

IN CONVERSATION WITH...: The ride is not over
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Omar Abdul Rahman's love for horses began in his university days and is shown by his collection of horse ornaments

National Academic Personality Award winner Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Omar Abdul Rahman has chalked up almost 50 years of work in the field of education but says there is still much he hopes to do, reports NURJEHAN MOHAMED

LOOKING at the several ornamental horses sitting on a sideboard in his office, you might think that a love for the animal was the inspiration behind Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Omar Abdul Rahman's decision to study Veterinary Science.

You would be wrong.

"I only started collecting these after I graduated," the 79-year-old says, with a smile.

"We worked a lot with horses as part of our training — we learned to ride, train, feed and care for them — so I developed an appreciation for horses," he says, adding that he is always on the lookout for additions to his collection.

And it has been a long satisfying ride for Omar, who was named the 2010 National Academic Personality last week.

He first became interested in Veterinary Science after attending a talk by a Kelantan state veterinary officer at his school in Kota Baru.

"I had wanted to travel and study outside of Malaysia — and Veterinary Science was the closest thing to Medicine that I could think of which would allow me to do that," he says.

He pursued his bachelor's degree at Sydney University and a postgraduate diploma in Animal Pathology at the University of Queensland before coming back to Malaysia in 1960 to work at the Veterinary Research Institute (VRI) in Ipoh, Perak.

Omar went to Cambridge University three years later to pursue a doctorate in Animal Pathology and upon graduation in 1966, he became the first Malaysian student to get a PhD from the institution as well as the first Malaysian to earn a doctoral degree in the subject.

Omar then returned to VRI before joining Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (now Universiti Putra Malaysia) in 1972.

He was the university's first professor and founding dean of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Sciences and later became UPM's deputy vice chancellor (academic affairs).

His work caught the attention of former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who appointed him as Malaysia's first science adviser to the prime minister in 1984, a position he held for 17 years.

This marked the beginning of a new era in the development of science, technology and innovation in Malaysia.

As science adviser, he sat on a number of national committees and initiated many programmes to enhance technology management; increase funding for research and development; and promote the commercialisation of research results.

Internationally, he was involved with the United Nations Council for Science and Technology for Development, the Third World Network of Scientific Organisations (Asian Region) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco), among others.

Omar also received honorary doctorates from local and foreign universities for his contributions.

In addition to these, he accepted the Asean Achievement Award (Science) in 1993 and the Fook Ying Tung Southeast Asia prize in 1998.

Former students and colleagues can vouch for Omar's passion for research and development.

UPM deputy vice chancellor (academic and international) Professor Datin Paduka Aini Ideris — winner of the 2010 Award for Innovation and Product Commercialisation — was a Veterinary Science student when Omar was dean of the faculty.

"I remember he spoke a lot about research back then, at a time when there wasn't a culture of research at all," she says.

UPM Department of Veterinary Clinical Studies' Professor Datuk Mohamed Shariff Mohamed Din — recipient of the 2010 National Teaching Award (Health Sciences) — credits Omar with creating the research culture universities enjoy today.

"When UPM was first set up, I was given a lab with no equipment except for a small microscope — there was no funding for research.

"There was no thought of getting published as we were focused on setting up our courses," he recalls.

All this changed when Omar became science adviser and pushed for innovation.

"We now have funding for research — thanks to Omar — and we're also talking about publishing in high impact journals," says Mohamed Shariff, who had nominated Omar for the National Academic Personality Award.

Omar retired from public service in 2001 but he remains as busy as ever.

He sits on the board of five public listed companies and is the chairman of Bostonweb Academy.

He is also a member of the Unesco Global Commission on Science Ethics besides remaining

as the chairman and the prime minister's special representative to the Commonwealth Partnership for Technology Management (CTPM).

Through CTPM, he works tirelessly to promote good practices for governance in development, using Malaysia's experience as an example for other developing countries.

He supports the idea of holistic human capital development through programmes he conducts for the Academy of Sciences Malaysia and the International Science, Technology and Innovation Centre for South-South Cooperation under the Auspices of Unesco.

Omar is gratified that his work in academia and beyond has been recognised.

"It means a lot that the academic community appreciates my contribution to the development of higher education in Malaysia," he says.

As to what he intends to do with the RM80,000 he won with the award, he replies: "I'll keep it for my retirement, although I don't know when that is as there is still so much to do."

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