

No, we're not training Nazis, says UMS after convocation controversy

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Universiti Malaysia Sabah vice-chancellor Prof Taufiq Yap Yun Hin speaking in Kota Kinabalu today as he marks 100 days in office.

KOTA KINABALU: Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) vice-chancellor Prof Taufiq Yap Yun Hin admitted today that the university's image as the state's premier learning institution has suffered due to the Nazi-salute incident last month.

Although UMS had done its best to advise students attending graduation ceremonies on behaviour, Taufiq said it was out of their control what they did on stage while receiving their scrolls.

"That is the university's function but you can see the damage has been done. Look at how the German embassy looks at us — they think we are training our students as Nazis or something like that.

"Well, we're not. That is not our intention at all and it has never been," he told reporters after delivering his keynote address in conjunction with his first 100 days in office here.

Taufiq said UMS had been on the alert after a graduand unfurled a banner in protest during Universiti Malaya's convocation last October

"We were not even aware our student did it (Nazi salute) until he declared it on social media. But it happened. So next time, we must make sure such things don't happen again."

UMS drew flak from the public after the Nazi-style salute incident.

The German embassy in Malaysia was quick to condemn the act and, at the same time, highlighted the terrible suffering brought by the Nazi regime during World War II.

The graduating student claimed his gesture was in protest over the "Jewish dominance of the world and support for the Palestinians in Gaza".

Taufiq said he was taken aback that something like this could happen in Sabah, famed for its unity and harmony.

"I am shocked. That's why I'm bringing this Rahmah (mercy and compassion) theme to the university. This is where you can respect others and accept differences," he said.

"And I keep saying that Sabah is a model for Malaysia.

"That is also why I've asked the Borneo Institute for Indigenous Studies (Boriis) in UMS to study the secret of Sabahans so that it can be implemented in the rest of the country."

He was referring to a study commissioned by the university to unlock the secret behind the harmony in multi-ethnic Sabah.

"If you stay in the peninsula, you can see the gap is so big — one race sticks only with their kind and sometimes they can't mix with others.

"But here we can sit and eat together, isn't that so? So what is the secret? That is the reason why we want it documented and to be an example to other states in the country," Taufiq said.

He also said it was unfair for people to only blame the university over the incident as "it's society sometimes that moulds our character".

In any case, he said UMS had moved past this controversy, adding they would focus on producing students who not only excel academically but develop as people with good values.

He said no action could be taken against the student as he had already graduated and obtained his scroll.

"For me, we can easily forgive them but they must know the effects of their actions on others," Taufiq said.

"That's why we want to educate our students to be more smart, respectful and handle situations better. If they have anything to say, I can be easily approached by anybody."

Taufiq said he wanted to stop the practice of UMS staff using recommendation letters from political figures to get promoted.

"I don't like this type of culture. The university has clear standard operating procedures when it comes to promotions.

"We want everything to go through merit and not through political recommendations. This is how we bring up UMS. This is important so people won't say UMS professors are 'kangkung' (no class)," he said.