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Saturday March 11, 2006

An open letter to Mustapa

Dear Sir,

Firstly, allow me to congratulate you on your new posting. It must be said though that you are not to be envied, for you are now faced with a Herculean task.

But, where are my manners? You have no idea who I am. I could be a complete nutcase.

Well, I'm an academic in a Malaysian public university. Which some people might consider a nutcase, anyway. But I'm very proud to be an academic.

It's a noble profession, and it matters not that my students earn more than me within a few years of graduating and that little children run screaming from my hideously outdated clothes. It's a calling to be an academic, and I care passionately about it.

That is why I'm writing to you. You see, there is much that is wrong with our universities and much that can be done by the Ministry to put things right.

You may not believe that my one purpose in writing to you is the improvement of our institutions, but let me assure you, we true academics (as opposed to wannabe politicians in lecturers' clothes) don't have hidden agendas.

Over the past few years, there has been this mantra chanted by the Government and university leaders: "We want our universities to be world-class universities." Unfortunately, this mantra does not have any explanatory notes, so we don't really know what "world-class" means. However, let us assume that a world-class university has the following:

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- Graduates who are employable, not only here but also abroad;
- Academic staff who are respected worldwide;
- Research and publications that are recognised by reputable international journals/publishers;
- An academic programme that is recognised worldwide;
- An academic atmosphere that can attract quality national and foreign students and staff.

- [Security Guard](#)
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If we accept these criteria as valid, what then can be done to achieve it?

Universities are not hampers

Universities are not rewards to be handed out. It has happened in Terengganu and the same has been promised to Kelantan. "Vote for us and we will give you a university."

This may make political sense, but it does not make any academic sense. A lot of planning is needed to ensure that the resources are sufficient to create a university of quality.

Malaysia is not a very rich country – we can't afford petrol subsidies, for goodness' sake – and we definitely can't afford to stretch our limited economic and intellectual resources to build universities in such a blasé manner.

Universities are not fast-food joints

They should instead be high-class restaurants. Universities have to be elitist in order to produce quality research and graduates.

An elitist university means that only the best candidates are taken in as students and only the best staff are hired. Classes and exams can then be pitched at a higher standard.

Furthermore, the resulting smaller student numbers mean seminars and tutorials can be truly conducive to discussions, and lecturers will have less of a teaching burden in order to concentrate on research.

This is not to say that higher education as a whole must be elitist. There are other forms of higher education

institutions that can cater to school leavers who don't make the cut, such as polytechnics and community colleges.

If you love your universities, you must set them free

Academics and students must be free to think and to express themselves.

Yes, I understand that this is Malaysia and freedom is seen as a dirty word by some, but without it, there is little hope of achieving "world-class" universities.

Intellectualism cannot grow in a repressive atmosphere.

We all know that in this country, there are many laws that restrict our freedom to express ourselves, but the irony is that for lecturers and students there are additional laws levelled at them.

You must be aware of the University and University Colleges Act – that wonderful piece of legislation designed to ensure that university students are little more than secondary school pupils.

You may not be aware, however, of the Statutory Bodies Discipline and Surcharge Act which affects academics who are the employees of statutory bodies.

According to this law, we can't say anything for or against government policy without getting ministerial permission first.

Now, this may be all right for a mathematician quietly thinking up new formulae with which to calculate the possibility of Malaysia ever qualifying for the World Cup.

But for social scientists, it is akin to having the Malaysian football team play football without using their feet (which is perhaps something that they do anyway, looking at previous results).

The simple fact of the matter is that universities should first and foremost be the birthplace of ideas and original thought, discussion and debate, and this can't be achieved with such laws hung around our necks.

And in case you're worried that greater freedom will make our campuses hotbeds of radicalism, please let me put your fears to rest.

The number of students in this day and age who really care about matters beyond Akademi Fantasia is very small indeed.

Most students just want to graduate and as quickly as possible get into debt to pay for their three-bedroom flat and Proton Waja.

Universities need Mandelas

If there is one thing that Malaysian universities need, it is good leadership. And by a good leader, I mean a Vice-Chancellor who has the qualities of an outstanding intellectual, manager and diplomat, who can ensure that academic principles are paramount, not political expediency.

That promotions are given based on merit, not patronage. That students are treated like adults, not children. And finally, that the university is run on the highest ideals of civilisation and intellectualism, not self-aggrandisement and base toadying.

An outstanding academic leader, someone who can efficiently organise the place, represent the institution with dignity and command the respect of those working under him, or her, is a rare creature indeed.

To seek out such a person, may I suggest that the search committee your predecessor was talking about be made a reality.

This search committee, however, must be independent and transparent. It must not be hindered by any political agenda and must instead pick the candidates based on ability – and ability alone. Factors such as race, creed, gender and nationality should not be a consideration.

Perhaps we'd like to take lessons from elsewhere. Oh, before you think I'm suggesting a "study trip" abroad (with the usual sightseeing and cultural diversions), let me make it clear that I think the taxpayers' money need not be wasted in such a fashion. After all, writing an e-mail is probably all you need to do to get the necessary information.

You may wish to start with New Zealand universities. I say New Zealand because the VC of Auckland University was recently poached by Oxford to be its Vice-Chancellor. The first non-English VC of Oxford since, well, since forever.

Now, that's world-class, don't you think? And from a country much smaller than us where the sheep outnumber the humans. Amazing. Well then, Sir, I think I'd best sign off now. You must have loads to do. Oh, before I forget, if you want to lighten the workload of your officers, may I make a last suggestion?

Why don't you just leave the day-to-day running of the universities in the hands of the universities? I bet the Ministry has enough on its plate without having to decide about trivial things like professorial promotions and the approving of leave for academics to go to conferences and holidays overseas.

Anyway, thanks for taking the time to read my letter. Good luck with your endeavours. Until next time, I remain,

**Yours sincerely,
AZMI SHAROM**

• ***Dr Azmi Sharom is an associate professor of the Law Faculty of Universiti Malaya***



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