



WHAT IS A UNIVERSITY?

RECLAIMING HUMAN, INTELLECTUAL AND NATIONAL RESOURCES FROM MEDIOCRITY

AT ITS MOST basic, a university is a degree-conferring institution of higher education that provides instruction and conducts research in various fields of knowledge. Which is like saying a chocolate cake is nothing more than a mixture of flour, eggs, water, sugar and cocoa, baked at a set temperature for a certain period of time. Or that sex is merely the act of procreation between the male and female of a species.

None of these definitions is wrong; it's just that they do not acknowledge the intangible heart of the matter. A good chocolate cake should be able to delight the senses with an indefinable sensuality. Just like sex. If done properly.

A university too is much more than what is suggested by the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition above. Yet, in recent press releases, it appears that those who are in power do not seem to understand this. The most shocking revelation was when the Minister of Higher Education was asked by (what used to be) a Sunday broadsheet for his comments on the possibility that local graduates are less attractive than foreign graduates because those who study in Malaysia have a lot more restrictions placed on their freedom to think

and express themselves. The Minister's answer was short and utterly terrifying. He said: 'We want our students to get 4.0.'

For those educated in the far superior and civilised term system, a '4.0' is the semester system's way of saying straight-As. Not only does this most categorically not answer the question, it reflects a way of thinking which shows a total lack of understanding as to what a university education is all about. This, coming from the man who is in charge of university education, I am sure you will excuse me while I lie in a corner in a foetal position and whimper to myself.

Then there is the matter of the 2005 *Times Higher Education Supplement* (THES) ratings of the universities of the world. Universiti Malaya (UM) dropped from number 89 last year to number 169 this year. Last year, I told a friend of mine, a fellow academic from Queen Mary College (number 112), that UM was making a big deal of its 89th placing. He said, that being the case, a drop of one place would be embarrassing. A drop of 80 places is therefore quite disastrous.

The repercussions of this drop have been numerous and predictable. The Prime Minister (an alumnus) has called for an

investigation; the vice-chancellor of UM has said it is an improvement (yes, really, he did); and the leader of the Opposition frothed at the mouth. Again what is lacking here is an understanding of what makes a good university.

There really is no need to get all wound-up about such ratings because, frankly, they are merely one indicator of quality. I'm not saying they're not important; they help identify weaknesses in the areas in which the criteria of the ranking are based. And therein lies the crux of the issue: criteria. I can assure you that if the criteria of a good university are how cheap it is to put a child through a degree programme and how docile its students are, then UM is in the top 10 and Harvard languishes at the bottom.

In other words, boasting about one's 'high' standing in the THES rankings is as pointless and distasteful as crying over one's 'low' standing. One should instead quietly study where the weaknesses are and try to improve them if one feels such an improvement will do the institution any good. This was the approach that should have been taken last year when UM was supposedly the 89th best university in the world. Instead of strutting

around like a bunch of peacocks, a sober examination of the ranking system and how it can help us improve should have been undertaken.

Now that UM is at 169, the same thing should be done instead of the hopelessly silly PR exercises of spin doctoring which have the appearance of the self-same peacock waving its moulted feathers in desperation.

This being the case, the ranking breakdown for UM shows that the strength of the institution is its recognition among its peers. This means that academics from other universities recognise and appreciate their counterparts in UM. That's nice to know.

And how can this be built on? Simple: Make sure that good academics join and stay. And pray tell how this can be done when UM pays pittance? Why, make sure the working environment is conducive to research and those who are able to do good work are promoted.

Good work here means publishable research by respected publishers and journals (not lifestyle magazines) and sound teaching; not administrative duties and brown-nosing.

This can be done quite simply by ensuring that the promotion process is open and transparent, for example, by publishing the CVs of all successful candidates. Then the world can see if a newly-minted professor is the real deal or just some dud with powerful kissing lips.

However, on to the rankings: UM is weak in international student numbers and international members of faculty. Question: What is the purpose of these criteria? Having individuals from around the world coming to study and work here reflects a recognition and respect for the institution by students and fellow academics that has spread beyond our borders. This is a good thing of course, but only if it happens naturally.

By this, I mean that foreign students come over because they feel the programmes being offered are first-rate and that whatever degree they earn is internationally acceptable. And foreign academics come over because they are of the opinion that working here is a good career move.

This can be achieved in two ways. First, by making sure our degree programmes are sound, with high academic standards, to entice decent foreign students. Then promote this fact, along with other appealing things about living in Malaysia, like Sunway Pyramid and things like that (for God's sake, I'm joking). With regard to foreign academics, this is a bit trickier because as everyone knows, there is a saying about peanuts and monkeys. So, in order to overcome this, there must be something else to lure the young up-and-coming lecturer

over here (let's face it, the established dudes have too big a mortgage to pay and they aren't going to come). That 'something' is the excitement of working in a university where ground-breaking and cutting-edge research is being conducted.

Artificially enticing foreign students and lecturers will simply not work and in the long run, be disastrous for the institution. Artificial means would include lowering the standards so as to take in any Tom, Dick and Harry to study or work here; begging foreign universities to have student exchange programmes with us (nothing boosts the pride of the university as much); or by paying huge amounts of money just to have foreign professors lend their name to our staff lists with little or no actual responsibility.

By doing these sorts of things, what one is really up to is manipulating the numbers for the sake of rankings. It does not create the quality that high foreign student and faculty numbers are meant to reflect.

What I have suggested above is a slow process that will take years to produce results, but you don't build stonking great monuments to excellence on shoddy foundations.

THIS IS BECAUSE MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES TREAT STUDENTS LIKE CHILDREN. THEIR FREEDOM OF SPEECH IS CURTAILED. THEIR FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY IS CONTROLLED. THEIR FREEDOM TO VOTE IS INTERFERED WITH.

What about the THES criterion, the international employability of our graduates (or the lack thereof as the figure seems to show)? This takes us back to the question that the reporter asked the honourable minister (see above). The hard fact of the matter is that, by and large, our graduates do not have the sort of qualities that would make overseas employers want them, nor do our graduates have the qualities to go out beyond the coconut shell to offer their services to the world.

This is because Malaysian public universities treat students like children. Their freedom of speech is curtailed. Their freedom of assembly is controlled. Their freedom to vote is interfered with. Without such freedoms, students can't grow. Sure they will get their degree, but they won't have the confidence, thechutzpah, and the guts to grab the world by the throat and announce their arrival.

The lessons learnt in university, the important lessons, are not only taught in the lecture theatres. They are learnt outside, on campus. They are learnt when students face challenges to their own ideals and beliefs, and when they either see a new way of looking at the world, or they develop the thoughts to defend their worldview. Our students are not given that opportunity, and no amount of hand-wringing and special soft-skills courses is going to improve the situation.

If you want good graduates, then you have to unlock the shackles. Lecturers can do their bit in the lecture halls and tutorial rooms by simply encouraging students to think for themselves and not be afraid to question their teachers. If their ideas are sound and we the lecturers look like idiots, then so be it. If their ideas stink, they will fall on their faces, but they can only get stronger for the experience. The mighty oak can't grow in a cage and neither can our students.

And finally, that mysterious, intangible quality that universities should have. I believe that universities have a responsibility to be an example of what society should be. They have a sacred duty to project the ideals of civilisation. Universities have to be a place where knowledge and honesty are paramount; where intellectual discourse weeds out lies and the cold, hard truth is revealed; where the governance is fair and just; where our human rights as enshrined in the Constitution are treated as sacrosanct. We must be brave to cling to these ideals and not capitulate to the short-sighted desires of those with the power.

To begin doing this, we need good leaders

for our universities. The Ministry of Higher Education recently announced that it will form a search committee to seek out such leaders. Forgive my cynicism, but this will only work if such a committee comprises men and women of integrity. And it can only work if the criteria they set out, in this quest for that wonderful university leader, are based primarily on the candidate's unquenchable dedication to academic ideals and freedom. Otherwise, even a committee sent from above and headed by the angel Gabriel himself won't see any positive changes.

I love being an academic. I believe that teaching is a noble enterprise and that honest research can help the society we live in. I also believe that our universities can be so much better than they currently are.

What we academics need is to look again at the qualities that make us good and, through us, make our university good. We have to work hard, teach well, be sincere, make integrity our cornerstone, and above all, courageously and outspokenly defend to the very end, academic principles and freedom. If we do this, the rankings will improve. And if they do not, we will still have much to be proud of. ■

Azmi Sharom is deputy dean of the Faculty of Law, Universiti Malaya