

# Celebrating IPPTN's 10 Years of Excellence and Achievements: Views of Past Directors

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2007 marks IPPTN's 10th anniversary. This year saw the publication of four books and two research monographs. These numbers are significant to the 22-personnel institute of which only six are full-time administrative staff. The director, associate research fellows and bulletin editors have full-time day-jobs as professors, associate professors and lecturers in their respective universities. Logistically, a number of them are from Universiti Sains Malaysia.

The history of IPPTN is not at all chequered but one of resilience, creativity, growth and epitomises *Malaysia Boleh*. The first Director was given a post comma and a task **full stop**. The brainchild of Y.Bhg. Dato' Professor Dr. Hassan Said at the then Ministry of Education, IPPTN was officially launched by the Minister of Education, Y.A.B. Dato' Sri Najib Abdul Razak with fanfare in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in Pulau Pinang. This is significant as IPPTN has continued to be decentralised from the hub of educational activity centring around Kuala Lumpur.

The first Director, Professor Baharuddin Salleh, a professor of Phytopathology and a former Dean (School of Biological Sciences), had what his two successors albeit in varying degrees also enjoyed, the dubious pleasure of being the Director of the Institute. They were given an impressive designation and accompanying tasks and a "fullstop". They had no funding. No researchers. No staff. No office. In short, their "full stop". Professor Baharuddin's task was to establish the institute and expand on the research already approved by the then Higher Education Section, Ministry of Education. He held the Directorship for just six months as he was later appointed USM's Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs.

Professor Abdul Ghani Salleh reminisced, "I took over from Professor Baharuddin in 1997. IPPTN had no office space to call its own. Like my predecessor, I had to function as the Director of IPPTN from my own office. Apart from planning and carrying out research work pertaining to issues in higher education, my first task was to find office space and support staff."

Needless to say all the Directors, to date, have turned out to be no mere inspired choices. In a very short year, Professor Ghani Salleh (his more known moniker) acquired the use of two rooms which were specially renovated to be IPPTN's office space.

Professor Ghani Salleh's success in property acquisition is not without irony. He is after all a Professor in Housing (Affordable Housing). The rooms in D18, at the time USM's Computer Centre, marked the beginning of IPPTN's physical presence. IPPTN's activities pertaining to research were bubbling along in virtual reality. Professor Baharuddin had earlier inherited and had made inroads into the approved research from the Higher Education Section of the Ministry of Education.

Professor Ghani Salleh's regret was that he had no time to initiate his own research and leave his mark as a researcher in the position. Within a year and after all the prerequisite game playing, "my love affair with IPPTN was just blossoming", he reflected, "I had to let the job go." He was given the mantle of the Dean of the School of Housing, Building and Planning, the second time.

Professor Ghani Salleh is all for better higher education. He has his reservations regarding the quality of students universities admit into their graduate programmes. His future for IPPTN is about quality, about content and about internationalisation. Most importantly to him, "We must be sincere in what we are doing."

Y. Bhg. Dato' Ghazali Othman, the third Director, may have left the position sometime back. He held the honoured top job of Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Student Affairs) for some years. On paper he is a retired academic and as with academics of his calibre he is far from retired. His passion for research is unwaned and his vision for IPPTN invigorating.

Taking up the baton from his predecessor, he initiated four research projects, two of which were directed by the Ministry of Education. The two top-down research projects meant that there was money. Nonetheless, he still had major chunks of the "full stop" to remove. Juggling his day job as a lecturer and researcher at the School of Education with being the Director of a one-man show organisation, he had to initiate research ideas and most taxing of all, canvassed for funding for those research. He won an IRPA grant for a 3-year research.

When he took over, he had one stenographer and one typist. These two were full-time. He recruited an associate research fellow and researchers but they were all "unpaid" part-time staff. He had relied heavily on

the research expertise and personnel of the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), USM. According to him, “they know research.” He had only glowing words for his research fellows and technical assistants from the CPR.

The former Deputy Vice-Chancellor told us he foresees six on the job challenges in the future. The first is that IPPTN is yet to have professional researchers. Secondly, the other perennial grouse, “to look for money [...] to look for projects” syndrome. He feels that, “recruiting research fellows from universities bring out problems of legitimacy,” his third challenge. He adds, “There is no independence.” Universities’ academics would inevitably reflect their “paymasters”: politics and philosophy. This led on to the question of acceptance of the findings. To Dato’ Ghazali, “Research is independent. The truth speaks for itself.”

Therefore, in this respect he is not unlike Professor Baharuddin who, “... strongly and **honestly** (his emphasis) believe[s] that IPPTN should be located and placed under the arm of the newly established [...] Ministry of Higher Education. Currently and fortuitously, IPPTN functions on “goodwill” as the executive control rests with the CEO of the university. This relationship inevitably produces delay. Thus his third, fourth and fifth challenges centre on independence: of findings, of policy, and in decision-making.

Professor Baharuddin too would like to see “delocation” of IPPTN. “The Institute,” he says, “would be more effective with full-time researchers and in Putrajaya, the locale in which all the movers and shakers congregate.” IPPTN has yet to tap the expertise from the Klang Valley academe where the bulk of Malaysian universities are located.

Finally, Dato’ Ghazali feels that IPPTN must focus on policy research. His experience, however, makes him realise that this way forward is bound to produce, in his word, “duplications”. Universities have some variants of policy research entity. USM has its CPR with its own resources. Professor Baharuddin, on his part envisaged, “...the Institute [IPPTN] must act as an independent but guided national referral centre in higher education.” Unless, the roles of each research entity are clearly demarcated, redundancy will be a natural and a very certain outcome.

What does it take to be a Director of IPPTN? All the Directors, past and present have two day jobs: full-time academic position – preparing and giving lectures, formulating assessments and correcting all of them, carrying out research in own specialised field, etc.; and full-time administrator and “girl-Friday” of a research institute – initiate national research, lobby for grants, recruit personnel, manage an office, etc. The job specs require a researcher, an administrator, a scholar, a lobbyist, a spokesperson and undeniably a workaholic

who has expertise in time management. The Director of IPPTN is no desk job and certainly not a trophy posting. For this 10th anniversary, numbers may be significant but really not that important. The hard work set by past Directors is not about numbers but about achieving. They all have enormous amount of energy and have standards. Aptly, this 10th anniversary is Celebrating Excellence and Achievements.

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## Addendum

The views of past Directors, particularly pertaining to future scenarios, reflect the constraints of management and organisation of IPPTN whilst these inspirational men were in office. It is a testament to their concerns and visions of a successful IPPTN that the last few years have addressed almost all the major issues that would hinder the legitimacy and effectiveness of IPPTN. The team of Associate Research Fellows now numbers 11 and only four are from USM. The other researchers are experts in various fields from other Malaysian universities. Active partnerships and collaborations are established with higher education researchers in Germany, Japan, Thailand, USA and Australia. Such ventures are expanding. Past experiences also underline the need for IPPTN to be located in a university. Access to a vibrant academic library and other academic supports are vital tools for research excellence. The current organisation allows IPPTN in Pulau Pinang to have access to other universities’ libraries and services, with their long-established niche specialisations, as and when required. Technology and the digital age redefine the concept of being in the physical periphery. It would not be so easy to argue that IPPTN’s current organisational arrangement is not cost effect and does not eliminate redundancy. In addition, “delocation” distances IPPTN from the Ministry of Higher Education and ensures its independence. IPPTN’s autonomy allows it to provide the Ministry with alternative views: research speaks to the “paymaster” but not for the “paymaster”. Research and scholarship have the right environment to be de-politicised and sustain academicism. Ten research monographs, four edited books, numerous journal articles and chapters in books is the current track record. Records are there to be bettered.

For more information, *IPPTN 10 Years: Celebrating Excellence and Achievements* provides a good up-to-date overview of the Institute, its history, vision and mission.