Legacies of inspiring leadership

UNIVERSITI Sains Malaysia (USM) lost two luminaries last week.

The well-known Tan Sri Ani Arope served the most years as chairman of the council, and later board of the university. Throughout his tenure working with three vice chancellors, USM was on an upward trajectory as the United Nations University Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development (2005), a research university (2007) and an Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) status university (2008).

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I can still vividly recall his words — "May the best university win!" — on submitting the APEX bid proposal.

He said it with a smile, after confiding earlier that he was absolutely convinced that USM was poised to earn the status. This was because he was always on the ball as far as the development of the tertiary institution was concerned.

Furthermore, his chairmanship was facilitative and supportive, with a clear understanding of the direction of the higher education institution.

There was no attempt to micromanage, a familiar complaint in several universities then. This gave USM an added advantage to create its own agenda (that eventually translated into the APEX initiative) and the flexibility to accomplish it.

The achievements of USM were due to his wisdom on the way a university should function and contribute to the community at large.

He had a scholarly appreciation for autonomy and tried to exercise it to the limits of his authority. He did not behave like a small-minded bureaucrat.

The other luminary was lesser known to Malaysians because he was headhunted while he was at the University of Hawaii to join the then fledgling brain gain programme.

Professor Maqsudul Alam was an internationally renowned microbiologist trained at the famous Max Plank Institute, Germany. He specialised in genomic research, more commonly called "synthetic biology". After much discussion at various levels, including with the then Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Maqs (as he was fondly called) agreed to set up the country's first Centre for Chemical Biology at USM (CCB@USM) dedicated to natural rubber genomic research especially *Hevea brasiliensis*.

Heading one out of seven of the world's first APEX projects to ensure that USM continued to escalate intellectually, he led the charge to decode the genomic constituent of natural rubber within a period of no more than three years, working with a specially assembled talented team of graduate and post-doctoral students, as well as staff.

The mission saw a race between at least five countries worldwide, some major producers of natural rubber, others major producers of natural rubber products globally.

A new entrant, Malaysia faced a particularly challenging task given a late start and from scratch. Notwithstanding that, under Maqs' no-nonsense stewardship and mentoring, not only were world-class facilities completed in record time but the rubber genomic sequences of some two billion bases were also decoded by CCB@USM. All these happened in less than 20 months, putting Malaysia and USM on the world map of pioneering genomic research in natural rubber internationally.

It was a highly instructive time for those who believed that Malaysia can race from behind to be a world leader as new knowledge creators as called for in Challenge number six of Wawasan 2020, provided there is courage "to challenge the status quo" — the then Chief Secretary Tan Sri Mohd Sidek Hassan's mantra that has rubbed off onto the USM culture of transforming the university, beginning with several of the APEX world's first initiatives.

By October 2009, Malaysia had gained recognition as the first country to decode the genome of natural rubber. As a result, CCB@USM received invitations to assist a South-South collaborative effort in agrogenomic work in jute, fungus, dates and more from the different parts of the developing world. The Bangladeshi government commissioned a national project, under the auspices of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, to enhance the use of jute through genomic research under Maqs' leadership. The genome sequence of the Tosha jute plant was uncovered in less than a year later in June 2010.

Unfortunately, despite Maqs' research contributions being a boon to Malaysia's socio-economic well-being, especially the trillion ringgit natural rubber industry, including that of the smallholders (who are facing an uncertain future), the country is unable to further harness his unique talent and rare expertise.

Maqs passed away on Dec 20 at Queen's Medical Center, Honolulu, Hawaii within a day of that of Ani Arope. Both luminaries will be dearly missed and fondly remembered for their courageous leadership in challenging the status quo in the pursuit of truth and knowledge. May they rest in peace. *Al-Fatihah.*