

ARSHAD'S LEGACY IS UNMATCHABLE

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TUN Arshad Ayub, former director of Institut Teknologi Mara (UiTM), left the surly bonds of earth to touch the hand of God last Tuesday.

He was, perhaps, the greatest educational administrator and innovator this country has known.

Arshad had a multifaceted and immense personality, and much could be said about his significant and contributions to society.

I will, however, concentrate on his role as an educational pioneer, innovator and social engineer.

He believed that education was a powerful weapon of social change. He was convinced that "everyone can be educated".

He did not wait for students to come to his oasis of knowledge. Instead, he

took the oasis to the thirsty.

I know of his visits to rural areas, where he would invite young people, some of them off the streets, to apply to his institute. Many did not meet entry requirements.

So he devised multilevel courses at matriculation, pre-diploma, diploma and degree levels to accommodate the variety of human conditions. To him, entry requirements were less important than the standards at exit points.

He was a man possessed with a zeal to extend educational opportunities to thousands who would otherwise be discarded by the traditional educational system.

In the 1970s, he was building campuses in the hinterlands of the country. He took the city to the village rather than ask the village to come to the city.

Because the law did not permit his institute to confer degrees, he teamed up with foreign universities for the conferment of twinning degrees.

He embraced many prestigious external degree programmes to enable his students to obtain coveted professional qualifications.

He made practical training an essential part of the curriculum because "theory must face market reality". He roamed the country to visit local authorities, statutory bodies and professional organisations to request them to accept ITM students for practical training.

He regarded his students as his children. He wanted them to be able to compete in the market. For that reason, he ignored the identity politics of race and religion then raging in the country.

He recruited capable academic staff from all races, religions and regions to train his students. The academic heads of many disciplines reflected the dazzling diversity of our nation.

His tolerance of other races and religions was exemplary. On Sundays, an ITM bus would ferry Christian students from Sabah and Sarawak to the nearest church in Berkley Estate, Klang.

He stood up to the "language nationalists" and insisted that tertiary education at ITM should be in English. In addition, all students must learn at least one foreign language like Mandarin or Japanese. This was in the 1970s!

To oversee the actual working of his institute discretely, he often walked from one block to another, attended classes uninvited. He queued up at

the student dining hall to check on the quality of food served to the students.

He blazed new trails, thought the unthinkable and attempted the impossible. He was decades ahead of his peers in educational vision, planning and implementation.

He left behind a legacy that is unmatched. Universiti Teknologi Mara, the nation's largest repository of tertiary education, is, and will remain for decades to come, an extended shadow of Tun Arshad Ayub's glittering personality.

The best way to honour his memory is to emulate his incredible dynamism and idealism.

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