

'Big gains in advancing ethnic rights under Tok Nan Chair'

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BINTULU: Significant achievements have been realised to protect and advance the rights of different ethnic groups in Sarawak while promoting ethnic diversity, since the founding of the Tok Nan Research Chair by Universiti Putra Malaysia Bintulu (UPMKB), said Dato Sri Abdul Karim Rahman Hamzah.

The Minister of Tourism, Creative Industry and Performing Arts said one of its proud achievements is the increase in the number of ethnic groups in Sarawak from 27 to 31.

"It is very likely the number will increase, especially considering there are other ethnic groups who have not been documented," he said at the opening ceremony of the 3rd International Conference on Science, Social Sciences and Humanities (Icossh) 2023, here yesterday.

The ceremony was graced by Premier Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri Abang Johari Tun Openg.

In Article 161A of the Federal Constitution on the indigenous races of Sarawak, which was amended on Feb 15, 2022, only 27 ethnic groups are officially recognised.

"It is now evident that the cooperation between the ministry and UPM has brought success to both parties. The Sarawak government is therefore serious in its efforts to gather data on different ethnic minority groups in Sarawak," Abdul Karim said.

He also expressed how pleased he was with the efforts made by UPM and the Tok Nan Chair to elevate the status of UPMKB as a hub for the study of ethnic herbs in the state.

"Indeed, Sarawak has many unexplored natural resources. The collaboration between



Abang Johari (centre) leads the audience in the hall to recite a prayer for the late Adenan. From left are Nyurak, Abdul Karim, Ismi and Shahrul. — Sarawak Public Communications Unit photo

the local community and researchers will enable the latter to gain greater knowledge of the resources that the former has been utilising to treat diseases.

"This is a well-deserved recognition, and I fully agree that UPMKB via the Tok Nan Chair should establish a research hub to study local herbs used by the different ethnic groups in Sarawak," he added.

Meanwhile, UPM Deputy Vice Chancellor of Academic and International Prof Dr Ismi Arif Ismail said a series of initiatives have been introduced via the research chair, including providing scholarships to Sarawakian students to enable them to continue their education from diploma level to doctorate.

"To date, eight students

have accepted the scholarship covering the period 2022-2023. Additionally, as part of its ongoing endeavours to establish UPMKB as a prominent hub for ethnic research," he said.

He said to promote Sarawak as an important tourist destination, the research chair has made serious efforts to collate information on the rich diversity of life, culture, arts and heritage of the state.

"The aim of the Chair is to collect and document the various treasure troves and legacy of the state, publishing them in the form of journals, videos and websites and sharing them via the Tok Nan Chair portal. This information will then be channelled to the ministry, which serves as a basis for its policymaking."

Ismi said experts in the field of ethnic studies will guide and supervise interested students through this programme.

"I believe this programme will enable UPMKB to emerge not only as a leader in agricultural and forestry sciences but combine existing expertise in social sciences to offer a multidisciplinary field.

"Therefore, I am confident that UPMKB through the Faculty of Humanities, Management and Science, will pioneer ethnic studies in Sarawak in addition to making the state a known tourism destination to showcase rich cultural heritage and tradition," he said.

Among those present were UPMKB campus director Prof Dr Shahrul Razid Sarbini and Bintulu Resident Nyurak Ketu.