

Varsities must be drivers of innovation and progress

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THE 13th International Association of Universities (IAU) General Conference marks the 60th year of the only worldwide general association of universities.

It was in August 1948, under the patronage of the Netherlands Royal House and the government, that Unesco called for a Preparatory Conference of University Representatives worldwide, in the city of Utrecht in the Netherlands.

It eventually led to the formal establishment of the IAU in December 1950 in Nice, Italy. Among its objectives was to create close collaborative links among institutions of higher education after the ravages of World War 2.

Sixty years later, the IAU has congregated again at its "birthplace" in the University of Utrecht to reaffirm its original objectives.

Presented under the motto "Higher Education and Research Addressing Local and Global Needs", the 13th general conference drew more than 350 university leaders, presidents and chancellors from around the world.

The ideals that inspired the setting up of the IAU are still relevant today. Although the challenges today may not be exactly the same, the need to promote collaboration and advance knowledge remain very much the pillars on which higher education rests. This is even more so in these days of globalisation.

IAU focuses specifically on the social significance of universities and learning from one another, and undertaking even closer collective action.

In many ways, it still echoes the very reason that led to the creation of the IAU, namely the responsibility of higher education and research institutions to serve the world.

Sadly, we have not learnt about the destruction and ravages of war. There are nations today that are still being ravaged by wars, and many children are being deprived of an education.

Badly needed resources are being diverted to buying deadly weapons instead of nurturing young minds. Indeed, many have been shanghaied to the war zones as child soldiers.

The significance of IAU cannot be underestimated as it is the only organisation of its kind and stature.

Universities and institutions of higher education need to exert an even more meaningful role as "drivers of innovation and progress, but also as institutions that can question proposed answers and find solutions to the unexpected or even undesirable effects of change", to cite the IAU.

Malaysian universities and the relevant authorities might need to be sensitive to such demands in their attempts to move up to the next level.

The recent exercise under the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (Apex), an initiative by the Ministry of Higher Education, is a commendable initiative.

Based on rigorous criteria of selection conducted by an independent group of experienced professionals, and aided by two international consultants, the ministry has shown that it takes this initiative seriously.

Added to this is the equally sound methodological consideration, supported by extensive on-site validation, giving it an even higher credibility in terms of quality and reliability.

This initiative is no armchair, cor-respondence-type effort where data obtained is suspicious, analysis is flawed and intellectual honesty questionable.

All said and done, the question remains: how can we help our universities to transform themselves into universities that are forward-looking and fired by idealism to lead and make a difference?

It looks like the Apex initiative, modelled after a highly successful German programme, provides for this.

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