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Hamdan's place in history assured

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"EDUCATOR Extraordinaire", "Statesman Extraordinaire" and other superlatives have been used to describe Universiti Sains Malaysia's second vice-chancellor and former Yang diPertua Negeri of Penang Tun Hamdan Sheikh Tahir.

These honorifics have been showered on him in recognition of his contributions to Penang and the country, many of which have often gone beyond the formal system of education.

"His place in history has been assured," Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon penned in his foreward to a book on Tun Hamdan Sheikh Tahir: His Life and Times as Seen by Himself and Others.

Describing this educator as a "great humanist", Koh went further to extol Hamdan's virtues as one who had always been concerned with promoting human development, community welfare and social justice.

"As a person he is very humble, warm and personable in demenour and very caring," he added.

Add to these traits, a sense of pride for USM and his fondness for the university where he served as vice-chancellor from 1976 to 1982.

"I came to USM not with money, but with very rich contacts that money cannot buy," says Hamdan, in reference to his experience as director-general of Education.

Expressing his reluctance in succeeding USM's first vicechancellor, the late (Tan Sri) Dr Hamzah Sendut, he said: "Hamzah studied with me at the University of Malaya in Singapore where we both studied Geography. I was not happy therefore to take over from my friend, who was retiring at 50."

However, this reason, along with a dozen others presented to (former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad) who was then Minister of Education, were not accepted.

Hamdan became the first man from the teaching profession (he started off as a teacher, was soon promoted to become a headmaster, and from there in successive progression, held the posts of the Controller of Examinations and later, director-general of Education) to be appointed as a Vice-Chancellor of a Malaysian university, a post usually reserved for a university professor.

The university was seven years old at the time.

When USM (then known as the University of Penang) opened its doors in 1969, Hamzah had 57 students. When he took up the appointment however, the university had about 3,000 students and an establishment of almost 500, including academic staff, administrative personnel, ancillary workers and other technical staff.

It offered first degrees, diplomas, post-graduate studies, matriculation courses and an offcampus study scheme.

Having sat on the council of higher tertiary education during his tenure as director-general of Education, he said he found USM "different" from other institutions.

"New concepts had been brought in by Hamzah, who was instrumental in establishing the Housing, Building and Planning Unit," he said.

The unit, which combined architecture, housing, along with town and rural planning into one academic discipline, produced some of the country's most "marketable" graduates.

"They (the graduates) were able to command higher salaries when hired in Penang, compared with graduates from other universities," said Hamdan,

adding that the employability of these students were based on the premise that when employers hired "one man, they could do everything".

He said although USM's other "rival" universities were located in Kuala Lumpur and perhaps physically closer to the ministry when it came to seeking operations funds, USM still managed to tap into a fair share of funds.

"This is thanks to extras we offered like the School of Housing, Building and Planning, and also the off-campus programme," he says.

Among the many legacies left by Hamdan is the establishment of a branch campus in Kelantan, which was exclusively for a School of Medical Science to meet the country's human resource needs for medical and health services on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia.

Often described as a man of "tremendous vigour" and one who thrived on hard work, he is remembered as a vice-chancellor who never took "No" for an answer, whether it was from his staff or officials from the Ministry of Education.

Still remembered as a man who walked fast, and very often "forgot there was such a thing as a clock", he is still remembered for many other firsts scored by USM.

They include the establishment of the Matriculation Studies Unit, PusatIslam and a mosque, swimming pool complex and the National Drug Research Centre.

Other projects set up under his hand and triggered a spill-over effect beyond USM's campus walls to the world were his INSPIRE Project, which was a research exercise designed to develop and test scientific approaches to increase the effectiveness of teaching learning in rural primary schools.

The National Integrated Data System, or NIDAS Project, was another Hamdan brainchild, in making USM an institution of higher learning whose activities were directly in line with national needs.

The soft spot he has for USM till this very day is most apparent, as would a father who has guided and nurtured a child through his formative years. He continues to track the university's progress with interest and pride from his home, proving that he will always be a part of USM.