IN SEARCH OF A WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITY OF TOMORROW: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE APEX INITIATIVE

Dzulkifli Abdul Razak

v1.2009

SHAPING MINDS, BUILDING LEADERSHIP
IN SEARCH OF A WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITY OF TOMORROW:
The Importance of the APEX Initiative

Vol. 1, 2009

by
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Oxford Fajar Sdn. Bhd. (008974-T)
(Formerly known as Penerbit Fajar Buku Sdn. Bhd.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preamble</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What the Future Holds</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change Remains Constant</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge and Organisational Sustainability</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness through Transformation and Innovation</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Support</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

The Sharing of Minds series was conceived to serve as printed repositories of the talks delivered by esteemed higher education practitioners, statesmen, and industry players in the talk series organised by the Higher Education Leadership Academy (AKEPT) since its inception in January 2008.

The talk featured in the first book of this series is by Prof. Tan Sri Dzulkifli Abdul Razak, the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), the first university in Malaysia to be granted the Accelerated Programme of Excellence (APEX) status by the Ministry of Higher Education. His talk, entitled, “In Search of a World-class University; the APEX Initiative”, will enable readers to delve into and appreciate the importance of the APEX initiatives as practiced in USM under the guidance and tutelage of Tan Sri Dzulkifli. In addition, it will allow readers a glimpse of the mechanisms put into place by the Ministry of Higher Education to ensure the transformation of Malaysian higher education institutions into world-class entities.

It is our hope that this, and the following books in this series, will truly trigger a sharing of minds that will result in an outpouring of new knowledge and a broadening of our intellectual horizons.
PREAMBLE
The need for global change in the higher education system is inevitable. Every scholar in society wonders what the university of tomorrow would be like. The current system may be deemed to be obsolete and higher education institutions (HEIs) in every nation are under threat because of this crisis. This is further underscored by the recent economic meltdown with special implications on universities worldwide. This phenomenon can be traced to a much longer time frame and did not occur within a day or two.

Since the beginning of the millennium, the true role of HEIs has faltered. One good example to ponder on is the Enron case. The fraud that almost devastated the US economy was linked to the fact that graduates of HEIs, especially those in the business schools, are not sufficiently engaged in issues of ethics. Now with the more recent global economic crisis taking its toll, once again the blame is being gradually shifted to the universities, especially in the US, including those so-called ranked as ‘world-class’ universities. It is also said to be a causal effect arising from the misconduct of a small but dominant group of graduates that hold key decision-making positions in equally ‘world-class’ corporations and organisations. Sadly, there appears to be a resurgence of such unethical behaviours even after universities such as Harvard, have reformed their education system following the earlier economic downturn as exemplified by the Enron case.

Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that, what we are talking about here does not involve merely ethics, couched within the understanding of the popular cliché - human capital - rather it reaches beyond into the fundamental role of universities to nurture and shape the character of human beings to transform them into ethical citizens of the word.
This presentation delves into more than just what makes an iconic university or the misplaced understanding of a ‘world-class’ university. It intends to level down to a more realistic setting, namely, what APEX University is, and why it is important for all of us to support the APEX initiative. To be sure, APEX is not about USM per se; it is about trying to reshape and to transform the landscape of higher education into an entity that is relevant for the twenty-first century, and which all of us, can take pride in. Inherent in this, is the challenge of how we can cooperate and collaborate in making this a national undertaking while ensuring its success. Indeed, given the high stakes, failure is not an option.

However, in so doing, we need to look into the issues that are not only peculiar to higher education, but, equally important, the relationship with central agencies like Public Service Commission, related Ministerial and inter-Ministerial involvements, as well as the expectations of the Malaysian public in general. This is complemented by the initiative of aligning the University with the global education agenda as approved by the United Nations, for example, the Millennium Development Goals, Education for All, and Education for Sustainable Development – all of which will end with the span of the APEX initiative deadline.

We believe that the work and the roles of an APEX University will differ substantially from that of the other HEIs because of its transformational framework. If we are successful in addressing the myriad of issues involved, a new model could emerge that offers an alternative to the existing model such that others may want to emulate. Some of these issues concern resources such as financing, and another is the ‘new’ talent needed to shape the APEX University. And yet another is the issue of governance. It is important to differentiate the APEX University form the prevailing model, since it is intended to address a different worldview; hence different skill sets and responsibilities would be required.

In dealing with such issues, one runs almost headlong into the bureaucratic hurdles that need to be overcome in the journey to APEX-hood. For example, the issue of getting the right talent and the passion that will engender the transformational change and to institute new and dynamic structures. Other issues are related to the questions of autonomy and accountability; after all, these are the two 2As that makes the APEX.

For this reason, USM initiated eight to ten task force groups to look into important factors related to governance, talent, and resources. They include issues related to quality of services, global agenda and future relevance, aspects of sustainability-driven programmes in seeking out people-led local solutions in the
context of an APEX University. This will allow the APEX University to metamorphosise from within the constraints of the cocoon of challenges so as to emerge as a viable ‘new’ entity and a force to be reckoned with within the arena of Malaysian and international higher education. Indeed, the former will be equally transformed, and it goes without saying that all these would incorporate the goals of the Ministry’s strategic plan launched on 27 August 2007. To quote the Minister of Higher Education of Malaysia (Mohamed Khaled 2009):

“One of the transformational initiatives launched recently involves the APEX initiative which provides for the government-aided, fast-track transformation of a university to attain world-class status within a very short timeframe. It is hoped that this kind of fast-track transformation will push the other universities to adopt a similar stance to achieving world-class status. This Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) places the selected institution or institutions at the apex of the HEI pyramid and some of the defining criteria for the APEX status include outstanding leadership, faculties, student body, and infrastructure. APEX universities need to be administered and manage by visionary, versatile, and motivated leaders committed to intellectual and academic advancement. They would need to reflect the excellence they require from their staff and know how to optimise their universities’ human resources and assets. They would need to be highly motivated themselves in order to motivate others to heights of excellence.”
WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS
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One main important issue facing higher education is the tremendous change and the uncertainty bearing down upon it. Incidentally, certain quarters would admit that higher education is currently in a state of crisis despite various indications showing that it is already inept to deal with the fast changing future scenario particularly with respect to the unfolding global trends. Alternatively, to others, it is still 'business-as-usual' where even the basics are yet to be met. This probably is the case for many HEIs in the developing countries.

At the very least however, it should be recognised that change in the education system is inevitable to bring in changes in the global economic structure. As these structures undergo massive turmoil, as admitted by many of late, accompanied by concurrent drastic changes, it is difficult to envisage education remaining unaffected. The case in point is the manner in which education has changed under the influence of the Industrial Revolution some 150 years ago (the setting up of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) as a new and bold university comes to mind). Since then, the education system has been increasingly perceived as a mechanical process of production similar to a factory-industry metaphor churning out students as products, with examinations as a form of quality control and, cohorts of students intake based on their year of studies as the 'raw materials' to be processed and value-add. The use of such manufacturing jargons has permeated into the education system over time, and gradually has moulded education to resemble more and more as an organisation intended for an assembly-line production. In light of this development, scholars are worried about the fate of HEIs in the next 25 years and beyond. If such circumstances are allowed to persist, several scenarios are possible, as suggested from the scenario-planning exercise carried out by USM beginning in 2005.
The corporate sector has displayed an increasing interest in higher education by sponsoring various educational institutions either directly or indirectly. Some business corporations have even created their own university-like institutions within their own system. It is not unusual to read about Intel University or Motorola University or Hamburger (McDonald) University in our midst. And as traditional universities are slow to change, it is possible that these corporations exert their influence to the extent the future of traditional HEIs may be jeopardised. As it is today, the dominant worldview of higher education is already slanted to and structured around the factory-industrial metaphor as argued previously, especially in the developing countries. Consequently, there is limited, if at all any, freedom in knowledge generation and dissemination since the HEIs vision, mission, and objectives are all aligned to the shareholder’s preferences for wealth maximisation through the processes of commercialisation. Quite apart from the issue of academic freedom and autonomy, higher education will be reined in by the corporate sector and the dictates of the marketplace, especially where the idea of a university as a learning organization is weak, vague and poorly articulated.

Yet, at a 2005 conference on higher education held in Luxembourg entitled ‘Universities of Tomorrow’, the concept of University autonomy and the role of the state in higher education in the twenty-first century was reiterated, while recognising the relationships between the business and education sectors. The idea of ‘quaternary education’ was also advanced then. In short, there is a need for a new perspective on higher education as we move into the world of tomorrow guided by the scenario-planning approach as undertaken by USM, as a follow up to the Luxembourg meeting. One of the more dominant preferred scenarios is the shifting of the global mindset regarding the higher education system from the current ‘industrial-factory’ metaphor to that of a ‘sustainability perspective’ or a ‘garden’ metaphor (USM 2006)

On the other extreme, is the ‘dead university’ scenario—one that envisages the demise of the HEIs in their current forms due to its inertia to change, thus leading to the death of independent scholarship as well as the withering of any significant role for academics in shaping the destiny of the society. A ‘dead university’ is a grim warning about the future of universities in the twenty-first century if it fails to be relevant to the emerging needs of the future.

The scenario-planning outcome has revealed that change is inevitable for higher education and it will involve at least four related scenarios. For instance, the shift towards the extensible and sophisticated use of technology and ICT as seen in the ‘invisible university’ scenario with physically ‘invisible and virtual’ structures. This could be the next level of a future open university. It however, requires heavy
investment in technological info-and infrastructure that most developing countries could not risk, thus making this scenario less likely to become a reality under the present circumstances. The impact of technology on education per se is not without controversies and its advantages are debatable when technological awareness and penetration are not well developed; let alone the issue of technological divide that remains pervasive till today.

Yet another is the ‘a la carte' university where the students are able to tailor-made their interests in an individualised manner. Like a menu in a restaurant, the students can pick and choose or mix-and-match what they desire to learn; there is no ‘one-size-fits-all' concept. This scenario too is quite probable in the near future but would require a level of flexibility that the current bureaucratic-intense processes will not be able to readily cope.

There is also a possibility of a state-sponsored university, such as Universiti Industri Selangor (UniSel). Again there are some rather insurmountable barriers for this due to the cost involved in maintaining the operation of a university, in addition to education being under a Federal jurisdiction constitutionally speaking. As mentioned earlier, it is the ‘garden' scenario that presents the most plausible option especially with the emerging concept of sustainability or sustainable development. This is also closely related to the sustainability of HEIs as an institution, and the sustainable development of the education ecosystem itself. Most significant is the use of the words ‘sustainable' and ‘sustainability' which also signify the new role of HEIs – to have a deeper understanding of ecology and its impact on quality of life in the society and humanity. To this effect, the United Nations has declared, 2005-2014, as the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). In this context USM, as part of its mandate as the pioneering Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development designated by the United Nation University in tandem with DESD, is the proponent of sustainability. It then allows the university to operate as the ‘garden' to nature the ‘following of the mind', metaphorically speaking. Hence, the ‘garden' metaphor is posited to oust the ‘industry-factory' metaphor which is seen as wholly unsustainable given the current practices of wealth maximisation at the expense of the ecological environment (symbolically, garden) being one of the three major elements inherent in the concept of ‘sustainability'. The other two elements relate to the sociocultural and economic dimensions-the triple bottom line as it were. Some would even venture to suggest natural resources as another crucial element. In any case, the ultimate objective is to go beyond the status quo and with these opportunities to create a new mould or model for the universities of tomorrow vis-à-vis higher education of tomorrow.
This, undoubtedly, requires no less than a transformational process that must uphold sustainability at the centre stage while transforming the role of the university into a sustainability-led HEI. In this respect, USM had already prepared itself for the ultimate transformation when APEX initiative was announced in 2007 by the Prime Minister, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, as part of the National Higher Education Action Plan or *Pelan Tindakan Pendidikan Tinggi Negara*. It is under his premiership too that the bold call for an ‘education revolution’ was made!

The launching of the APEX initiative in Malaysia should be seen as an indication that our nation is equally keen to improve, if not transform, the higher education system. It is therefore imperative to bear in mind that the APEX initiative in Malaysia is not just about USM, but about the nation and its future. The realisation of an APEX University is a vote of confidence that HEIs can contribute significantly in shaping the destiny of the nation and be influential in the nation-building process. In other words, APEX is a critical agenda for the nation that deserves the support of everyone (Dzukifli 2009a). It calls for the redefining of the mismatch in our current higher education ideals as we take a leaf from Eastern wisdom which declares that ‘learning is about being and not about having’ as articulated by Confucius, or that of Islam that regards knowledge as a source to not only create material wealth, but also to create spiritual well-being. The post-industrial system of education is deficient in that it does not adhere to such wisdoms, emphasising only the development of material well-being in a very reductionist way. It is in this context that the following discussion is presented using USM’s journey to becoming the nation’s first APEX University as the primary example.
CHANGE REMAINS CONSTANT
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As the world is in constant flux, HEIs have to stay relevant by adjusting to the new perspectives and new needs. Some of these changes are rapidly transformational in nature. Unfortunately, the pace of global transformation within the HEIs is extremely sluggish. As stated by Diez-Hochleitner (1996), President of the Club of Rome:

“Education is still living in the past because its present social context is totally different from the situation for which it was designed. Education must not only be adapted to the needs of our age, but it also must make a real effort to look ahead some twenty-five years.”

As an APEX-status university, USM had already set out on its agenda for a transformational change to facilitate its transit onto the new millennium in 2000, long before the APEX idea was mooted and the accolade awarded to it. How did USM achieve the APEX university status?

First, we must acknowledge that the APEX concept is about transformation and therefore very future-oriented. And there is no better time to contemplate this other than the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century. This is a major one-time opportunity for universities created in the previous century to make a lasting difference. In the case of USM, we begin with the question of how would a university in the ‘new’ century be different from that of the previous century (Dzulkifli 2008). Like all Malaysian universities, USM was established mainly to focus on teaching and to provide for human resource development of the country, in our case, especially in the areas of science and technology. In other words, we emphasised more on knowledge dissemination and transfer, although like all good universities, research and development (R & D) has always been regarded as an inherent part of the knowledge creation activity of the university. But its importance was generally subsumed under the role to teaching. However, over time, R & D gained
prominence and USM was recognised as a research-intensive university in 2006 following a very intense in-situ evaluation by an independent committee of the Ministry. This signaled that another model for USM was possible, and it sets the stage for the transformation that USM had been preparing for since the beginning of the new millennium.

The APEX initiative provided ample opportunity to consolidate the many activities and programmes undertaken thus far into a set of general strategies for USM, namely the elimination of redundancies, raising quality and competencies, and creating new opportunities to reinvent itself as a university of tomorrow. The consolidation process took into account a number of key activities and initiatives launched by the university since 2001, for example:

- **The Kampus Sejahtera Programme in 2001** which embodies the Malaysian value of sustainable development, as encompassed in the word *sejahtera*. Such a value system is unique and pristine that foremost one needs to appreciate and understand the Malaysian sociocultural dimension before grasping and experiencing the entire meaning of *sejahtera*. Briefly, it bridges the physical, social, emotional, mental intellectual, and spiritual (PSEMIS) elements of education. The programme encourages volunteerism, teamwork, research-based data-gathering activities, ‘in-sourcing’—recognition of local expertise and indigenous knowledge, and complete documentation of activities carried out with relevant recommendations for change and improvement. It is open to the entire campus community for participation as a bottom-up process. ‘The University in a Garden’ concept, which is a continuum from the above but covering a wider application in the search for new metaphor for the university, is also aligned with the concept of *sejahtera*. This has led to degrees of articulation regarding what constitutes a university of tomorrow by drawing inspiration from nature that is inherently endowed with the value of *sejahtera*. Indeed, implicitly embedded within the concept is the idea of sustainability as being practiced by the traditional Malaysian community since time immemorial as a dominant agrarian society. ‘The University in a Garden’ concept allows the university to develop ideas of transdisciplinarity and community engagement, and to position itself globally as an alternative model of a university in the emerging Age of Sustainable Development or Era of Sustainability similar to MIT in the days of Industrial Era as mentioned earlier.

- **Since sustainable development has taken prominence internationally through various global summits and discourse, USM is able to leverage on many of**
the resolutions passed. By 2005, when the United Nations declared 2005-14 as the UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development, USM was able to gain recognition from the United Nations University (UNU) – Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS) as one of the seven pioneering Regional Centres of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development in 2005, the only one within the ASEAN region then. This provided USM an international mandate to promote and streamline ‘sustainable development’ as a key concept throughout the education system. It also called for the establishment of a transformational education system as one of its key elements for change, akin to the then Prime Minister’s called for an ‘education revolution’. It is crucial to recognise that this has provided an opportunity for the university to close the gap in the nine challenges of the Vision 2020; the nation’s blueprint, where the issues relating to sustainability, and the environment in particular, has not been adequately addressed and highlighted. This ‘blindspot’ in the national vision will have many undesirable consequences of not being appropriately addressed.

- The outcome of the scenario-planning exercise undertaken by USM in 2005-6, reaffirmed that a change in higher education is imperative if it is to move with the times. More importantly, the scenario relating to sustainable development predominates, although other scenarios are in parts, equally relevant to be incorporated in the new strategies when necessary.

- Much of these efforts jive well with one of the five thrusts in the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-10), that focuses on promoting sustainability and quality of life, namely the fourth thrust, and enabling the other thrusts to be achieved with relative ease, for example, moving up the economy value-chain based on sustainability, and the elimination of socio-economic disparities and inequalities. Indeed, it follows that as a university, streamlining ‘sustainable development’ as the mode of future in meeting both the national as well as international goals, including that of the Millennium Development Goals (2000-15) and Education for Sustainable Development (2005-14).

In summary, the 40-year evolution of USM into an APEX-status university, recalls some of the future concerns spelt out in the 1987 Brundtland Report on sustainable development (also known as the Report on sustainable development (also known as the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development Our Common Future) as the platform for USM to forge a new future.
KNOWLEDGE AND ORGANISATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

Edward O. Wilson (1998) noted that ‘… the on-going fragmentation of knowledge and the resulting chaos in philosophy are not reflections of the real world but artifacts of scholarship.’ This resonated too well with the transformational plan of higher education which has suffered from the fragmentation and separation of knowledge that is largely purveyed in silo-like fashion in the prevailing model of higher education system. In fact, this view challenges the current worldwide model that tends to regard a university as a ‘factory’, producing students (products) in an ‘assembly line’ mode of production. As a predominantly science-based university, this strikes a chord as to what needs to be transformed into, namely the ‘oneness’ of knowledge. We concur that fragmentation of knowledge deviates from the reality, and as a consequence, renders the knowledge meaningless more so in dealing with the complexities of emerging in the new century. Such an isolated knowledge-base would not have the desired impact in the ‘real’ societal setting where the various knowledge-bases converge, interact, and intersect with one another to lend more meaning and depth to life, nature, and the future. Science alone, without the contribution of art as a major discipline, will not provide the appropriate perspective for an optimal solution to life’s challenges, and vice versa. The dominancy of science created by the Industrial Revolution some 150 years ago has resulted in the kind of intellectually fragmented society that we are living in today, and this is not what the future in envisaged in an image of a globalised and borderless world.

Yet, the reality is that most universities are still complacent in their narrow-minded search for knowledge. The observation made by Diez-Hochleitner (1996) as quoted above is by and large still relevant, and so begs the question, in what direction should higher education be heading?
This is where the key concepts and ideas that USM has been focusing on converge, and in articulating them, it provides crucial answers that lie in sustainable development or sustainability. The ‘garden’ metaphor reinforces the fact that knowledge is diversity in unity and transcends what meets the eye. The term ‘tree of knowledge’ in fact is an ancient one that mirrors on the ‘oneness’ of knowledge, in a very interconnected way, at least at the philosophical level. It is all-encompassing and marks the convergence of meaning both in the tangible sense as well as in the intangible sense - the latter is often being marginalised. Thus, insofar as the twenty-first century is concerned, this convergence must be reflected in the system of education if more complex and diverse issues confronting the world today and the future are to be amicably resolved and reconciled, where no particular branch of knowledge and disciplines dominates. The error in judgement resulting from the Industrial Age must not be allowed to perpetuate itself through the education system. And if the ‘artifacts of scholarship’ - to quote Wilson - linger on, then it is the responsibility of the community scholars to put it right again! Exploring in-depth the garden metaphor has given us more and more room to resolve some of these fundamental issues in a very systematic way as inspired by nature.

It is, therefore, apt that the APEX submission put forward by USM in 2008 to bid for the APEX-status university focuses on the theme: ‘Transforming Higher Education for a Sustainable Tomorrow’. It categorically states USM’s mission to be a ‘sustainability-led’ university of the future. We believe that this is a very unique value proposition, and an innovative approach in the attempt to create an APEX university within the allocated time. Being the first HEI in Malaysia (and evidently internationally as well) that develops and embraces sustainable development as its overarching principle in education for the institution, it presents a historically unique attempt to rewrite the rules of education away from what it is today. As depicted by the tagline ‘The University in a Garden’, it celebrated diversity and is oriented towards people first in that it caters for their needs, without marginalising their traditional and indigenous knowledge and wisdom with the ambit of sustainability. In addition, in the context of learning to last, it also gorges a harmonious and peaceful living environment, as all good gardens aspire to be, in contrast to a plantation, allowing the garden metaphor to co-create new values while revisiting some of the older ones.
UNIQUENESS THRU
TRANSFORMATION
AND INNOVATION
UNIQUENESS THROUGH TRANSFORMATION AND INNOVATION

In an international conference entitled ‘Pathways Towards a Shared Future’, organised and hosted by the United Nations University and UNESCO in Tokyo in 2007, the discussion revolved around the changing role of HEIs in a globalised world. The conference highlighted the notion that in the twenty-first century, a nation’s educational identity would be recognized by a handful of universities that characterised the nation and no longer by the national education system per se. It asserted in the preamble of the conference that:

“Copernican change has taken place with regards to the roles of Higher Education Institutions. No longer do national systems of higher education lend prestige to their constituent parts, the institutions: rather the opposite, is true. It is internationally acknowledged qualities of individual institutions which lend prestige to the national systems to which they belong. Higher Education Institutions are becoming more internationalised as they increasingly cooperate and compete with other institutions worldwide and as they prepare their students, drawn more and more from abroad, for the new realities of globalised labour and business markets.”

In this case, the APEX initiative is therefore timely, and it is imperative that Malaysia ensures the success of this initiative if it wants to be visible in the global higher education arena as part of creating ‘Pathways Towards a Shared Future’ as envisaged by the abovementioned theme. It is noteworthy that the Ninth Malaysia Plan does make reference to this issue in a specific way.

In tandem with this awareness, USM is also conscious of the importance of innovation (both social and technical) as an enabler for transformation to embrace the Copernican-type of change. Put another way, in order to achieve the goals of the APEX University, USM must encapsulate its own uniqueness which could serve as a major source of differentiation among other HEIs. We realise the urgency to move into a new paradigm but not so much as to emulate others by benchmarking them. In
an interview, the co-author of The Blue Ocean Strategy, W.Chan Kim (2005) stated:

“Never try to imitate anybody, because as long as you benchmark with somebody, at the best you will be is like them. Meanwhile, the person you benchmark is a head of you. You will never close the gap.”

This thinking has therefore, forced USM to strategise beyond merely benchmarking, but instead to focus on the creation of new opportunities based on the outcome of our scenario planning process. Clearly, the use of the term ‘benchmarking’ has been overrated in Malaysian HEIs such as that it paralyses our own capabilities to forge ahead by not being able to challenge existing assumptions and standards that have been imposed on us- some of which are excess baggage of the past. We often try to fit into the paradigm as defined for us by others to the extent that we are unable to initiate our own transformational processes that are relevant to our immediate and future needs. This has led us to wallow in a futile ‘catch-22’ situation.

Fortunately, APEX is an excellent platform to depart from the ‘old’ rhetorical thinking, while at the same time encouraging the need to ‘think-out-of-the-box’, which to us, is related to ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’. (Dzulkifli & Ramli 2008).

In so doing, we begin to further recognise how HEIs can play a vital role in undertaking major societal commitment and social responsibility not only in their immediate communities, but equally significantly on a global level. Issues related to overcoming poverty and improving the quality of life in a sustainable way, for example, are the keys to the heightened performance of any university that speaks the language of sustainability. New challenges like global warming and climate change must be grappled with as part of their institutional commitment. Succinctly, while moving forward, HEIs are at once global players as they prepare students for global citizenry without disowning their responsibilities at the local-national level. In this respect, global agenda (such as the MDGs) is a vital component of the universities’ vision and missions, especially in the developing countries of the Global South where many societal issues and problems continue to exist despite the claims that ‘globalisation’ is rapidly changing the global landscape for the better. Indeed, the world is still far from being ‘flat’ as often claimed.

For USM, the context and target that we have defined for ourselves as an APEX-status university is the ‘bottom billions’ - the two-third of the world’s population said to be languishing at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid in an increasing prosperous world - the ultimate contradiction. In many ways, this dire contrasting situation once again reminded us of the failure of the existing system of education often purported as the leveler of society. This then allows us to contemplate on a new paradigm for which we will redirect our focus at the base of the social pyramid as a way of articulating the garden metaphor of sustainability-led
university. This is our way forward to change the landscape of higher education in Malaysia as a necessary condition to begin the Copernican change in the Malaysian Higher education setting.
CONCLUSION
CONCLUSION

The transformational journey leading to the creation of an APEX University is premised on seven key characteristics (Dzulkifli 2009b):

i. the future, namely, searching for transformational ideas that can further define the global future,

ii. uniqueness being pioneering based on differentiated expertise and relevance in enabling future talents,

iii. sustainability by ensuring that the knowledge base is not compromising the future generations

iv. humanity by ensuring that the underlying mission is directed towards uplifting the social well-being of the community, especially at the bottom of the pyramid,

v. universality by seeking ‘new commons’ through trans-disciplinary approaches, collaborations and partnerships,

vi. change as a systematic way of achieving innovative and creative transformation, and

vii. sacrifice, a mark of dedicated intellectual altruism toward achieving the APEX status.

Each of those listed are interconnected to one another so that it provides a holistic bigger picture of the future. Collectively, it too will differentiate USM from the other HEIs, and in many ways insist that another model of a university - perhaps a fourth generation HEIs - is possible, as much as a new world is!

It is about rewriting the rules of the games to meet the demands of the twenty-first century and beyond, recognising that all things are fast changing, and education, including higher education, cannot remains status quo any more. The risk of being irrelevant is greater than before simply because there are now new players in the global higher arena who are asserting their presence in a very influential way to meet the demands for higher education worldwide. Since a decade ago, the rate of enrolment in HEIs is said to have increased more than tenfold-meaning that there are ample opportunities for others to compete. Furthermore, it could be a precursor to the ‘dead university’ scenario as mentioned above.

In summary, we need to redefine the worldwide concept of education in the new millennium as the existing politico-economic model collapses and with that, its grip and influence on the education sector. Conversely, this is the time that higher education must quickly reassert itself, and shape the future
economics model based on sustainability. For this to happen, the APEX initiative as envisaged by USM, holds an exciting promise not only for Malaysia, but even beyond her shores. It remains our hope that the APEX University of Malaysia will be the beacon that will rally scholars and other higher education practitioners to return to and reaffirm the basic mission of education as the leveller of society at large, as we look forward to just and peaceful time ahead.
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ONLINE SUPPORT


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