



UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA (USM)

An exclusive report to be distributed with ***THE INDEPENDENT***

Transcript of the interview with:

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Vice-Chancellor

WORLD REPORT (WR): How has the University in a Garden concept evolved since the last time we met?

Dato' Dzulkifli: Since we met last year, the government has announced the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) University Initiative. This Ministry of Higher Education programme gives special emphasis to universities that qualify and moves them to the next level. Initially there were nine universities that bid for it and we are the only ones in the country who received the APEX status. With that came a number of new developments. The first is that we are given the full autonomy to run the university in terms of governance, finance and everything else needed for the university to excel. Secondly, it allows us to plan a transformation phase the way we see fit. Thirdly, we are given the opportunity to pick and choose staff and students. All our efforts have now been to see this APEX status materialise. We have instituted a transformation plan, which we devised for the given five-year period, from 2008-2013. We aim to revolutionise higher education for a sustainable future, giving us an entirely new concept of what university studies should be like in the 21st century. Embedded in that is the concept of University in a Garden, where we attempt to incorporate sustainable development as a focus of universities in the

21st century. This is a turning point, as far as university studies are concerned, given the scenarios we see in the world today involving environmental and financial crises. Education will experience a crisis very soon if we cannot cope with the changes happening around us. We are trying to pre-empt the issues that we think will emerge 10 to 20 years down the road.

(WR): Considering this is a consumer-based, consumer-driven society, how do your students absorb this philosophy?

Dato' Dzul kifli: We are moving away from that consumer-based society. That is one of the biggest challenges. People can be consumerist in a sense but they need to be very, very selective with what they consume in the future. The values of recycling, conservation and giving back to the community need to be embedded in higher education. Consumption for consumption's sake is not the way forward. Our university is modelled on that premise. For example, one of the activities that our students have undertaken themselves since we became an APEX university was to decide not to use polystyrene or non-perishable polystyrene. There was a big campaign and now polystyrene has been banned from the university. Students are into very ecological materials and that is a mindset we are trying to develop further. Students are now planning the next phase, which is to remove the use of all plastics within the university. But what is important for me is that it shows a mindset change, contextualised by education; how do you actually educate people to move away from these patterns of consumption? In the context of plastics for example, there is the possibility of using biodegradable plastics or Malaysia's own indigenous sources, such as palm oil, as a base. It is a big challenge but if higher education does not change itself and the way we educate people, education will become just another commoditised consumer product.

(WR): This mentality is very present on your campus but it is certainly not the way things are done. It must be a clash or a culture shock for your graduates once they enter the labour market.

Dato' Dzulkifli: The engagement is not only within the campus but with industry and the community as well. Our students are not isolated. As you correctly pointed out, they would get the shock of their lives the moment they left university. We are looking for industrial partners who are also very much into sustainable development. Part of the transformation plan that I talked about is to invite like-minded industry and use those industries to encourage others within the same sector to move along that line.

(WR): A corporate presence inside universities is basic. What more can be done to attract a larger presence of corporations inside universities?

Dato' Dzulkifli: I do not think that is a must. We must consider the value base we want. If there is a corporation that does not subscribe to our values, we do not need to have a corporate presence of that nature. That is basic as far as we are concerned. One of our intentions is to develop what we call, a science and arts innovation space. This space is a point where we could integrate knowledge, because science, rightly or wrongly, has lost its orientation as far as the knowledge base is concerned. The problems we see today, in no small way, could be attributed to the kind of science we develop. The automotive industry will tell you: we need to generate and add value again. The important dimension of the arts, humanities and social sciences needs to be reworked. The idea of the science and art innovation space is precisely to invite corporations into the university, given that set of values. We also want to generate opportunities and seven or eight such corporations have indicated interest. One has already moved in and two others will follow very soon. They are not 'global leaders' but they are emerging industry that subscribe to the same values we think are important for the future.

(WR): You mentioned having seen science lose its essence in a way; do you see that happening more in western countries like the UK than here?

Dato' Dzulkifli: It is a global phenomenon. We all see science and technology as the ultimate solution to all problems. Developing countries in particular look at scientific technology as a means to recreate the success of industrialised

nations. In most cases they forego the costs because invariably it is a long-term cost. If I go to London now, it is still very good and maybe you think this is what development is all about but what about the pollution? It is important for us to critique from both the Western and the developing world. That methodology is not rigorous enough and has to an extent failed. We must reinvent science. There is a big discussion globally among scientists who are concerned about the environment.

(WR): Many companies from the West are looking for other markets to develop and if you can make them do things differently than they did before, we might all win. There is a huge track record of UK and American companies who are not exactly environmentally friendly when it comes to developing countries.

Dato' Dzulkifli: Exactly. There are two different sets of rules. Back home, these companies are well behaved and follow the same rules and standards, but over here they are a different animal. That is why, as I said, there are no big global players in the schemes that we do. We are very critical of what the tobacco or petroleum industries do. But of course money is involved.

(WR): That is China's problem. We ask them not to pollute, but they answer that we have been polluting the world for all of our industrial development from the 1920s-1960s and now we are telling them not to do develop when they want to. I understand their point.

Dato' Dzulkifli: Still, two wrongs do not make a right. That is the easy answer. The more difficult one is to tell them that there is another way to develop. That is the challenge ahead. Hopefully we will be successful. Big changes must take place within the next five years. I am not sure how much we can accomplish but I am pleased that there are enough people around the world who share these sentiments. In fact we have organised a conference in Penang with a group of thirty Vice-Chancellors who will meet to discuss this dimension.

(WR): We have identified huge potential in Malaysia as a popular destination for study abroad students. Ways of teaching and programmes like yours in engineering are no longer taught in Europe. What are your feelings about this?

Dato' Dzulkifli: We are already attracting students from Commonwealth countries, Canada, the UK and Scandinavia. The Japanese are also coming in big waves. Students can come here to see what we are doing and how we synergise with the environment. We have some of the most extensive biodiversity in the world. If you do not know how to leverage that, you should not be in the education business.

(WR): You are a considerably large university for this country, with about 30,000 students. That is very well aligned with Vision 2020 and the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP) of democratising higher education. But with such large numbers, one immediately questions quality. What quality assurance programmes are you putting in place?

Dato' Dzulkifli: The first step we are taking is to reduce our numbers. 29,000 is not the number of students we want to have. 29,000 is acceptable when there are five or six universities, but now with more than twenty public universities and another twenty private institutions, the numbers could be more evenly spread around. We are going to reduce our numbers by half, with about 10,000 undergraduates. On the other hand we will increase our postgraduate numbers. It is more important for our university, especially in the context of Malaysia, to focus on post-graduate studies and research given the kinds of things we want to achieve. For instance, if the automotive industry were not good enough because it pollutes, what would be the alternative? We are also looking at healthcare. Tropical diseases have not been studied and people are dying of these diseases everyday. Unless universities in the third world begin to focus on this issue, we will not make any headway. Our own studies indicate that if global warming continues, malaria will be all over the world by 2030-2050. It is already in Australia and it will be in Europe, the UK, US, Sweden and more. In our typhoid fever programme, which we have been working on for the last three

years, we have managed to reduce typhoid diagnosis from three days to fifteen minutes. There is more in the pipeline and we are going to shift our focus to where there are gaps in knowledge and research.

(WR): That is very cash-intensive research...

Dato' Dzulkifli: Yes but we already have the technology.

(WR): If it is indeed that simple then why is only just now being studied?

Dato' Dzulkifli: There is no money to be made out of it. While some research may have a 23%-30% margin, this one has a 5% margin.

(WR): But the scale of those margins is high, in the millions...

Dato' Dzulkifli: Yes but there are millions of people who cannot afford it. This whole equation needs to be worked out. One of the things that I talk to my colleagues about is how to interpret returns on investments (ROI). That does not count into your profits and losses. How do you reflect this ROI, as intangible as it is but very much more meaningful, in your books? People have talked about triple bottom-lines where this can be incorporated into another bottom-line. There are different ways of doing it. There is no one fixed way to define higher education. We have gotten into a 'one size fits all' system and often that size is determined by somebody else. People whine and cry about their ranking, but ranking has very little to do with us.

(WR): You are quite well ranked though...

Dato' Dzulkifli: Yes, but that is not our game plan. If the ranking happens, great; if it does not, so what? The bigger question is how you transform this into something real. There is already a system of alternative rankings using this kind of a platform.

(WR): You are playing a part in government policy initiatives to democratise higher education to achieve Vision 2020. In your opinion what does this new government need to address in order to improve higher education in the country?

Dato' Dzulkifli: The government is talking about the right things, including innovation and higher values, but our worry is what innovation and which values? Innovation has also become a 'one-size fits all' concept. If people talk to us about moving up the value chain, we ask where is humanity in your value chain? If humanity is not in your value chain, then it is the same problem all over again about bottom-lines, consumerism and selling things that people do not need. We are going to speak with the government on this but given the APEX status, we are allowed to chart our own definitions.

Although they really do not like the discourse, I remind them that the Vision 2020 preamble says Malaysia ought to develop in its own mould. You do not take from somebody else to develop Malaysia; you really need to crystallise what Malaysia is all about. But that mould is not coming. We are still talking about the old mould and when this Prime Minister talks about innovation, we are worried that it is still the same old innovation driven by the same old signs. It is not good for higher education in the long run. Our position is that higher education needs to take a different stake on this. While it is good to have innovation, what innovation and what values are we going to propose? At the end of the day innovation is just a process; the end point is what is important. These challenges in the Vision 2020 talk about Malaysia as not only a consumer of science and technology, but also a creator.

(WR): The idea of a knowledge-based labour force looks very good on paper but does not happen overnight...

Dato' Dzulkifli: We cannot do it overnight and we must change the mindset, otherwise we are repeating all over again. But I do not want to downplay this; it is a very good start. But a lot depends on how the discourse goes and we have

taken our position as far as this is concerned. To really compete we need to find a new paradigm to compete in.

(WR): Neighbouring countries, such as Korea and Singapore, are making a huge emphasis on this and fuelling a lot of money into their systems.

Dato' Dzulkifli: Yes, but the game plan is different. I can run the university like a football club; they just need to give me the money. But now Singapore is realising that in sending their students abroad, they may not return. Korea is no longer sending their students abroad, especially the post-graduates. They want to keep them in the country and bring the experts in, so they have the expertise and they have their people. These are the issues that need to be discussed and it is not as clear-cut as saying this one country is successful and we should follow that. That is a big mistake.

(WR): As Vice-Chancellor, could you please give us your main achievements and your challenges for the future?

Dato' Dzulkifli: With regards to my achievements, that is for somebody else to say. One of my satisfactions is to have gotten this APEX status. That is a major milestone, not so much for myself, but to give the university a new lease on life to move towards very ambitious ideas on how to change higher education. If we plan well and given the values everybody is looking at, perhaps we will get more people to back it up.

Our challenges are to fight the old way of thinking to get into a new mindset. Sustainability is not a well-accepted idea especially when it is not just in the context of the environment but also in the context of people. There are four billion people living on fewer than three US dollars a day. What happens to these four billion people, which will increase to six billion in the next couple of decades? How do you undertake a sustainable world with two thirds of the population living on fewer than three US dollars a day? Are we not a global community? That is why when we talk about sustainability, health is a major issue for us because that is within reach. We must change the whole idea of

how to evaluate success. These four billion people are an issue for us. What are the things that we ought to be working for apart from health?

How do you reach them on the level of education? This is a different programme altogether and now there is a network of fifteen universities talking about this. We are not alone and globally, there is a lot of interest. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) cover education but how much achievement is there before they expire in five years' time? We did a survey and less than one percent of universities actually work on the MDG. It came as a surprise for us. You begin to ask how relevant higher education is, if the United Nations has agreed upon a global agenda in which half of the ideas relate to education and universities are not gung-ho about this. There is also another UN initiative on Education for Sustainable Development, which will end in 2014. That mandate is to mainstream sustainable development within the framework of higher education. Again when you ask around, nobody is involved. The only support we have is from UN University (UNU). There is a network of fifteen universities under the auspices of UNU that are beginning to rework what higher education is all about. The best way to get this going, in our example, is to inform and mobilise the students. We tell our students the world is yours for the next take, we have spoiled it for you; how are you going to make amends? With this agenda in mind, the students are telling the professors and lecturers that we want to learn about sustainable development. It is a bottom-up process that people are forced to learn because the demands for higher education are there.

(WR): What would be your final message for the UK audience?

Dato' Dzulkifli: The world has changed. As a leading country with a lot of expertise, there are many people in the UK who aspire to this. And not only the UK; I gave a talk to a group of Irish universities and there is a lot of support from them on how to move forward, particularly after the financial crisis. This has opened many eyes and people are wondering what has gone wrong. The people who have created the problems are from the Ivy Leagues; if they are that good, why are we now in this mess? There was a quote that says that

Madoff will go to prison because he was not Ivy League educated. The Ivy League people know how to worm themselves out of it and still lead a wonderful life.