



WORLDREPORT

UNIVERSITI TEKNIKAL MELAKA

An exclusive report to be distributed with *THE INDEPENDENT*

Transcript of the interview with

Dr Ahmad Yusoff Bin Hassan

Vice-Chancellor

World Report: *We have seen that there are a couple of things going on right now in this university. You have an almost brand new campus, with many building work going on. Could you please tell us about the new challenges that you are facing, and give us a brief introduction on the current situation of the university?*

Dr Ahmad Yusoff Bin Hassan: I feel that this is rather a very young university as it is only about 8 years old. It started as a university college, and then converted to a fully-fledged university in 2007. To the ministry we are categorised as a focus university. There are research universities, comprehensive universities and focus universities. Focus universities will play a definitive role in bringing up Malaysia in terms of human resource training. Focus in the sense that we are not going to offer all kinds of programmes, but just strategic competitive programmes. In our case we are focused on engineering, ICT and management. With all these three things together we have got six faculties. Four of them are in engineering, which are mechanical, manufacturing, electrical and electronics. There is also one ICT faculty and a new one being endorsed by the ministry, which is the technology management and entrepreneurship faculty. We are not just offering ordinary management courses but ones that are related to managing technology coupled with the aspect of promoting entrepreneurship. I believe these are the different factors you want to relate to with other universities. I also believe the government

has been quite good in funding our infrastructure. You have seen that we have a brand new campus, and more importantly the teaching equipment that we have. Another unique feature is that we are going to go practice orientated. I have gone away from using the term 'hands-on' because there are some connotations with this term and it can be misinterpreted as a lower level of hands-on. However, we want to have the idea of being parallel to Germany. Where we see the German training, they have hands on with high technology and not hands on with just ordinary things. We are supposed to produce well-able engineering graduates to run the knowledge-based kind of economy with the high technology industries. Therefore we are going to do that kind of thing within the market and we are designed to produce and provide that kind of human resource for Malaysia.

World Report: *You have basically identified what the labour market needs and what Malaysia needs in terms of graduates, and you have set up a university to respond to that.*

Dr Ahmad Yusoff Bin Hassan: That is why I believe we are going to also focus on helping the nation with wealth creation. We were asked to partner with a very strategic industry. Our research is applied research within the industry, and this will have very high impact on the economy. Basically, we try to go for things that can potentially generate revenue or wealth creation for the nation.

World Report: *What would you say differentiates your programmes from the other universities' programmes? What are your competitive strengths and why would one student want to come to UTeM and not to another technical university like UTM for example?*

Dr Ahmad Yusoff Bin Hassan: I believe we are in competition and we always want to be the best. If you think of the blue ocean kind of strategy, you try to do something different. We are not going to compete with the research universities. With engineering in terms of training we resort to outcome based education. You are going to the base learning of concepts; students sense that kind of concept,

and we have very good support on infrastructure and very good links with industry. So those are the elements that are the pulling factors for people to come in. For Malaysia, Malacca is a very nice place to be, internationally as well. This is a world heritage site, and one of the two Malaysian heritage cities of the world. The other world heritage site is Penang. So you have got another pulling factor there. I think you should go around and see how beautiful the state is. We get a lot of tourists coming in especially now as it is the school holidays. Now the city is full of people and I think it is a very nice ambience. The weather, the communications and living costs are also low. The medical fees here are also very low and are a factor that is pulling the neighbouring countries to come and to look for treatment. The health industry is bringing many Indonesians to Malaysia. Therefore we are set to receive not only local but also international people.

World Report: *We have identified huge potential for sandwiched or attached students to come here, maybe for a semester or for a course. The engineering taught here is focused on developing countries' needs, and is the type of engineering that we no longer teach in the UK. I do not know if you would agree with that? The way you approach engineering here and the type of engineering you teach is one that caters to the needs of developing nations and developing infrastructures. That kind of approach is not the one that is offered in the UK.*

Dr Ahmad Yusoff Bin Hassan: I was trained in the UK for ten and a half years, from taking my A Levels right up to my PhD. I then came back to Malaysia. The phase that we are going through is a very exciting phase. The economy that is now knowledge-based is no longer only producing primary goods but is converting these goods and adding value. That is why creativity and innovation are the catchwords of the day. I believe that we have a lot of design and innovation competition even within our organisation. Korea and Taiwan have moved ahead very fast and I want to race at that kind of speed. I believe that with education as mentioned by the vice chancellor of UTM, of course the basics do not change. What we have now is a big challenge in terms of producing Malaysian products, Malaysian solutions and Malaysian ideas. We are meeting new challenges and not only national challenges,

but also global challenges. This is because we are going towards a borderless world, so the solutions that we are coming up with are not only for Malaysia but also for the market as a whole. That is the mindset now, so we want to produce engineers. We are also trying to confirm with the Washington Accord, being a member and endorsed, as the engineers produced here can work in any country in the world. This has come about as when you go to Europe you have the process that ensures everybody is at a certain level. Even though the Germans do not like it, they still like their own way of training. They say they are good enough but they also have to succumb to the regional agreement as well. I do believe that we are going to produce engineers of that calibre not only just for Malaysia but also for the region at least, and better still for any part of the world. In fact, I have just been to Pahang where the secretary general of the Northern Consortium of UK universities was visiting. There are nine universities. The primary ones are Manchester, Sheffield, Birmingham and Liverpool. I think nine or eleven of them are in partnership and we have four of the Malaysian Technical University Network collaborating together to have a common programme; a crossover to make sure the mobility and the special breed of engineers that can come partly here and partly there. Normally it is done by the private sector, 1+3, 2+1. But more so now we really need to have a big reputation in collaboration with the well established universities. Yes, it can be by accumulating the credits, by just getting a few from a selection of universities. I think it is a good proposal that we are considering now with the UK.

World Report: *What is your view of the involvement of private corporations within universities and what do you think needs to change in order to attract them in a more determined way?*

Dr Ahmad Yusoff Bin Hassan: Private universities in engineering are not coming up as fast as they want to because it involves a lot of capital. The private sector is trying to go for the softer option, softer programmes. But coming into engineering slowly, engineering per se, they cannot compete with the public universities yet. But, they are improving very fast now and I think they are going to fight for

credibility to show that they are on par with or maybe better than the public universities. We are actually at the cautionary level, to ensure that we are always in front. We have an advantage right now because of the funding and I think we really have to speed up more and more, and make ourselves better all the time in order to increase the gap. I believe the competition level is really there. As for the synergy level, partnering is definitely a possibility, and I am not closing that option. There are things that we can come out with together besides industry; the private sector can be seen as a partner as well. As of late, there is a lot of national competition and business competition. All of these are opening up competition for all the institutions, and there you have the private and public competing and we see it is neck to neck sometimes. It is very healthy for the private sector to come in and check the balance of the whole thing, motivating you to always be better. It is motivation that can push you to the limit. In fact when you look at the national plan, towards the vision 2020 if you see the numbers projected, the private sector is going to produce more than the public. This is because we are only going up to 20 public universities for 2020. We are not going to increase more. However, we are going to increase the capacity a bit and of course zoom in on quality.

World Report: *How does the growth of numbers affect the quality, and what do you do to ensure quality here?*

Dr Ahmad Yusoff Bin Hassan: The Ministry of Education is really inviting us to look at the quality. Also, one of the parameters of KPI (key performance indicators) is the number of PhD holders and the number of PhD's that we train out from the university. Those are the ones that are going to be evaluated as performance and research, not the number of research and papers but how many transpire towards the commercialisation and how many really go that far. So the numbering game is still there but it is going to the other part of the scale with the basic training but higher. That really signals the kind of quality we are supposed to gear up to.

World Report: *Are you satisfied with the quality of the university and do you believe the efforts are sufficient?*

Dr Ahmad Yusoff Bin Hassan: It is a big challenge with the constraints that we have, the time span given, but I think men work best under pressure. Therefore the duty of the boss is to push things further, and the ministry is doing that. Just before you came in, I was with the officer that relays the expectation of the ministry to the universities telling us the KPIs, and all the other things that are targeted over a time period. They always invite us to come out with a fantastic outcome.

World Report: *The government's policy regarding higher education is this vision 2020. There are two questions which are, your view of the importance to democratise higher education inside Malaysia, and what issues you feel the government should address in order to improve higher education?*

Dr Ahmad Yusoff Bin Hassan: We should have a special opening for diplomas because the research universities are producing people doing research. On focus we call ourselves a technical university, which is another breed. When I first came in I felt that universities should not offer diplomas, only polytechnics should, but we are opening up to this idea in order to go beyond. I mentioned to the deputy minister recently that there are many things we can do and are willing to do with commitment and sources. We are able to do this but the support must be sustainable in the long term. To give you an example, would be the question of creating mobility for students to join the NCUK. I noticed that especially in Europe there will be an excess of capacity which will be good. However in Malaysia we are developing the capacity, because only 17 – 23% are in tertiary education. I believe this is good but we need a special injection of capital and more infrastructures very quickly. At the moment it is not coming in as fast as we wish.

World Report: *The secretary general told us that the government is spending 20 – 25% of the national budget on education, and out of that a large percentage goes into higher education.*

Dr Ahmad Yusoff Bin Hassan: Of course, and those are the constraints we have, but the government is trying very hard and the proportion of money being allocated is very high. I believe it is actually the highest in the region. I am thankful, as it shows the seriousness of the government to make education the agent of change, but sometimes it is not enough because expectations are always higher. We try to achieve that but we are also bound to limitations as well.

World Report: *As Vice Chancellor what would you say are your most important achievements since you took office and what are your top priorities?*

Dr Ahmad Yusoff Bin Hassan: I think the first thing that I did was to set four things to make a real transformation. Number one was to create a sense of urgency to change for the better. Secondly was to set the vision, mission and objective to put forward what to achieve in the clearest manner. Thirdly was to install the process of change and use a model that is workable. This is something very important. The fourth was to really zoom in on the people that can really bring about the change, the characteristics, the training and attributes that people need to carry out the mission. In a way I think after one year, the top management and people started to realise where we were going, what we wanted to achieve and now they seem to be clearer. The biggest challenge is changing the mindset of people, because money and everything can be initiated by some kind of arrangement. Changing the mindset to bring about those changes is definitely the biggest challenge and if we can get it right, we can get the best potential and the best things to come out. That is the main solution.

World Report: *To finalise, I would like to give you the opportunity to send a message on the importance of Malaysia-UK cooperation, in terms of education, research, R&D and any other points of view you'd like to highlight.*

Dr Ahmad Yusoff Bin Hassan: The UK is my second home after Malaysia. I was there for ten and a half years and I still have many acquaintances there. I can go back and knock at the door at three o'clock in the morning, which I have just done

recently. But the thing is the visa issue, which makes it difficult for people to come in. Also the conditions for international students to go in UK are very tough. It makes it very difficult for the sponsorship of students in UK. That is something that worries me. The second thing is the course fees are still very high. This has resulted in people moving to where the fees are lower in the other side of Europe, such as Germany. Next week a professor from Liverpool is coming here for a seminar. With the UK there is an advantage as the language and the culture is so familiar. That is a plus point. I believe the government should encourage prospective students to go to other countries besides the UK because of the cost.

World Report: *Thank you very much for your comments.*