

**Special honours for
UPM academics**

By KANG SOON CHEN

educate@thestar.com.my

EARLIER this month, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Mustapa Mohamed announced that the country's export of halal products had gone up from RM23.1bil in 2010 to RM35.4bil as of last year.

The burgeoning growth of the country's halal industry did not happen overnight. Throughout the years, the Government has put in various measures to make Malaysia a global hub for the production and trade of halal products and services.

According to Mustapa, the Government has been actively involved in an effort to raise the halal integrity level, besides building the capacities of the halal product companies and promoting the Halal Malaysia brand.

The Eighth International Halal Showcase (Mihas) held at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre last year brought together halal foodstuff and new technology from around the world.

A total of 385 companies from 28 countries, including Malaysia, took part in the four-day showcase.

The Halal Products Research Institute in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) has been at the forefront of research and development (R&D) in the halal detector technology.

Prof Datuk Dr Yaakob Che Man, who is known as the "halal scientist" from the UPM Faculty of Food Science and Technology, founded the aforementioned institute.

His brainchild is HaFYS, a halal verification system that can detect porcine DNA within an hour through polymerase chain reaction.

The product, which was acknowledged as a breakthrough innovation in halal detector technology, bagged several awards at the national and international level including the National Intellectual Property Awards, Islamic Innovation Awards, Brussels Eureka Awards and the BioInno Awards.

Currently, it is patented in Malaysia and 22 other countries including the United States.

Prof Yaakob was among the 15 academic staff from UPM who received the Vice-Chancellor Fellowship Award from the Sultan of Selangor Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah during the Putra Academic Excellence Awards (MGAP) 2011 ceremony recently. The Sultan is the Chancellor of UPM.

Held for the fourth time since 2009, MGAP was a gala ceremony honouring the achievement of UPM's academic staff in the areas of teaching, research, innovation and professional services. The awards were formerly known as Putra Teaching Award, Research and Innovation Award, and Consultation Award. Four new categories were introduced to the awards this year including the awards for Professional Services, Book Publication, Journal Publication and Arts and Creativity.

Prof Yaakob was also one of the three recipients of the highest overall award – the Vice-Chancellor Special Award – in the research category, Food Science and Technology cluster.

“To many people, halal products are just a religious issue because even countries in the Middle East did not see the halal industry as an important player in the economic sector,” said Prof Yaakob.

“What they fail to see is that the halal certification is a good marketing tool for the products as it is also a mark of quality assurance. Furthermore, halal products are suitable for both Muslims and non-Muslims,” he added.

The multiple-award winning professor, who was also named as the National Tokoh Maulidur Rasul in 2010, maintained that halal science should not be viewed as secondary to other branches of science.

“There is no reason why halal science should not be compared to science in outer-space exploration. Although halal is a religious requirement in Islam, halal science is not limited to Muslims only,” said Prof Yaakob.

UPM attained its research university status in 2006 under the Ninth Malaysia Plan. It received an extra boost earlier this year when Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin announced that the university officially gained autonomy



Prof Fatimah received recognition for the important role she played in advising the Government on national policies in agriculture.



Dr Zeenathul, who is a molecular biology and virology specialist, was acknowledged for her excellence in teaching.

together with four other public universities. UPM vice-chancellor Datuk Dr Radin Umar Radin Sohadi said the university always encourages the academic staff to carry out high-impact studies that are beneficial to the community and the industry.

"The culture of research excellence in the industry will spur the growth of human capital and the economic sector in the country," said Dr Radin Umar.

During his speech at the awards ceremony, Dr Radin Umar said that research and development and the commercialisation of research remained as the main focus of the university's development plan.

"The university has a mission to make meaningful contributions towards the creation of a prosperous nation through our discovery of knowledge among the students and the academic staff," said Dr Radin Umar.

Meanwhile, Assoc Prof Dr Zeenathul

Nazariah Allaudin from the Veterinary Medicine Faculty was acknowledged for her excellence in teaching with the Vice-Chancellor Special Award in the teaching category, Pure Science and Health cluster.

The passionate educator said the award received was a very special token for the eight years she spent teaching in the university.

"Learning in the university involves complex knowledge acquisition and a high intellectualism. It is important that students have a positive attitude and they need to be committed to their disciplines," said Dr Zeenathul who specialises in molecular biology and virology.

To stir intellectualism in her classes, Dr Zeenathul set in the motion for her students to debate various topics so as to sharpen their critical thinking skills. "I believe that there is no wrong answer and every short-

coming can be improved," said Dr Zeenathul who is known for her teaching philosophy, "Be champions to make learning a wonderful experience".

She shared that there was never a dull moment in her lectures as her students were vocal and raring to participate in discussions.

The last recipient of the Vice-Chancellor Special Award, Prof Dr Fatimah Mohamed Arshad from the Institute of Agricultural and Food Policy Studies, received recognition for the important role she played in advising the Government on national policies in agriculture.

"The agriculture sector is neglected in many developing countries with very little spent on its R&D. In Malaysia for instance, the food sector has remained stagnant in the last decade because more focus was given to the manufacturing industry," said Prof Fatimah who received the award in the professional services category.

The global food crisis in 2008 which triggered the exponential rise of food prices in many countries, such as the 50% to 100% hike in Haiti, was a wake-up call to the world that the agriculture sector was still important, said Prof Fatimah.

"Can you imagine that even our country was not spared the crisis when we faced a shortage of rice? And the prime minister from Haiti was forced out from office because of the food crisis," said Prof Fatimah.

"Some people tend to look at the export earnings and profit in the investment on agriculture. What they often overlook is that a sustainable agriculture sector protects against the insecurity problem and social uprising, as seen in countries which suffered the food-crisis," said Prof Fatimah. She added that the award she received will spur her on her cause to campaign for a sustainable agriculture sector in the country.

"You can never go wrong when you invest in food. Human civilization started with agriculture and it should stay that way," she said.



Sultan Sharafuddin, accompanied by Dr Radin Umar (in red tie), visits Prof Yaakob (bottom left) at his booth.