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COVER STORY

# Giving back to the alma mater

UNIVERSITIES today are no longer just regarded as a place to seek and gain higher knowledge post-secondary school but they are also an avenue to prepare graduates to be job-ready and skilled for roles in the industry.

Tertiary institutions also take on the role of thought leaders in various fields and producers of cutting-edge research that benefit governments, businesses and society.

As competition escalates, faced with financial challenges that curtail spending and changes brought about by technology and the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, universities need to be quick, agile and adaptive to stay relevant.

Global top universities such as Oxford in the United Kingdom and Harvard in the United States have long been assisted by their alumni. In Malaysia, public universities are also recognising the value of their alumni in supporting and providing contributions voluntarily to expand a university's development.

Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) deputy vice-chancellor (Industry, Community, Alumni and Entrepreneurship Network) Professor Dr Zaini Abdullah said the alumni have an important role in university development.

Their input, in whatever form, will have a phenomenal impact on the university. For instance, the alumni can contribute to enhance academia, research and infrastructural system of UiTM.

The members can also have direct impact on the university when they are constantly engaged in its activities such as prominent alumni talks, sharing sessions with field experts and alumni homecoming that will bring reciprocal benefits to both UiTM as well as the alumni," he added.

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Alumni Centre director Professor Dr Hazandy Abdul Hamid said the role of the alumni has broadened to cover involvement in the university council representation, network-building, recruitment of prospective students and mentoring of undergraduates as well as a source of fundraising.

"Alumni members are our brand ambassadors. Many universities including UPM highlight their notable alumni as a way of connecting their successes to the tertiary institution.

A strong and a positive relationship with our alumni offers social, academic and professional benefit. Likewise, the alumni have realised that the association with the alma mater is not just mere nostalgia but it's much more," he said.

University of Malaya (UM) Institutional Advancement Centre director John Robertson shares the sentiment that the university alumni in Malaysia will undoubtedly play a more significant role in the development of a tertiary institution and perhaps, in the future, some alumni may make monetary contributions.

The UM database records more than 190,000 alumni but sadly, at present, it is only in contact with 30 per cent. Just like many universities in the country, historical student records have been largely neglected but we are employing many strategies to address this. Without a programme of data updates and relationship-building, significant donations and endowments such as those in the US or UK, for example, will not be easily achieved," he said.

He added that contributing to one's alma mater takes many forms; it is not just fundraising as it can include mentoring, internships and inspirational talks.

"US and UK universities enjoy beneficial leg-



UPM Alumni participating in a charity football tournament. The cover picture depicts UM graduates at their convocation ceremony held at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1963. PIC BY NSTP

welcome to invest in groundbreaking research and facilities that can impact the nation and the lives of the people, for example finding cures for health problems which affect the global population. There is potential to produce world-leading researchers in areas that UiTM covers in the 27 faculties that it houses."

UM is seeking donations from its alumni primarily for student welfare programmes and enhancing learning facilities.

"These areas were chosen to maximise impact and improve the well-being and overall learning experience of students," said Robertson.

STRATEGY

UiTM is strategising to improve alumni involvement with the establishment of a dedicated entity — the Alumni Network Centre — focused on the integration of the alumni ecosystem. This centre integrates various alumni associations registered under the Registry of Society and approved by the university (as stated in Act 173, Section 16, UiTM Act 1976) with the establishment of the UiTM Alumni Federation which allows alumni a bigger common voice.

UiTM has also set up the e-Alumni system as a platform for its alumni to update their particulars at alumni.uitm.edu.my

"We are creating an easy access portal for alumni to communicate and be updated on developments. Various alumni programmes have been conducted by the 27 faculties and 13 state campuses," said Zaini.

"I am a UiTM alumnus and am proud to be one. I encourage UiTM alumni to register and update their particulars."

The UPM Alumni Centre manages more than 30 programmes throughout the year which involve alumni working as entrepreneurs and those in government and corporate sectors, foundations as well as corporations.

"Our successful programmes include the Distinguished Lecture Series, Mentorship Programme, Alumni Sharing Knowledge, char-

ity football tournament and Homecoming. The main event this year is a dinner to raise funds to look after the welfare of UPM students. Makan Malam Amal Sirih Pulang ke Gagang: Homecoming 10th is scheduled on Oct 6 at Dewan Besar UPM and will be attended by the Sultan of Selangor, Sultan of Selangor Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah, who is UPM chancellor," said Hazandy.

He hopes UPM alumni will make their alma mater a platform for knowledge-sharing, experience and skills so that knowledge can be

CONTRIBUTIONS

UPM's Alumni Centre is seeking to build stronger connections with former graduates so that they feel involved with their alma mater.

"Leveraging the alumni community can be a win-win for both the university and alumni. Many alumni want to give back to their alma mater as a sign of their gratitude and affinity for the university," said Hazandy.

"We recognise and engage alumni as experts, future employees, future employers and mentors. They can be great role models and can offer practical guidance to students embarking on their studies and careers.

"We actively work across programmes and activities to incorporate alumni into our comprehensive Alumni Passion and Compassion Initiatives."

UiTM holds the view that its alumni should make both monetary and non-monetary contributions.

"They can contribute to UiTM's financial standing like those to many outstanding universities in the world. They can sponsor academic enhancement programmes.

"For non-monetary contributions, alumni who own companies or are in instrumental positions in established firms can help place UiTM graduates who meet the mark in their companies through an ecosystem of selection and placement. This arrangement will result in a steady stream of workforce for the companies, provided there is feedback in terms of the requirements for skillsets and knowledge," said Zaini.

Alumni in SMEs can also benefit from such an arrangement and with support from a well-

trained workforce, company performance can be enhanced.

Elaborating on monetary contributions, Zaini added that alumni can offer scholarships to brilliant students who cannot afford stipend and tuition particularly in critical and professional fields such as medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, engineering, law and accountancy.

Sponsorships can include student mobility programmes so that UiTM undergraduates can gain international exposure and recognition. Sponsoring students' projects in international and local competitions, be it innovation or other forms of contests, can yield impressive results.

"Apart from academic programmes, the importance of scholarship for research activities should not be underestimated. The alumni are



Graduates from UiTM's 13 campuses have an important role in its development.



Members of the Universiti Malaya Alumni Association looking at photos of their heyday on campus. PICTURE COURTESY OF UM

shared among students and the campus community.

"UPM will always open its doors for its alumni to play an active role in the development of student talent capital in a bid to enhance student's academic excellence and personal development. I invite them to contribute, mobilise energy and return to campus to help uphold UPM as a research university with an international reputation," said the UPM Faculty of Forestry Class of 1997 student.

As for UM, Robertson said that alumni rela-

tions at the university is undergoing a restructure and, therefore, events, programmes and alumni activities may not be rolled out until after the convocation.

"I am not an alumnus but I am passionate about my role as director of the Institutional Advancement Centre here at UM. My message to any of our alumni who are not already in contact with us and do not receive the annual alumni magazine is to reconnect with us at <http://umalumni.um.edu.my> to help us make a difference."

## A reflection of the university

PROFESSOR Datuk Dr Mohamad Abdul Razak describes his course mates, who were the first batch of medical students at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), in two words — "tightly knit".

"UKM was established in 1970. I entered the medical faculty in 1972/1973 session and we spent our days in the General Hospital of Kuala Lumpur," said the president of the UKM Alumni Council, who had his first experience as an alumnus and first president of the medical student alumni association in 1981.

"My specialty is orthopaedics and I went on to become a professor and was the director and head of department at the UKM Hospital in Cheras." He was deputy vice-chancellor of student affairs at his last post in UKM.

"It's time to give back to the alma mater. UKM is like a mother to me. And it is my responsibility to give back to it," added Dr Mohamad who is Cyberjaya University Society Malaysia (Oxbridge Malaysia) — registered in 1960 — was formed to pro-

The Malaysian chapter of the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Australia restarted five years ago in December 2013 after it was dormant for six years.

Its president Datin Dr Low Pek See, a paediatrician who graduated in the late 1970s, said the committees following the revival were of different age and disciplines.

The direction of the chapter is fourfold: to have a chain of support starting with the orientation of new students through liaising with UNSW admissions, encouraging them to be members of the on-campus group; provide insights into various industries and mentorship through alumni

events; foster networking among the alumni as well as members of other Australian chapters; and maintain communication with the alma mater for symbiosis.

The 600-strong Oxford and Cambridge Society Malaysia (Oxbridge Malaysia) — registered in 1960 — was formed to pro-

mote social, recreational and cultural activities between past and present members of the two British universities in the [then] Federation of Malaya; organise a dinner to celebrate the annual Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race and further any cause or project in the interests of the universities or their members.

The objectives still remain, said present president Chook Yuh Yng.

"As a society, we have platforms to contribute to the community in our outreach programmes to nurture the next generation of brilliant minds. The society guides prospective candidates on application, answers questions on eligibility criteria through engagement with them at events and social media platforms and answers email queries.

"It also helps connect the universities with alumni for support in areas such as raising funds, commercialisation of research, recruitment of students and industry linkages," added Chook.

"Apart from that, we continue to challenge our intellectual minds with current affairs debates, industry trends and news, and thought-provoking talks."



Zaini Abdullah



Hazandy Abdul Hamid



...reconnect with us... to help us make a difference.

JOHN ROBERTSON  
UM Institutional Advancement Centre director



Mohamad Abdul Razak



Chook Yuh Yng