

VITAL ROLES OF ACADEMIC TRADITIONS

THE International Conference on Internationalisation organised by the Internationalisation Association of Universities (IAU) and hosted by the University of Siena was held last week. It coincided with the university's 775th Academic Year Inauguration in Tuscany, Italy.

Conference participants were privileged to attend the colourful ceremony steeped in academic traditions that date back to 1240 when the university was established as one of the world's oldest higher institutions of learning, with a non-Anglo-Saxon heritage.

Known in Italian as Università degli Studi di Siena (UNISI), it was initially called Studium Senese as the first public-funded tertiary institution in Italy. In the



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mid-1300s and with better acceptance and governance, it became Studium Generale. An alleged mass exodus of University of Bologna (Studium Bolognese, the first university in Europe) students to Studium Generale followed. They were supported by generous funding from the local community to study in neighbouring Siena. After the unification of Italy, Studium Generale was recognised as University of Siena.

Given such a colourful history, it is no surprise that the university continues to thrive, backed by its rich heritage. This was well-displayed during the 775th inauguration when noble academic values were upheld in a ceremony filled with tradition,

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Academicians from five continents at the 775th Academic Year Inauguration of the **University of Siena**.

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beginning with the academic procession while musicians, who followed in line and carried banners of yore, played the tune of the university, scored since its inception.

To mark the special occasion, the event was held outside the grounds of the university.

The honour was given to the city that offered the Palazzo Communale, the august town hall of Piazza del Campo, a landmark where nearly all the important events in Siena's history took place in or around this square.

The piazza is a unique medieval "square" in the world with a large concave shell-shaped amphitheatre-like space below the majestic Mangia Tower. It is a favourite spot for students and the public to mingle.

The ceremony was made even more colourful by the academic gowns of par-

ticipants of various nationalities and institutions from five continents.

The rector enumerated the successes of the university and what is in store in the future, especially with regard to internationalisation in line with the theme of the conference.

He illustrated why and how University of Siena is recognised as the one of the most internationalised Italian universities to date. Not to be left out were the staff and students, both of whom offered critical opinions on the delivery and progress of the university in the area of internationalisation.

Academic maturity was on display at the public event, befitting the occasion in the name of academic freedom and institutional autonomy as a sacred preserve of a university.

A professor delivered a lecture on advances made by drugs. Titled *Small Molecules Solving Big Problems*, he took

the audience on a scientific journey of the way pharmaceuticals have evolved from traditional and herbal medicinal forms to modern-day drug delivery systems aided by sophisticated computer technology.

It reminded me of my days as a pharmacy student at Universiti Sains Malaysia. The take-home message for me is that drug discoveries are no longer "sustainable" with a whopping cost of US\$2.6 billion (RM11.2 billion) per drug extended over a decade of research and development. It is an "unhealthy" development making "nonsense" of innovation as a platform to ease the ailments for the majority.

The rector of Naples University and I, representing the IAU as its president, were guest speakers. I spoke on the subtheme of Internationalisation — Moving beyond Mobility to Sustainability.

I took the opportunity to shed some light on how internationalisation has been steered towards generating "revenue" as

against meeting the targets of "access, equity and success" as envisaged in several global agenda, especially the recently launched Sustainable Development Goals (2016-2030).

As the ceremony came to a close, I could not help but think of Malaysian universities 700 years from today.

Will their academic traditions and scholarship be rooted deep enough to withstand the challenges that universities are subjected to, tearing apart their education ethos and foundational purposes for higher humanitarian goals? This, of course, depends on the actions that university leadership take today in defence of the idea of a university, just like University of Siena.

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