

THE SANGGAR SANJUNG FORMULA

WHEN Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) initiated an annual award and recognition taglined Sanggar Sanjung in 2001, the intention was to internalise the successes of the institution and impress on everyone that it can do so much better collectively.

“Better” was open to the interpretation of its members to raise the bar. The *crème de la crème* will certainly make a mark deserving of the Sanggar Sanjung Award and Mention. No numbers were posted then; no Key Performance Index *per se*.

The idea was to let members of the campus decide what was “best” for the university, as an autonomous entity, which in turn depended on what was “best” for the community and country.

It was very much a bottom-up approach where the members were empowered to

determine the level of achievements following university guidelines and criteria. There were many discussions and meeting of minds to come to an understanding on what was “best”, not just for the individual, but also the team, USM and, most of all, the community.

As a consequence, the USM “performance” level moved in an upwards trajectory year-on-year. Within the next three years, the prize money for the Sanggar Sanjung Award tripled, but later gradually plateaued as the bar had been raised sufficiently high enough to make it competitive. Individuals and various

teams, and disciplines emerged one by one, year by year.

They soon made it into exclusive lists worldwide. Of late, many have topped the list as among the world’s best and the

trend is set to continue. These are some of the outcomes of the decision not to compete with others but with oneself at all levels. At the same time, transdisciplinary collaborations were forged across the board.

By 2005, USM became one of the pioneering centres for sustainable development under the auspicious of the United Nations University.

In 2007, USM was the first “research university” proposed by the Ministry of Higher Education. The tertiary institution was awarded the Accelerated Programme for Excellence university status in 2008.

In other words, the Sanggar Sanjung attitude is to treat “work” as an end, and not just as means to an end which is often tainted with other interests.

Around the mid-2000s, the Sanggar Sanjung recipe caught the attention of the Higher Education Ministry. The Anugerah Akademik Negara (AAN) was born. Professor Asma Ismail, then USM deputy vice chancellor (research and innovation) — now a Datuk and Higher Education Ministry director general — was tasked to or-

ganise the inaugural AAN and the two subsequent ones, before handing it over to another organiser.

Therefore, it is understandable to see her smiling face while the prizes were given away to USM researchers who had earned their rightful place in various categories.

But nothing could be sweeter than when Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Dr Augustine Ong Soon Hock of USM was deservedly named the 9th Tokoh Akademik Negara — the country’s highest academic award. Known fondly as “Papa Ong” among USM students, he was much liked by academics and administrators alike. Soft-spoken and meticulous, Papa Ong displayed the traits of a father figure: firm, patient and committed. Seldom did he lose his temper or even temperament when engaging with students and subordinates.

He is a leader in his own right. Not only is he a dedicated researcher, but also a persuasive and passionate teacher in the field of organic chemistry.

