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New direction for development
JAMES CAMPBELL

THE recent release of the New Economic Model (NEM) has caused considerable debate in Malaysia and abroad.

Recently we hear that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak on his trip to Washington DC, the United States has been asked about NEM by President Barack Obama.

The importance of NEM has not been lost on economists, politicians and the public.

One area of particular interest which has received less attention is how NEM relates to and meshes with reforms in higher education and specifically with the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) which is being developed at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM).

The synergies between NEM and APEX are a welcome development since they point to the central significance that APEX plays in preparing Malaysian higher educational institutions for the new economy.

As a practical approach to globalisation and the need to perform in a competitive higher educational environment, APEX which is articulated by USM’s strategic approach, is directly and centrally in keeping with the aims and approach of NEM.

In this sense there is “common ground” between the aims of APEX and NEM, which needs to be understood if we are to grasp the new thinking that characterises the former and its relationship to the direction of Malaysia. The NEM and APEX symbioses need elaboration since they are a foundation for any understanding of the way USM’s APEX strategy can be more fully understood in public policy context.

NEM includes eight Strategic Reform Initiatives.

These include re-energising the private sector; developing a quality workforce and reducing dependency on foreign labour creating a competitive domestic economy; strengthening the public sector; transparent and market-friendly affirmative action; building the knowledge base and infrastructure; enhancing the sources of growth; and ensuring sustainability of growth.

These initiatives fit the APEX agenda since it is centrally concerned with building knowledge and sustainable practices which can enhance and engender sustainable growth.

The key ways in which APEX and NEM intertwine point to an underlying and strong vision for Malaysia’s development and a coherent policy framework which bodes well for the future.

This unity between NEM and APEX suggests a deep appreciation of the way economic and educational policies are interconnected and reliant on each other. The underlying philosophies and positions outlined in NEM correspond with APEX in significant and mutually reinforcing ways.
Firstly, the high income goals of NEM correlate neatly with the flagship strategies of USM in regard to, among other things, engaging: energy efficiency and renewable energy carried out by the Centre for Education, Training and Research in Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency at USM; advancing knowledge in regard to medical and dental science carried out by Advanced Medical and Dental Institute; the Biomedical and Health Sciences Platform; Centre For Drug Research; Centre For Marine and Coastal Studies; Institute for Research in Molecular Medicine; Malaysian Institute of Pharmaceuticals and Neutraceuticals; and the Clinical Research Platform.

These examples are drawn from a rich research platform at USM and point to the solid commitment of USM through its APEX strategy to “create innovations for social wellbeing and wealth for the country”.

The focus of USM on Technology and Science ties in explicitly with the recognition by NEM that Malaysia has certain advantages and strengths in Applied Technology and its “rich biodiversity”.

Secondly, the focus by USM on its bottom billions strategy and its inclusive educational environment fit the inclusiveness mission outlined within NEM.

In many ways, the approach of USM to inclusiveness and social justice echoes the concerns over NEM.

This cooperation between APEX and NEM signifies a realisation on the part of policy makers that Malaysia’s economic growth depends upon its commitment to fairness and social justice.

Not only is USM’s strategy prescient in this regard but it synergises with the national interest as outlined in NEM.

Finally, USM’s overriding concern about sustainability corresponds with NEM. Sustainability which drives the APEX agenda is recognised in NEM not as an afterthought but rather as a critical issue for the continued development of Malaysian economic growth.

In these three critical ways, the APEX strategy of USM places Malaysian higher education front and centre in the debate over national economic development and growth.

The critical ways in which APEX now supports and drives the agenda of national economic and social transformation in Malaysia cannot be underestimated.

With the release of NEM and the work currently being done to achieve the goals of APEX, significant public policy initiatives have been put in place to realise Malaysia’s national aspirations.

These hopes are now being given a firm footing in public policy. The issue facing Malaysia is how to realise these goals.

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