

Catching Up With...: An unconventional man

New Straits Times - 23/4/2006

Tan Sri Arshad Ayub is often identified as the man who, in the 1960s and 1970s, gave Bumiputeras a second chance at an education and a job. More than 110,000 Bumiputeras have graduated with diplomas and degrees from Institut Teknologi Mara, which he helped mould into a premier educational institution.

HE made Mandarin compulsory for those taking business courses, Tamil for those taking plantation management. Tan Sri Arshad Ayub kept English as the medium of instruction, and introduced Russian, French and Arabic. He clearly thought out of the box in his time at Institut Teknologi Mara. He took those who failed to get through Form Six and gave them a chance to re-sit their Cambridge Higher School Certificate.

Arshad accepted school leavers with excellent results but who still could not get a coveted place in Form Six. He gave them an education that would prove to any employer that, in his words, "I am damned good". Today, he is still a man not confined by convention. The 78-year-old, who has always eschewed racial considerations, is thinking of more non-Malays in university administrations.

"Maybe the time has come for more non-Bumiputera appointments in university administrations. Appointments should be on merit and apolitical. There should be more women and non-Bumiputeras." Arshad believes the time may even have come for a non-Bumiputera vice-chancellor. He is of the opinion that Malaysian education will eventually "converge into oneness", and, one day, Malaysians will no longer have a balancing act.

"But that will take a longer time. We will have to live with the existing system for now."

He is happy with the appointment of Datuk Rafiah Salim as Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Malaya. "She's a good choice, and a real departure (from the usual candidates). It's good to get new blood in."

Arshad, also chairman of UM's board of directors, was consulted over her appointment by a selection committee set up by the Higher Education Ministry.

He believes the time has come for such a selection committee to be made permanent, to recommend appointments for vice-chancellors and their deputies of all universities, and even council chairmen.

Arshad's involvement with ITM began in 1965 when he was asked by then Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak to head a training college for the Rural and Industrial Development Authority in Petaling Jaya.

This college became Maktab Mara, when RIDA became Majlis Amanah Rakyat, or Mara, which in 1967 turned into ITM.

(In 1975, he left ITM to become Deputy Governor of Bank Negara Malaysia).

He was the perfect candidate for ITM when the need for enlarging the education cake arose. And in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when he was building it up, it was not about being soft or

going easy on anyone.

"When I take a horse to water and it doesn't drink, I'll push it into the water," he said, chuckling. And if it still refused to drink, then it was the boot.

Che Arshad, as he was fondly known while he helmed ITM, believes in objectivity, and it is the key to how he has balanced affirmative action and meritocracy.

That's why he is passionate about transparency and integrity in education.

"Once you set the standards, you can never, never, never lower them." He thumped his desk emphatically each time he said "never".

"If a student does not meet those standards, then, sorry, he fails."

Pro-Chancellor of Universiti Teknologi Mara, as ITM has become, Arshad is still remembered by many as a man who brooked no nonsense. He said ITM was about giving chances, but he still expected students to measure up. School leavers short of a credit were accepted, for instance, but they had to obtain the credit they needed within six months.

"Otherwise, they were out."

It's probably why the mostly non-Bumiputera lecturers who served under him were committed to educating their Bumiputera students. "At least two-thirds of them were non-Bumiputera, but they were committed."

They wanted to be the best, and get the best out of their students, he said. "In the final analysis, it is the quality of the product that matters." His 10 years in ITM saw unprecedented growth, the building of the main campus in Shah Alam, Selangor, and branch campuses in other States. Enrolment grew from hundreds a year to thousands. Because ITM was closed to non-Bumiputera students, it could not become a university or confer degrees. Arshad knew he needed to make ITM graduates more marketable, and hit on a credit transfer programme with an American university, Ohio University.

This programme grew to include dozens of US state universities where thousands of ITM diploma holders later completed their degrees. The model was adopted by private colleges in the late 1980s, when young non-Bumiputeras could not get enough places in local universities and a severe recession meant many parents could not afford to send them to Britain. At the same time, British universities had begun to charge full tuition fees for foreign students, causing then Prime Minister (now Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad to retaliate with his Buy British Last policy. The Government decided to recognise American degrees, and private colleges' twinning programmes were born.

These events gave many non-Bumiputera ITM lecturers and administrators careers in private education.

Source: NST | www.nst.com.my