

From a Crowdfunding Story to 12,000 Scholars, YTAR Celebrates 60 Years and Still Growing Leaders

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For 60 years, Yayasan Tunku Abdul Rahman (YTAR), one of Malaysia's longest-standing national education foundations, has been helping Malaysians access higher education and develop into leaders for this nation.

On 13 August 2026, YTAR marked that milestone at Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad, a landmark steeped in the nation's history. It was on these grounds, on 31 August 1957, that the Union Jack was lowered and the Malaysian flag raised for the first time, marking Merdeka.

A Fund Born of Grassroots Generosity

It began in 1965 when a reader of Utusan Melayu proposed an education fund to honour the 62nd birthday of Malaysia's first Prime Minister, Y.T.M. Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj.

Malaysians from all walks of life, from schoolchildren to corporations to government and political parties, raised M\$60,170.20 (Malayan dollars) to ensure that education would be accessible to all. This initial sum, worth approximately RM380,000 in today's value, was formalised as a national institution by the Tunku Abdul Rahman Foundation Fund Act 1966 (Act 43).

Since that foundational moment, the organisation has grown exponentially, disbursing RM96.6 million in scholarships and programs to support more than 12,000 young Malaysians to reach their full potential.



Malaysians came together to raise M\$60,170.20 for an education fund honouring Y.T.M. Tunku Abdul Rahman's 62nd birthday. It laid the foundation for YTAR. Newspaper cutting

Reflections Of A Granddaughter

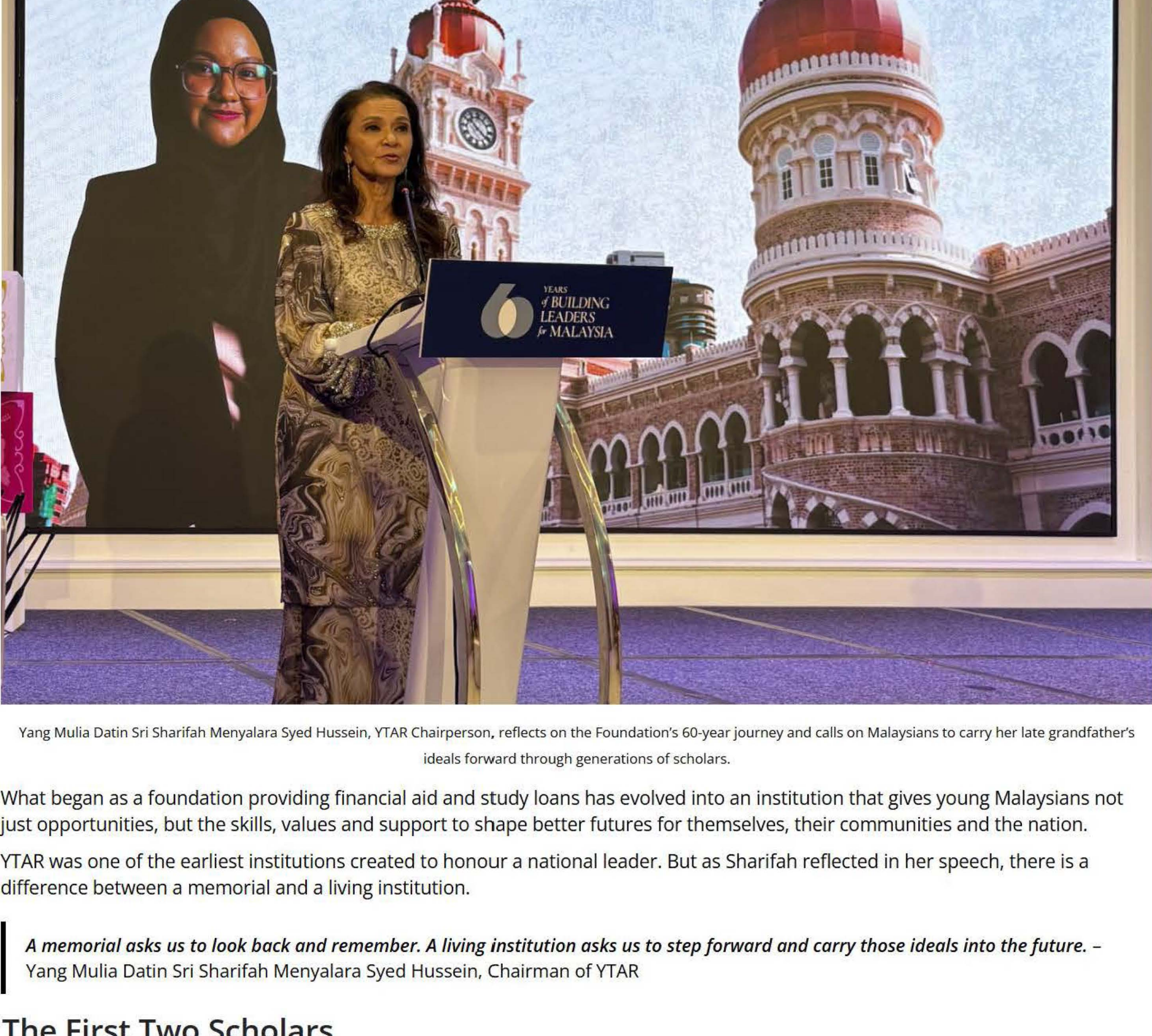
To most Malaysians, Tunku Abdul Rahman is remembered as the "Father of Independence". To Yang Mulia Datin Sri Sharifah Menyalara Syed Hussein, YTAR's Chairperson, he was simply "Tok," or affectionately, "Tok Tam."

She recalled growing up with his frequent reminders that before embarking on anything grand, one must first build a strong foundation, which he believed was education, not just for academic achievement, but as the bedrock of character and purpose.

Standing in the newly restored Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad, where her grandfather's generation witnessed the nation's journey to independence, she saw a fitting example of this.

The building's restoration itself had been aided by Ellysha Najwa, a 2020 Tunku Scholar who now works with Warisan KL. Seeing a young Malaysian who the Foundation had supported play a part in restoring a piece of the nation's history brought that idea to life.

There is something rather symbolic about how one generation builds, while another restores and revives. – Yang Mulia Datin Sri Sharifah Menyalara Syed Hussein, Chairman of YTAR



Yang Mulia Datin Sri Sharifah Menyalara Syed Hussein, YTAR Chairperson, reflects on the Foundation's 60-year journey and calls on Malaysians to carry her late grandfather's ideals forward through generations of scholars.

What began as a foundation providing financial aid and study loans has evolved into an institution that gives young Malaysians not just opportunities, but the skills, values and support to shape better futures for themselves, their communities and the nation.

YTAR was one of the earliest institutions created to honour a national leader. But as Sharifah reflected in her speech, there is a difference between a memorial and a living institution.

A memorial asks us to look back and remember. A living institution asks us to step forward and carry those ideals into the future. – Yang Mulia Datin Sri Sharifah Menyalara Syed Hussein, Chairman of YTAR

The First Two Scholars

Among the evening's most poignant moments was the presence of YTAR's very first scholars. Dr Zakaria Ali and Ms Ch'ng Kim See, now in their 70s and 80s, were among the earliest recipients of the Tunku Abdul Rahman Scholarship, back in the late 1960s.

Standing before a new generation of Tunku Scholars, they were living proof of the Foundation's longevity. Both spoke of a deep sense of gratitude, as they reminisced on their journey with the Foundation, and agreed that being chosen as the first recipients opened doors to worlds they might never otherwise have seen.



Special guests at the celebration were YTAR's first scholarship recipients, Dr Zakaria Ali (left) and Ms Ch'ng Kim See (right), who shared how the scholarship opened doors to opportunities that shaped their lives and careers. Photo credit: YTAR

Dr Zakaria's scholarship took him to Southwestern University in Texas, then through Mexico, and eventually to Harvard, where he completed a PhD in the History of Islamic Art. His research and teaching have contributed to the nascent field of Malaysian art history. He is also an acclaimed writer, having published poems, short stories, novels, essay collections, travelogues, and diaries.

Kim See was awarded a scholarship in 1967 to study librarianship at Universiti Malaya, launching a career that made her a regional authority in library and information science, taking her from the National Library of Malaysia to the United Nations in Vienna. She later spent over two decades in Singapore as Head of the ISEAS Library, but the pull of home never really left her.

"There is truly no place better than Malaysia," she says. That pull eventually brought her back, and in 2025, she began a PhD at Universiti Malaya, the same university where her journey started nearly six decades earlier.

Growing More Leaders For Malaysia

The evening's keynote speaker, YB Datuk Aaron Ago Dagang, Minister of National Unity, challenged the audience with a reminder: while Malaysia has come a long way since independence, and many have since had access to education, the mission to bridge the gap for high-potential students from underserved communities remains urgent.

The Minister emphasised that YTAR's role has evolved beyond simply providing scholarships. Today, the Foundation actively identifies talent and develops the potential of youth who might otherwise be left behind.

Over the course of six decades, more than 300 strategic partners and others, ranging from individuals and corporations to universities and government agencies, have supported YTAR's journey. Their contributions went beyond mere funding; they opened doors to higher education and transformed the futures of thousands of Malaysians. – YB Datuk Aaron Ago Dagang, Minister of National Unity



Young Tunku Scholars also joined the celebration. A new generation of Malaysians being developed to lead and shape the nation's future. Photo credit: YTAR

YTAR's CEO Kularetnam Vijayakumar often likens the Foundation's work to the patient, long-term act of growing a tree. Quoting Tunku Abdul Rahman himself, he reminded the audience: "Some people think that as soon as you plant a tree, it must bear fruit. We must allow it to grow a bit."

That impact continues to be sustained by a community of trusted partners like AHAM Asset Management Berhad, OSK Foundation, CIMB Foundation and Grab, to name a few, who act as social investors in Malaysia's future leaders.

He pointed to Razman Durhan, in the room that evening, as proof that patience pays off. Razman grew up in Kinabatangan, Sabah, working multiple jobs to support his family before he applied for the scholarship that would carry him through Universiti Malaya Sabah, funded by AHAM Asset Management, a partner since 2020. Today, he works to develop sustainable fisheries in his home state. AHAM has since funded nine more scholars in the years since.

The larger story of this Foundation is one of amanah, of trust – that was given to us (YTAR) to support and build young people who will, in turn, support the nation. – Kularetnam Vijayakumar, CEO, YTAR



Kularetnam Vijayakumar, YTAR's CEO, closed the celebration by encouraging Malaysians to carry the legacy forward by investing in the next generation of leaders.

Perhaps most moving was the mention of an anonymous donor whose family reached out to YTAR just last year, following his passing, to share his story. He had been the first in his family to pursue higher education with the support of his mother and a few good samaritans.

It was support he never forgot, and in his passing, he bequeathed RM1 million through his estate to make sure others could receive the same. That gift launched the Tunku Community Legacy Fund, which has already funded seven scholarships, with countless more to come.

Stories of generosity like this remind us that Malaysians can shape the nation's future. YTAR now invites all Malaysians to be part of that same story. Whether through corporate partnership or individual donation, your support ensures that the next generation of leaders has the opportunity to rise, lead, and serve our nation.

Help YTAR build the next generation of Malaysian leaders. Learn how to partner or give at www.yayasantar.org.my.