

RANKING

# Benchmarking universities

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**S**TRENGTHENING fundamentals in teaching and learning as well as a keen focus on being more visible in the academic and industry circles are the key enabling factors for Malaysia's five research universities to be placed in the top one per cent of the recently announced Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings 2017/2018.

The strategy clearly paid off for University of Malaya (UM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) and Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) which are all in the top 300 band of the global ranking system involving 26,000 universities across the globe — with UM leading the pack at 114th position.

According to Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh, the achievement of the five universities is proof that the decision of establishing research universities 10 years ago to improve higher education through research, publication, citation and innovation has paid off.

"These continuous improvements in the rankings among the research universities is spurring and monitoring the whole higher education ecosystem into a more dynamic one. We will continue to encourage more collaborations and sharing of facilities and research as well as improve the students and lecturers' mobility. Emphasis on translational research at universities is also benefiting the community at large and the nation," he said at a press briefing in Putrajaya last week.

UM which have steadily risen year on year in its ranking from 147 in 2013 is now so close to being in the top 100 in the QS World University Rankings.

The university is ranked top in the nation for four indicators of the world rankings which are academic reputation, employer reputation, student to faculty ratio and citations per faculty.

Professor Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud, UM's acting vice-chancellor, attributed the university's current position to the success in the execution of UM's strategic plan. The plan with the purpose of driving the university forward delivered positive impacts.

"We have been making certain changes to our strategic plan, one of which is tweaking our internationalisation efforts to be more focused and evidence driven so that we can best spend our resources," he shared.

An example of this is making use of a network set up in UM last year focused on Disability and Public Policy under the auspices of the Asean University Network (AUN). AUN is a small network of 30 universities — top universities within the 10 countries in the Asean region.

"We can invite universities outside the AUN to join too because it is a thematic network. It is being funded by the Nippon Foundation for the first three years with support of US\$600,000 per year. They have promised to further their support if we do well," he said.

A few years ago, UM also offered to be the secretariat for the Asia-Pacific Academic Consortium for Public Health instantly making it the hub for 100 other universities. "Through efforts like this people then will get to know you and you gain visibility," said Awang Bulgiba.



Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh (second from right) sharing a light moment with (from left) Professor Datuk Dr Asma Ismail, Professor Datuk Dr Wahid Omar, Professor Datuk Seri Dr Noor Azlan Ghazali, Professor Datin Paduka Dr Aini Ideris and Professor Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud. Looking on are Higher Education Deputy Minister Datuk Dr Mary Yap Kain Ching and Higher Education Ministry secretary-general Tan Sri Dr Noorul Ainur Mohd Nur. PIC BY MOHD FADLIHAMZAH

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**PROFESSOR DATUK SERI DR NOOR AZLAN GHAZALI**  
UM vice-chancellor

He said UM has 600 memoranda of understanding signed with universities around the world. "In truth, with the MOUs we collaborate with universities four times that number. Many are bottom up, not top down, with research proposals and activities from our researchers. This is a more sustainable model for the university and good for the long run," he said.

The number of citations have also improved considerably for UM because of the collaborations. "International collaborations bring about greater citations," said Awang Bulgiba. "In terms of publication, two years ago we were above the world average in terms of quality in about 14 categories as listed by Scopus — the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature: scientific journals, books and conference proceedings. This year we went up to 18. We hope to cover all categories in the list by 2020."

UPM which climbed 182 places from 411 in 2013/2014 to the current 229 in the QS World University Rankings 2017/2018 is delighted that it is inching closer and might even reach its target of being in the top 200 earlier than 2020.

"We have surpassed our targets so far. If we jump 30 steps next year, we will be within our target earlier by two years," said UPM vice-chancellor Professor Datin Paduka Dr Aini Ideris.

She said UPM will again analyse the achievements and weaknesses it has made and see what it can do better and work harder especially in the area of citations.

"We strive as hard as we can on making fundamentals like teaching and learning solid. Our entire community ensures together this happens. Our visibility was not so clear before. So last year we concentrated on visibility through networking and participation in academic events and there is a rise in that area."

"We have improved in the faculty and student ratio, academic and employer reputation. We have worked closely with the industry to bring them into

campus, arrange attachments for students in selected good companies and we get good feedback from employers on our students," she said.

UKM which saw the best improvement in rankings — moving up 72 places from 302 to 230 — with effort being placed on visibility and recognition.

"Our focus is clear — we are a university built on the aspiration of Malaysians at large. Our goal is to be a university that is referred to, relevant and respected. Ranking comes along the way. We don't chase ranking as we want our academia to do the right thing academically. We want to impact society with our scholarly achievement. Our work touches all our stakeholders and we have UKM presence in terms of initiatives and projects in every State throughout the country," said its vice-chancellor, Professor Datuk Seri Dr Noor Azlan Ghazali.

This past year Noor Azlan said UKM have been busy with industry meetings — talking to industries on campus — as well as establishing academia partners. "Last year, for example, we signed up with the likes of Oxford University and Cambridge University for collaborations and we are the first among Malaysian universities to sign up with World Bank for joint initiatives. And we share our success in as many networks that we have," he said.

UTM sees being placed at 253rd place as the result of a finetuned work culture.

"In UTM Global Plan 2012-2020, we have stated that we would reach Top 50 in the world in terms of engineering as a subject. This year, we are in the Top 100 in that category. We are going into the last phase of our global plan 2018-2020 — taking into consideration the fourth industrial revolution. We jumped very significantly in academic and employer reputation criteria for the QS World University Rankings but our performance in the international staff criteria suffered a drop because of the cutback in budget. We must also improve international citation," shared UTM vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Ir Dr Wahid Omar.

For USM, being ranked at 264 in the world is an indicator of being back on track. Previously, it was ranked 330 in the world.

"Since 2014 we have moved 91 places and this year is the best so far. We need to put our fundamentals right. We now have an online performance and KPI-based management system in to measure what's going on and how we are progressing. We do this as a team — the management and the deans. For the first time I see improvement. The fundamentals are in place. We know now what moved us and what brought us down. That, to me is very important. That you know your profile and have strategy in place and have the university move," said USM vice-chancellor Datuk Prof Dr Asma Ismail. This is what allowed USM to turn around in one year, she said.

"We are back on track and are able to be together with other RUs. We co-learn and co-share some information. This is the success of Malaysian universities. We work together as a team and will become anchor universities to ensure Malaysia remain as an international education hub," she said.

## QS WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKINGS 2018 MALAYSIAN OVERVIEW

2016	2017	Institution
114	133	Universiti Malaya (UM)
229	270	Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)
230	302	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)
253	288	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM)
264	330	Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)
601-650	601-650	Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS (PETRONAS)
701-750	601-650	International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)
701-750	701+	Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)
751-800	701+	Universiti Teknologi Mara (UTM)

Source: QS Quacquarelli Symonds 2006-2018 www.TopUniversities.com