



UNIMAS responding to agenda 21 of the UNCED

By GHAZALLY ISMAIL

Today, universities throughout the world are faced with a multitude of agendas and compelling issues that are unique to the next millennium. Universities are forcibly driven to come to terms with some of the realities and perplexing considerations they must grapple with in their own ways to meet the needs of today's modern society. Soon, here in Malaysia, we are to become witness to an unprecedented growth of higher education provision this country ever experienced.

With the amendment of the University Act, all existing public universities in the country will be effectively corporatised and an anticipated mushrooming of private universities will occur. All these massive expansion of higher education facilities will not only provide the society with greater options for learning and training but will introduce the much needed competitions among Malaysian universities. Each of them must strive and clamour for that academic status of excellence and achieve absolute credibility at dispensing their respective roles and functions worthy of an institute of higher learning. For universities in Malaysia perhaps it is a period of stocktaking to gauge and assess their past contributions to our own society and to prepare the ground for new positive developments in the future.

Issues that often surround calls for changes in higher education provision include the purposes of higher education, how it should support society generally, what role it should play in underpinning the economy, what the future shape and balance higher education provision should be, and what size of higher education system was required. These are indeed basic questions that need to be addressed, both for individuals and for society as a whole.

Beyond these and other issues that may have been raised, some noted scholars are now questioning the ability of universities of today to respond constructively to many of the challenges in society, particularly to those affecting our environment. Many argued that universities have failed in their task to promote environmental literacy. This happened despite our own admission that our modern age may end due to impending environmental crisis. In 1987, The United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development concluded that rapid deterioration of the global environment is threatening life on earth and that urgent and decisive political action is necessary to prevent and mitigate more widespread environmental destruction. In order to survive, humanity must go beyond our present age with its systems of beliefs and practices.

In June 1992 at Rio de Janeiro, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) adopted Agenda 21 where the overwhelming majority of the world's heads of states and governments agreed to implement the Agenda's recommendations to promote sustainable development and environmental protection. Some of the recommendations focused on increasing environmental literacy at all levels of education. Education, and the uses and purposes of knowledge have been hailed as our prime hope that will be able to develop new connections and understandings among our present scientific, ethical, aesthetic and religious worldviews needed to solve our environmental crisis. But the most pertinent question asked by many today is: How seriously have the educators within the present day universities heeded to this warning and responded to this call? How intensively and effectively have they addressed and focused on issues of sustainable development and environmental protection in their university curricula?

University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) in positioning itself as a forward-looking university must be sen-



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sitive to and capable of responding to the needs of the modern society of the future. At the outset UNIMAS has risen to the challenge and made literacy about sustainable development and environmental protection a focal point for the education of all its students. This move will ensure that all UNIMAS graduates are environmentally literate and responsible citizens.

The overall mission of UNIMAS recognises the critical importance of environmental problems in today's world and is committed to environmental responsibility. To address this, UNIMAS has fostered environmental studies by establishing a research institute called The Institute of Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation (IBEC). Here an inter disciplinary

approach to teaching and research that strengthens holistic environmental appreciation are encouraged. Already IBEC is engaged in education, research, policy formation, and information exchange on flora and fauna, environment, population and development to move toward a sustainable future.

Among the generic development courses offered to all students, an environmental literacy requirement has been advocated through a compulsory course called 'Science and the Society' which amply addresses environmental issues affecting our livelihood today and the future. In all or most of the courses offered at the faculty level there has been a deliberate effort to significantly infuse themes on sustainable management and environmental protection. Every opportunity is used to raise public, government, industry, foundation, and university awareness by publicly addressing the urgent need to foster an environmentally sustainable future.

The UNIMAS administrators and faculty members teach environmental responsibility by example through environmentally sound management and practices. Programmes of resource conservation, recycling, and waste reduction have been established on campus. An environmentally literate campus community at Kota Samarahan can be a tiny but significant starting point towards the creation of an informed citizenry worldwide required to overcome the problems of sustainable development and environmental protection. The approach taken by UNIMAS is believed to deservedly earn this visionary university status - that of a role model in advocating, practising and contributing to the sustainable development and environmental protection of our planet Earth as recommended by the Agenda 21. May the education, awareness and convictions of UNIMAS' future graduates provide us with an assurance that, as far as our environment is concerned, the future is in good hands.

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