

The real measure of universities

NST- 11/10/2006

A FEW years ago, Universiti Malaya could boast that it was one of the top 100 universities in the world. Now it has slipped again in the top 500 rankings, a second fall from grace in so many years.

A British newspaper educational supplement ranked UM 192nd this year, from 169th last year and 89th in 2004. Is the university coming apart at the seams?

Rankings and acknowledgements are double-edged swords. It is glory when you are the toast of the town and vilification when you are in the dumps. As much as UM was justified in basking in its glory in the past, it must now wallow

in some self-pity.

The fall in rankings of the country's oldest and most prestigious university is also seen by some as an indictment of the Malaysian education system, and symptomatic of everything wrong with it.

But wait, there is some good news. The tertiary education system seems fine. The other big campus, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), is now ranked 185th, compared with 289th last year. Perhaps it should now be known as the nation's premier university.

Universiti Putra Malaysia is also rising, improving itself to 292nd spot from 394th; Universiti Sains Malaysia to 277th

from 326th previously.

So this appears to be a UM problem alone. Newly appointed vice-chancellor Datuk Rafiah Salim said that news of the drop in rankings marked one of the saddest days in her career.

But maybe Rafiah and her colleagues should not be too hard on themselves. Of course, any fall in ranking is bad but it is not the end of the world. The glass is still half full.

For instance, the survey looks at 500 universities when there are tens of thousands worldwide. Although we should not celebrate mediocrity, to be among the top 200 in the world is not a mean feat.

Of course, the top 100 is better but that is the future.

The newspaper rankings were based on several factors, including a poll asking academics to name their top 30 research universities; employer feedback; international students enrolment; staff to student ratio; and research citation numbers.

Now, if we are to ask anyone in the world to name the best universities, chances are that Harvard, Cambridge and Oxford will roll off their tongues. Incidentally, they are also the top three in the world in the same survey.

The point I am trying to make is good branding breeds good perceptions.

They are undoubtedly great schools but the fact that even a layman knows them means these institutions will always top someone's or other list.

By and by, not many care about their research output or academics either.

And if a survey is focused on which university has the best sports facilities, cultural centres or dining halls, these three will feature on it, too.

Thus, a good university might count on its academic excellence but perception and image will carry it a long way. Unfortunately, the same survey which gave UM the thumbs-up two years ago is now kicking it in the teeth. Perception, unless rectified, tends to morph into reality.

Now, the results should not be dismissed entirely but neither should we embrace them wholeheartedly. Whatever the shortcomings, they generally hit the spot. The rankings point to weaknesses and suggest solutions to improve them.

Education is an idealistic pursuit and peer recognition goes a long way to lift self-confidence and self-worth. As a nation, we are consumed by good grades and academic achievement, hence the considerable amount of navel-gazing, hand-wringing and sighing at Lembah Pantai at the moment.

One quick way for UM to move up the rankings is to work towards satisfying as many criteria as possible. Some, I suspect, have more to do with presentation than substance. Say if foreign students are a criterion, then enrol more foreigners, even at the expense of locals. If the student-teacher ratio is a problem, hire more professors. If it

is research, then offer more grants for academics, especially the "glamorous" ones from abroad to come to UM.

Perhaps initiate a merger or takeover of the Institute of Medical Research, Rubber Research Institute, or Palm Oil Research Institute — all world-class institutions — which will rocket UM's standing.

Surveys are only as good as the method. If there are flaws, anyone can work the system and boost one's ranking. UM can exploit the survey's weaknesses and at the same time, improve its academic credentials.

At any rate, let us not forget that Universiti Malaya and some of the other older universities at home are still much better than the thousands abroad, including those in favourite Malaysian destinations such as the United States, Britain and Australia.

It must also be recognised that it is quite difficult to get in-

to UM, as opposed to some popular foreign universities that enrol foreign students just for the money.

I don't believe we should worry too much about UM, unless it slips further next year. The most important thing is for it to restore its self-confidence, banish the perception that it is on the decline and reclaim its image as the nation's premier school.

The most important measure of a great university is not how some London newspaper ranks it, it is how the university has evolved to make itself relevant to the community and the quality of its graduates.

If they can fit in society and function in a globalised environment, then it must be good. If its graduates are competent to serve the country, possess courage to embark on ventures, idealism to champion causes and irreverence to challenge convention, then a university should rank well no matter what.