

We need scientific minds as role models for youth

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UNIVERSITI Sains Malaysia started the New Year with a bang, when our *angkasawan negara* descended on the campus on Jan 5. Like the space launch itself, it was a historic moment not only for USM.

About 5,000 came out in support, including about 1,500 following the event in lecture halls through close-circuit television cameras.

The face-to-face encounter with Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor (SMS, for short) proved an encounter of a lifetime. For almost 1 1/2 hours, they were mesmerised by the detailed experiences that Dr Muszaphar shared with them, beginning with his childhood ambition to venture into space 25 years ago up to his tumultuous entry back to Earth.

Most intriguing was his version of what life in space is, something unimaginable to most people.

How did he sleep? Eat? Exercise? Answer the call of nature? How did he feel when he saw Mother Earth from space for the first time? What about the experiments he had to conduct? What were the results?

These were among the barrage of questions Dr Muszaphar had to field from students. All questions were handled with humility and, at times, a sense of humour.

Not a single one was left unanswered or put aside because it was considered trivial, including one about what the "smell" of the International Space Station (ISS). It was this that made Dr Muszaphar the hero of the day!

He was literally swarmed by the audience when he inched his way out after the event, while posing for photographs, giving autographs and even friendly advice.

Despite having hosted Nobel Laureates, celebrities and glamorous figures previously, none could match the hero's welcome accorded to the *angkasawan negara* by the campus.

More interestingly, it indicated a promising future for science in particular and knowledge in general for the up and coming generation. The long-held belief that the youngsters of today are disinterested in science was for once challenged.

Thus far, there has been a dearth of activities "exposing" successful intellectual Malaysian figures. At least not the level of publicity entertainers are given. New starlets are being introduced to the public by the media frequently. But not so people like Dr Muszaphar.

Should he did not have made it as the country's first astronaut, chances are he may have remained little known despite his very interesting experiences and achievements.

Not many know that he has spent time in Afghanistan and Cambodia. Or that he is a part-time model and co-owner of a restaurant.

In short, he has diverse and vibrant interests, unlike what is happening today where many students have no time for anything else. Or discouraged to do anything else.

In fact, the person whom Dr Muszaphar regards as his mentor, Professor Datuk Mazlan Othman, should have been made better known as an intellectual icon for young aspiring science students.

We must also remember the "backroom boys" responsible for making the space programme an astounding success. They are the unsung scientific heroes who we have conveniently forgotten, believing they will not inspire others.

USM's experience with Dr Muszaphar has categorically disproved this perception. Instead, much needs to be done to meet the demands of the inquisitive minds of young Malaysians.

Our responsibility is to give them the space and opportunities to not only find the right answers but, more importantly, ask the right questions. Only in this way can new discoveries be made and a truly knowledge-based society created.

In a nutshell, the empire of the future is the empire of the mind — a great one at that.

To Dr Sheikh Muszaphar and the like, their task remains a tremendous, if not a challenging one.

One of most recent examples one must keep in mind is none other than Dr Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen Abdul Kalam, India's 11th president from 2002 until July last year.

A versatile person, he played a leading role in the development of India's missile programmes (see <http://www.indianmuslims.info/book/export/html/12>). Despite this and having held the country's highest office, he chose to humbly do what he loves most—engage with students and teach.

He is now involved in various programmes like Youth Movement for Developed India 2020.

Like Malaysia, Dr Kalam wants to transform India into a developed nation by 2020 as professed in his book *Ignited Minds: Unleashing the Power Within India* (2003). We can get no better example than this to emulate.

And through Dr Sheikh Muszaphar we see such a future in the making, God willing!

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