

DISCOURSE

The language of knowledge

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THERE was no lack of nay-sayers when the idea of establishing a national university which uses the Malay language as the main medium was mooted by a group of Malay intellectuals in 1968.

Up till then, there was only one university in existence — University of Malaya (UM) — which has its roots in the British era of the pre-independence days of the country and naturally has English as the language of instruction. At that time, students either pursued higher education at UM or went abroad where the English language ruled in the academics.

But the group of intellectuals led by Professor Emeritus Datuk Abu Bakar Abd Hamid, Dr Syed Husin Ali, Zainal Abidin Abd Wahid, Mohd Zain Abd Majid, Tengku Samsut Bahrin and Mohd Ghazali Abd Rahman persisted in their goal to make Bahasa Melayu the language of knowledge in the proposed university.

Now 47 years on, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) has defied the critics: it has produced some 182,375 graduates and its academicians and researchers win accolades for some of the most highly cited research in the world — all using the Malay language as the language of knowledge.

"UKM fought for the sovereignty of the language. When it opened its doors in 1970, it became

a pioneer in the use of the Malay language as the language of knowledge in the various courses offered," said Abu Bakar, 79, at the recent anniversary celebration of UKM in Bangi, Selangor.

The university was regarded as an avenue for students from Malay-stream national schools to pursue higher education, thus it was recognised as an instrument in strengthening the existing education system.

"The establishment was driven by a demand from the public who saw the need for such an education institution as only the English-educated could gain entry into university up till then.

"When there is a system that allows the discriminated against in terms of language to go to the next level, they will show their worth and thrive. Opportunities must be established and doors must be opened," he said, relating the sentiments that led to the momentous event.

While there were doubts about the quality of graduates especially in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, Abu Bakar said it was proven in no time that they were on par with those from the more established UM, the only competitor at that time.

And the tradition continues with UKM being one of the five research universities in the country today, garnering awards at the international stage.

While the use of Malay language has thrived in the academics, in exercises such as rankings, some say it hampers higher achievement.



UKM will continue to strive to become a globally reputable research university with the Malay language as its language of knowledge."

NOOR AZLAN GHAZALI
UKM vice chancellor



UKM alumni at the 47th anniversary celebrations.

"Universal trends are challenging the use of local languages in higher education. While globalisation is an issue, the greater issue is confidence," said Dr Syed Husin Ali, 81.

This challenge is related to the problem of funding for the academia, he opined.

"Research efforts and publications in the national language must push on. Politics can influence academics. But creativity must be encouraged. There must be academic freedom, regardless of language," he added.

Abu Bakar and Syed Husin were speaking at a dialogue on *Bicara Nostalgia Kecemerlangan* (Nostalgia of Excellence talk) as part of the celebrations.

In his welcome speech, UKM vice chancellor Professor Datuk Seri Dr Noor Azlan Ghazali said in its 47 years, the university has faced various challenges to produce highly-skilled, professional and conscientious human capital from all segments of the Malaysian society.

"To do this, UKM will continue to enhance the quality of its teaching, learning and research at all levels and faculty — appropriate for the demands of the time. It will continue to strive to become a renowned and globally reputable research university with the Malay language as its language of knowledge."