

MALAYSIA'S PREMIER HIGHER EDUCATION MAGAZINE

# Prospect

## Malaysia

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# USM

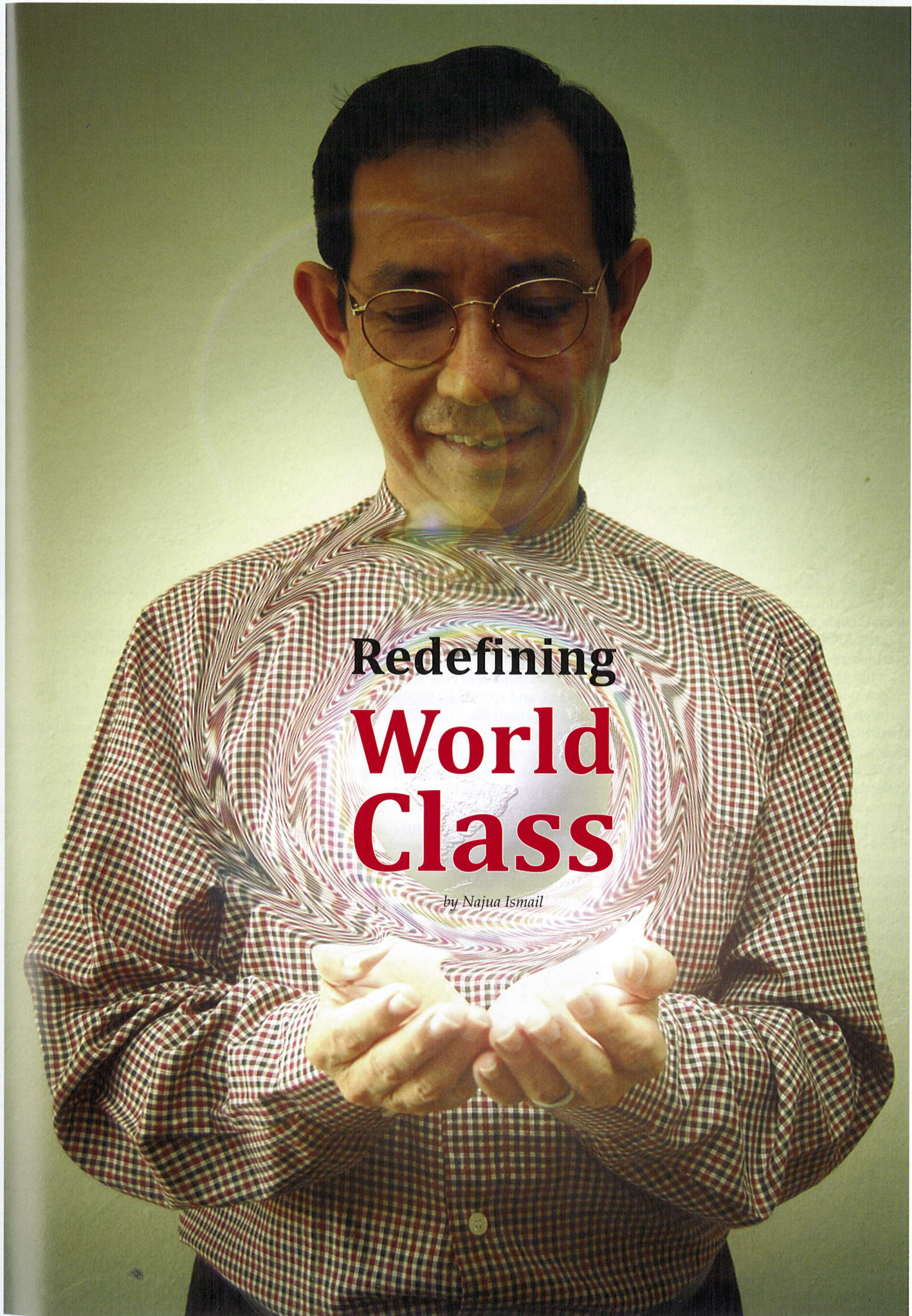
## Redefining World Class

### Meet the deputies:

UTM's Internationalisation  
Champion

Guardian of a Responsibility

**Moving Beyond its Niche – focus on IIUM**



Redefining  
**World  
Class**

*by Najua Ismail*



Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzulkipli Abdul Razak, Vice Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), may not strike one as a rebel. Well, not if one's idea of a rebel is a brooding red-jacketed teenager. But if according to the Federal Chambers Advanced English Dictionary, a rebel is someone who refuses to accept normal rules and conventions and chooses to behave differently, then he certainly fits the bill.

This may not be obvious in his disposition but it certainly comes through in a conversation with the man, particularly when discussing USM's selection as the APEX University.

"USM's selection is quite coincidental in the sense that the university has been preparing for a long term change, long term overhaul, with or without the APEX. And this comes about from our own internal desire to ensure the university remains relevant given the changes happening around us in the world of higher education," maintains Professor Dzulkipli.

"It's quite pertinent in that sense, to reevaluate not just the position of USM but more generally higher education in Malaysia – the meaning of universities itself in the 21st century."

He continues, "When I took over this university at the end of the year 2000 in December, I was in a privileged position to see the transition from the 20th to the 21st century. And of course the question everybody asks is: how is the 20th century different from the 21st century? And that pertains to everything. But somehow or other we've neglected to discuss this in the context of universities and higher education."

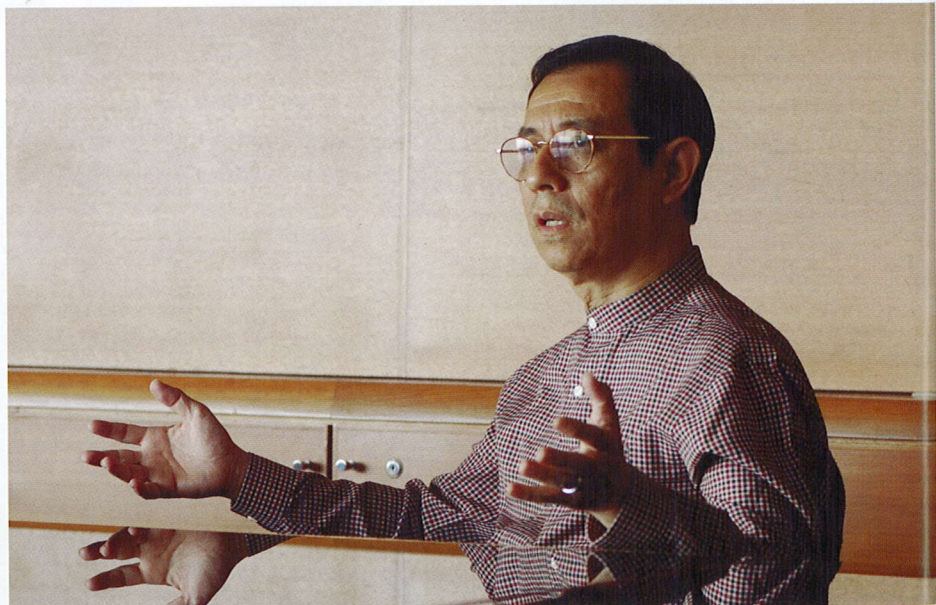
### The 21st century university

In pondering and exploring the role of

universities in the 21st century, Professor Dzulkipli was inspired to consider the need for a transformation of USM. One of the ways this was initiated was through the Kampus Sejahtera programme, which was established in 2001. While the name of the programme seems quite conventional, it ironically suggests a break from convention.

"Kampus Sejahtera crudely translated is Healthy Campus. There's no equivalent in English. Sejahtera cuts across emotions, physical, and spiritual," explains Professor Dzulkipli. "That alone is enough to signal to us, if you want to create something new, we must look for new dimensions. And that new dimension does not necessarily lie in the so-called developed world that has professed excellence in their own terms."

Establishing our own standard of excellence is something Professor Dzulkipli feels strongly about and believes should be applied to local universities.



"Why do we not define for ourselves what success is all about in the context of our own civilization? What's important to me is to recognize that we have our own civilization," he asserts. "We've got our own set of values, we've got principles, which are just as enriching if not sometimes better than somebody else's civilization, values, and principles."

"So, similarly in equating our universities, I've thought about this long and hard. If you go back to history, it would not have been possible to have the Renaissance of Europe in the 12th century if there was no enlightenment of knowledge in the Islamic world well before that. We've got something that can be used to propel ourselves into this world of excellence but we have to be cautious and mindful about it and plan it in a strategic way."

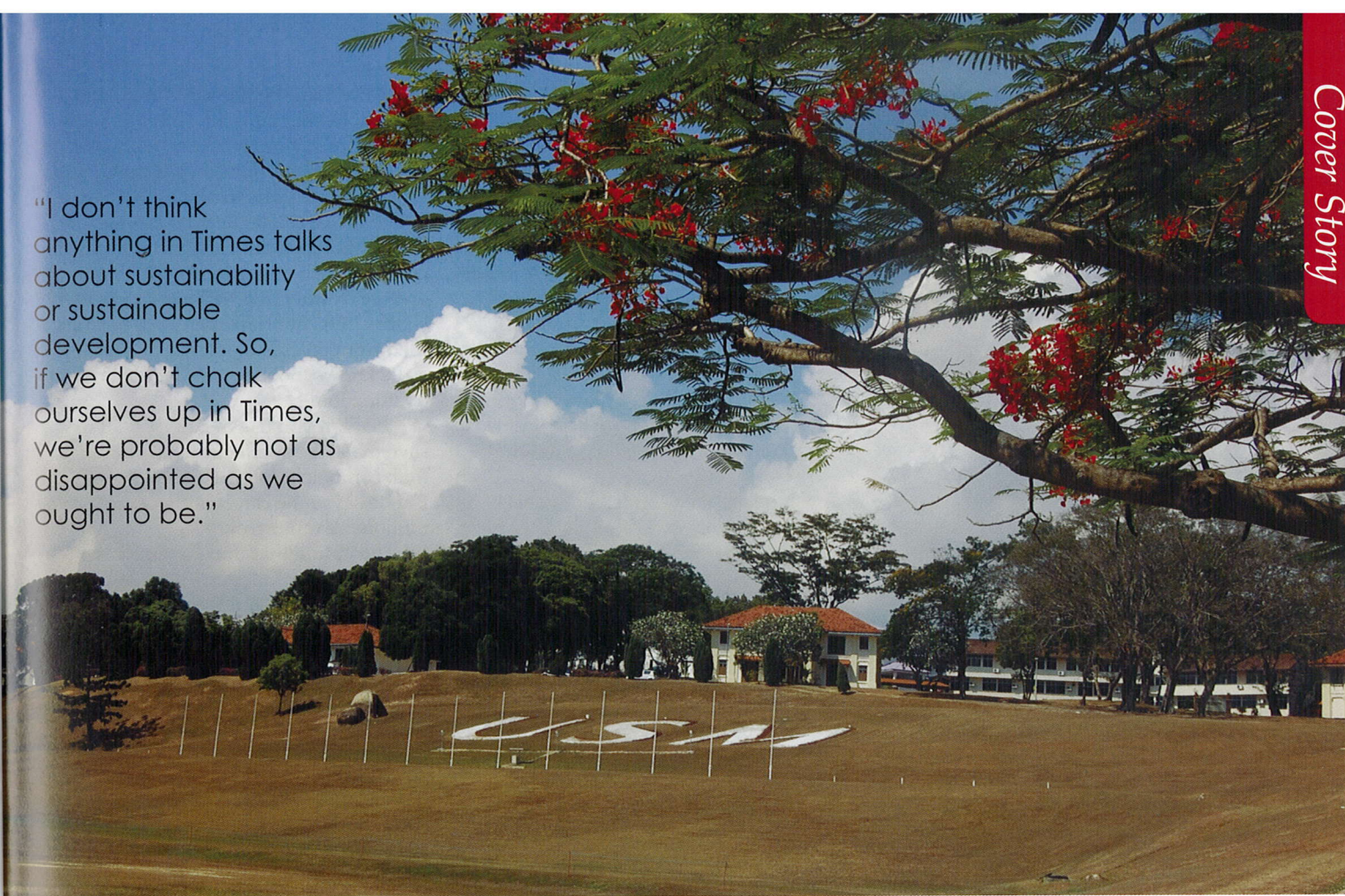
USM's strategic plan for transformation involves addressing an issue of pressing concern in the world today and is underscored in its proposal submitted for the APEX Programme - Transforming Higher Education for a Sustainable Tomorrow. This is in keeping also with Professor Dzulkipli's desire to explore the role of universities in the 21st century. As he points out, everything today comes back to the whole notion of sustainability.

"Will the world sustain itself in the future when its population is nine billion if we continue to live the way we live right now? How can USM handle this whole question of sustainable development? How do we take this to the mainstream? How do we remain relevant if this is the problem of the future?" he reflects. And that becomes almost the overarching principle of what an APEX University means to us."

### At odds with the ranks

However, Professor Dzulkipli acknowledges that his aspirations

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for USM may be at odds with what's typically expected of a top ranked university.

"If this is the kind of yardstick that we use that none of the rankings that we've got around the world now justifies this. If you look at Times (Times Higher Education Supplement-Quacquarelli Symonds (THES-QS) World University Ranking), I don't think anything in Times talks about sustainability or sustainable development," he maintains.

"Times talks about business as usual. So, if we don't chalk ourselves up in Times, we're probably not as disappointed as we ought to be."

Still, there was an outcry this year when the THES-QS rankings were announced. Many were quick to harp on USM's slide in the rankings from 307 last year to 313 this year, even as the three other universities in final contention with it for APEX status ascended the rankings by significant margins.

Professor Dzulkifli remains unfazed.

"We will define our own say. I have been adamant about this, when you say top 50, top 100, we need to find our own league that suits our own aspirations and our own purpose. It cannot be that if I'm trained for a 100m race, I compete in the league of 200m or 400m," he persists.

"This does not make sense. If I want to play football then I cannot go into a league of rugby. Certainly I will lose out.

"I think those are very fundamental issues that need to be understood. But for the larger population I think it's not

something that they want to be bothered with. They just want to see where you are in the whole scheme of things."

### No competition

Another criticism frequently levelled at the university with APEX status is that now USM has an unfair advantage over other universities.

To this Professor Dzulkifli responds, "This is not about competition. If you want to talk about competition, to a certain level there is already competition. When you talk about the selection process, there's already a "competition" in the sense that every university was asked to submit their proposal. And they were taken through a process before an APEX University was decided upon.

"So, in that sense if I read it right from the kind of discussion that I've got, they've made their decision that there's one university that meets the so-called criteria. And I'm sure if there were two universities that made the criteria, two universities would get it.

"The question of unfairness should not arise now because you've gone through the selection process, you've made the bidding, and you've not made the mark as you were. So, I feel that question is settled."

Having said all that, Professor Dzulkifli is keen to emphasise that competition is not an issue as far as he is concerned.

"We have taken the position that we are not competing. If you read our

Transformation Plan, we've deliberately taken the Blue Ocean strategy of moving forward. And clearly in the Blue Ocean strategy, it talks about making competition irrelevant," he explains. "So, I do believe that if you want to move ahead, competition is not the only way to do it. Again, this is new thinking.

"In the world of universities, we talk more about collaboration; we talk more about working with other partners. And competition as we envisage it in sports is not the only way to move ahead."

He elaborates, "APEX is an acronym for Accelerated Programme for Excellence but that excellence is not defined. Indeed we will define that excellence when we go through this process. And that excellence has to be something that we believe in.

"Unless you talk about APEX as a pinnacle of one mountain and that pinnacle now is occupied by Harvard and USM must somehow push Harvard aside to be there, then perhaps that's irrelevant. But if you're talking about different kind of scenarios then all things are possible."

### Whose world?

These different scenarios, according to Professor Dzulkifli, involve looking at the world from a different perspective altogether. After all, if there's one thing everybody assumes about an APEX University is that it should be world class. But what exactly is a world class university?

The Vice Chancellor of USM says the same question was asked of him

during the APEX selection process and he responded with his own question: Whose world?

"Then I said I will articulate my own world. A world with a population of 6.5 billion, of which 4 billion is totally neglected. If you go by statements of the World Bank and many central agencies, this world of 4 billion people are people who are living on less than US\$3 a day," Professor Dzul kifli asserts.

"If universities are not bothered with this world and they want to remain in an ivory tower that works only with the top 2.5 billion, I would venture to say universities at that point become irrelevant.

"That's the world we want to define so you will see in this articulation, we talk a lot about the bottom billion and the people who are now languishing at the bottom of the pyramid who have very little hope for survival, let alone quality of life. I think universities of the 21st century must change its focus to those groups of people who have been neglected for a long time."

In the world Professor Dzul kifli articulates, there are more pressing concerns than the usual book-of-records or award-winning type of achievement.

"If there's one university, for example, that has the technology to launch a rocket to the moon. I would probably not be too interested, if launching a rocket means another three billion people will die because you've devoted much of your resources to launch this rocket," he says.

"The irony now is China. China has launched a rocket but 60,000 children in the country are now in the hospital because they can't even control properly

the manufacture of baby's milk.

"To me that's such a big contradiction. Rocket science is so precise but that precision is not being articulated in producing baby's milk, which is not even rocket science! That is the kind of contradiction that universities are going through if we do not take our own stand."

To drive home his point, Professor Dzul kifli throws out another example, "If you say a jumbo jet cannot accommodate 1000 people, we're talking about 20 jumbo jets crashing everyday in the world. But because we've not put it in those terms, it does not sound important to us," he opines.

"These are the change in mindsets that people in universities must usher in. Because the politicians are not interested, the economists are not interested. They've all got their own agenda to look after," asserts Professor Dzul kifli.

"As long as I tell the Ministry or the government that 100% of my students are employed, they will say, yes, you are a successful university. I may have students that work in an industry that pollutes. Who cares? My students may work in an industry that exploits. Who cares?"

### The have and have nots

The contradiction of what universities are all about maintains Professor Dzul kifli, is what hinders them from serving their true purpose, which is to relate to the needs of society and confront issues of societal survival. However, education today has been relegated to an industry and like many other industries, the people in it are more interested in the bottom line.

"Sure, making money is important," says Professor Dzul kifli, "but not at the expense of saving lives. The moment you get that framework into your mind, you will prioritise your work differently."

"I have a colleague who is working hard on tongkat ali. He says he wants to compete with others to produce a cure for erectile dysfunction," Professor Dzul kifli shares. "Ok, but how many people have died from erectile dysfunction? As far as he knows, nobody has died of erectile dysfunction.

"So, can you use the tongkat ali to save malaria patients instead? Rather than compete to produce such drugs. But he says if he can beat them, he'll be a millionaire tomorrow."

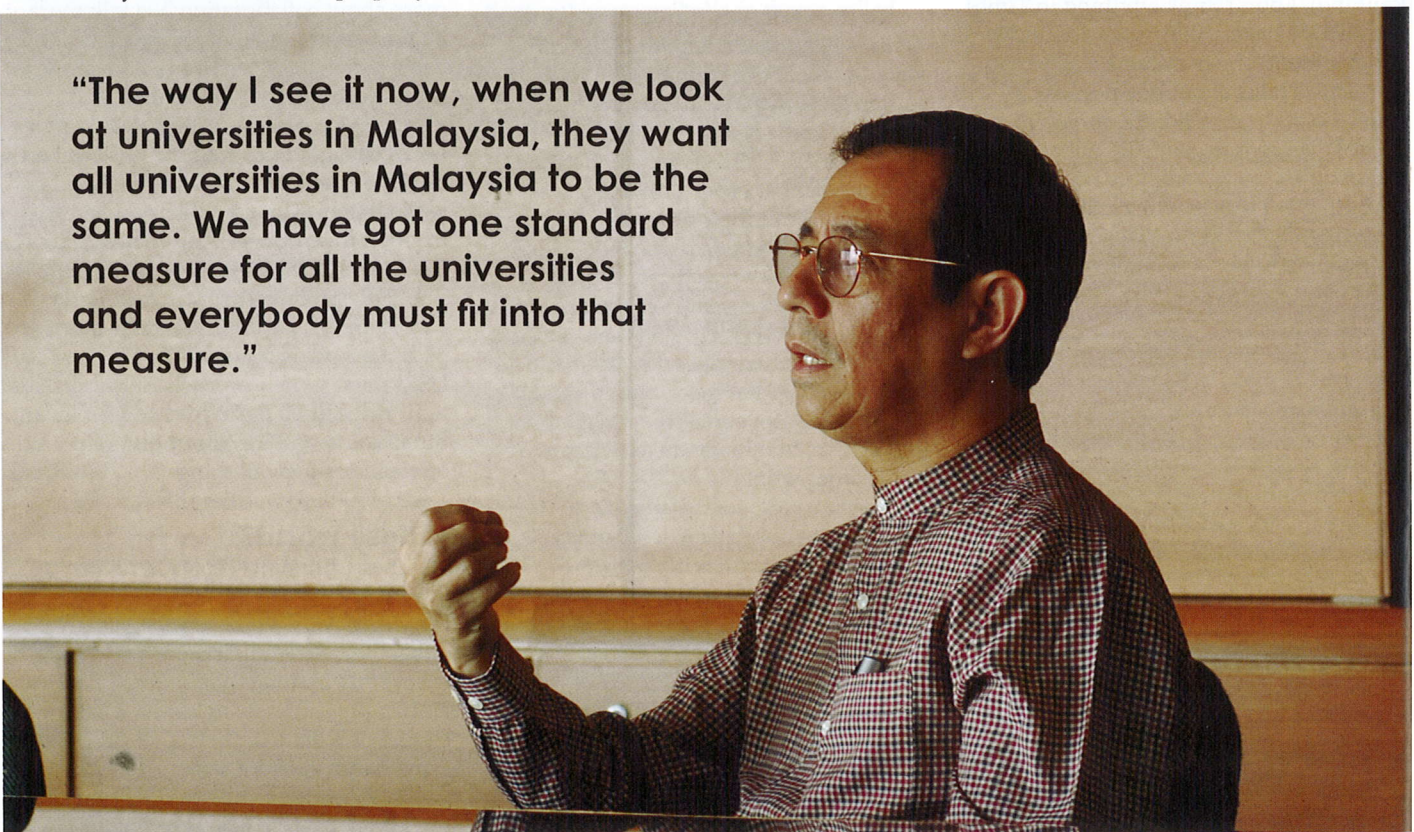
The notion that the university is a place to make money has been ingrained in many scholars and that is why such thinking prevails, points out Professor Dzul kifli. He elaborates on the culture of patenting as another example.

"Patent means you're not going to share with anybody else. I argue this with my colleagues in the West. I told them either the Muslims, the Arabs, or the Indians invented zero. You've got numbers one to nine, but you don't have the concept of zero," Professor Dzul kifli explains.

"Somebody invented the concept of zero but if that person had patented this concept of zero, we will not have computers today because computers work on the binary one and zero. If you also need to pay for the patent it will cost millions and millions of dollars and the price of computers will be much higher.

He adds, "I asked them why is it at that particular point when you take the

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knowledge from this group of people, you don't even think of patents? But the moment you produce your computers, you want to patent it. Why can you accept the knowledge of others but the moment the knowledge is yours, you say nobody can use this knowledge until you pay a sum of money.

"This is what the academic world is all about now. So much so, we don't talk about the rich and poor anymore, we talk about information rich and information poor countries. The irony is that universities and education are supposed to be a leveller of society. But why is it, the more universities we've got, the wider the disparity between the rich and poor?"

To turn things around, Professor Dzulkipli suggests taking a leaf out of an old sage's book. "Confucius says that 'learning is about being, not about having.' But if you sit down properly and you think about it, learning today is about having."

"That's why we find 'learned' people with their values all over the place. They are vulnerable to corruption, they do all sorts of things that do not reflect a good human being just because they want to have," opines Professor Dzulkipli.

"And we cannot fault them because if our education system says that, then that's what they are. So, we have to blame ourselves for this. The universities have to blame themselves for this."

## Hope for humanity

Despite the bleak outlook, Professor Dzulkipli has faith in his fellow academicians. "Scholars are a different group of people. They are like a candle, they will sacrifice their own needs for other people," he maintains.

"But that passion has not been articulated well. Scholars now are seen as people who drive Mercedes, people who have got Tan Sri and Professors in front of their names. That perception needs to be revised and changed.

"If you look at other successful universities outside, it is the passion that drives them. People hunt for knowledge so that they can harness this knowledge to improve things around them."

Professor Dzulkipli believes it's a matter of motivating scholars to use their judgement and appealing to their sense of humanity.

"Lecturers are easier to reason with if you can produce enough statistics. For example, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), we are using a trillion plastics a year. You can imagine the amount of pollution created. If that kind of statistic is made known then it gets them thinking... if they are worthy of their scholarship," he argues.

"If they're a businessman, that's a different story. If they are worthy of their scholarship, they'll start to think and I



see this in my researchers. They see the need to switch from non-degradable to biodegradable.

"You need to prick their conscience to make that move, because they want to contribute and make a difference when they are no longer in this world. If you can appeal to that, then we're fine. But we're not appealing to them enough."

## Appeal of APEX

Professor Dzulkipli sees the APEX initiative as an opportunity to tackle these concerns he has raised.

"My interest in the APEX University foremost is the autonomy. If we say we want to be different, then we must have enough room to be different. The way I see it now, when we look at universities in Malaysia, they want all universities in Malaysia to be the same. We have got one standard measure for all the universities and everybody must fit into that measure," he laments.

Professor Dzulkipli feels that consigning universities to a stereotype only puts society at a disadvantage because different people have different educational needs.

He likens the one-size-fits-all approach to McDonalds. "You go in you already know; it smells the same, food is the same, menu looks the same, even the staff attire is the same.

"So an APEX University is not about conformity, it's not about following current trends. To me, an APEX University is about blazing our own trail. I think this whole notion of world class, let's not stereotype it.

"I sometimes fail to understand this, we are asked to innovate but at the same time we are asked to follow some herd mentality. If I'm asked to innovate then I

should be able to innovate the university so that it's different from all other universities."

This is also in keeping with the country's aspirations, notes Professor Dzulkipli, as indicated in the principles of Vision 2020.

"Kita nak wawasan 2020 ini dalam acuan kita sendiri; creating a nation in our own mould. That in itself defines this whole idea of having one standard we want to follow," he asserts.

"I remember distinctly that the Prime Minister then said we don't want Kuala Lumpur to be another London, or New York, or Tokyo, or whatever cities there are. Meaning to say that at that particular point already we've got the desire to create a city of our own that defies all other cities around the world."

## Rebel with a cause

By that same token, Professor Dzulkipli insists that a world class university as envisaged by the APEX initiative would be something different altogether. He admits that such a concept may be too complex for some people to grasp.

"People outside may not be interested in this discussion we're having. They may feel it is too philosophical, too detailed, but it is what defines a university," says Professor Dzulkipli.

"Going back to these rudimentary and fundamental issues is what the APEX is all about, at least for me. If they think I'm wrong, they will take it away and give it to the next university. That's fine.

"Even without the APEX my colleagues and I will follow the same path. It is a calling now. It's no longer just work to be done."