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Future looks bright for UUM

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"I AM conscious of the fact that the university was set up specifically to focus on management-related courses. Excellence is expected since it is catering to a specific target," said Datuk Dr Shamsuddin Kassim, 58, Universiti Utara Malaysia's third vice-chancellor.

Unlike other universities, studies in UUM are confined to management-related subjects like economics, accounting, and information technology. It also has schools of social development, management, language and scientific thinking, graduate studies, as well as the institutes of quality management and entrepreneurial development.

With such a specific target in mind, everything in the 1,061-hectare campus in Sintok, Kedah, has been designed with producing graduates who will excel accordingly.

The students live in 10 hostels which have been named after major companies - MAS, Tenaga Nasional, Pernas, Petronas, EON, MISC, Telekom Malaysia, Perwaja, Kumpulan Guthrie and Proton.

The residents of each hostel are given special access to these companies, which will benefit them as students, and perhaps later as employees.

However, this does not mean free publicity for these companies. Selected by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the companies are required to pay RM250,000 towards a revolving endowment fund from which the students can apply for loans to run businesses or for living expenses.

Similarly, the campus also has a shopping mall which serves as an incubator where the students put the management theories they learn into practice.

They are allowed to operate businesses but these are run along the same way as real businesses. For instance, the students have to register their businesses with the Registrar of Companies and pay income tax.

As in the real world, some businesses are sole proprietorships while others are in the form of partnerships. Since these students-cum-businessmen have lectures to attend, they employ workers to help out. Some of these businesses were started through loans that the students applied on their own.

At present, the mall holds 20 shops like laundrettes, retail outlets and stationery shops. The students are permitted to operate these businesses only as long as they are studying in UUM. Upon graduation, they will have to hand them over to the next batch of students through a proper sales agreement.

"All our facilities are designed to give the students a high quality of life so that they may excel in their studies," said Shamsuddin, who has been vice-chancellor since April 1993.

In an environment that combines an educational centre with tourism and recreation, the UUM campus has a sports complex and many outdoor facilities. This includes a nine-hole golf course, jungle walks, a deer park, butterfly farm, bird sanctuary, botanical gardens, the only permanent archery range in the country, fish ponds and an abundant animal life.

In Shamsuddin's own words, the campus is a "beautiful place to live, and a wonderful place to study; our facilities are no less, if not better, than other universities."

These facilities are open to the public, and during the school holidays,

they can stay at the hostels or in the three-star hotel situated within its grounds.

However, the UUM was not always the tropical paradise it is now. Once, not too long ago, it was a place no man dared to venture.

"During World War II, this place was the centre for the MPAJA (Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army). The communists were active here. By 1952, the locals had moved to Gurun, but some came back. There was a lot of danger, so most people were afraid to come here. In 1972, the town was burned down by the Government to get rid of the facilities and for a long time, this place was abandoned. The last murders took place in 1976 when the communists ambushed some soldiers," said Shamsuddin, as he looked out of the windows of his office where we sat on the very same hill where the army had conducted special operations to fight the communists.

(It is in honour of those people who were killed by the communists that UUM erected the Sintok Monument within its grounds.)

Perhaps it was to change the image of the area that UUM was sited there, but the official reason given was that it was part of the decentralisation of education.

"UUM would help to bring development to this region, as well as create a concern for education among the locals and expose them to higher education."

However, the fact that the university is sited in such a remote part of the country is also the cause for some of its problems.

"It is difficult to utilise resources that are concentrated in the major urban areas. If this university was in the Klang Valley, I could easily invite any foreign visitor to give talks to my staff. As it is, people have to be flown all the way here. Therefore, we have to plan for the expertise that we seek from outside."

Even when this expertise is obtained, it may not be so easy for Shamsuddin to fly them to Sintok.

"During the misty periods, the weather can get so bad that the aeroplanes may have to be diverted to Penang for one to two hours before resuming the journey."

Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak had one such experience on Sept 7 last year when he was scheduled to open a seminar on rural education in UUM.

Then there is also the problem of staffing. It now has 455 academic staff to teach its 7,944 students.

"Staffing is a critical issue. We have been building our manpower and sourcing from outside and it is an unending search. But generally, it is difficult to attract staff."

The university is sited 50km from Alor Star, and there is nothing else in Sintok except the university and rubber estates. The lack of public amenities is a put-off for many people.

"It is also difficult for staff who have young children to work here because the nearest school is in Changlun which is 12km away. I myself have to travel that far each day to send my son to school," said Shamsuddin.

For the same reason, wives of academics will not be able to work unless the university offers them employment.

However, Shamsuddin is optimistic that things will change for the better soon.

"More and more people are becoming fed up of staying in KL and the Klang Valley, and have expressed interest to come here. With a township being planned for Sintok, schools will be built here, and we will not face these problems any more."

This optimism comes from the hardship that Shamsuddin led as a boy in

Kuantan, the son of a farmer from Sumatra who was determined that his sons would get a good education, no matter what.

"My policy is to take things as they come. Nothing is too difficult that it cannot be overcome," he said.

On a happier note, Shamsuddin proudly declares that UUM has had nine batches of graduates, with most doing well in the private sector.

"Our IT graduates are better paid than others, because they have practical experience and are offered jobs even before they graduate," Shamsuddin said.

It is the practical training as well as the compulsory co-curricular activity that has increased the value of UUM graduates, making them more confident, possessing the necessary team spirit that allows for better assimilation in the private sector.

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