



# Unimas aims to be world class

**H**IS curriculum vitae states that Datuk Dr Mohd Zawawi Ismail is the foundation vice-chancellor of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas). A unique one, but one that is most apt.

Zawawi still remembers quite clearly the day that he was told of the appointment.

He had just reached his home in Bangsar from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in Bangi where he worked, and was getting ready for a bath when a telephone call came through from the then Education Minister, Datuk Dr Sulaiman Daud, summoning him.

"I rushed to the Ministry, all the time trying to figure out what I had done wrong. When I reached his office, I saw that all the senior officials of the Ministry were there, including the secretary-general. After the pleasantries were over, the Minister asked me if I would take on the job of starting a university in Sarawak."

Zawawi left that meeting feeling overwhelmed and flattered by the offer, wondering what a university in Sarawak would be like. He had been to the State once before. Just to be sure that it was not all a dream, he went once again to see Sulaiman to reconfirm the job offer.

"I was then told that the first intake would be in July the next year. By this time, it was already October 1992, which meant that I had only 10 months

**Unimas emphasises the total development of the individual and the idea of education for capability, says its foundation vice-chancellor Datuk Dr Mohd Zawawi Ismail. NORAINI SHARIFF reports.**

to get going. Therefore, the pressure started from that very day."

Zawawi promised Sulaiman that he would go back to think about the university and would submit a report on Jan 1 the next year. He managed to do that one day earlier, on Dec 31.

"I was lucky that it had been a long time since a university had been set up. The last time was in 1971 when UKM was established. Therefore people were helpful and gave me ideas."

Zawawi considers himself fortunate to be given "a blank piece of paper" and that he had the chance to forget common practices and look at new forms of academic pursuits and forms.

"I came from a very comprehensive university myself, having studied in Leeds, England, and having worked in UKM. Therefore, I had an idea that the university in Sarawak would be broad-based and comprehensive also."

Aware that the university had to consider the local background, Zawawi then went to Sarawak to see what the people there wanted. Other factors to be considered were the global scenario and national needs.

"Medical studies was required, so that became one faculty. I wanted to

have an engineering faculty, and Sarawak's natural resources could not be neglected. Therefore there had to be a Faculty of Resource Science and Technology. Also, the social sciences in Sarawak offer a lot of opportunities - cultural, social, modernity, social issues. From the world perspective, information technology was important," Zawawi said when explaining his rationale for the faculties which were started.

Other issues were creativity and arts, which led to the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, and economics and business.

"In the future, problems will also be more complex. Therefore, there will be issues of man and machine and human development. Therefore there must be a Faculty of Cognitive Science and Human Development."

By August 1993, the University Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) was ready to register its first students.

By the end of 1995, seven faculties had been established, offering a total of 31 undergraduate programmes.

Today, the university boasts faculties of engineering, medicine and health sciences, cognitive sciences and human development, social sciences, resource science and technology, applied and creative arts,

and information technology.

It also has institutes of biodiversity and environmental conservation, health and community medicine, software technology, and the centres for student development, applied learning and multimedia, language studies, technology transfer and consultancy, and academic information services.

Its keywords are the total development of the individual and education for capability.

"By subscribing to the idea of education for capability, which aims at the development of individual capability, the university is committed to fostering a learning culture that encourages students to be intellectually autonomous, to be confident in adapting to changing circumstances and to extend their expertise to new environments, to take responsibility, and to be accountable for managing change," Zawawi said.

Unimas now has a student population of 1,315, with 220 academic staff. Its first batch of students graduated last year.

It angers Zawawi whenever he is confronted with some people's opinion that Unimas has no identity.

"I think we have. We are not in any mould, but technology and management are important components



**ZAWAWI... Focus on multi-media development**

to us. We are a comprehensive university, IT-intensive, and we are focused in our areas."

Because of the extensive emphasis on multi-media development in the campus, much effort has been made to creating a network community - with its campus-wide computer network, its efforts to provide every academic a networked personal computer, its centre for academic information services (CAIS) which provides both library and computer services and its centre for applied learning and multimedia (CALM) which was developed into a research as well as a network resource for multimedia.

All these, say Zawawi, have played a vital role in creating an information infrastructure that has become the envy of other campuses.

"Our students were already on the Internet two years ago. Our policy is one man, one personal computer. Everyone has an e-mail address and people communicate by e-mail. We already had video-confer-

encing before anyone was talking about it," Zawawi boasts, adding that the university has had a home page for a long time.

Unimas is also in the midst of a trial run for distance learning programmes through the Internet.

"We were laughed at when we first spoke of it," Zawawi said with a satisfied smile.

Unimas is also proud of its 30-member orchestra developed by the Faculty of Applied Arts which had its first public performance-cum-launch in mid-1995. Many of the members are non-music majors, including those from the engineering and medical faculties.

Other assets which bring it great pride are its Institute of Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation which Zawawi says is world-renowned, and its Institute of Health which has exported diagnostic equipment for dengue to Singapore and the United States.

As for Unimas itself, Zawawi is confident that by the year 2020, it will be a world-class university.