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LEARNING CURVE INTERNSHIPS

# Understanding an icon

IN APPRECIATION:  
A leadership scheme for international young executives hopes to unravel the mind of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and groom transdisciplinary leaders

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**A**UTHOR and ex-journalist Akiko Kato has former Malaysian prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad to thank for her career in journalism.

While promoting her book *Voice from Asia to Japan*, a compilation of articles on Dr Mahathir's views in the Mainichi *Shimbun* newspaper released a decade ago, Kato revealed that the fourth Malaysian premier had inspired her to be a journalist.

Kato, then a *Mainichi Shimbun* Hong Kong correspondent, told Bernama in an interview in 2001: "The main reason I wanted to become a journalist was to have a chance to interview Dr Mahathir, a leader I admire from my university days."

It was likely that those who read Dr Mahathir's serialised autobiography in the *Japan Economic Times* as a child or teen in 1995 also shared Kato's fascination for the charismatic international figure and aspired to be a leader like him.

The recently launched Mahathir Distinguished Internship Programme (MDIP) hopes to provide young global citizens who grew up during the era of Dr Mahathir's leadership with a platform for unraveling the mind of their role model and studying his numerous accomplishments — from redefining the landscape of Malaysia's development to bringing together nations through the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Non-aligned Movement, among others.

A joint project by the National Professors' Council (NPC), the Institute of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Thoughts, Wangsa Perdana Foundation and Perdana Leadership Foundation (PLF), the internship programme was set up to commemorate his 86th birthday last month and honour his

contributions to Malaysia and the world. It hopes to prepare young executives everywhere for top leadership roles in all spheres.

Dr Mahathir is a global icon for the young and old, says NPC deputy chairman Distinguished Professor Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, who is responsible for overseeing the internship programme.

"He is perhaps best remembered for transforming Malaysia from an agricultural nation into a manufacturing economy while other developing countries are still dreaming about it. His blog ([www.chedet.cc](http://www.chedet.cc)) records millions of visitors; even a taxi driver in Copenhagen (Denmark) recognises him," says Shamsul.

It is high time that Malaysia paid attention to what the younger generation thinks of the retired politician and "we have to encourage young people with leadership potential across the world to discover him via rigorous analysis instead of remembering his legacy in a romantic or nostalgic way", he adds.

While Shamsul notes that there have been "fantastic current and previous attempts to understand Dr Mahathir", these have been "too selective".

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Distinguished Professor Shamsul Amri Baharuddin

"There hasn't been any real effort to examine his work in its totality and to relate it to nation-building," says Shamsul, who hopes the scheme will produce intellectual discussions that show complete appreciation of Dr Mahathir's achievements.

The MDIP is open only to young executives below the age of 35 years and candidates must have some experience in their respective fields.

The internship hopes to attract those who perceive themselves as "leaders across fields" just like Dr Mahathir whom Shamsul describes as "a statesman and a global man".

"He moved from Science to Social Sciences to the Humanities. He is a medical man who had successfully delved into the realm of politics and economics to run a country, which is not an easy task."

The future needs leaders of Dr Mahathir's calibre, says Shamsul.

"Chief executive officers of today have to head multiple companies across time zones. If they have yet to acquire the qualities needed to be such a leader then this internship will groom them to be one."

He promises the programme, which lasts a year, to be comprehensive.

The chosen interns are expected to submit a viable research proposal and plan of action for the duration of the internship.

During this time, he or she must deliver two seminars based on their proposals shortly after arrival and at the end of his or her stay.

"We will connect them with a network of key people to help them with their research. On top of that, they will have mentors in related fields," says Shamsul.

They will be based in the PLF, which is the custodian of Dr Mahathir's legacy, and also a base from which he continues to engage in civil activism.

The interns will receive a monthly stipend, a housing and transportation allowance, a return economy air ticket from his or her home city to Kuala Lumpur and a certificate on completion of the programme.

Malaysians are welcome to apply but must compete with their international counterparts for places.

Shamsul guarantees a demanding selection process as the organisers want to make the programme "befitting Dr Mahathir's stature".

Malaysia stands to gain a lot from this research exercise as "we will develop a network of people who will continuously examine Dr Mahathir's ideas and how these can or have been reproduced



The former prime minister's contributions will be studied under the Mahathir Distinguished Internship Programme

elsewhere".

The universe is our mirror, adds Shamsul, and the interns will tell us "our strengths, weaknesses and our place in the world".

It is also an opportunity to enlighten outsiders about Dr Mahathir.

"To understand Dr Mahathir is to know the relationship between society, state and market and how the former prime minister had harnessed the three elements when he was in office," says Shamsul.

Some wonder if the exercise will put Dr Mahathir in a bad light. Shamsul assures that all discussions about Dr Mahathir will be grounded on thorough research and not "criticising for the sake of criticising or hero-worshipping".

Shamsul believes a fair scrutiny of Dr Mahathir's contributions is warranted as he is a proponent of academic freedom.

"After doing his own research and consulting economists, he found currency control to be the best option for Malaysia in countering the effects of the 1997 and 1998 financial crises. He went against the advice of world leaders to borrow from the World Bank, which showed that he was an academic freedom fighter," says Shamsul.

Calls for applicants will be made in major international media such as *The Economist* and *The Wall Street Journal*, on the Web and through international bodies such as the United Nations once details of the scheme have been confirmed.

"We expect to announce the interns by Dr Mahathir's 87th birthday in December," says Shamsul.