


[Home](#)

Impact, not impact factor

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzulkifli Abd Razak

Comment

[New Sunday Times - 01/02/2011](#)

THE year 2010 ended on a rather good note with the appointment of Malaysia's first three Distinguished Professors. Professor Tan Sri Mohd Kamal Hassan, Professor Datuk Shamsul Amri Baharuddin and Professor Dr Lai-Meng Looi are leading the way as announced by Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin.



(From left) Mohd Kamal Hassan, Shamsul Amri Baharuddin and Dr Lai-Meng Looi pave the way in the academic sector as Distinguished Professors

More than the monetary perks they received, this accolade marked a new milestone in recognising scholarly personalities and achievements among Malaysians. The Distinguished Professors are role models who can be emulated, especially by the younger and future generations of a knowledge society that we aim to evolve into. For too long our idols have been celebrities with rather different lifestyles and, at times, values. These Distinguished Professors set another path to become a celebrity of the intellectual kind. This augurs well for Malaysia, which until now has yet to nurture a vibrant intellectual community.

It is a breath of fresh air that Distinguished Professors are not selected just based on the usual numbers and tangible indicators normally associated with success. But more importantly, the award highlighted their stature as thought leaders and thinkers who shape ideas and give credence to the more intangible part of intellectual life.

That two of them are of the non-Science discipline is hardly surprising. Their Science counterparts generally shy away from taking a dominant role in the public domain. They are akin to the stereotyped nerdy absent-minded professors who are content to remain cloistered in laboratories. It is not that they are less significant but they are, by and large, not groomed for the role of a public intellectual.

But this is not necessarily the way that the future scientific world would want to be perceived as, as science takes a more central role in the world of ideas. One can easily identify with Carl Sagan and Stephen Jay Gould who have captured the imagination of millions in the public arena with their intellectual prowess. So too Richard Feynman, who created his popular legacy with his notable lecture in 1959 titled "There's Plenty of Room at the Bottom", long before he received the Nobel Prize for Physics. He was allegedly alluding to the realm of nanotechnology.

Indeed what distinguished them from the others is the "impact" that they made, especially on society, rather than just the "impact factor" that has now dominated the world of knowledge. "Impact factor" is often understood as "a measure reflecting the average number of citations" of articles published in journals. The higher the impact factor, the more the journal is deemed important, and likewise the articles published in them. While the impact factor is frequently regarded as a standard of quality, it is not without controversy, especially among non-Science disciplines which do not fully subscribe to the idea. In many ways, knowledge has been distorted by the impact factor as researchers hold on to the publish-or-perish maxim.

The Open Ed 2011 conference, themed Impact and Sustainability, in Barcelona, Spain brought the issue of open education into focus. This means more and more materials are available without cost so that they will have a greater impact on society when more people have access to them. The notion that knowledge is monopolised

by profit-making journals is being raised. It is not a novel thought but it was not until Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the United States decided to "give away" its courses that the idea is revived. In Britain, however, the Open University has been doing this for more than 40 years, offering free online courses in almost all disciplines on the OpenLearn website. You can go to YouTube for free downloads.

In this regard, MIT Professor Rebecca Henderson was quoted as saying: "My deep belief is that as academics we have a duty to disperse our ideas as far and as freely as possible." It is about trying to share the world's knowledge, improve access and bring about more equity -- an educational impact that has long been an elusive target. Education is increasingly blamed for the widening disparities instead as we assess the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015), for example.

Locally, the formation of the National Professors Council some six months ago seems to support the notion that intellectuals too are responsible for raising the community's stature by engaging it on a knowledge platform.

As we ring in the New Year, this idea must be mainstreamed so that intellectuals and the education that they help to shape become even more relevant and have an influence on society at large, rather than an exclusive few.

Happy New Year.

* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at vc@usm.my

[Terms & Conditions](#)