

Fresh Faces Young Voices

What's your status?

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The most innovative ministry in M'sia?

To tackle the challenges faced by students, industry and academics, many innovative ideas are being introduced to improve the tertiary education ecosystem.

IS it a bird? Is it a plane? Well, kind of. It's an AirAsia-Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) plane!

In September, AirAsia unveiled a unique design on one of its Airbus A320s. It was a livery of UPM's Raintree, also known as *Enterolobium Cyclocarpum*, with UPM's name prominently emblazoned above its motto, "With Knowledge, We Serve". Deep.

The AirAsia-UPM plane is the outcome of an innovative initiative known as the CEO @ Faculty Programme which was introduced by the Higher Education Ministry (MOHE) in 2015.

Unknown to many, AirAsia group CEO Tan Sri Tony Fernandes was appointed as an adjunct professor under the programme with UPM, his host university. Suffice to say, this tie-up led to impactful collaborations between the university and famous airline company.

Recently, the ministry emerged as runner-up of the Prime Minister's Innovation Awards 2017, with MRT Corp taking first place. Among ministries, it was top of the list for its "Soaring Upwards" initiative.

I spoke to Datin Paduka Ir Dr Siti Hamisah Tapsir, director-general of Higher Education, and asked her, "What is Soaring Upwards?"

She responded, "It is the ministry's motto under which various initiatives have been introduced. It symbolises a continuously improving higher education system.

"While some have pointed out that it is grammatically redundant, the double emphasis is reflective of the innovative, and some may say quirky way we do work at the ministry."

According to Siti Hamisah, under the Soaring Upwards umbrella, MOHE has introduced 13 innovative programmes.

I asked, "What makes the CEO Faculty Programme so innovative? CEOs already speak in universities all over the world."

She highlighted the unique features of the programme which involved appointing the CEOs as adjunct professors and coming up with a structured engagement schedule (up to 30 hours a year) to lecture, provide guidance to universities on curriculum development and mentorship to young lecturers.

"To date, 73 CEOs are on board, benefiting more than 90,000 students, investing over 1,500 hours of their time – for free," said Siti Hamisah.

I asked, "What else?"

"We have the 2u2i Work-Based Learning programme which allows students to spend two years in university and two years doing hands-on practice in the industry. Then there's the Gap Year National Service programme which enables students to take up to one year off in between their studies to participate in nation-building volunteerism activities.

"We also have My e-Portfolio and the iCGPA assessment systems which not only assess knowledge but also soft skills, volunteerism, communication and leadership, critical thinking, and positive values.

"It's the first in the world of its kind and unlike previous assessment systems which

tended to be too academic-driven," said Siti Hamisah.

Fair enough. I recall that one of my best-received articles was on Eizaz Azhar, a school dropout at 14 who is now completing his MBA at the Asia School of Business (ASB), a collaboration between the Central Bank of Malaysia and MIT Sloan Management School.

Thanks to an initiative known as APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) under the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), individuals like Eizaz are able to use their experience as entry into higher education.

Siti Hamisah added, "Just last month, the Prime Minister launched the Malaysia Research and Education Network-X or MyREN-X.

"It is a revolutionary effort that links universities, polytechnics, research centres and agencies in Malaysia to a 100 gigabytes per second network bandwidth (in short, really fast Internet).

"This will spur collaborative research work internationally and allow Malaysia to enhance its nationally coordinated online learning initiative known as Malaysia MOOC."

I asked, "Won't this just cause 'innovation fatigue'?"

Siti Hamisah said innovation must always happen and the current innovations address a need within higher education.

"Graduate employability, English language proficiency, industry-academia collaboration, commercialisation of research, creating endowment funds as alternative income-generating streams, and mainstreaming technical and vocational education and training (TVET) are just some of the areas in which we must be innovative to address these challenges – otherwise, we will be left behind."

Siti Hamisah told me that the ministry is also aggressively looking into the impact of the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) on jobs and the future workforce to ensure that "we produce graduates with 21st-century skills who survive and thrive in the future workplace".

I guess Siti Hamisah has a point. Recently, a US Department of Labour report stated that 65% of today's schoolchildren will eventually be employed in jobs that have yet to be created – and this doesn't yet take into account jobs that will be replaced by automation within the next 10 years.

While time will tell whether Malaysia's Higher Education Ministry is the most innovative, for now, it can take pride that its efforts are not going unnoticed.

Francisco Marmolejo, the World Bank's lead tertiary education specialist, tweeted in August after attending a seminar on education that "#Malaysia (is) doing innovative work to redesign its #higher system. A global innovative case to follow".

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