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SUSTAINABILITY STILL A RELEVANT PLATFORM TO INTERNATIONALISE USM RESEARCH GLOBALLY, SAYS DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION MALAYSIA, UK AND IRELAND



LONDON, February 2016 – Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) is recognised internationally as a model of a sustainability-led university and can expand upon this platform for internationalisation especially in the face of current challenges in funding, said the Director of Education Malaysia United Kingdom and Ireland (EM), Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zainal Abidin Sanusi who stopped by the USM booth at Middlesex University's education fair held in conjunction with the Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility Staff week 2016.

Citing his own experience, Zainal who is presently on secondment to EM from USM stated that USM researchers could apply for international funding on the basis of USM's reputation for sustainability by tweaking grant applications towards the aims of international funding bodies yet linking the applications back to the platform of sustainability.

As a young academic at USM in 2005, Zainal was appointed as the Co-ordinator for the Regional Centre of Expertise where he promoted Education for Sustainability Development. Through this Centre he was able to access funding from various international grants including EU grants and Erasmus Mundus thereby enabling him to promote USM's sustainability programme on an international platform. "That's where the internationalisation process started," he said.

In the current global scenario, where Europe is urgently seeking solutions to various humanitarian and safety issues linked to terrorism and extremism for example, Zainal is of the opinion that these focus areas can ultimately be linked to the Sustainability Circles, which seek at their core to ensure human security; as such, Sustainability studies would include issues that pose a threat to this security - including terrorism. In this way, USM can potentially highlight its expertise in various fields related to sustainability from the security perspective, such as Islamic Development, Islamic Studies and even Language, Literature and Discourse, which can offer some understanding of Muslim thinking that is currently much sought after in Europe.



As Director of EM, Zainal's responsibility is to promote all Malaysian universities; however for him, USM still stands out due to its value-added focus on sustainability that is globally recognised and can be a selling point, hence can be promoted to a higher level in the international arena. This is where Zainal can further contribute towards USM's internationalisation agenda, through his own background in sustainability studies. "USM's APEX status on the sustainability programme is a main highlight that we can sell," he said.

"Personally I can see that USM stands out in terms of perception, impression and reputation. When we have meetings here, people acknowledge USM for its sustainability values. There is potential for USM to be included in the current strong alliance for sustainability which includes the University of Arizona and two other universities, one of which is here in London. I would like to see USM in the loop of that network of sustainability."

Zainal joined USM in 2001 as an ASTS fellow and graduated from Waseda University Japan with a PhD in International Studies three years later. This was immediately followed by a postdoctoral appointment at the United Nations University, Japan where he completed a project on Education for Sustainable Development at the Institute of Advanced Studies. Upon returning to USM he was lecturing on International Relations but at the same time was assigned to USM's Corporate Office where his focus was on sustainability, linking USM's work on sustainability to international activities, forums and conferences.

"Such administrative appointments at USM (at the Corporate office and as Deputy Director of USM's Centre for Global Sustainability Studies or CGSS) helped me to develop experience and expertise not only in the content area of Sustainability studies but also in promoting academic and student mobility, besides supplying valuable insights into operations and management of the internationalisation process through having to manage centres that work closely with international stakeholders," he said.

In 2011 Zainal was seconded to the Higher Education Leadership Academy (AKEPT) where he was required to apply and integrate everything learnt from higher education (teaching/learning, research, governance) to ensure that the policy making process included informed decisions reflecting realities of Malaysian universities.

"The experience gained from the management /operations aspect at USM gave me some ideas on how universities should be functioning in terms of linking back to the national agenda of Higher Education," he revealed.

Zainal is tapping into all his prior experience as an academic, researcher and administrator in his current appointment to the EM in London.

"I would not be able to do my work now without those substantive years in USM because here you really need the policy perspective plus the actual experience on the ground as the job is bilateral in nature, dealing with institutions here which requires hands on knowledge on teaching, research and community engagement – all of which I did in USM.

"On this job I am promoting Malaysian universities, policy, plus the national agenda of the Ministry of Education. This requires strong background knowledge particularly on internationalisation as well as on-the-ground/practical knowledge on international students from my teaching days at USM. These prior experiences are all vital in order to fulfil the mandate in promoting Malaysia to universities in UK, Europe, Ireland, specifically in promoting collaboration inflow and outflow," he stated.

The Erasmus+ programme is an excellent platform to promote USM's areas of expertise on an international level especially since the programme will enable Middlesex university to build further linkages with USM not only related to mobility but also to expand research collaboration. In this respect, Zainal suggests that USM's niche in sustainability can be an inclusive platform for Middlesex and USM to share knowledge and collaborate in research projects that can involve various schools and academics within both the institutions.

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