

Newspaper	THE STAR
Date	3 / 8 / 2017



Fresh Faces Young Voices

What's your status?

Danial Rahman
newsdesk@thestar.com.my

Record-breaking year for M'sian higher education

The Star - 3/8/2017 Pg. 22

While global rankings have been positive, they also serve as a reminder of possible improvements.

THE first half of 2017 has been positive and historical for Malaysian higher education. Across various international achievement indicators, Malaysian universities as well as the higher education system as a whole have recorded significant improvements.

The Higher Education Ministry has even coined a new narrative to summarise the recent achievements: UMAR.

U refers to Universitas 21 or the U21 Ranking of National Higher Education Systems, also known as country rankings. In it, Malaysia's higher education system is ranked 25th in the world.

This is an improvement of 11 places since 2012. U21 is a consortium of international research universities and this ranking project is based at the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economics and Social Research, University of Melbourne.

What caught my eye was the "resources" category, in which Malaysia is ranked 11th in the world – ahead of Britain, Hong Kong, Germany and Japan. When adjusted to levels of economic development, Malaysia is ranked first.

The U21 report states that Malaysia "devotes 50% more to resources than what is expected given its income level". Over the years, Malaysia has shown significant improvement in this category – second (2013), first (2014), third (2015), second (2016) and first (2017). Without a doubt, the Malaysian Government has consistently committed huge resources to higher education.

M stands for "Malaya" or Universiti Malaya (UM). According to the QS World University Rankings 2018, UM has improved by 53 places since 2013 and is now ranked 114 in the world. While 114 may not sound like the sexiest of numbers, it places UM ahead of top institutions such as Cardiff University, Newcastle University, RMIT and Georgetown University.

A highlights our position in Asean. According to the QS rankings, Malaysia is home to five of Asean's top eight universities – ranking third, fourth, fifth, seventh and eight respectively.

Singapore's Nanyang Technological University and National University of Singapore lead the placing, with Thailand's Chulalongkorn University in sixth place. This is significant as it shows the quality of higher education Malaysia possesses, as well as the potential it has.

R is for Research Universities. According to the QS rankings, Malaysia's Research Universities (MRUs) are in the top one per cent in the world. How is this so? Well, out of approximately 26,000 universities world-wide, all five MRUs are ranked 264 and below, placing them within the top one percentile.

Five public universities make up the MRUs. They are UM, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. In the last five years, the MRUs have improved as much as 182 places in the world rankings – a sign of great dedication and hard work by the Malaysian higher education community.

A decade in the making

UMAR success stories are not coincidental. The successes, led by the MRUs, have been a decade in the making.

In fact, 2017 marks the 10-year anniversary of the MRU initiative. These efforts were first mooted by then Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and subsequently implemented by former Education Minister Datuk Seri Mustapa Mohamed (now International Trade and Industry Minister) and Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin (now Johor Mentri Besar).

The current Higher Education Minister, Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh, is overseeing the sustainability and continued growth of this high-impact initiative.

Room to improve

Without a doubt, the rankings and indicators also tell us another story – namely where Malaysian higher education is lacking and needs to improve. I have summarised these into four areas.

Firstly, resources management. Despite ranking 11th for resources in the U21 report, Malaysia ranks 39 for output. In my opinion, this indicates that the issue is not the lack of resources, rather the manner in which the funds are being deployed and managed.

Efficiency must be enhanced and complacency must be made a taboo. Perhaps, the current reduction in funding from the Government is the necessary jolt for our universities.

Secondly, industry collaboration. It should progress beyond signing memorandums of understanding (of which there are many). It should move towards depth and quality of collaboration between universities and industry, which leads to innovation, product commercialisation, joint research, grants and even student placement opportunities.

Thirdly, education quality. It goes without saying when the quality of education is high, it will impact various ranking indicators – including reputation, international student intake and quality of faculty. This is related to the quality and impact of teaching and learning, something that can be overlooked if too much emphasis is placed on research (do not forget the students!).

Fourth, and finally, graduate employability. All said and done, every university's primary role is to produce employable graduates. Rankings, etc. do not matter if such a role is not achieved. While international indicators do not always capture this point, it is something on which our universities cannot compromise.

I sincerely believe our universities are not resting on their laurels to ensure they continue to improve, in line with the ministry's motto "Soaring Upwards" (Google it). Malaysia's higher education system is not void of problems. But rather than focus on the negatives, we should also know the positives.

The achievements of our higher education system today should make us proud.

Finally, if you ever head to the Higher Education Ministry, try to remember UMAR beforehand. It will come in handy in case you run into Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh, who is known to carry out impromptu UMAR quizzes.

Danial Rahman has education close to his heart and welcomes feedback at danialrahman0330@gmail.com. The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own.