

# Vision for UKM to be in the world's top 100

UKM's new vice-chancellor has started implementing initiatives in its Strategic Plan to enhance its research culture, among other things.

By REBECCA RAJAENDRAM  
educate@thesun.com.my

PROF Dr Mohd Hamdi Abd Shukor (pic), 48, can come across as strict and serious. But the youngest vice-chancellor of a Malaysian public university is actually very friendly, bubbly and bursting with ideas to catapult Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) into the top 100 universities in the world.

With his salt and pepper hair, sharp suit and a red tie, he has already begun implementing initiatives in the UKM Strategic Plan 2019-2021 to enhance the university's research culture, among other things.

He stresses that he is "a strong believer in quality" and wants only the best for the university.

The former Universiti Malaya (UM) deputy vice-chancellor (academic and international affairs) from Muar, Johor, began his three-year term on Jan 1.

Prof Mohd Hamdi obtained his Bachelor of Engineering (Mechanical) from Imperial College in London, Master of Science in Advanced Manufacturing Technology and System Management from the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology and his PhD from Kyoto University in Japan. He is a professor at UM's Faculty of Engineering Department of Mechanical Engineering.

> **Could you tell me about your first 100 days as UKM's new vice-chancellor?**

It's been an interesting 100-days I suppose, that have been filled with learning about the university, which is rather new to me. New in the sense that the culture here is slightly different. I came from UM where we had different traditions. Over here, I think they are slightly stronger in tradition, particularly the Malay traditions. I'm not saying that having a strong tradition is bad. It's just a matter of how things are done here.

> **How does it feel taking on this role?**

I take it as national service. Initially, I felt very alien as I did not know the people at UKM or how things work here. The learning curve has been very, very steep. After 100-days, I know a lot more people now and I feel very comfortable with them. I've started to feel very much at home now in comparison to when I first came here.

> **What is your vision for UKM?**

My vision for UKM is to see it become a renowned international university and not only a local player. I also want to elevate all the professors to an international level, so that they are renowned internationally, not just locally.

Secondly, I want UKM graduates to become the first choice of employers. That is really my greatest hope.

> **What KPI have you set for yourself?**

Within my three-year tenure as vice-chancellor, I want UKM to be in the top 100 in the world, particularly in the QS World University Rankings.

UKM is now ranked 184th in the world. Entering the top 100 is possible, it is very possible.

I would also like to see the percentage of our graduates being employed increase.

We have been stuck around 76% for almost the past five years and I want to push it to at least 85%.

Research-wise, as much as possible I want to see UKM's researchers publishing in the top journals in the Web of Science (WOS), the database for the best journals.

We had 1,500 papers published in WOS journals last year and 85% of them were science and technology based.

So don't publish in any other journal except for the top WOS journals.

I also want to increase citations. Right now, we publish but people don't cite us.

> **How do you plan on fostering UKM's research university status and culture?**

We are going to give publishing incentives to researchers who publish in the top journals.

These incentives will go back into the research accounts of our researchers to accelerate and increase the amount of research done here.

For example, if the researcher publishes in the top 10% of WOS journals, we'll give RM7,000 if they are from Science and RM14,000 if they are from social science.

The second initiative is the research advancement aid unit.

In that unit, we hired five renowned professors who are good in writing to help our people to improve and edit their papers, especially the social sciences.

We need to improve their English level because a lot of the rejection is due to the English used in the papers.

Third is that 50% of the tuition fees paid by the postgraduate students (by research) will be channelled to the supervisors in the form of a research grant.

In order to do research, you need to have postgraduate students and at the moment, the number is dwindling.

I hope to increase the number of postgraduate students by at least 25% to 30% this year with this scheme.

Initiative four is I have put in RM6mil this year alone to bring in renowned, foreign professors to UKM on a three-year contract. My strategy is to be "sitting on the shoulders of giants."

They will co-supervise, apply for international grants, write papers with UKM staff so we can really up the game for the faculties and the institutes.

So we will put a few professors and also young lecturers under them to be nurtured and mentored by them.

> **What would you consider are UKM's strengths and how do you plan on building on them?**

UKM is a very comprehensive university and they already have a research culture. So, that's their strength but it needs to be aligned with the output.

Their second strength, which I find quite interesting is that they are already generating their own income.

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Everybody has started to generate income through their own faculties, institutes and agencies. Which is very good because they have that mindset already and are not depending on the university or the government's money when they can generate their own through various activities.

UKM also has very strong ties with the local community and industry, particularly here in Bangi. They have lots of community engagement projects and I want to enhance this through three levels of enhancement.

Right now, we do a lot of community service but I'm not interested in that. I would like them to do more community engagement, which is not only to clean up and help but to look at exactly what the pain points are and issues in the society and come up with the solutions

required.

Eventually, it's not just engagement we should be aiming for, but community leadership. We have to move into having impactful community engagement.

Community leadership is that you lead society and change their mindset. Look at their paradigm and try to influence their thinking. It shouldn't just be about solving their problems because a lot of issues in our society is a problem with mindset.

> **What experiences and lessons learnt during your tenure as deputy vice-chancellor at UM have you brought along to UKM?**

UM has a very different culture and way of doing things even though both are academic institutions. So, there are things that we can implement but it has to be modified and assimilated into the UKM mould. There is no "one size fits all" and I do not intend to bring everything lock, stock and barrel.

For example, in terms of publications. For a long time in UM, we have been pushing a lot for quality publications and I think that UKM should share the same notion.

Anything we do should embrace quality. So, anything that UM does in terms of quality enhancement will basically be very similar but in a different context of implementation.

For example, we must make sure the lecturer or academician is really good if we want to bring them in. Likewise for students, we don't simply take in anyone, in my opinion. We should not compromise on quality.

> **What legacy do you hope to leave behind?**

Honestly, I do not want people to remember me. It's not about me, it's about the institution. So, if they don't remember me, it's okay. I want people to know UKM.

For me, let's work on UKM and make sure that it becomes a very, very strong university that is renowned internationally with a strong team of academicians.

> **What are your views on Malaysia's higher education system?**

I think the Malaysian higher education system is improving a lot. My main concern is that we do not shift the goal post too often.

There is already the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education).

It doesn't matter who helms the ministry or who is the minister, I think the blueprint should be adhered to and carried out according to its timeframe.

Secondly, we probably have a bit too many institutions. At the moment we have 20 public universities and 74 private universities. The local market is not huge with just 22mil. We really need to expand the market not just in Malaysia. We need to look at the international market.

Thirdly, truly it is the financial support which the public universities are experiencing now. We are generating income.

But with all the red tape and bureaucracy, a university is not fully free in a lot of ways to exercise its ability to use the resources that it has.

For example, say I want to put our reserves into any businesses. I will need to ask permission from the Finance Ministry.

The freedom is not there yet but I think things will improve. There is a lot of discussion to give autonomy in its full sense and moving forward, giving real autonomy to universities is very, very crucial.

If you reduce the financial help yet want them to make money, you really need to untie their hands and legs.

If you still have this chain but are asking people to run, it's not really the way forward.

