

FOREIGN POLICY/UNIVERSAL NEWS SOUTHEAST ASIA

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UNIVERSAL NEWS: Asia is the world's fastest growing economic market. It is anticipated that 70% of student demand will come from this region by 2025. How do you feel Malaysia is preparing itself for this level of demand?

DR. ZAINAL ABIDIN HAJI KASIM: When I was at school, most of us went to England, including myself. Because of the education, we have managed to transform the country over the past two decades. We have emerged as a hub. We are a potential hub for education. I think we already have about 80,000 foreign students and we are going to aim for 200,000 by 2020. I believe we have the expertise and the people and we will continue to build our capabilities and competencies for Malaysia.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: The University was established in 1997 and it is quite incredible that you have achieved this level of recognition from the Government in such a short period of time. What have been the main contributors to the standards of education at UTP?

DR. ZAINAL ABIDIN HAJI KASIM: When the university was about to be established, we were clear about our vision – to produce quality graduates, not only in terms of numbers but technically qualified leaders. We wanted it to be small (45,600) because it was about quality, and not quantity. Academic and industry collaboration is important to ensure that programs are relevant to industry.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: Given the nature of Petronas, industry-based learning is important. Can you highlight examples where Petronas is directly supporting and working in conjunction with UTP as far as the courses that are available to students are concerned?

DR. ZAINAL ABIDIN HAJI KASIM: I think we are the only university in the world that has a seven month internship program. We have also sent people to Schlumberger and I met them last week in Paris. We send them to ESF in Germany as well, and you can see the results and the benefits from sending people for internships they get actual, real life experience on projects.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: You are now working on expanding in the gas sector. How has Petronas benefited from UTP in the sense of having a very direct access to students?

DR. ZAINAL ABIDIN HAJI KASIM: This University was not just meant for Petronas. It just so happened that Petronas owns a proportion of it. About 60 to 75% of programs and research in particular will be tailored towards the oil and gas industry. It is not about academic excellence – it is about the well-rounded personality of the individual. We start with that from the selection process. We interview 2,500 over two days and then we select the best 600. We look at their leadership potential and what they have done at school and their critical thinking, self-confidence etc. That is why our graduates are well-known and 90% get jobs within six months of graduating.

We have allowed our students to participate in most conferences. For example, we had a world engineering, science and technology conference a year ago, and this is open to people around the world. We need well-known publications. We are moving towards R&D (research and development).

UNIVERSAL NEWS: One of the Government's initiatives in particular is to increase R&D. in 2009, 98 patents were developed for commercial activity. Last year this went up to 113 and every year they are trying to push things forward so that Malaysia has a solid base in the patents market. How do you feel UTP is contributing towards these active patents?

DR. ZAINAL ABIDIN HAJI KASIM: The number of patents is a measurement of success, but that is not enough. If they are not commercialized, they are useless. So we want patents that can be commercialized and used by industry. We are increasing that number too. We are working with industry and this will solve the issue. I think our R&D budget in Malaysia is 0.06% of GDP whilst in Taiwan it is 2%. But we have realized this, and the Government is offering lots of initiatives such as masters funding.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: They are trying to produce another 60,000 PhDs by 2020 which is a vast amount. How will UTP contribute to this vision?

DR. ZAINAL ABIDIN HAJI KASIM: That is how we limit our undergraduates. We are expanding our research – we currently have 800 masters and PhDs and we are expanding to 1200. We hope that by focusing on research we will have more PhDs and masters. Of course – it cannot be just from the local population; it has to be from outside as well. There is no way you can have locals meeting the demand. Petronas is contributing to about 42 to 43% of the revenue for the Government, and the sole responsibility lies with UTP in terms of getting the right graduates as well as the technology. We want to be a contributor that can develop technologies that are unique to our internal resources.

For example, the laws on CO₂ are very different and we could have a technology to separate this and make it more efficient, while the rest of the world does not have that unique character. Given our resources, there must be a way. We are focused on CO₂ management and green technology.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: You have an R&D program dedicated to CO₂. Approximately 40% of the world's gas reservoirs contain high levels of CO₂ and there is still 30 trillion cubic feet of CO₂ in gas fields.

DR. ZAINAL ABIDIN HAJI KASIM: Yes, but we cannot do it on our own.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: Collaboration is therefore very important. Who would you say is your most important alliance at the moment within the education sector and who are you interested in working with in the future?

DR. ZAINAL ABIDIN HAJI KASIM: We have been working with international universities, but now we should work with local private and IPTA universities. I feel we can learn from each other. We have to work with industry as well, and this is more important. We have worked with Shell and Schlumberger for example.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: Green technology has been a buzzword for a number of years now. What kind of emphasis do you place on green technology within your R&D departments?

DR. ZAINAL ABIDIN HAJI KASIM: Firstly we are an oil and gas company and CO₂ can cause problems. So we are looking at other more environmentally friendly sources of energy. We are looking at producing fuel from plants and biofuel from palm oil and other waste. We are also focusing on solar. Green technology from Mitsubishi is focusing on the production of biofuels and hydrogen from biomaterials.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: How does UTP fit in as an ambassador for the educational part of Petronas?

DR. ZAINAL ABIDIN HAJI KASIM: We want all universities to have an international outlook. Today we have about 20% of our students who are international but the problem is that most of them are from the surrounding region. I wish we had more from the western countries. They must increase the international mobility of students. We send students to

France and Germany, but they are not coming here. They should appreciate the value of studying here, such as the culture, tradition and new knowledge. I want more international students to come here.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: What initiatives do you have at the moment to attract international students?

DR. ZAINAL ABIDIN HAJI KASIM: The courses we have are not tailored to the local people. For example, we carry out a masters program in petroleum engineering in partnership with Heriot Watt in Scotland. They come here to lecture, so the quality is maintained, and it is cheaper. We also offer a seven month internship. This is something relevant. We will continue to approach it in that way in partnership with others. We also split course – for example you can do one year here and then go back to the UK or the US or anywhere. Education is flexible.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: One of the problems for Malaysia is the so-called ‘brain drain’. Many Malaysians have gone to the US or the UK to gain qualifications, but they have not come back. You were one of the Malaysians who went to study, but you came back. What motivated you to come back?

DR. ZAINAL ABIDIN HAJI KASIM: At that time we were given scholarships to support us, and we know why they sent us. They sent us to come back and serve the nation. But I am sad today that you send people over and they do not just not come back, but they do not even pay us back. But we try our best to nurture these people and inform them that the country needs you, you just have to come back. The majority came back and you can see that the nation has progressed as a result. We have contributed, and I am proud.

But the Government has a lot of initiatives to attract our own people back as well as other people over. It is a matter of time, but we need branding. UTP needs branding too. It is all about branding.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: How do you feel having the name of Petronas has benefited the university?

DR. ZAINAL ABIDIN HAJI KASIM: It is good and bad. It is good in terms of collaboration and assistance. But UTP cannot be solely dependent on Petronas. Being associated to Petronas makes people wonder why they should contribute to our funding however because they say that Petronas is a rich company and it is building and supporting UTP.

Over time, we have produced about 6,000 graduates. The culture of Malaysians compared to westerners in terms of contributing is less. We have responsibilities and children. We are hoping for the best with regards to endowments, but it is an uphill struggle.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: And your aim through R&D is to produce leaders and entrepreneurs.

DR. ZAINAL ABIDIN HAJI KASIM: Research is expensive. We have to go to industry and obtain some funding. We are trying not to be dependent on Petronas. We are giving them the best graduates, and they help us in return. We want to be the first private university to be recognized as a research university. We want to be one by 2013, if not earlier.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: As a private university you can be self-sustainable but it will take time to get to the stage where you can afford to throw this kind of money at R&D. Do you see this as being a problem?

DR. ZAINAL ABIDIN HAJI KASIM: Petronas will only be investing in certain areas. We are hoping to be recognized as a research university by 2013, if not earlier. We hope the Government will partially fund us. When we are a research university, we will be able to establish partnerships all over the world.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: What message would you send to our international readership on behalf of UTP?

DR. ZAINAL ABIDIN HAJI KASIM: This is a globalised world with no boundaries. Education has always been at the forefront and will continue to be. Mobility should be standard all over the world. We should help each other. I hope that this world will be free where people will have the ability to contribute to the success of education. I have been working at Petronas over the past 35 years, and I have realised that you have to be passionate about excellence. You must uphold integrity. To me, that makes a better world. When I joined, there were only 200 people, and now there are 40,000.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: Thank you very much.