

Gripped by 'beauty contest syndrome'

By KOH AIK KHOON

koh@ukm.my

SIX prominent alumni of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) were invited by their alma mater to reminisce about their student days on May 18, the 39th anniversary of the institution.

One of them talked about the "three tigers". He pointed out that the commonality among the top three universities in Malaysia is that they all have tiger(s) on their crests.

University of Malaya (UM), being the oldest, has three. Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), the second oldest, has two and UKM, the third oldest, has one.

In any ranking of universities, be it The Times Higher Education Supplement -Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings (THES-QS), THES-QS (Asia) or Kajian Penarafan Institusi Pengajian Tinggi Awam (Setara), these three tertiary institutions are usually at the top.

The latest is the first THES-QS on Asian

universities. UM is in the 39th placing, UKM in 51st and USM in 69th. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) are in the 82nd and 90th placings respectively. They all are among the top 100 universities in Asia.

UKM is rather pleased with the result, on digital display at the entrance to the Bangi campus.

The top three learning institutions in Malaysia are in constant healthy rivalry, each wanting to move ahead of the others in terms of world or regional ranking.

Universities elsewhere are also gripped by this so-called "beauty contest syndrome". Everyone wants to be the best and looks the best.

Being at the top of the academic totem pole confers benefits not only to the university, it also brings pride and joy to thousands of alumni.

When you are at the top, you have more bargaining power when it comes to heftier research grants and operating budgets which are the lifeline for any university. You don't want to be

impoverished.

Herman Melville has said that "to produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the fleas".

Similarly to produce a mighty university, you must have a mighty team.

Top and productive scholars give a tertiary institution its much sought-after intellectual might.

They make it visible and visibility is part and parcel of "peer review" which is a criterion in any ranking.

UM, UKM and USM have been in existence for more than 39 years and universities do need time to reach a level of intellectual maturity and sophistication.

UKM is at the threshold of four decades and as they say "life begins at 40".

UKM's next mission is Vision 2018 in which it aspires to be among the top 50 universities — not in Asia — but in the world.

The writer is the Deputy Director of UKM Alumni Relations Office.