Benchmarking universities

University rankings: Where do they really matter?

New Straits Times

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 top 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 250,000 universities across the globe — with UM leading the pack at 114th position.

According to Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Dr Maszlee Malik, the achievement of the five universities is an expression of the decision of establishing research universities 10 years ago to improve higher education through research, publication, citation and innovation has paid off.

These improvements in the rankings among the research universities is inspiring and maintaining the whole higher education ecosystem into a more dynamic one. We will continue to encourage more collaborations and sharing of facilities and resources 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 in a press briefing in Putrajaya last week.

UM, which has steadily risen on year-on-year rankings from 167 in 2012 to 114 in 2017, is now close to being in the top 100 in the QS World University Rankings.

The university is ranked top in Malaysia and is the highest-rated university in Malaysia for the fourth consecutive year.

Professor Awang Bulgiba Bajing Mahmod, UM's acting vice-chancellor, attributed UM'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 to break the international thrusts to be more focused and evidence driven so that we can best spend our resources," he said.

An example of this is making use of a network set up in 2017 for UM last year focused on Disability and Public Policy under the auspices of the Asian University Network (AUN). AUN is a network of 30 universities — top universities within the 10 countries within the region.

We can make universities outside the AUN to join too because it is a thematic network. It is being funded by the Japanese government for the first three years with a grant 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 Asian Pacific Academy for Public Health and Environment taking the hub for about 100 other universities. Through efforts like this, people will get to know you and you gain visibility," said Awang Bulgiba.

Datuk Seri Dr Maszlee explained that the Ministry of Education is also looking into collaboration with other countries to promote the work of Malaysian universities.

"We are taking the lead and are able to work together with other RMIs, comparable or similar organisations, and we are looking into high value-added programmes that can drive the visibility of Malaysian universities and bring them a step closer to the top 100," he said.

He said UM has 640 memoranda under standing 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 has also improved considerably for UM because of the collaboration. International collaborations bring about great creations, 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.

UM currently has 180 places from 311 in 2012/2013 to the current 229 in the QS World University Rankings 2017/2018 as it is still progressing, and might even reach its target of being in the top 100 by 2020.

"We have surpassed our targets so far. If we jump 38 steps next year, we will be within our target earlier by two years," said UPM vice-chancellor Professor Dato' Dr Ali bin Iskandar.

She said UPM will soon analyse the achievements and weaknesses that 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 online community users together this happens. Our visibility won't be to clear before. So last year we concentrated on visibility through networking and participation in academic events and this is one of the areas where 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 select good companies and we get good feedback from employers on our students," she said.

"UM 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 exportation of Malaysia at large. Our goal is to be a university that is referred to as 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," said the vice-chancellor, Professor Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Azlan Ghazali.

This past year, Azlan said UTM have been busy with industry meetings — talking to industries across the country — as well as establishing academic partnerships. Last year, for instance, 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 and entailed that we share our success in many networks that we have," he said.

UM sees being placed at 231st place as the result of a focused work culture.

In UTM's case, from 2012 to 2020, we have stated that we would reach Top 100 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 categories for the QS World University Rankings, but our performance in the international staff categories suffered a drop because of the cuts in budget. We must also improve internationalisation, shared UTM vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Ir Wan Ahmad Omar.

For UTM, being ranked at 264 in the world is an indicator of being 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 presence for our faculties and programmes to measure what is going on and how we are progressing. We do this as a team — the management and the students. For the last three years, we have improved. The fundamentals are in place. We know what we need to do to move forward and what brought us down. That, to me is very important. That you know your profile and have strategies in place, and have the university move," said UTM vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Prof Dr Asma Ismail. This is what allows UTM to remain in one year," she said.

We are taking the lead and are able to work together with other RMIs, comparable or similar organisations, and we are looking into high value-added programmes that can drive the visibility of Malaysian universities and bring them a step closer to the top 100," she said.

"As we continue to work, we will ensure to upgrade and co-produce some new content. This is the success of Malaysian universities. We work together as a team and we become a nation that is unison, and that is the mark of Malaysia remains as an international country," she said.

We want to impact society with our scholarly achievement. Our work teaches all our stakeholders and we have UTM in presence in terms of initiatives and projects in every State throughout the country," said its vice-chancellor, Professor Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Azlan Ghazali.

UM's Global Vice-Chancellor Associates, Noor Asma Ghazali, said that the rankings were a reflection of the country's growth and compared the Malaysian universities to other top universities around the world.

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The QS World University Rankings 2018: Malaysian Overview

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<th>University</th>
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