

'Warga emas' enrich classes at varsity

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ONE of the greatest rewards of an educator is to see the students pass out after completing their studies. Hence, during each convocation, the entire university community celebrates not only the students' success, but also the extended support that made these achievements possible.

From time to time, there are occasions when the convocation draws an even more special meaning. In one such case, the first student with cerebral palsy graduated with flying colours, earning her the privilege of the coveted Chancellor's Gold Medal at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

USM recorded another historic moment in its most recent convocation. This time, a group of six from the pioneer batch of warga emas (senior citizen) students walked up to the stage to receive their scrolls from the chancellor.

The new graduates were from the warga emas programme launched in 2005, designed to provide opportunities for Malaysian citizens 50 years and above to gain tertiary education at USM.

With at least 10 years' relevant experience and a minimum SPM qualification, the warga emas students were given a 50 per cent discount for their fees throughout their period of study in-campus.

When the warga emas programme was first announced, it captured the imagination of Malaysia's silver-haired community.

The pioneering batch saw students up to the age of 74 being accepted into the programme. Unfortunately, due to a variety of reasons, some, including a woman from an estate plantation, had to leave.

All this put a question mark on the feasibility of the programme but seven others soldiered on. Still, reservations and uncertainties persisted.

For some of these students, having to live away from their families and being on their own among the overwhelming number of other students clearly presented a challenge.

Imagine having to rush to classes, take instruction from younger lecturers and professors in class, not to mention the necessity to share facilities with fellow students at the hostels and elsewhere in campus.

In short, unless one is truly determined to make it, life as an adult student can be very daunting.

What's more when the requirement for a degree will hardly make any significant difference to their career.

But this is of course not about careers or employment. Not even about any form of monetary gains and rewards. Instead, it is about dreams and translating them into reality.

For most of them, the dreams could be at least 30 years old, kept alive by the hope that some day an opportunity will knock on their door.

The warga emas programme was one such opportunity, a chance in a lifetime for many of them.

It was during a simple farewell dinner organised by the six newly-graduated warga emas students that others realised how determined they had been in accomplishing their long-time dreams.

The amount of sacrifices that they, and their families, made were by no means easy, making their achievements quite extraordinary in every sense of the word.

For this reason alone, while the students are thankful to USM for this rare opportunity, the same is even more so for the university.

Given the success story of the warga emas programme, the benefits accrued to the university from each of the students are equally extra-ordinary.

They have enriched the classes with their out-of-the-textbook knowledge shared among the younger course-mates. They enriched the campus community with their maturity and added colour with their humour and wit.

In the coming weeks, USM will be inviting the warga emas students into the campus once again; this time with the other students in the inaugural warga budaya and warga sukan programmes.

We look forward to welcoming many more applicants who want to make their dreams come true at USM.

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