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Only nine but UMS forges ahead

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WHEN Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad proposed the setting up of a public university in Sabah in 1994, few imagined that an isolated area close to the State Legislative Assembly building in Likas would be home to a sprawling campus a decade later.

From its humble beginnings - it was renting premises when it started - Universiti Malaysia Sabah now has two campuses - the main one at the scenic Sepanggar Bay, about 15km from Kota Kinabalu, and another in Labuan.

Student intake has increased from 205 in 1995 to more than 9,000 at present.

Vice-Chancellor Tan Sri Professor Abu Hassan Othman said UMS's early years were challenging and productive.

"It was a challenging time because we were asked to set up UMS from scratch. After nine years, I am proud that UMS is recognised as an academic institution not only in the country and region but also in the world.

"We have established links with renowned institutions such as Leeds University, Oxford University and Bristol University in the United Kingdom, Hokkaido University in Japan, and the University of Tasmania in Australia.

"We have been successful because our products are market-driven and relevant to the needs of the country," he told Learning Curve.

The university offers 55 academic programmes at 12 schools, the latest addition being the School of Medicine.

It also houses the Borneo Marine Research Institute, Tropical Biology and Conservation Research Institute, Biotechnology Research Institute, Ethnography and Development Research Unit, Psychology and Social Health Research Unit, Centre for Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning and the Centre for Postgraduate Studies.

UMS is now looking at curriculum development to strengthen course content.

"We have instructed our deans to benchmark our programmes against the five best institutions and programmes in the world. We are not planning to become Harvard or Oxford but we can be UMS, a centre of excellence in teaching and research.

"The university will also appoint academic advisors comprising corporate and public sector leaders, both local and foreign, to ensure we move in the right direction in curriculum development," he said.

According to Abu Hassan, UMS is striving to become a research university "because no university can become an excellent university without excellent research".

He singled out research in marine biotechnology which has recorded some success in seaweed farming.

Studies are also on-going in marine aquaculture which include monitoring of waves, tides, current, coastal erosion and other aspects relevant to coastal zone management.

In monitoring biodiversity, the university has a reference collection facility called Borneensis, which records flora, fauna, traditional knowledge and live specimens of endangered and rare species.

UMS has received Intensification Research in Priority Area (IRPA) grants amounting to RM5.88 million since 1996. It also received a RM4.5 million

fundamental research grant this year and last year from the Higher Education Department.

Foreign grants include those from the Asean Regional Centre for Biodiversity, the Japanese International Corporation Agency and the World Wide Fund for Nature.

On links with foreign universities, Abu Hassan said it was important to expose staff and students to development in research overseas.

"In most cases our linkages have been excellent. Our School of Engineering has links with the University of Leeds and we can now build low-cost houses using waste material from palm oil. In fact, we will build a model house soon," he said.

In future, UMS wants to set up linkages with institutions in Japan and South Korea.

Citing more examples, Abu Hassan said 13 aquaculture undergraduates recently underwent industrial training in Japan. Four students were sent to Australia for their practical work in environmental science last year.

"The world is changing. We need to attain knowledge from others. I am proud to say that many want to collaborate with us. I am sure the next decade of development will see us becoming a much more recognised institution at the international level."

On its part, UMS is attracting foreigners to do postgraduate studies. It has at present 15 students from 11 countries.

"Our selling point is our location. It offers the best environment for studying. Our fees are also competitive and we have highly qualified staff. It is critical for us to get foreign students because they are the ones who will market UMS and the country," he said.

Creating an excellent work culture among its 440 academic and 430 non-academic staff is another challenge.

"Those in the service must remain committed and dedicated. So far, all the schools are doing well because we have a quality assurance committee which monitors progress and development. Quality in the environment, teaching, research, publications and websites has become a culture to us," he said.

UMS has also set up an Outdoor Development Centre, which aims to produce staff and students who are disciplined and innovative.

"It is the only facility of its kind in a public university. There are activities such as the flying fox and rock climbing, through which we hope to develop and discover talents.

"In the future we will have horse-riding and kayaking to Pulau Sepanggar. Our location by the sea will allow us more water activities.

"Our students are given every opportunity to develop themselves. We need to produce graduates who are able to communicate effectively in the working world," he said.

"Our motto, Strive to Excel, will guide us. If we work towards excellence, we will become a recognised university in the world," he said.