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UM boasts host of important figures

EVERY nation has its intellectual figures: Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Hegel and Martin Heidegger from Germany; William James, Noam Chomsky and Thomas Kuhn from the US; Andre Malraux, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir from France.

These intellectual giants are often related to one another by having taught or being taught at the same academic institution.

Chomsky and Kuhn are professors at the Philosophy and Linguistics Department at Massachusetts Institute of Technology while Sartre and de Beauvoir were classmates at L'ecole Normale Superieure, Paris.

Every nation has one or more institutions that serve as the meeting place for intellectuals, who then become a vital force in the development of that nation.

In Malaysia that centre is Universiti Malaya (UM).

The current and previous prime ministers are alumni.

Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was a medical student at the King Edward VII College of Medicine from 1948 to 1952, while Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is a graduate of UM. He majored in Islamic Studies.

Among other leaders educated at UM are Tun Dr Hamdan Sheikh Tahir, Tan Sri Datuk Musa Hitam, Datuk K. Pathmanaban, Tan Sri Tan Chee Khoon and diplomat Tan Sri Razali Ismail.

UM has intellectuals from every department in every faculty. The late Datuk Dr Ungku Omar Ungku Ahmad, the medical researcher and director of the Institute of Medical Research, received his MBBS from UM.

Dr Ungku Omar, who died less than a month after his 38th birthday, is known for his contributions to improving the health of rural folks.

Other medical students include Tan Sri Dr Salma Ismail, the first Malay female doctor, and Tun Dr Siti Hasmah, wife of Dr Mahathir In Mathematics, UM has Professor Datuk Dr Tan Wang Seng, who received his first degree at the Singapore branch.

Tan Sri Dr Augustine Ong Soon Hock, the palm oil scientist with strings of scientific patents attached to his name, is another alumni from the science faculty.

Professor Datuk Ahmad Nawawi, a driving force in the Science Faculty, is a world figure in mycological research.

Professor Datuk Dr Zuraina Majid is an archaeologist-cum-anthropologist. Her discovery of the Perak Man at Lenggong Valley made headlines around the globe.

One always thinks of Professor Dr Ungku Aziz when one thinks of the UM of the late 1960s to the late 1980s.

He was the Vice-Chancellor during those two decades, having taught at the Economics Department before that.

He holds the distinction of being Malaysia's only Royal Professor.

What can one say about UM's intellectuals in the arts, humanities and social sciences?

UM can boast a National Literary laureate among its ex-students: Professor Dr Muhammad Salleh, while another renowned author is Khalidah Adibah Amin.

Author Dr Wang Gungwu was a faculty member of the History Department.

Datuk Zakiah Hanum is another noted historian that UM has produced.

Profesor Datuk Dr Mohammad Taib Osman, eminent scholar of Malay culture and literature, has been with UM for a large part of his life.

The late Tan Sri Dr Abdullah Sanusi Ahmad, the founder of the Civil Service Institute (INTAN), and Man Power and Planning Unit (MAMPU), was a UM Vice-Chancellor from 1996 to 2000.

Another head of an institution is Professor Dr Kamal Hassan, now rector of the International Islamic University, who graduated from UM with First Class Honors.

The region's most celebrated Islamic scholar, Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, was a professor and dean of Arts and Social Science faculty at UM.

When the Raffles and King Edward VII colleges were merged in 1949 after World War II, the founding fathers wished the resulting university would play a major role in building the new nation.

With the list of intellectual figures this centenarian institution has produced, one can conclude that their hope was fulfilled.

For details, log on to: www.um.edu.my