

# New head for top research varsity

An alumnus who calls his alma mater "home" is taking it to new heights

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PROF Dr Mohd Roslan Sulaiman, 51, is taking on his new role as the vice-chancellor of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) with fervour.

The UPM alumnus never truly left his alma mater and is proud to now lead the research university.

He will helm the position for three years – a stint that started on Sept 1.

Prior to this, he served as UPM's deputy vice-chancellor (Student and Alumni Affairs) for three years, and held several administrative and academic positions, including the Board of Principals of UPM Student Residence chairman, and the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences deputy dean (Student and Alumni Affairs).

When he graduated with a degree in veterinary science in 1994, Prof Mohd Roslan did not plan on becoming an academic.

Instead he became a veterinarian in a local poultry farm before later moving into the academic realm at UPM.

In his first media interview since accepting the role at one of Malaysia's top research universities, Prof Mohd Roslan speaks exclusively to *StarEdu*, sharing his thoughts and visions for UPM.

**> How does it feel taking on this role especially since you are an alumnus of the varsity?**

It is indeed an honour, and a huge responsibility to have been chosen to lead my own alma mater.

I take this as an opportunity for me to play a role in UPM's progress, and to contribute to its development as a knowledge-based institution.

I believe the way forward is for UPM to remain grounded in our motto, "With Knowledge We Serve".

With the knowledge that we have gained and continue to seek, we must serve the nation, and give back to society as best we can.

**> What is your vision for UPM?**

My work as the new vice-chancellor, is to stay on track as one of the top public universities in Malaysia, keeping in mind that we have to plan and prepare ourselves to face many new chal-

lenges that the world is facing due to the pandemic.

My vision is to spotlight UPM's strengths: what we are well known for, and how we can best contribute to the nation.

Self-sustainability has never been more important than it is now, and I hope to revive our role in advancing agricultural technologies, so that we can help strengthen our country's agricultural sector. Accordingly, we also need to focus on food security, which is vital for the nation's survival.

**> What KPI have you set for yourself?**

The three-year term that I have been given is not a long time.

Thus, my main KPI will be on consolidating UPM's strength in agriculture, especially in advanced technologies and student character development with an emphasis on entrepreneurial skills.

At the same time, I also intend to focus on enhancing the quality of research work and maintaining our excellent track record in all fields.

To achieve this, all initiatives, strategic objectives and specific action plans will be drafted and included in the 2021-2025 UPM Strategic Plan and UPM Transformation Plan Beyond 2025.

**> What would you consider are UPM's strengths and how do you plan to build on them?**

UPM is known for its expertise in the field of agriculture including biotechnology, forestry, food science, and veterinary medicine.

We must also acknowledge that UPM has developed expertise in many other areas crucial for the country's development, such as engineering, business and finance, computer science, language and communication, and education.

We need to celebrate these varied areas of expertise in the context of teaching and learning, research and innovation, and engagement with industries and communities.

Nevertheless, in my opinion, UPM's most important strength is its people, namely its staff and students.

We need to nurture a sense of pride and belonging among our staff and students, so that we can support each other and develop collaborations and alliances which last long after we leave UPM.

**> You have been published in more than 200 high-impact journals. How will this benefit UPM's growth as a research university?**

My research experience will help me understand the processes and challenges that all academics face.

This means that I will be able to relate to the challenges at the grassroots level, and not just from the top of the ivory tower.

I will have to remind myself of the struggles of an academic, and not get carried away by the other responsibilities my position entails.

**> What experiences and lessons learnt during your tenure as the deputy vice-chancellor will help you achieve your goals for**

UPM?

As the deputy vice-chancellor, I was responsible for student affairs and alumni.

I had direct contact with students, getting a glimpse of their lives at the university.

It also gave me an insight into students' aspirations of what they hope to gain from their university experience, and what they hope to achieve when they leave.

Students are our major stakeholders at the university.

They are clients with expectations and they will become the graduates that represent us. Their success will determine our success, and how we are viewed by others.

It is our responsibility to ensure that our students leave the university not only with their degrees, but also having gained in life skills, and maturity as human beings.

If we can ensure that our students are future-ready, then we can proudly say that we have done our job.

**> What is the legacy you hope to leave behind?**

As the world struggles with challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, we need to learn to be self-sustainable.

To do so, we need to learn to be flexible in our approach.

I hope I leave behind a university that is confident in its strengths, that is prepared to face all the challenges yet to come, and one that is ready to fight for its survival.

We have heard of concepts such as 'future-ready' and 'future-proof'.

Now, we need to prepare ourselves and be ready for the future, and therefore we must anticipate being 'future-ready'.

**> What are your views on Malaysia's higher education system?**

For a developing country, Malaysia has a relatively stable and progressive higher education system well-managed under the purview of the Higher Education Minister.

This allows for our higher education institutions to be guided by a clear blueprint, the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education).

In this regard, UPM, as with other universities in Malaysia, works towards achieving all 10 shifts stated in the blueprint.

In the process, we were able to attract a huge international student population, as we made our mark as a popular higher education destination in this region, particularly for postgraduate degrees.

The challenge moving forward, as with the rest of the world, will be how to deal with the huge decline in the new intake of international students due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has forced us to revolutionise our teaching and learning environment, and to develop strategies in adapting to the drastic changes to not only how we work, but also how we live.

To survive and to progress, our higher education system will have to be more flexible and relevant to current and future needs.