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Young and resourceful

Jaswinder Kaur

BEING a young institution of higher education has not stopped Universiti Malaysia Sabah from forging ahead in producing quality academic staff and graduates and from establishing links with re-nowned institutions overseas.

UMS, which turns nine this year, is the pride and joy of Malaysians in Sabah, who cheered when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad proposed the setting up of a public university in the State in 1994.

From renting premises when it first started operations in 1995, UMS now has two campuses: the main one at the scenic Sepanggar Bay, 15km from Kota Kinabalu, and another in Labuan.

Student intake has increased from 205 in 1995 to 9,833 now. There are 56 programmes on offer at 12 schools, with the latest addition being the School of Medicine, which took in its first batch of undergraduates in May.

It is also home to 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.

Vice-Chancellor Tan Sri Professor Dr Abu Hassan Othman said the university's early years were challenging but 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 been successful because our products are market-driven and relevant to the needs of the country," he said.

UMS is looking at curriculum development to strengthen course content by asking its deans to benchmark programmes against the five-best programmes in the world. Academic advisors comprising corporate and public sector leaders are also being appointed.

He said UMS was striving to become a research university "because no university can become an excellent university without excellent research".

UMS has received Intensive Research on Priority Areas (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, he said it was important to expose staff and students to development in research overseas. In future, UMS wants to set up more links with institutions in Japan and South Korea.

"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."

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.

"Our students are given every opportunity to develop themselves. We must produce graduates who can communicate effectively in the working world.

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