

Headline **Don't ignore its value**
Date **24 Sep 2010**
MediaTitle **New Straits Times**
Section **Local News**
Journalist **N/A**
Frequency **Daily**
Circ / Read **136,530 / 330,000**

Language **English**
Page No **18**
Article Size **498 cm²**
Color **Black/white**
ADValue **6,895**
PRValue **20,686**



Don't ignore its value

THE controversies and paradoxes have once again emerged as results of the ranking of universities were announced.

On one hand, I share Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr Zakri Abdul Hamid's view that rankings are irrelevant ("Universities and their irrelevant rankings" — NST, Aug 27) and that universities in Malaysia need to re-examine their fundamentals.

But, on the other hand, universities just cannot ignore the results. Universities have an obligation to the people and to their stakeholders. This is a form of international "auditing" that stakeholders can at least judge the performance of the universities.

Practically, this ranking has been used as one of the key performance indexes (KPIs) that universities need to strive to achieve and work to be better ranked the next time round.

For instance, the 2010 ranking by the QS World University Rankings saw three of Malaysia's universities moving up the ranking order: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) all improved on their positions last year. UKM is ranked 263 this year compared with 291 last year; USM at 309 compared with 314; and UPM is at 319 compared with 345.

However, the ranking saw Universiti Malaya (UM) slipping to 207 compared with 180 last year. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) dropped to 365 compared with 320 last year.

The Times Higher Education (THE) World University ranking was revealed on Sept 16 based on new criteria set with Thomson Reuters. Our five research universities are not anywhere in the top 200 world-ranking universities due to the new criteria set.

Perhaps, we need to choose which ranking to focus our efforts on. Rankings should not be judged using one-size-fits-all indicators.

But we cannot be "sour grapes" and say that we are going to ignore the results because we think it is irrelevant. We certainly cannot also be obsessive.

But we must be open-minded and continue to benchmark against best practices of noted Ivy

League universities and continue with the strategic transformation plans that are put in place by the Higher Education Ministry and the respective universities to meet the relevant needs close to home, with the hope these strategies would also result indirectly in better placements the next time round.

What makes a university good or excellent and thus become a preferred higher institution for as-

piring students, dynamic academics and innovative researchers?

Dr M. Naicker in his letter "Where criteria count" (NST, Sept 14), indicated some criteria that he would use to choose a university "considered good" for his child, such as academic and non-academic pre-entry requirements, recognition of degree awarded by reputed professional bodies or councils, actual number of small group teaching sessions, actual hours of supervision, employer feedback and the like.

Rankings are awarded to universities on the basis of value of education provided (quality reputation), among other factors.

In the past 12 years (1997-2009), almost all research conducted on students' intention to join a university (local or abroad), rested on factors such as financial attractiveness, course suitability and availability (content and structure), ease and flexibility of enrolment, value of education (quality reputation), physical facilities and resources as well as family and friends' influence.

It is interesting to note that in Malaysia, the top three most important factors do not include value of education. Instead, they are cost of education, physical facilities and resources and people influence (family and friends).

In fact, a study by UM (Lau Sear Haur, 2009) showed "value of education" having the lowest mean score. This is unlike studies undertaken in Europe, Australia and America where value of education has always been the most important factor.

Dynamic academics and innovative researchers would be seeking a university with value of education (quality reputation) factor simply because a high quality, rep-

utable university would ensure quality teaching, research and community engagement activities.

In fact, they are all inter-related, as quite rightly pointed out by Dr Umi Khattab in her letter "Can ingenuity flourish with constraints?" (NST, Sept 14) that good teaching and community work is the result of good research and innovation.

However, unlike Umi, I do not liken "publish or perish" as a Western notion. It is rather a scholarly notion (it knows no culture, colour or race) that any good academic should adhere to, irrespective of which part of the world they originate from or what constraints and challenges are put to them.

I speak through experience as someone who came into the academic world at the age of 27 with a PhD in 1983. Times were certainly different then but like the other colleagues of my time, after almost 30 years on, we have moved with the times and continued to research, supervise, teach, innovate and be involved in community work amidst the many constraints and challenges before us, and have managed to excel, if not in all, then in some of these aspects because we truly believe these are the roles a true academic must play.

I would like to echo Zakri's plea for academics to be involved in global research problems as outlined in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). We have to research beyond our national boundaries so that novel findings in science and technology and social sciences can be shared globally; so that our researchers and universities can be equals to the other great researchers and universities globally.

However, all the issues mentioned in the MDGs (such as eradication of extreme poverty, achieving primary education, promoting gender equality, combating HIV/AIDS and ensuring environmental sustainability) are also issues faced by the lower 40 per cent socio-economic group in our country as clearly indicated in the New Economic Model propagated by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Na-

jib Razak.

Charity must begin at home and I fervently believe that if issues mentioned in the MDGs are tackled well nationally, the data obtained can be shared through smart collaborative research links with our counterparts overseas. In fact, I am certain that is already being done by prominent professors in the top five research universities in the country.

Being in the information and communications technology (ICT) field, I am pleased that Umi has so much confidence in technology. Indeed, today, one can work from anywhere.

But let's not forget the simple bare facts of bad connectivity and accessibility penetration. Malaysia hopes to achieve 50 per cent penetration of broadband by the end of this year, which stands at 37.3 per cent penetration compared with 70 per cent enjoyed by South Korea, Taiwan and Japan. Only the Federal Territory has 105 per cent penetration; Selangor 55.5 per cent; Kedah 21.5 per cent and Kelantan 15.5 per cent. Sabah has an even much lower percentage of connectivity and accessibility of penetration.

Again, unlike those in the business field where working from home would be more suitable, academicians need the labs, need other researchers to discuss and debate with and need the conducive scholarly environment to write and innovate.

Bill Gates mentioned in one of his autobiographies that he believed "one cannot totally communicate through the technology; one needs to meet face to face to be able to feel what is being uttered".

I believe it's the people (the professors, associate professors, senior lecturers, young lecturers and students alike) who give rise to the value of education (quality reputation) of a university. What is a beautiful university building without the beautiful minds of the people (professors, lecturers and students) who occupy it?

PROF DATUK DR HALIMAH BADIOZE ZAMAN
Faculty of Information Science and Technology
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Bangi, Selangor

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