

Red letter day for UMS as 648 receive scrolls today

KOTA KINABALU: On Jan 31, 1994, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in a meeting with the rakyat in Beaufort, about 100km from here, made a pledge for a university for Sabah.

What happened after that was an endless toil to make that university a reality. By November of that year the Dewan Rakyat approved the setting up of the university with its name as "Universiti Malaysia Sabah" or UMS.

Armed with the mission to strive for academic excellence in various fields, UMS opened its doors to the first batch of 196 students nine months later for its 1995/96 academic year, and 444 for the 1996/97.

Today, UMS marked its first milestone when these two groups of 648 graduates, including eight post-graduate students, donned their robes to receive their scrolls in the maiden convocation ceremony of the university.

What is special about the ceremony for UMS, the ninth public university in the country, is its ability to confer three different degrees - Bachelors, Masters and Ph.D - simultaneously during its first convocation, a feat by any standard in the country.

"That is a very encouraging achievement. Although UMS is a new university, it could produce three different degrees simultaneously," said its Vice Chancellor, Prof Datuk Dr Abu Hassan Othman.

The degrees are a Bachelor of Science for 640 students, Masters for six and Ph.D. for two students.

Some vested interest may see the university through political lenses since UMS was a political pledge, but the ability to produce those graduates

in its fourth year, confirmed that its establishment in Sabah is more than just a political promise.

Its academic record should speak for itself.

"I do not see the establishment of UMS as a political process. I see it as a fruit of developments ... that was a pledge of the ruling government and they had carried out that responsibility," Dr Abu Hassan said.

Not wanting to be dragged into a discussion on the political aspect of UMS, he said: "My duties as a vice chancellor is to ensure that the university is being developed to meet its stated objectives."

UMS at present is home to more than 4,000 students in 12 different schools of studies like social science, business and economics, science and technology, engineering and Information Technology, psychology and social work, food science and diet, international tropical forestry, education and social development.

The UMS branch in Labuan offers studies on business and international finance and informatics science.

For more than four years, UMS has managed to stay apolitical, avoiding any attempt to drag it into the political arena when certain groups in the state alleged that there were too few students from the state.

"This, I cannot agree. The university's policy is very clear on the distribution of opportunities for higher education to all who have the qualifications, and at the same time be sensitive to the needs of the people of Sabah," Dr Abu Hassan said.

For example, he said, about 42 percent of UMS students are from Sabah and "this is a high percentage."

From the 648 graduates receiving their scrolls,

271 recipients of the Bachelor degrees are from Sabah, while five of the six Masters are also from the home state.

"This is another evidence to show that educational opportunities up to higher degrees are available to all students in the country, especially Sabah... so I am not beholden to any political views because I carry out government policies which are very clear," he said.

How far UMS would go therefore, would depend on the vision of its vice chancellor and the determination of its academic staff to make that institution a centre of educational excellence.

"I believe in innovation, and in this era of globalisation, rapid developments in society based on knowledge and information, the university can't afford to be slow," he said.

For a young university operating in four different places while waiting for its main campus to be ready, UMS is a fast-moving university indeed.

Consider this scenario: UMS began with about 200 students but now has more than 4,000; from three schools it has now expanded to 12 and although only a few buildings of its main campus are up and ready, its branch in Labuan is complete with all the facilities.

Its academic staff has now increased to 11 professors, 27 associate professors, 129 lecturers and four language experts.

UMS has also won the confidence of those in Japan, Germany, United Kingdom, Australia and Denmark which are seeking to cooperate with UMS scientists in various research on marine science.

UMS has its own research units, notable of which is the Borneo Marine Research Unit with

its own boat and equipment.

It has inked various pacts for research purposes while providing training for its students.

At the same time, it has obtained an allocation from the Jeddah-based Islamic Development Bank to procure equipment and facilities for its engineering programme.

However, while it wants to compete with the other institutions, UMS will not compromise on quality.

"UMS moves fast but our 'products' are of standard. For example, our internal and external examiners had declared that the thesis of our post-graduate students were of international standard," said Dr Abu Hassan.

UMS has also been described as the "answer" to the rich resources of the state and it seems that the duo are complementary to each other. Sabah requires researchers and other expertise to unlock its riches, while UMS would benefit because the resources would ensure a rich hunting ground for these researchers and experts.

"Sabah is very rich in natural resources, flora and fauna and its marine life. We will therefore step up our research to contribute to Sabah's development. At the moment, the focus is on marine and the agricultural industry," he said.

Dr Mahathir, when laying the foundation stone of the UMS campus in November 1995, said: "A university like UMS is not just a storehouse to provide knowledge on the hard sciences but also to contribute to the development of the nation and the cultural values and intellect of the race."

UMS is moving in that direction, and maybe it is time for another look at the institution without any political overtone.