

Producing Oxbridge-level universities in 20 years



IDRIS

HIGHER EDUCATION: Strengthening of tertiary education sector on track, says minister

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THE government will push ahead to raise the quality of higher education in Malaysia, with the aim of making one or two universities equal to Cambridge or Oxford University in 20 to 30 years.

"Knowing how important education is, we promise Malaysians to deliver the best education that we can," said Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh.

He told the *New Straits Times* that

the tertiary education sector in Malaysia is being strengthened and its progress is on track, particularly in terms of performance and ranking.

"The way we are soaring upwards, I believe in 20 to 30 years, we will be able to stand alongside the likes of Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard," he said.

In the wide-ranging interview at his Higher Education Ministry (MOHE) office in Putrajaya, Idris also spoke on the following:

THE moratorium on new colleges and universities remains;

MOHE will allow "gap years" for university students;

UNIVERSITIES must not be too obsessed with rankings;

MOHE will not and cannot micro-manage public universities any more;

PUBLIC universities cannot be too dependent on government funding, with the amount to be reduced gradually to 70 per cent; and,

EDUCATION Malaysia Global Services has been offering online ap-

plications for foreign students since January, with visas given for the duration of study and no longer a yearly renewal.

Idris also spoke about recent achievements by local universities and students.

"Our debaters emerged champions at the Cambridge Interschool Debating Competition (Cambridge IV) last year. And recently in Perth, at the Australasian Interschool Debating Championship (Australians), where we were the first Asian team to take the top spot after 41 years."

"Our ranking is going up. We are going to have two top 100 universities by 2025, meaning higher rankings in term of subject, university position and even country," he said.

As for the employability of Malaysian graduates of local universities

and institutions of higher learning, those who completed Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programmes seem to be doing better, with TVET graduates seeing a 97.4 per cent employability rate compared with public and private institutions and polytechnics, which have an average of 76.1 per cent.

But, according to Idris, this issue is being addressed through numerous initiatives that would produce holistic, entrepreneurial and balanced graduates.

"If you look at universities today, you will observe that there are changes in how programmes are carried out."

"If before there were no programmes to give in-depth insight into industries, now, we have the CEO Faculty Programme, where chief executive officers come on campus for

20 to 30 hours per year as icons for students and to share their knowledge, experience and best practices with lecturers, who would then be able to relook the existing curriculum and formulate new ways of teaching that would ensure a rise in the employability of students," he said.

He said this initiative will reduce the mismatch in the supply and demand of the job market.

Another initiative is the 2u2i Programme, a work-based learning programme where students learn for two years at a university and work two years to gain experience in an industry.

It has been implemented in Universiti Malaysia Kelantan in its entrepreneurship programme and Universiti Putra Malaysia in its plantation-related programme.

Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin in Terengganu will implement the 2u2i concept in its accountancy programme.

"With real-life experience in the industry gained during their degree



'Higher education quality soaring upwards'

THE following are excerpts from the *New Straits Times* exclusive interview with Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh.

Q: You are at the helm of the Higher Education Ministry, which is one of the most important ministries and the future of the nation depends on people like you. What are your thoughts on this?

A: Knowing how important education is, my first promise is to deliver the best education Malaysians can get locally, which means that we have to keep increasing the quality of our higher education.

How do we do it? You can see the quality of (higher) education has been soaring. The rankings of our universities have been going up (and) our student debaters are winning competitions globally. Recently, our Malaysian debaters won championship titles at the Australasian Interschool Debating Championship in Perth, the first two wins after 41 years.

Our rankings are also improving, so we aim to have two top 100 universities by 2025, which can include higher rankings in subject, university position or even country. As far as the universities are concerned, we are going upwards; that's why we use the tag line "soaring upwards".

We are not there yet, but I promise you, we are going to be there eventually. It won't take long; at the rate we are improving nowadays, we are already keeping abreast with the top universities. It may look like we are aiming too high, but the way we are soaring upwards, I believe that in 20 to 30 years, we will be able to stand alongside the likes of Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard.

Q: So are we already identifying the universities and the steps to take in search of a university equivalent to Oxford University and the like?

A: We have already identified our

top five research universities (RUs). They are Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. At the top of the ranking is UM, which is clearly ahead of the other four universities. Nevertheless, in the last few years, the other RUs have shown improvements in subject rankings. At the same time, academicians from these universities have also been receiving international recognition.

Q: The focus on TVET (Technical Vocational Education and Training) and community colleges has shown an increase in employability. How do we balance this with the unemployment of university graduates?

A: At the university level, the way we implement the programmes has changed. Before this, we didn't have the CEO Faculty Programme. Now, we bring CEOs (chief executive officers) from the industry to give a talk, network with lecturers, view the curriculum and allocate 20 to 30 hours a year for them to sit down with lecturers to change the curriculum and the way they teach, and also ensure that employability is available.

Besides that, we also have the 2u2i Programme, where students spend two years at university and another two years in the industry. This has been implemented at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan and will soon be implemented at UPM and Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin. We cannot say that they (the students) don't have any work experience after they graduate with industry experience of two years. For example, in animal science, the students will have experience dealing with livestock. In the plantation industry, for instance, under UPM's plantation management, they will have to undergo two years in the plantation industry. If students are into entrepreneurship,

they should be able to observe how businesses are handled to start their own company. So, there will be no such thing as employability issues. We are also upgrading entrepreneurship programmes in all campuses.

Our evaluation system has also changed, where we are using the integrated cumulative grade point average (iCGPA), which is the first in the world. We believe students should not only be evaluated based on their academic performance, but also on these skills — interaction, communication, entrepreneurial, practical — and ethics, to ensure they become holistic students, as

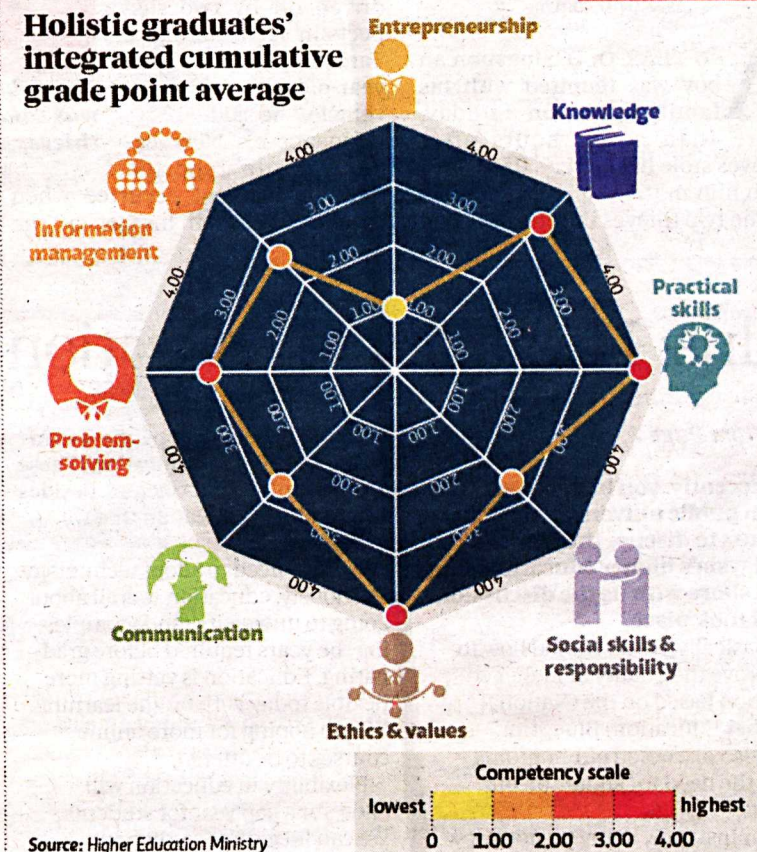
stated in our (National Higher Education) Blueprint.

Students' proficiency in the English language has also improved tremendously, with the percentage of those achieving Band 3 (in the Malaysian University English Test) increasing to about 27.8 per cent. So, based on these initiatives, I believe that our graduate employability will be better.

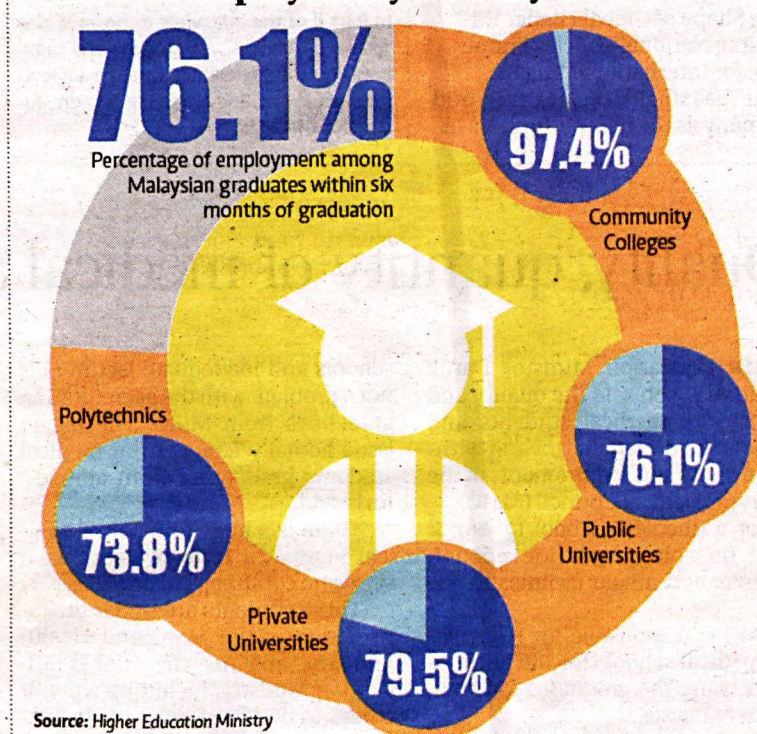
I am not saying that what we implement today, we will get results tomorrow. It will take four years for this group of students to graduate from universities.

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Holistic graduates' integrated cumulative grade point average



Graduate employability in Malaysia



programme, there will be no issue of employers questioning their work experience after graduating.

"Say, for instance, students study animal science. They would have ample experience handling livestock (upon graduation). Or, for plantation management, they would have two years of that already in real life. It's the same with students of entrepreneurship; they would have spent two years learning and working with actual entrepreneurs."

"We will be increasing more entrepreneurship programmes at universities to encourage this," said Idris.

In addition, there is also a change in evaluation, where, through the implementation of iCGPA (integrated cumulative grade point average), it is no longer just based on academic achievement, but also participation in co-curricular, social and voluntary activities.

"This is a first in the world because we believe that we should not measure students' achievement through academic performance alone, but al-

so how they interact and communicate, their entrepreneurial and practical skills, and their values and ethics to ensure that they become holistic, as stipulated in the first shift in the National Higher Education Blueprint 2015-2025," he said.

He also highlighted an improvement in student performance in the Malaysian University English Test for the 2015/2016 academic session. There is an increase of 27.85 per cent for those who scored Band 3 and above, compared with the previous session's performance.

"So, with the CEO Faculty Programme, the 2u2i Programme, iCGPA, entrepreneurship programmes and improvement in English language (proficiency), I believe graduate employability will be better."

"But the impact will not be seen immediately as it will take four years at least for those who undergo all these programmes to graduate from university," he said.

Flexibility in education is another focus that the ministry is stressing on.

In a recent meeting with vice-chancellors earlier this month, Idris said attendees discussed ways to make education accessible to all without needing to be present physically at universities.

"We talked about how technology can be adopted to make education more flexible via online means, for example."

"And, that students can get a degree without having to spend the full length of the programme in full semesters consecutively, where there could be leeway to do a gap year during their studies. We also plan to introduce credit for volunteerism," said Idris.

He revealed that the attendees were cognizant of the trend where students may have their first year of study in the United States, the next semester in London and the next in Istanbul.

"There are universities doing all that. Perhaps we won't adopt all the concepts, but we're looking to make education more flexible," he said.

Idris: Flexibility in education will allow for gap year

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Q: Recently, you had an Away Day with public university vice-chancellors to discuss the future of Malaysia's higher education. Can you share with us the discussions that took place?

A: Basically, we discussed how to improve the quality of higher education based on the (National Higher Education) Blueprint. We also discussed our branding and the need to "shout" on our niche.

For instance, many do not know that, based on a study by QS Top University Rankings, Kuala Lumpur is ranked as the most affordable city for students in 2016.

A survey by the British Council on "The Shape of Global Higher Education: National Policies Framework for International Engagement" has singled out Malaysia and Germany as the best performers in

national policies on openness to international higher education. These are some of the plus factors, besides the quality of education that we have.

We also need to adopt technology. Previously, education was all about going to university (and) completing the years required before graduating. Education is getting more flexible today with online learning. We are hoping for more online courses to be offered.

Flexibility in education will allow for a gap year for students. We can introduce credit hours for volunteerism, too. These were some of the things discussed during the session with the vice-chancellors.

In Part II of the interview tomorrow, Idris speaks on university autonomy and rankings, income generation through endowment and waqf, and attracting foreign students to Malaysia.



Undergraduates at an orientation programme at Dewan Tunku Canselor at Universiti Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. UM is one of the country's top research universities. File pic