

## Empire of the minds

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Article

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MALAYSIA held its first Higher Education Conference and Exhibition in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, last week. The event was attended by potential students and high-ranking officials from the Middle East and the North Africa (Mena) region.

As many as 15 Malaysian universities took part in support of the ministry's internationalisation effort. No doubt, this in tandem with the global trend where knowledge sharing is a vital component of higher education.



As testimony to this, at a not too distant venue, a Knowledge Conference was opened by Shaikh Mohammed Rashid Al Maktoum, vice-president and prime minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai.

The conference was to devise a strategy to raise the standard of knowledge, research and university education in the region through the establishment of a "Knowledge Complex" (Khaleej Times, Oct. 29).

The project is expected to reach out to the Islamic and neighbouring regions.

The initiative is seen as part of the mission to contribute to human development in the Arab world from the US\$10 billion (RM34bil) endowment under the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation launched in May. It will aid in the improvement and development of university education in the Arab world.

Coincidentally, a few days earlier, the government of Saudi Arabia announced a US\$10 billion initiative to build a university by the Red Sea as part of its educational reform (Financial Times, Oct 25).

This is in addition to the establishment of 17 new colleges in the kingdom, as reported by Arab News, including new colleges for design, naturopathy, applied sciences, nursing, and administrative and human sciences.

Known as the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, up to 15,000 people will benefit from this research-focused university when it is scheduled to open in 2009.

It is dubbed as one of the best-funded universities in the world, being the centre-piece of the kingdom's higher-education reform plan.

Reportedly, it plans to guarantee academic freedom, loosely based on Aramco's (Saudi oil company) gated community in the hope of raising the percentage of 18-24-year-olds in higher education to more than 50 per cent from the current 30.

However, as reminded by the UAE vice-president during the conference: "Deeds, not words, is what we need."

He lamented that there is too much talk about knowledge-based societies in the region but little action was being taken.

One such reality is the comparatively lower literacy rate.

And among the Organisation of the Islamic Conference members, this is the case in more than 36 of its members.

Much of this is attributed to poor education programmes and a low budget allocation.

This is where Malaysia stands out as a clear example with an education budget allocation close to a quarter of the total, apart from its enviable record towards eradicating poverty among its population.

In so doing, Malaysia's approach serves as an example for others to follow as attested by many of those coming from the Mena region having benefited from the Malaysian education system.

Complementing this with the Knowledge Complex, the future seems bright indeed.

Among them is the 15 point strategy announced to increase the level of knowledge, namely programmes to improve university education, boost leadership skills, give loans to refugees and promote research.

Other projects include an online scheme to help women and a database initiative.

Also being planned are the enhancement of training of translators and support for research in developing machines to enhance translation from and into Arabic.

Sabbatical grants will be offered to knowledge producers, such as writers, men of letters, researchers and intellectuals, to complete their books and new works.

Overall, it aims to be the beacon of knowledge in the footsteps of the Baghdadi Baital Hikmah (House of Wisdom) where knowledge is disseminated from other sources through translation into Arabic and provided at no cost to universities, public libraries, study centres and all interested knowledge producers.

We should recall what former astronaut Neil Armstrong stated during the dedication of a new engineering building named after him at Purdue University recently:

"We dedicate this building today but by itself, it cannot impart knowledge. It requires people."

In short, a building's name, or the physical infrastructure, would not make valuable contribution to the university unless the human dimensions are also addressed and developed simultaneously.

In the final analysis, when it comes to creating a knowledge-based society, it is not just the form but, more importantly, the substance that will ensure a sustainable human growth worldwide, regardless of what label one chooses to attach to it. Welcome to the world of the future, the empire of the minds.

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