

Reflections on IMU's success in the last two decades and the way forward into the third decade*

Abu Bakar Suleiman

*State of the University's Address by the President, Tan Sri Dato' Dr Abu Bakar Suleiman, on University Day, Friday, 22 February 2013, Auditorium, 4th floor, Bukit Jalil Campus

The International Medical University, Kuala Lumpur (IMU) has just completed 20 years of success and had a series of events to celebrate its 20th anniversary as well as its achievements in 2012. As part of the 20th anniversary celebrations, IMU successfully co-hosted the Ottawa conference with the European Medical Education Association in Kuala Lumpur. This was the first time this conference was hosted in Asia and it was one of the biggest and most successful of the Ottawa Conference series ever held. This conference focuses on medical education with the major emphasis on assessment.

Another event to mark IMU's 20th anniversary was the launch of the book "IMU 20th Anniversary – learning for life"¹ at the beginning of 2012 which showcased the development of IMU. Following this, another book "The IMU Journey"², comprising of a collection of essays by senior members of IMU, was launched in February 2013. This book relates to IMU and the various activities undertaken under the IMU banner.

We have over the last year, seen the establishment of three centres in IMU:-

- The Institute for Research, Development and Innovation (IRDI)
- IMU Centre for Education (ICE)
- IMU Centre for Life Long Learning (ICL)

These Centres will have important functions which can prove to be of strategic importance in future.

On the corporate side, IMU became part of a larger corporate entity, IHH Healthcare Bhd, which was listed in July 2012. This listing was important nationally and internationally, and its success has been reflected by the numerous prestigious prizes won by the listing exercise.

All these are a reflection of the success enjoyed by IMU which has been the result of a lot of hard work by all the staff of IMU. As IMU moves into the third decade of her existence, the past success becomes just a memory, and there is no need to bask in past glory. Instead there should be a concerted effort to focus and work together towards future success. As the higher education sector

undergoes consolidation, IMU will be faced with major challenges and will have to do some soul searching.

We are all going through the process of globalisation, which is generally believed to be good for all nations. In many ways this has become inevitable. Over the last twenty years, global trade has grown rapidly, at a much higher level than global economic growth. However over the last two years, some troubling developments have been occurring. Trade has actually been slowing, and in some important areas it has been growing slower than GDP growth. This has come to something like a shock in the trade arena that some economists have started to wonder – what is happening to globalisation? Is globalisation going backwards? While the globalisation trend is relentless, and will not be reversed, this slowing of global trade has major implications for various sectors of the economy.

In this globalised, interconnected world, where companies operate all over the world, and our people take vacations all over the world, and where IMU have partners all over the world, what will happen when companies and countries that have always looked outwards, start to focus on looking inwards instead?

What does IMU make of certain developments that may have relevance for her? For example:-

- Companies in the USA have been outsourcing their work to other countries with cheaper labour costs, particularly to China. However China has to improve its infrastructure and costs are rising there. Some companies in the USA have apparently realised that it may be more effective to get work done locally than to outsource it. While it is still early days, it is something to watch carefully.
- In banking, for a long time, growing global and building massive, global banks was the fashion to achieve efficiencies. Global banks brought global risks, which individual countries could not handle. This resulted in destruction of banks and potentially countries as well, when the financial crisis occurred.

President, International Medical University, 126, Jalan Jalil Perkasa 19, Bukit Jalil, 57000 Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA

Address for Correspondence:

Tan Sri Dato' Dr Abu Bakar Suleiman, President, International Medical University, 126, Jalan Jalil Perkasa 19, Bukit Jalil, 57000 Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA

Email: abubakar_suleiman@imu.edu.my

There are examples of other globalising eras in history, be it the Silk Road of the Tang Dynasty or the steam and rail revolution in the 1880s. Nations that do not adapt or change, experience difficult times. Currently the dominant force for globalisation is the USA, and they do have the means and the tools to manage this difficult period, but it may not be without pain, as what is being observed.

How about IMU? Does IMU have the ability to cope in trying times? Does IMU have the ability to change and adapt? Does IMU have the ability to seek opportunities, even in trying times?

In looking at IMU's achievements, the university has done well. Locally IMU has set the standards in private higher education in medical and health related courses. While IMU is good, it is really not good enough! Over the last ten years IMU has received feedback from various sources formally and informally – that it is not good enough. It is not good enough that 85% of our students do well on transfer to partner universities, and 15% do not do well. The 15% that do not do well is a reflection of IMU's inability to respond effectively, to ensure that all her students meet international standards, have resulted in difficulties for IMU. Is this a result of complacency, or resistance to change? This inability to respond effectively will undermine IMU's will and ambition to excel. Hence, firm and committed collective action is needed to be better than good.

The reduction of places in IMU's partner universities for medicine is a significant development that has major implications for IMU, as the medical course has been the platform that has enabled the growth of other programmes in IMU. This development is really not unexpected as it has been occurring for some time and has been exacerbated by the difficult economic climate, and the changing domestic policies in the different countries where IMU's partner universities are. What is needed is the ability to react constructively to the new challenges. IMU needs to be a leaner, be more efficient, more productive and more innovative. IMU must be more flexible and strive harder to achieve growth despite

the challenging times. The circumstances are such that IMU needs to look for growth on a barren field. Obviously this will be a difficult task, but this is what is needed for IMU to survive, if not to prosper.

IMU needs to ensure that it can endure difficult times, and there is no room for complacency. There is a need to trim the fat and ensure greater accountability throughout the organisation. Also, IMU has to ensure appropriate and equitable allocation of work, which must be measured.

IMU also needs to ensure the competence of her staff, and her policy of developing into a learning organisation is part of the strategy to achieve this. All the staff must have personal development plans to ensure that their competence and skills are up to date and career development plans can be achieved.

As a private university, teaching and learning must be the core activity and is the basis of IMU's existence. IMU has also invested in research, which is important in any university, and contributes to professional and academic development, and to scholarly input. Research also contributes towards excellence in different ways, such as through continuing professional development, and can result in better performance in teaching, learning and related activities.

What is clear is that research is important as part of our scholarly activities; research will enhance IMU's reputation and attract good quality staff interested in an academic career.

However IMU's core competence must be in teaching, learning and related activities, and it must excel in this area. While IMU is improving in this area, there is a need to strive to be better, and to be able to measure IMU's performance.

There are challenging times ahead of us, which can be overcome. This can be done by not accepting the status quo, but by changing to meet the challenges. In order to achieve this, many of IMU's personnel will need to get out of their comfort zones.

In reflecting the three I's of IMU, there is definitely a need to continuously work on being more innovative, and being more imaginative. However "Insight" is seldom mentioned to the same extent as the other two I's (Innovation and Imagination).

In looking back two or three decades, there has been this notion that companies of that era had been successful because they had big size and big brands.

However it has been observed that some major brands, which had appeared good on the outside, but were really, rotten on the inside, had collapsed. Enron and Lehman Brothers are just two such examples, and there are others. Research has shown that organisations that put a priority on their values are more resilient and ultimately do better. It has been observed that Silicon Valley has been brilliantly successful. The "original" Silicon Valley was Route 128, outside Boston, that has not done so well. Both had ample money and brains, however Silicon Valley had an insider culture of cooperation, that appears to have made a difference.

As we move into the increasingly networked world of the future, success will come based on the quality and values of the "inside" of the organisation. However in IMU's case, this must serve the larger purpose of working for the broad vision that the IMU leadership has strived for. IMU must not retreat, but in the face of current challenges, IMU needs to relook and reset her ideas. This is the "insight" that IMU needs to work on, even as it strives to be more innovative and more imaginative.

IMU's success over the last two decades will not ensure future success. It is IMU's commitment to her values, to change, to innovate and excel, to work together, that will pave the way to success in the next decade.

REFERENCES

1. IMU 20th Anniversary – learning for life, 2012.
2. Mak JW, Lim PKC, Yap IKS, eds. The IMU Journey, February 2013.