



Associate Professor
Shahizan Hassan,
Director of CUIC.

Partnerships for progress: University – industry collaboration

By Najua Ismail

WHILE universities have always been considered a wellspring of knowledge and ideas, they have also traditionally been perceived as being detached from the general public.

In the past, universities were viewed as a sanctuary for scholars and researchers who had their noses so close to their grindstone when it came to their intellectual pursuits that they failed to open their eyes to the issues and concerns of the world outside their bubble.

This is not the case anymore as many universities today are actively engaged with the larger society and play an important role in contributing to the nation's socio-economic progress by nurturing creativity and innovation, developing human and social capital, influencing national policy, as well as advocating for social welfare and corporate social responsibility.

Promoting partnerships

Many universities have established centers dedicated to strengthening their partnerships with the industry and community, which have paved the way for collaborations that are mutually beneficial, and that contribute to the country's economic and social aspirations.

Since its inception, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) has set up a unit to work closely with the industry in the areas of student internships and in career related programmes.

Today that unit has transformed to become a full-fledged centre and recently underwent a rebranding exercise to reflect its evolving portfolio.

"The centre was previously known as the Centre of University Industry Link, but when our new Vice-Chancellor, Professor Dr Mohamed Mustafa Ishak was appointed, he said, we don't just want to link with the industry, we want to collaborate; so the name we had before didn't justify what the centre is doing now. So we've changed it to the Centre of University Industry Collaboration (CUIC)," explains Associate Professor Shahizan Hassan, Director of CUIC.

"However, we not only rebranded its name, but also its structure and function as well. Our collaboration with the industry is not limited to student internships and research; we are also exploring other types of collaborations."

Industry advice

One such example is to get the industry to help UUM improve its curriculum by providing advice and input to ensure that it is relevant, up-to-date, and in compliance with industry needs. The university will also seek the industry's help in improving the marketability of their graduates.

"This is very important because the feedback that we've been getting from the industry is that our graduates are lacking in soft skills," he maintains.

"So if that's what they're saying, let's get them

involved. Work with us to come up with programmes that can help the students improve their soft skills."

In fact, UUM already has a collaborative arrangement with MISC and Proton on a soft skills development programme for its final year students. The programme is considered a part of the companies' CSR initiative.

Strategic Collaboration

The university is also looking at strengthening ties with the industry through an industrial attachment programme for its academic staff.

The aim is to gain practical experience, which will enhance their professional competencies and academic expertise.

Various job related issues and problems can also be addressed. Additionally, the programme will provide industrial staff with the opportunity to pursue their doctorates.

"Having a large pool of human capital with PhD qualifications will enhance our potential to become an economically formidable nation. This is a big challenge. So what we're going to do basically is come up with a special programme called the Industrial PhD," elaborates Associate Professor Shahizan.

Under the programme, working professionals with more than eight years experience may pursue their doctorate without interrupting their professional lives as they can formulate their thesis and pursue their research in an area related to their work. The university will

appoint a supervisor to supervise the candidate's research.

"There are a lot of smart people in the industry. Their resourcefulness, tacit knowledge, skills in decision-making and resolving work related problems, as well as accomplishments can be translated into a viable project paper equivalent to a PhD standard. UUM can support and guide these people to achieve their paper qualification. Economic value can result from such collaborative efforts which in turn will benefit companies, the community and the nation," asserts Dr Sri Shanmugam Arumugam, Programme Chair for CUIC.

"We need to harness the potential of our industrial workers. Limiting these opportunities to

academicians alone is a colossal national waste."

"Valuable ideas generated through research often sit on book racks in local universities. Likewise, valuable tacit knowledge resides in the minds of company staff and rarely gets disseminated to others. Knowledge sharing, knowledge transfers are vital for a progressive nation. Through strategic collaboration, industrial experts can now share their expertise with our staff and students, and likewise our academic staff can share their knowledge with industry folks for mutual benefit," continues Dr. Shanmugam, who has thirty years of experience working in MNCs in Penang before joining UUM.

According to Professor Mohamed, CUIC will play an important role as a

hub for coordinating the university's engagement with the government, industry and the community. "We already have a solid student internship strategy; and now we are strategically working on a range of programmes including internships for our lecturers, action research, industrial consultations, and the Industrial PhD, which are all in line with our national aspirations. UUM's social responsibility to the community, will receive further impetus with close rapport, serious engagement and communication with our stakeholders" says the university's vice-chancellor.

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