

LEARNING CURVE PERSPECTIVE



DZULKIFLI
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Alumni and their ties to their alma mater

A REUNION at an alma mater is always a grand occasion for the alumni. There is a saying, *tempat jatuh lagi dikenang, ini kan pula tempat bermain*, to which I must add *apa lagi tempat belajar?* This sums up close ties with the alma mater and all that it represented over the years.

Last week, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) welcomed its alumni to its campus for its annual general meeting.

While the meeting was the formal excuse to return, there were several "more important" reasons why many alumni — some of whom came from faraway places — attended the event.

Their convergence on Anjung Budi, the official landmark dedicated to the alumni, was indeed very symbolic. *Budi* is the appropriate word that acts as the glue between the alumni and alma mater. The *peribahasa orang*

berbudi, kita berbahasa speaks volumes about this relationship, conveying a sense of "paying back" for all the alumni have received from the university — not only knowledge but also, equally important, the invaluable experiences that members gained as part of the "education" that shaped the character and personality of the students.

A PJ Abdul Kalam, the 11th President of India (2002-2007), who is also a renowned scientist, said: "Sometimes it's better to bunk a class and enjoy with friends, because today when I look back, marks never make me laugh, but memories do..."

Likewise, the USM alumni reminisced over the yesteryears. That Abdul Kalam was a recipient of the USM Honorary Doctorate in 2008, the year the university was awarded the APEX (Accelerated Programme for Excellence) status, makes his quote much sweeter for

the alumni to savour.

So it is not surprising that most alumni felt an acute sense of belonging and ownership of the campus and the alma mater, regardless of the length of time they have been away.

They seemed to instinctively know the layout of the campus, almost like the back of their hands, especially those spots that etched lifelong memories; what is more is that those memories can still induce laughter many times over even till this day.

The alumni seemed to have the knack of knowing the location of some of the old structures for example, the Globe Theatre — the first lecture hall (which doubled as a movie theatre) — and the Foo Man Chu canteen (yes, the famed movie character) where students spent their time and newly learnt knowledge to solve the problems of the world.

And even the well-preserved nat-

ural enclave (Durian Valley) and precious "green lungs" designated at the behest of the first vice chancellor, the late Professor Tan Sri Hamzah Sendut, the architect of the campus who was ahead of his time. Hamzah, a visionary planner, articulated the notion of a "green" campus, long before the word became fashionable more than a decade later.

A testimony to this is a granite sculpture by Peter Gelencsér, a well-known sculptor who over the last four decades had major works in public places in Holland, the United States, Japan and Western Australia, as well as Malaysia, notably USM.

He was commissioned by the University Senate in 1974 to carve a "monumental abstractionist work" titled *Transformation*, using marble from Baling, Kedah. Standing 3.8 metres tall in a landscaped roundabout, this public sculpture was the first of its kind to be ini-

tiated by a university in the country.

Most USM alumni take pride in this fact which then paved the way for many more firsts that were to come (save a few "unpleasant" ones!) that were ushered in by the "transformation" mindset that Gelencsér's work (peterg@git.com.au) continues to inspire as he was also a lecturer in Fine Arts at the university from 1973 to 1977.

In other words, the alumni of universities are well-endowed with the moral responsibility to ensure that the history, traditions and living heritage — be they tangible or intangible ones — are kept intact as part of the larger institutional memories that give life and meaning to what the university is all about.

While growth and development are essential to any vibrant institution of higher learning to keep pace, it must be as transformational as it is sustainable, especially for a university such as USM that has set a goal as the sustainability-led University in a Garden.

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