

# Academia feels a

Nst 15 JUL 2011

**T**HE following is the interview with Universiti Malaya Vice-Chancellor Professor Datuk Dr Anuar Zaini Mohd Zain:

**Q: From a relatively quiet university hospital, you walked into Universiti Malaya. Soon after your arrival, you became a controversial figure. What are your views on this transformation?**

**A:** To say that university hospital was quiet is not right because the scene was very dynamic. We were involved with the community all the time, with sick people and those with problems. They come to the hospital for attention. That is actually where I learnt to deal with human beings.

In university administration, one deals with different human beings. The campus consists of academicians, workers and students — it is a different community altogether compared with the hospital.

In the medical centre, we had all types of people, some very simple. You just needed to talk to them and they were satisfied. Some cases were more urgent.

It is the same in the university. There are various signs and symptoms of problems. There are areas which can be easily managed and those which are difficult. Fortunately, the areas which are difficult to manage are very small.

The first thing I did at the university was to look at the people, to understand them, particularly the staff and students. As I tried to understand diseases and the problems of the community then, I do that here now.

I talked to all of them — stu-

dents, deans, heads of departments and staff. I found a lot of issues. I couldn't handle them by just talking to everyone, so we had a lot of group discussions and brainstorming to tackle the issues that affected everyone from the driver

and gardener to the professors.

The most difficult community to handle is the academicians because all of them are intellectuals, with their own perceptions and concerns over their own academic survival.

And then we have a 25,000-strong

# doctor's touch

what is happening outside. Some leaders like to be in the limelight.

The first thing I did was to call the student leaders to my office. I asked them what their interests were. They said they wanted to do this and that, that the university was not looking after them and that their lecturers were not good.

I said "Okay, I will look at all that but I don't want politics." I asked them not to be anti-Government. I said "I want you to criticise the university, the management, and tell us what is not good. Let us

tion. There was also miscommunication. The issue was this: The policy had already been set and I was to continue the policy. If there was any change in policy, then I should have been the first to know. As far as I knew then, the policy was to close it. However, there was a change in policy halfway that resulted in the re-establishment of Pusat Asasi within the campus.

Pusat Asasi enables matriculation programmes to be held within the campus. UM is the only university which can do this. The

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**“ I also find that they (students) focus on the wrong issues... they react to what is happening outside. Students imitate what is happening outside. Some of the leaders also like to be in the limelight. ”**

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sit down together and manage it.” What I have done with the student leaders is to have workshops, which also involve academicians, to re-look the management of the university.

I do not know the rest of the university closely, only the (medical) side. Although half the strength of the university is in the medical centre, 4,000 people, it is a different ball game here because the people here are different.

**Q: You made headlines with your statements on Pusat Asasi Sains. It led to intervention from politicians, including senior Ministers. What were your thoughts then?**

**A:** As far as that issue is concerned, there was a lot of misinterpretation.

policy before I started was that the (Education) Ministry would take over (the matriculation programmes). The public got me wrong. I was just the executor of a policy that had been spelt out.

**Q: The Education Ministry has said universities should meet monthly with students and academicians. Does UM practise this?**

**A:** We have meeting after meeting every week. I have set up several committees. One is to review the whole curriculum; to look at the relevance of content, the teaching and learning methodology and to make students more articulate.

student population spread over various faculties. The first thing I noticed was that there were leaders and non-leaders.

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**□ PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 24**

# Striving for excellence

Wed 15 JUL 2004

## □ FROM PAGE 23

communicative and critical in their analysis. We are trying to look at this in totality, and I have co-operation from everyone.

Every faculty now has its curriculum review committee with a central committee at the Chancellory leading the whole exercise.

We also have a committee to look at quality management systems. The whole university has been divided into several committees to look at this. We have 15 core areas to look at in terms of quality management systems leading to an ISO accreditation. *Insha-Allah* by next year we will complete all our tasks.

We also have a committee to look into new things we want to implement. We call it the action plan. We have already completed this plan. We have had hundreds of meetings since last year to identify all problem areas. We have identified the cause of problems, how to overcome them and how to operationalise the changes.

We also have a committee to look into the problems of residential colleges and we have an action plan on that, too. We are also looking at how to manage student activities — its a profession on its own. We are in the process of creating a teaching module which we will share with Asia Pacific student activity managers. We are planning an academic programme to train student activity managers.

I think not less than 500 people are involved in various committees. This is out of the realisation that we need to strive for excellence in education. We need to look at all of these. Our main concern is management systems.

As far as the firefighting equipment is concerned, all is in order. As for wiring, there was no new wiring, no new connections. We have a good circuit breaker and our maintenance people are always vigilant.

**Q: But you saw reports of the tendency of students nowadays to be militant?**

**A:** Yes there were reports but as far as I am concerned, in the university, militancy and physical aggression are not as great as they were previously. But now, there is more infiltration of the mind. I am more worried about this.

When I was in campus, almost everyday there was aggression. When dignitaries visited, they would demonstrate. Now, you don't see these things. They demonstrate because they are instigated by those outside. There are outside elements influencing these students.

**Q: Were you ever involved in demonstrations when you were a student?**

**A:** I had no time. I was concentrating on my studies to become a good doctor.

**Q: You were, I think, in the same batch as (former Deputy Prime Minister) Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Are you a staunch supporter of him and his struggle for reformasi?**

**A:** I came to the university in 1968 and graduated in 1973. I am not sure when Anwar came to the university or when he graduated. I know that when I was in university he was a student leader. Many of my own contemporaries were student leaders. My seniors also. But

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have had it.

When I was in the Medical Faculty, you had to be very fast. I used to tell my colleagues over there that we have to be one step ahead of the VC, always be one step ahead. But now, I tell them, “I will be one step ahead of you.”

**Q: People think UM is swarming**

**Q: But there are pros and cons, meaning if they don't come here, they will go elsewhere.**

**A:** As far as the university is concerned, we want the environment and the culture to be positive towards national development. You may have critical thinking, and if it comes out constructively, then that is what we want. We want our stu-

**Q: Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad recently spoke of an erosion of intellectual culture at campuses. Do you agree with him?**

**A:** What we are doing at the moment is to enhance intellectual culture. There should be a lot of intellectual discourse, interaction and all these will only come if individuals like us in the community realise this is important.

Many academicians are isolationists; they do not really interact with others. I would like to emphasise that we should not only focus on our individual selves, but also on our institutions. Individual expertise should be shared with other people. Now, there is this realisation that the institution comes first. When this happens, you will have an intellectual culture.

The Minister was right in saying that intellectual culture should be enhanced. In this respect, this is what my main focus is, to harness the strength of our academicians, their expertise and their stature in the international and national arenas, and build the institution around it.

**Q: The recent fire at Dewan Tunku Canselor has brought public attention to you and the university. You have said the fire is the work of outsiders and that it was a criminal act. Was that mere speculation on your part or was that based on investigations?**

**A:** I deny that. I did not say that. In fact, I told the police that was not what I said. I think the reporters twisted it. What I said was the fire must be the work of outside people because if it was arson, it was professionally done.

Our students have no money. But they (reporters) said I said that. I never said other people were in-

almost all of them I *tak kenal* (do not know).

**Q: There are claims that you are anti-Government.**

**A:** That is complete nonsense. I am a professional. I treat anyone that comes along who requires my expertise and I am an academician. I concentrate on these issues. I was never a student activist. People say "*Eh, macam mana Anuar boleh jadi Naib Canselor* (How did Anuar become Vice-Chancellor)? He was never a leader in college days". I was never even a school leader because I was just a plain *kampung* boy coming to town to study. And I wanted to become a doctor, that was my intention. But along the way, people noticed my leadership.

I developed it in the medical centre. Being one of the rare Malays, the few Bumiputera academic trainees, I was quite vocal about making things better for the students. I fought for the students, for my own colleagues. I was a very vocal medical officer. And I was a very vocal lecturer, always telling the administration they were wrong. Finally, they made me a deputy dean to shut my mouth.

Even then, I insisted I wanted changes. While I was deputy dean, I made a lot of changes in the management of students and academic programmes. That was how I learnt. Leadership here is by experience. As a doctor, you have to be a leader because you are leading the community or your patients.

**“ I am concerned about quality. We want to be better and be a benchmark for other people. One day, we will be there with Oxford and Cambridge. Our format is already in that line. ”**

**with anti-Government students.**

**A:** No, what I think is that only a very small group of students and academic staff are involved. The majority want to go along with what we do. But the small group of students have very strong linkages outside. And they are sometimes quite dominating. We are watching this closely. If they are dominating on constructive things it is all right but if it is on something not constructive and against the philosophy of the university, then we take action.

But a lot of things are being done outside campus, and this is beyond me, beyond us. These political groups draw our students outside. How to tackle this? It is beyond academicians. So what we do is co-operate with the authorities and give them information. The best people to handle matters like these are the authorities.

**Q: Mohd Fuad Ikhwan, one of your students (also president of the UM Students Representative Council), was arrested by the authorities. How do you take that?**

**A:** I think he was detained to help give more information to the police. If he is found to be actively involved in clandestine or anti-Government activities, then the punishment will be obvious, we have no qualms about that, but we need to get the police report first.

My advice to students is to utilise knowledge and develop culture as their time in campus is very short,

students to be versatile, very articulate, and have a good analytical mind.

We must teach our students to be that. If we don't teach them, then we have failed as academicians.

**Q: If Mohd Fuad is found liable, would he face expulsion?**

**A:** The maximum is expulsion, that is automatic. There are no two ways about it. According to the Act, he cannot continue with his studies. If, however, he is released and wants to come back to the university, then we will have to look at several factors.

**Q: Has the university expelled any students during your time?**

**A:** Not during my time. Earlier, yes. But this one year, no. Suspend- ed yes.

**Q: So you believe students who indulge in anti-Government activities represent the minority?**

**A:** Yes, the minority, because 65 per cent of students are female. A total of 48 per cent are in the science-based faculties. They do not have much time. A lot of those involved are those in the soft sciences. So, the majority of students come here to study. Only very few are involved in such activities. Female students are more focused on their studies.

**Q: Why is it perceived that only Malay students are involved in such activities?**

**A:** You have to look at the community. What is happening inside the university is a mirror image of what is happening outside campus. It is a total mirror image. I am not surprised.

**Q: So, the silent majority, can they be said to be pro-Government or indifferent to politics?**

volved in the fire. All I said was let the police investigate. I also said don't speculate at this point.

I was told of the fire within 10 minutes of the fire being detected. When I arrived, I saw that the fire was already huge. I thought "*Masya-Allah*, this is bad". I thought only a small corner of the hall was on fire, not the whole building. My first impression was that something was wrong inside, maybe something electrical as it is an old building. It did not cross my mind that it could have been done by someone.

**Q: Do you think it is possible that students did this?**

A: I don't think so, whether be they from UM or elsewhere. This is because I was a student here before.

A lot of students came crying to me, saying they would never do this to their own place. Students come to the university and the first place they go to is the hall. There are also all kinds of activities there — examinations, lectures, cultural performances, and exhibitions. It is their centre, why should they raze it to the ground? If it was a work of arson, then it was quite professional.

**Q: So the other possibility is a short circuit?**

A: My own thinking is that there was some carelessness. The hall had been open until midnight on the day of the fire. I don't like to speculate, but it could be that, with people walking in and out. So, to me, the most likely thing is that it was an accident and I hope the police and all those involved in the investigations would get all that.

You have to convince people. You have to make sure they have confidence in you.

**Q: How did you react to your appointment as VC?**

A: Initially, I did not want to be. Never in my wildest imagination did I think I would be Vice-Chancellor. However, I was coaxed on many occasions. I said I did not think I should ... I was happy looking after the medical centre.

In the end, the Minister (Musa) called me and said I had to be the VC, the Government wanted me to. So I said if responsibility has been given to me like that, as a directive, then I would take it because I never run away from responsibility. A doctor will never run away from responsibility.

**Q: Now after 15 months, do you regret becoming a VC?**

A: I don't think I regret. There are a lot of challenges. One thing I regret is less time for my patients, but I still get to see them. Talking to my patients is actually medicine for me. It gives me a lot of strength.

Earlier, there was a lot of uncertainty whether the students, community and the people would accept me. But I am now getting a lot of positive response saying that I am sincere and open, and that gives me strength.

This is a new challenge and it is very good to be able to help the university change. And that is my aim, to prepare the university for future challenges. We are now already at the international level. If you are at that level and do not perform, you

only three years. If they do something that is not in keeping with this, then they will have to be solely responsible for what they do.

There are a lot of things students can do constructively in campus. There is no question about their freedom being curtailed, or their voice not being heard.

Students like to hear their voices. If the voices are good, *tak apa* (it is all right). But if the voices follow what people outside are saying, *inilah yang masalah* (it will be a problem).

I told them to develop their own student political arena within campus (which is different from outside) to develop their political leadership skills and to talk about issues which are related to the university environment. They can talk about their welfare, criticise the VC and speak up on not having enough car parks. But to the students, these are mundane issues. That is unfortunate.

**Q: The Prime Minister has said that a new condition may be imposed for university entry and only those really interested will be taken in.**

A: We support that policy totally. We don't want elements to divert student activities. I told the academicians who are supporting student activities to find activities that can divert their attention to something fruitful. We want that more than anything. If we can identify people who are not interested. I am more than willing to not let them come in. They will spoil the university.

A: The majority are with the Government. They want to develop. They want to be left alone to develop. *Apa ni kacau-kacau semua* (What is all this disturbance)? But these students are not politically savvy. They must come out and speak their minds, say they want to be left alone.

I think many lessons can be learnt from things that have occurred recently. At the recent symposium, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad urged students to concentrate on their studies as there is no other way to excellence. That is what we want to emphasise. There is no other way to get a scroll, a good scroll.

So there is no short cut, you have to work hard. Working hard, however, does not mean just reading books but also participating in interactive learning, group discussions and intellectual discourse. But sometimes there are also the E-nerds, they keep to themselves and don't want to join in student activities.

**Q: There have also been calls for you to resign from, among others Puteri Umno pro-tem head Azalina Othman Said. Were you offended or hurt?**

A: I was not prepared for that. I was concentrating on our own Press conference. And the more urgent matter that day was where to hold the symposium which the PM was scheduled to open the next day. And she (Azalina) came barging in.

**Q: Do you think such aggressive behaviour would harm Umno's image?**

# in education

**A:** I don't know. As far as I am concerned, we are professionals and we do things professionally. Why she did it is beyond me. There should be ethics and decorum in dealing with an issue.

**Q: Has she apologised to you?**

**A:** No, she has not, but that is not an issue. As far as I am concerned, there are better ways to deal with it.

**Q: Umno information chief Datuk Mustapa Mohamed has asked Umno members to support you in ensuring the smooth running of the university. Do you feel vindicated?**

**A:** Well, I think I do! As for the smooth running of the university, we have core businesses and part of it is to interact with communities outside and the interaction is always at the intellectual level through intellectual discourse. We provide public information through our research and teachings for the use of the community and vice versa. For the moment, I would think the strongest impetus for all academics is to get full support.

Only this small handful of people are causing these problems. And the police are monitoring the situation. There is no need to pounce on the university and say we are a useless lot. If we do, then morale will drop and the academicians will be disturbed. People will not be attracted to stay in academia. That will be a loss to the country. We want good people to stay. They are very highly qualified, very intelligent people. Let us give them our full support because they will bring about progress.

**Q: There is already a brain drain, isn't there?**

**A:** Yes, we do not want that to

lowers) ... so we must always, think of the nation, the community we are serving, our responsibilities and then all will be all right.

**Q: There are accusations that you are not on the ball and was slow to react to the distribution of leaflets and publication of Varsity 2001.**

**A:** That is totally not right. As far as I am concerned I have been working for the Government for many years and I am a thoroughbred civil servant.

On the leaflets, I have my own security organisation within the campus and it is one of the most experienced. All these leaflets, as soon as they are distributed, we get them. They are (distributed) by people from outside, they drop in and go off. In the case of *Varsity 2001*, as soon as we received it, so did everybody else. It was simultaneous. I called some students in and they said they were not responsible. I told them to lodge a police report. Once it is with the police, I should not be meddling anymore because it is a police case. The police said it is a commercial crime. I told them (police) whatever information we get we will give it to you (police). So to say we are not responding is not the truth. Our duty is to report this. Obviously of late a lot of things were happening in the campus because the PM was coming and there was a symposium. So people are attacking us. But our cooperation with the police is very good.

**Q: How is your family taking all this?**

**A:** Obviously they are very anxious. I have a small family, a wife and two children. They are totally supportive. I know what I want to do and I told them we have to face

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worsen. If you tell them they are good for nothing, then they will say “might as well I leave”. I am trying to retain these people. I tell them not to worry, they will get good salaries, incentives, promotions.

whatever comes. As a leader you have to face the hazards. People will shoot at you. The question is how do you handle the attack. I ask them (family) to *berdoa* (pray).

**Q: Why are they leaving the university?**

**A:** Leaving the university is something that has always happened. I was grappling with this even in the Medical Faculty. Every year, about 25 of my colleagues will leave. This is for economic reasons. But some leave because they are not suited to the academic environment, they are just using us as a stepping stone. But a lot of them are good academia material. Because of family, however — they want their children to go to school elsewhere — they leave.

What we give is also probably not enough. This is merely in the professional areas, in science and technology. In the soft sciences — accounting, economics and business — these are professional areas too.

**Q: If there are students who support the Opposition but are quiet about it, then will it be tolerated?**

**A:** We cannot control them. We should allow them to have their own minds as long as they don't disrupt things, are not militant, try to influence others, or disturb the environment.

I ask the students why they want to demonstrate. They say "*Nak jugak demonstrate. Kalau tak orang tak nampak.*" (They want to demonstrate otherwise people will not see them). They want to project themselves. I told them there are many other ways to project themselves.

**Q: Professor, do you agree that the fact that such students exist is part and parcel of the higher education scene. And that no matter what is done, these students will continue to exist anyway. As such, it is not a question of bad management on the part of the university.**

**A:** Yes. This cohort of students, aged between 17 and 25 years, is a volatile cohort, volatile in all aspects — volatile in their minds and in their perception. There is a conflict between reality and idealism. How to balance this?

They say they have no responsibilities — they are students, not Government servants. They think: When I work, I want to be this, the country must be this, very idealistic. And they forget about the reality of things, there are so many compounding factors. They also forget they are responsible to the community, to their families.

If they fail, *siapa yang rugi* (who suffers loss)? Nobody but their parents, their brothers and sisters, and their sponsors.

In balancing idealism and reality, students must be able to develop positive traits. If we suppress this, I shudder to think what sort of leaders we will get in future — leaders who are not able to think. Certainly we do not want *nak turut* (blind fol-

**Q: Your family must be worried as you are having sleepless nights now.**

**A:** As a doctor, I don't sleep much anyway ... only five hours a night.

**Q: Statistics have shown that the highest number of failures in universities in general are among Malay undergraduates. Why do you think this is so? What steps have been taken to address this?**

**A:** I need to have more data. My experience is that they tend to be easily influenced by outside elements. I am very interested in data right now on students' performance.

**Q: Some say students are the way they are because of frustration, their freedom is curbed by the University and University Colleges Act 1971.**

**A:** I think that is just an excuse. I even encouraged them to have a speakers' corner in colleges to talk about contemporary issues on development, on economics, on the world market, but nobody wants to do this. You know why? Because they don't have any material in their heads. They cannot talk about all these issues. They don't have the facts.

I am disappointed with them. I want them to develop their oratory skills. There are 11 residential colleges. I want them to have debates. They can talk about anything, except partisan politics, but that's all they want to talk about and they talk nonsense.

**Q: You said that UM can achieve its goals easier if there is no interference. From where? politicians? What kind of interference?**

**A:** I am talking about negative interference that will distract lecturers and make them go out and *jerit sana, jerit sini* (shout here and there). They will not carry out research and will neglect the students.

**Q: Interference from the Opposition?**

**A:** Yes, the Opposition. The ruling party should also be told that if there is backbiting, finger pointing and character assassination, then it would be difficult (to form smart partnerships).

**Q: You have spoken about getting ISO certification for the university. Is this a normal practice for universities? As far as we know, even world-class universities like Oxford do not have ISO certification.**

**A:** The culture in the university now is to open itself to evaluation. We are improving all the time. The medical centre is ready for accreditation, for the ISO9000:2001.

I am concerned about quality. One day, we will be there with Oxford and Cambridge. Our format is already in that line.