

Going for greater autonomy

All public universities in Malaysia would be better off if more decisions could be made by them instead of by the Higher Education Ministry.

GONG Xi Fa Cai! Although this time Chinese New Year occurred earlier in the Gregorian calendar, the long weekend was widely welcomed with too many projects adding to the pile of procrastinations.

Alas, while long weekends are usually a welcome bonus in terms of getting work done or revisiting dormant projects, this one was comparatively unproductive as so many friends returned home from Singapore and Hong Kong, requesting long afternoon teas until the firecrackers marked the beginning of open house season.

Attention then focused on eating Teochew oranges and trying to receive *ang pow* from my married Chinese friends, who gave conflicting predictions about my (Water Dog) fortunes in the Year of the Water Dragon.

Before the religious authorities descend upon my tail, I should stress that my decisions are in no way affected by the recommendations of *feng shui* masters, however scientific their approach.

The visit to Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) on Wednesday provided an excellent opportunity to refocus the mind.

This university, founded in 2000, appointed a new chancellor two months ago, the Tunku Ampuan Besar Negri Sembilan, who presented degrees to hundreds of



Roaming Beyond the Fence
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graduates at the Putrajaya International Convention Centre in November.

The university's main campus is in Nilai, a town whose impressive story of growth is a merit to the state government.

Even though some aspects of the planning could be better (the forests of signs obscure one another), urbanisation here seems to have taken place in a more organised manner than settlements in the Klang Valley.

Capitalising on the opportunities for *merantau* provided by the proximity to Kuala Lumpur, Seremban, KLIA and Putrajaya, a new education hub next door, Bandar Enstek, is coming into fruition too.

Cempaka International Ladies' College is already here on a vast, stunning campus.

The top-performing Tunku Kurshiah College will soon open here, and Epsom College is opening here too, providing competition to Marlborough College already under construction in Iskandar in Johor.

Unlike those colleges, USIM is a

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publicly-funded institution of higher learning.

This, together with its label as an "Islamic university" might trigger some assumptions, if not images of fully veiled-ladies and *gutra*-topped, *jubbah*-clad bearded scholars wandering around domed academic blocks, then perhaps of agitation and controversy that the International Islamic University Malaysia is sometimes host to.

The Chancellery, centrepiece of the campus, does indeed have a dome, is oriented towards Mecca, and is state-of-the-art.

A briefing was given in the Senate room, whose technological gadgetry was complemented by rustic

chandeliers and flags of the federation in the correct order (states with monarchs ordered by length of reign unless serving as Yang di-Pertuan Agong, then states with governors ordered by length of service, and the Federal Territories flag at the end) instead of randomly, which one unfortunately sees even in government departments these days.

This was followed by a tour of the Faculty of Leadership & Management, of which the counselling training rooms were the most spectacular feature.

Dropping by the campus' radio station, run by the students, I asked: "Do the university authorities censor you?"

With one eye on the Vice-Chancellor, the young lady replied: "We have our own editor," and the VC immediately added "I don't stop them from saying whatever they like; same with the university newspaper."

Curious – so the university's radio station and newspaper have more freedom than those licensed outside for public consumption.

Yet anyone can visit radio.usim.edu.my.

Throughout the library tour, I had some interesting side discussions.

One lament was that USIM's graduates have a tough time securing

employment in the private sector: "The private sector only employs privately-educated students".

I have heard this complaint before – but from the other side – at a private university, a senior administrator complained that her graduates found it difficult in securing employment because of discrimination against privately-educated students.

One way to combat such perceptions is to enable public universities to behave like private universities.

Already, some public universities have been granted some autonomy from the government.

I asked if USIM wanted the same. "Of course," came the reply.

I suggested to the assembled executives, board members and academics that USIM, and indeed all public universities in Malaysia, would be better off if more decisions could be made by them instead of at the Higher Education Ministry – recalling that another Islamic university I recently visited, Al-Azharin Egypt, is in the midst of claiming greater autonomy for itself too, remembering the period from 972 to 1812 when its *waqf* (trust) funding was truly free from government interference.

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