Unirazak targets niche areas

Boutique university offers specialised courses needed for national development

Jennifer Jacobs

It used to be called Unitar and offered distance-learning courses. But in 2007, when it was taken over by the Tun Razak Education Foundation, the board of trustees decided that there was a need for change — everything from the acronym to the kind of courses offered.

So Universiti Tun Abdul Razak went from Unitar (which was confusing as it was associated with Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman and the United Nations Training Institute) to Unirazak and became a boutique university — small, niche and specialised.

Unirazak president and vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Dr Md Zabid Abdul Rashid says the university spoke to both the public and private sectors to identify where the gaps were and designed programmes to address them.

“In 2007, the board of trustees realised the country was in need of good leaders both for the public and private sectors. They realised that existing institutions would not be able to fill the need in a short span of time.

“At the same time, the government realised that despite 30 to 40 years of development in entrepreneurship, the growth of quality entrepreneurs was simply not there.

“So we looked at how Unirazak could play a more effective role in developing and nurturing young leaders both for the public and private sectors as well as produce entrepreneurs who could be successful in the long run,” Zabid says in an interview.

The result? A boutique university offering specialised courses in niche areas that are required for national development, and one that is now affiliated with more than 70 public and private institutions from all over the world.

Firstly, Unirazak sought to address the lack of quality leaders.

“When you talk about developing and nurturing future leaders, you’re talking about a process that will take years. What we’re trying to do is get a group of people to understand the fundamental characteristics of a good leader, whether in the public or private sectors.”

Leaders need to have basic traits, which can be nurtured, Zabid says. “If someone doesn’t know how to present himself, you can train him to do that. If someone is shy, you can train him to be more assertive.

“To be a leader, you also need to know how to handle people. How do you handle conflict, negotiations and cross-cultural sensitivities? These are the things we want to train our people to recognise and understand in our Bachelor of Arts (Leadership) course,” he says.

Unirazak also offers a Bachelor of Business Management (Entrepreneurship) course specifically designed for budding entrepreneurs. How does this differ from other business degrees?

“For one, it is done with the assistance of professors from Babson College, which has been ranked as having the No 1 undergraduate programme for entrepreneurship for the 15th consecutive year in the US.

“For another, all our students are required to start their own business upon graduation. We are not interested in students who want to take this course for fun; that is why we make it a requirement,” Zabid points out.

Unirazak also offers an accounting degree with a professional qualification.

“It’s basically a two-in-one. It is a four-year degree and when you graduate, you not only have a Bachelor of Accounting but also a CPA [Certified Practising Accountant] Australia qualification. And because CPA Australia has an agreement with the UK-based Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA), graduates also get a membership in CIMA.

“The purpose is to create as many professional accountants as possible as opposed to just accounting graduates,” says Zabid.

The third programme is a Bachelor of Taxation. “This programme is also a one-of-its-kind in the world; it’s the only one where you train people to become specialists in tax. Tax is different from accounting as it combines the disciplines of accounting and law,” says Zabid.

Why tax? “In Malaysia, we have more than 12.5 million people in the workforce. Almost two million of these have income tax accounts. It is believed that at least another one million or two million have yet to have an account.”

“So the question is how are we going to service all these people? Tax is a very important part of nation building. The government cannot move without tax and you need tax graduates to become tax advisors, assessors and collectors.”

Zabid adds that there are less than 300 tax specialists in the country at the moment, not taking into account the Inland Revenue Board (IRB) staff.

The university is also working with the UK-based Chartered Insurance Institute to offer a Bachelor of Business Administration (Insurance). “This is another programme where, if you graduate, you should be able to get some exemptions from the professional paper.”

Zabid explains that the university decided to offer a course on insurance because, like taxation, there are not enough insurance experts in the country.

“Although the country has 30,000 people working in the industry, the insurance penetration level is less than 30%. If you want to move to a higher level of income status, the society needs to be insured. So you need experts in this area.”

There are less than a dozen graduates with professional qualifications in insurance every year, says Zabid.

“If the country wants to move
to a higher income status and you don’t have people who are experts in things like property insurance and liability insurance, how are you going to do it?

“In that case, you need to import people and if you do that, you need to train people and they need to get the necessary experience. We’ll only see the results in 20 years. But if we don’t do all this now, the country will have to keep importing expertise, which will continue to affect our balance of payments.”

Unirazak also has a school dedicated to training people for government. “We offer a Bachelor of Arts (Government and Public Policy) and the curriculum was devised in consultation with people from the civil service,” says Zabid.

With the growing demand for expertise in Islamic finance, the university also offers both bachelor’s and post-graduate courses in Islamic finance.

“Some of the papers will get exemptions from the International Centre of Education in Islamic Finance (IACEF), especially the professional Islamic finance paper, which is what you would take if you wanted to work in a bank.

“Islamic finance is growing in importance and we cannot have fly-by-nights to advise us. We need these graduates to make the industry more professional. So we are working with the industry to supply them the kind of manpower they need. In fact, if you look at it, all our programmes are industry-related,” he adds.

As for its post-graduate global Islamic finance programme, Zabid says it is done in conjunction with five European partners.

“Why global Islamic finance? Because that’s where the demand is. People are interested to learn more about what Islamic finance is and here in this particular programme, our students have the opportunity to work overseas.

“They can study in Belgium or Spain or Germany and then they come here to do one semester in Islamic finance. We’re the only partner in Asia to get a dual certification, just to give our students international exposure. We realised that there is an acute demand for such a course globally,” he says.

Basically, Zabid says, the university wants to ensure that its graduates are ready to hit the ground running.

“We want to make sure that what we provide are graduates who are ready for the market and for that we make sure that our lecturers incorporate the views of both the public and private sectors.

“We also make sure that our lecturers do what we call co-teaching. The problem with industry people is that sometimes they cannot teach but they can talk. So for those, we have our lecturers alongside to do the teaching part of it.”

What about accreditation? “We follow the normal accreditation process. All our programmes are approved by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency and have been given provisional accreditation. Full accreditation would only be given when the first set of students graduate, so it’s only a matter of time.

“There’s no issue about it as all our programmes have been accredited in the past. We are now looking at international accreditation but before we do that, we need to fulfill the requirements for local accreditation first,” Zabid explains.

Most of the programmes Unirazak is offering are new and unique.

In terms of problems sourcing for lecturers, Zabid says: “It has been very difficult. We are trying to source lecturers from various places. For instance, for our tax degree, we are talking to people from IRB. Some of them will become our lecturers while we train others to do it.”

One problem is that not many young people in Malaysia look at lecturing as a possible career choice.

“The foundation is a not-for-profit and we spend money to send people to do their master’s degree and PhDs. But the biggest challenge we face is that there are not many people who are interested to study. For example, we have scholarships for people to do their master’s degree in taxation but nobody is interested,” Zabid says.

The reason is, “by the time they get their professional qualifications, they realise they can make more money working in industry than working with a university. Lecturers don’t have the same stature in Malaysia as in other countries; they are not seen as a premium class. The ministry is offering RM80 million in grants for people to do their PhD and there are no takers,” Zabid notes.

He says Malaysians don’t seem to appreciate the value of post-graduate studies. “We have diploma holders over here rising to the level of, let’s say, director of human resources. And when you talk to him about conceptual skills development, he cannot understand what you are talking about because the level of abstraction is different.”

Zabid charts out the level of abstraction required at each level. “At diploma level, you are skills-based, at bachelor’s you are more conceptual and it keeps getting more conceptual as you progress to your master’s and your doctorate. A PhD is a formal process of training people to be more creative and imaginative.

“People would say all this is very theoretical. Of course it is. You don’t design a car based on practice, you design it based on theory and then try out your ideas. First you must have imagination and only then you can have reality. The problem here is that our people don’t have imagination. So how are we going to have the reality? That’s why we are where we are today.” — The Edge
Zabid: Malaysians don’t seem to appreciate the value of post-graduate studies.