

FOREIGN POLICY – UNIVERSAL NEWS SOUTHEAST ASIA
Dr. Gauth Jasmon, Vice Chancellor, University of Malaya
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UNIVERSAL NEWS: Asia has been recognised as the fastest-growing student market and fiscal market in the world and by 2025, it is estimated that 70% of student demand will come from this region. How do you feel Malaysia is preparing itself for this?

DR. GAUTH JASMON: The Government has set a target for 200,000 international students by 2023. At the moment, Malaysia has got about 87,000. Attracting foreign students into the country is currently a priority.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: The University of Malaya is Malaysia's oldest university. When the University of Malaya was established, it was said that the university "would provide for the first time a common center where varieties of race, religion and economic interest can work together". Do you think this statement still holds true today?

DR. GAUTH JASMON: Yes. There are many races and people from 110 countries studying at this campus. We have about 5,000 international students and 20% of our academic staff is international. We have about 2,500 academic staff and this staffs come from about 40 countries. We have a very strict academic requirement for our recruitment. In addition we believe in a larger proportion of foreign staff.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: How do you go about selecting your prospective staff?

DR. GAUTH JASMON: We have certain criteria. For each level, there is a certain requirement in terms of research track record, publications and international profiles.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: Why would an international student pick the University of Malaya above anything else?

DR. GAUTH JASMON: Local students know which universities to look for when it comes to different programs. For undergraduate programs, there is a government policy that we cannot take more than 5% into undergraduate programs, but there is no limit on postgraduate programs. Most of the 4,000 international students are in postgraduate programs. We ensure that we have high-quality students. We also offer scholarships on the condition that they deliver high-quality publications after they finish.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: How do your scholarship schemes work?

DR. GAUTH JASMON: We created a scheme called the Bright Sparks Scheme where if you are a first class honours graduate from a good university, you are automatically given a scholarship if you do a PhD. You can come from Bangladesh, Egypt or China for example.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: Your Faculty of Islamic Studies is a very recognised university. It is recognised as part of the university that prepares students to go to the Middle East directly; it is a unique place. Are students from the Middle East attracted to these courses or are other international students attracted to them?

DR. GAUTH JASMON: A great number of our students who come to the Faculty of Islamic Studies come from Indonesia. We have about 300 or so Indonesians in addition to our local students who want to major in Islamic Studies. Islamic Studies is very broad; it even includes Islamic banking which is becoming big in the region.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: Have people become more attracted to Islamic banking?

DR. GAUTH JASMON: About ten years ago, there were very few people who wanted to borrow money based on the Islamic banking concept. But now all the banks are going for Islamic products. You can get Islamic banking facilities in China and Thailand now and in Indonesia of course. The fact that it has started in China means that it is going to go all over the world, because it is a big market. I think Islamic banking is going to grow all over the world. It is only a matter of time in my opinion.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: Malaysia has slowly matured over the past 10 years and has placed more of an emphasis on research and development (R&D). In 2009 you had 113 patents and this number is going up. How do you think that is going to benefit Malaysia in the years to come?

DR. GAUTH JASMON: If we want to make Malaysia a center for educational excellence, we must have world-class universities that are ranked internationally. Once you have a position in the world ranking, then it is easy to tell people about Malaysia. You cannot bring people's attention to Malaysia if you do not have any universities that are internationally ranked. As Vice Chancellor, I am committed to ensuring that this university will go up the world rankings over the next few years. I believe that the other universities will follow us soon. Once you are recognised internationally, you will enjoy more transfers

from locals and internationals. If you claim to be internationally renowned but you do not have the evidence to show this, then it is very hard. I think it is good to participate.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: You joined the university as Vice Chancellor on November 8th 2008. In 2009 you pushed the University of Malaya into the top rankings of world universities. What were the main factors behind that occurring?

DR. GAUTH JASMON: When I first came, the first thing I did was to set the proper KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) which included top-class general publications. That became the most important KPI for everyone. That is why everything improved. Secondly I channelled the university endowment into funding high impact research. We have quite a good endowment and I took a proportion of that under the condition that if they got the money, they would promise me a certain amount of research. In the end, the amount of publications tripled in three years. Thirdly, all entrants had to be top-class.

There are many levels of research quality but at the moment, the university must increase the quality of academic and research work here. When we reach another stage, then we can start thinking about research that has an impact on society and the global environment. We are going to target key global issues in the future. There are stages to this development.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: If you were to select one university that you are not currently working with, and you could offer some collaboration in R&D, which university would you go for?

DR. GAUTH JASMON: I would like to do more with universities in China, Taiwan and Korea because they are among the fastest growing universities. I think we want to grow as well, so you can really get something out of it. We currently have 300 active partnerships around the world in the U.K., the U.S. and Australia. But the universities in China and Korea for example are running, as if they want to finish the 100m race in half the time. I want to try to get up to their speed.

Recently, when the Prime Minister of China came here, he came straight from the airport to this university and spent 75 minutes here and he gave a speech where he stressed that the future of collaboration is higher education and the economy. He wants to see more of that.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: As regards standardisation of testing, there have been efforts made through the MQA and then expanding into collaboration with China. But it has to be restricted to universities of excellence. How long do you think it will take before ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) as a whole will have representative universities that collaborate throughout the region, which will enable standardisation?

DR. GAUTH JASMON: The top universities in the region are working hard to work together, and we are always meeting every few months with conferences. There are still issues like how you recognise credit transfers and so on. I think all that has to be sorted out, but generally, good standards and high quality is there amongst all universities. There are only issues with the systems. All graduates are as good as each other. But it will take some time before we achieve common standards. Quality is not an issue for the good universities.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: Do you believe that this standardisation will be possible by 2025?

DR. GAUTH JASMON: I think it will be possible by 2020 because everyone is talking about quality. As you know, this is the fastest growing region in terms of the economy and education.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: But I think that Middle Asia has the advantage that it is that little bit more accessible.

DR. GAUTH JASMON: Yes. We use English widely, and even in China. In another 10 to 20 years, everyone will be very proficient in English here, so it is a very attractive destination.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: World Report stated that seven times the amount of people in the UK are learning English in China right now, which I think is quite remarkable.

DR. GAUTH JASMON: Yes. And the tuition fees for home students in the UK can be up to £9,000, so they will be coming over here soon.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: I know that Southampton has signed an MOU to come out here. How important do you consider the location is for an internationally recognised university? Do you think it is important to be near Kuala Lumpur?

DR. GAUTH JASMON: Before I got involved in this job, I set up a private university, and I was doing that job for 12 years. Location is absolutely important; you cannot put a

university 50 miles away from the nearest town. It must be on the outskirts of a big city. When you build a university, perhaps you do not want to build accommodation or a shopping center, so I need to go to a place where I do not need to do this, and where I just need to build academic buildings. If you build a university 50 miles from the nearest town, you have to build everything and you spend most of the money on non-academic things.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: You graduated with a degree in electrical engineering in London. You have a number of other qualifications, but the one that fascinates me the most in terms of a move was when you were invited by Telecom Malaysia to set up University Telecom. There must be more to you than electrical engineering!

DR. GAUTH JASMON: I was invited when I was 39 years old and at that time I was the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Development here. I was only there for a year and a half, and then I moved onto Telecom Malaysia. They employed me because they said they heard that I was capable of setting up a university. Of course, I was given permission to go and the Government gave me early retirement so I got a pension etc.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: And the success does not stop there. The Government has invited you to set up a multimedia university.

DR. GAUTH JASMON: University Telecom was the name it was initially given, but a year later the Government asked us to set up a multimedia super corridor in the heart of the multimedia corridor. After 12 years there I joined a college and after eight months there I came back here. Of course, this job is not advertised. They have a research committee and they asked me to come for an interview. I actually went for two interviews, one here and another elsewhere, but I got this one!

To be honest with you, in order to do this job successfully you just need to be brave. A lot of people are not brave enough. Because I have been in this business for so long, I know you have to be brave. A lot of people are just too cautious and diplomatic and worry if people will get upset, but I know what needs to be done. At the end of the day, once you have a track record, wherever you go it is not a problem. That is what this business is all about; it is not difficult.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: What message would you like to send to our international readership on behalf of the University of Malaya?

DR. GAUTH JASMON: There is no doubt that the future is in Asia and in Southeast Asia in particular. Southeast Asia is growing rapidly and it is going to grow more. This means that you are going to develop a lot. This region has a lot more resources to exploit, so people can make it big if they come over and set up businesses here. This is why China is so keen to work with us. By the way, 25% of ships come through the Strait of Malacca, so we are a very strategic region. There is a lot of growth and this is the place to be. Malaysia is multiracial, multireligious and multicultural and it is a very safe country. Many nationalities are living here, and it is a good place to be.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: Thank you very much.