflecting claims of favouritism.

A search committee was tasked to shortlist potential candidates. Later, a selection committee interviewed the potential candidates.

This led to Datuk Rafiah Salim being made the university's VC in May 2006, the first woman to helm a local public university. A similar mechanism saw the elevation of Prof Datuk Dr Sharifah Hapsah

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Syed Hassan Shahabudin as VC of UKM.

While it's no comprehensive model, it has plugged some glaring loopholes in the appointment process.

While Harvard may not be the best model for us to ape – it is a world-class university flush with funds – it provides some lessons. Mustapa and his team should take time to study Faust's appointment, if they haven't done so already.

The process is exhaustive, and so beautifully transparent.

According to a note on Harvard's website, in the two most recent presidential searches, a search committee initiated the

search with letters to some 245,000 individuals – including all Harvard faculties, students, staff, and alumni and selected leaders in higher education and research, government, and the non-profit world.

In that letter, the committee 'sought advice on the challenges and opportunities facing the university, as well as the most important qualities to seek in a new president, and invited nominations of individuals warranting serious consideration'.

All in all, the committee received some 2,300 letters and emails and had some 750 nominees.

I bet you nothing of that sort took place in our VC appointments. One recent VC was picked out of a basket of just six candidates.

Now, the next point is going to blow your mind away! The Harvard selectors added a new twist to the process. They formed two advisory groups – one comprising faculty members, with the other consisting of students from Harvard's different schools.

Yes, you read correctly. They actually got students involved in the process, while we still fear exposing our university students to contact with anything remotely political. And it was no passive involvement, mind you. The student-led advisory group met eight times, with representatives of the search committee attending each meeting.

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