50 years’ of strategic links in education

HIGHER CURVE:

President Barack Obama’s visit will help raise the partnership to another level

It was the spring of 1986 when I visited Ohio University, Athens, United States, to attend a talk at the Tun Razak Conference, organised by the then Razak Chair holder, Professor Datuk Zainal Abidin Wahid.

I was doing my master’s then at a university in Oklahoma. A group of us endured the adventure of a 16-hour bus ride covering three state lines and innumerable stops to Ohio just to attend the conference and meet with other Malaysians studying there.

As we entered the university hall where the conference was held, the seats were filled with students and lecturers in smart business suits. When Prof Zainal addressed the crowd from the podium, there was unmistakable excitement among the Malaysians who appeared to hang onto his every word. I remember feeling proud that the speaker was a distinguished Malaysian scholar. Vaguely, I recall the talk was about national integration and development in Malaysia.

When he finished, Malaysian students applauded vigorously. Little did I know then that this would be the most memorable event of my student life in the US, for, although I never got to meet Prof Zainal, time and again his name would crop up during student gatherings.

It did, however, dawn on me then that Malaysia-US ties in education had long evolved before my arrival.

Fast forward to November 2013. I was back at OU, as a journalist covering Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who had launched an outreach programme in conjunction with Malaysia’s 50th anniversary of strategic partnership with the university.

The programme was an initiative of the Razak Chair in Southeast Asian Studies housed at the university’s Centre for International Studies.

Fifty years of partnership. A long time to nurture a relationship, which began in the mid 1960s, that brought new programmes to Malaysia, as well as the American style of teaching and curriculum to the then Institut Teknologi Mara (now UiTM).

Central to the partnership is the Tun Razak Chair, introduced in 1981, a prestigious faculty position at OU that works to foster cross-cultural understanding of Malaysian-American perspectives, and named after the second prime minister, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein.

As providence would have it, 33 years later, Razak’s son, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak sealed the chair’s prestige when OU conferred him the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Humane Letters for his achievements in the areas of education, democratisation and unity on Jan 15 at the UiTM main campus in Shah Alam.

In his acceptance speech, Najib had said that it was 45 years ago scholars from Ohio had reached out across the world at a conference in Nigeria, where members of the OU faculty met their ITM counterparts and agreed to work together to design a new curriculum.

It was the beginning of a lasting relationship, he had said.

The Tun Abdul Razak Chair is unique in that it made history as the first to be established in a North American university by a foreign government.

Touted as an extraordinary venture in higher education, it has made important contributions to Malaysian-American understanding and educated more than 2,000 Malaysians.

It had also helped Americans acquire expertise on Malaysia and Southeast Asia, develop partnerships and build the finest library collection on Malaysia in the Americas. Since 1987 the university had been designated the sole repository for Malaysian books and journals in North America.

The chair also made it possible for Ohio to host 14 senior Malaysian professors (including Prof Zainal) to teach, conduct research and organise outreach programmes to enhance mutual understanding between the US and Malaysia.

These programmes had produced hundreds of graduates in business administration, communications and management.

There are some 2,400 OU alumni in Malaysia, making it the largest concentration outside Ohio. Today, there are some 100 Malaysians studying at the university.

Besides Prof Zainal, the third holder of the Razak Chair, the others include Prof Dr Syed Muhammed Naquib Al-Attas (the first) and, Prof Puan Sri Dr Fatimah Hamid Don (the second). Fourteenth and current chairholder, Prof Dr Habibah Ashari was appointed in the summer of 2011.

She has been instrumental in introducing Bahasa Malaysia as a foreign language study option at OU. The language course, introduced last August, is aimed at encouraging students to use the language effectively for practical communication and to offer insights into the culture and civilisation of Malaysia.

Retrospectively, President Barack Obama’s two-day visit will mark another milestone in US-Malaysia ties, albeit, on a different
level. It will also be the first time in over 40 years that a sitting president visits the country after Lyndon B. Johnson in 1966.

According to reports quoting Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes, the visit could elevate US-Malaysia relations to a new high. Considering our long history, the partnership can only move forward for Malaysia to achieve its goal of a regional education hub. American research universities, with their integration of learning, discovery, and doing, can provide the best environment for educating our students.

They have the fundamentals to provide undergraduates to participate in valuable foreign research that elevates their professionalism. In this respect, higher education is one of the high points of US-Malaysia ties as Malaysia hopes that other US universities will emulate the Razak Chair.

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Razak Chair distinguished scholars:

- Prof Dr Syed Muhammed Naquib Al-Attas (1982-83)
- Prof Puan Sri Dr Fatimah Hamid Don (1983-85)
- Prof Datuk Zainal Abidin Wahid (1985-87)
- Prof Dr Abdullah Hassan (1987-89)
- Prof Datuk Abu Bakar Abdul Hamid (1989-91)
- Prof Dr Ahmad Mahdzan Ayob (1993-95)
- Prof Dr Mohammed Yusoff (1995-97)
- Prof Dr Mohamed Sulaiman (1997-2000)
- Prof Dr Abdul Kadir Din (2003-05)
- Prof Datuk Mohd Salleh Din (2008-10)
- Prof Dr Habibah Ashari (2011-present)