

# HIGHER ED



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**“E** DUCATION is a great equaliser. No matter how impoverished one's origins are, education can change one's destiny. And with education, one can be just as good and as successful as anyone else in the world in one's chosen field provided there is commitment and drive to achieve it.”

This is Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Dr Zakri Abdul Hamid's advice to youth.

Zakri is the recipient of the prestigious National Academic Laureate Award at the Education Ministry's 13th National Academic Awards.

Honoured for his contributions in the academic field, his achievements reflect how the role of the academic goes

## Multiple roles of an illustrious academic

beyond teaching and research at scholarly institutions.

Citing his mother as the one who inspired him to work hard at his studies from very early on during his childhood in Ketari, Bentong in Pahang, Zakri embraced the belief that only education can help people from a humble background break out of

poverty and contribute to society at large.

Son to a lorry driver father and homemaker mother, Zakri has risen to become a globally recognised and highly respected educator thought leader, and science diplomat, providing the knowledge and expertise that could influence policies and governments.

Zakri, 71, is a recipient of many accolades and prestigious awards throughout his career.

Other than the National Academic Laureate 2019, he most recently received the United Nations Malaysia Award (Environmental Sustainability) 2019 for his

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## Educator, thought leader, science diplomat

contributions to promoting biodiversity conservation, and the sustainability of the environment.

Of the award from the United Nations, Zakri said "this award symbolises how a Malaysian can reap success at the international level".

He also received the Midori Biodiversity Prize (2018); Asean Biodiversity Heroes (2017); Merdeka (Environment) Award (2015); Zayed International Prize in Science and Technology (2014), and Langkawi Environmental Prize (1998).

In 2017, US trade magazine Biofuels Digest listed him as one of the top 100 influential people in the world on Advanced Bioeconomy.

Recently, the Asian Scientist magazine based in Singapore honoured him as one of the Top 100 Asian Scientists for 2019.

### JOURNEY IN THE ACADEMICS

Zakri's tertiary-level academic journey began at the then College of Agriculture, Malaya in Serdang, Selangor (now Universiti Putra Malaysia).

"I took up Diploma in Agriculture studies. Agriculture in the 60s was like information technology today, everyone wanted to take it up," he shared.

On the first day of orientation, Zakri — lacking confidence due to his *kampung* upbringing and trying to be as inconspicuous as possible — took the last seat at the back of the large hall.

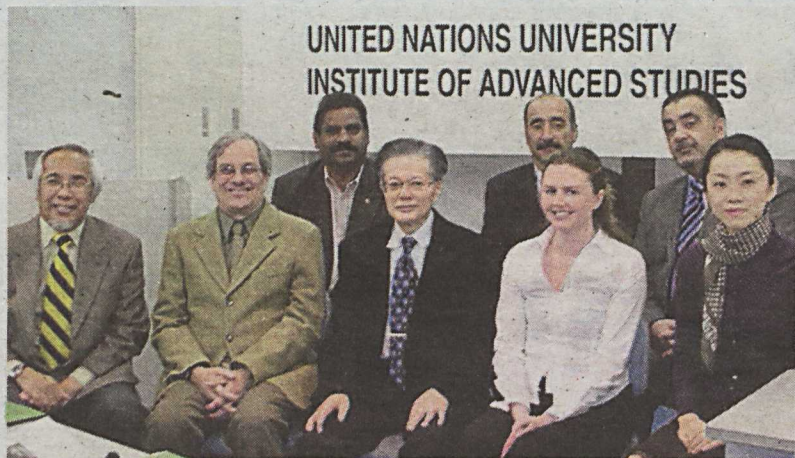
To his dismay, the legendary Mohd Rashid Ahmad or Pak Rashid — a much respected lecturer at the college — called him out and asked him to take a front-row seat.

"He asked for my name. And then he said: 'Boy, look here. Fear no one.'"

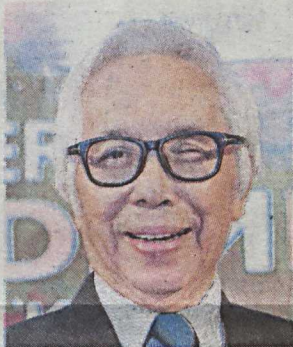
"These were very strong words and they became words I live by. When I entered the international arena, I met presidents and world leaders, I was not nervous because of Pak Rashid's magic words. They were so powerful and I remember," said Zakri.

After receiving his diploma in 1969, Zakri pursued further studies in the United States at the Bachelor's level at Louisiana State University, in 1972; Masters at Michigan State University, 1974; and PhD at the same university, completing it in 1976.

Zakri then joined Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and became part of the pioneering batch



The team at the United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies in Tokyo, Japan which Zakri Abdul Hamid (left) headed.



**Biodiversity is the basis of life, the web of life itself.**

**ZAKRI ABDUL HAMID**  
Recipient of the prestigious National Academic Laureate Award at the Education Ministry's 13th National Academic Awards

of academics who helped built the institution to what it is today — placed among the top one per cent of the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings and ranked number one in Malaysia for Top University under 50.

"I became a professor at 37 and served UKM for some 25 years with my last post as the deputy vice-chancellor (Academic & International Affairs)," he said.

He then left to assume the position of director of the Institute of Advanced Studies at the United Nations University in Tokyo (UNU-IAS) in Japan from 2001 to 2008.

During his tenure, he transformed the UNU-IAS into a leading UN think-tank on biodiversity and sustainable development.

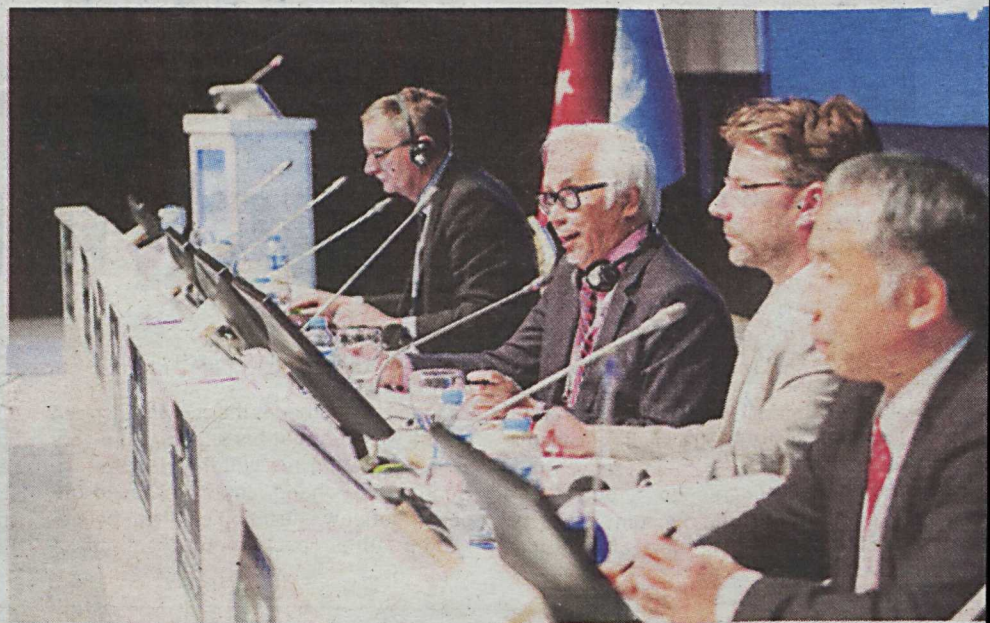
"I assisted the rector of the UNU to develop Regional Centres of Expertise for the promotion of Education for Sustainable Development. These networks address local sustainable development challenges through research and capacity development."

These efforts contributed towards the setting up of The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

During the run-up to the 2015 UN Summit, which launched the 17 SDGs (the 2030 Development Agenda), Zakri was a member of the Global Leadership Council of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)



Zakri Abdul Hamid in a group photograph with the eighth secretary-general of the United Nations, Ban Ki Moon (centre).



Chairing the 121 member nations of the Intergovernmental Platform on Science-Policy Advice on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services was one of Zakri Abdul Hamid's (second from left) key contributions in bridging scientists and policy makers.