

**Transcription of the Foreign Policy/Universal News interview with Prof Dato' Dr. Muhamed Muda,
Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive, Universiti Sains Islam, Malaysia**

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UNIVERSAL NEWS: Asia is the world's fastest growing market economically and with the expansion of the student market, it is estimated that roughly 70% of student demand will come from this region by 2025. How do you feel Malaysia is preparing itself for this demand?

PROF. DATO' DR. MUHAMED MUDA: I think Malaysia is well-positioned in this respect. We have had a strategic plan for education for quite some time (formally since 2008), so things are being rolled out. I think we should be able to participate and become an active player in this context.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: Malaysia is in a very unique position I believe as it is a country which is very welcoming and it is also an Islamic nation. What do you think makes Malaysia so unique?

PROF. DATO' DR. MUHAMED MUDA: We have a moderate Islamic approach. The religion can be interpreted in different ways, including extreme and moderate. Because we are taking a moderate approach, we are able to accept the changing global market in terms of science, knowledge, technology and so on, but at the same time we are safeguarding the virtues of Islam. This is an important aspect.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: The University Sains Islam commenced as a college in 1998 and it has since progressed and was awarded university status in 2007. How do you see the university moving up to the top six and being a very competitive university?

PROF. DATO' DR. MUHAMED MUDA: We are the same as the rest of the universities in Malaysia. We strive to provide an excellent education in terms of content, curriculum and teaching facilities for instance. But bearing in mind that this university has a unique requirement – students must enter this university with an Islamic education background, regardless of their religion and their racial background. They must be at SPN in Arabic and Islamic education. Anyone who has this basic qualification can come and study here.

Currently many of the students who are eligible come from the religious stream of education. But regular schools are also offering these subjects, so we will have students from various educational and racial backgrounds. Given that, we are just like any other institution that aims to provide education with the background and foundation we have. All knowledge comes from our God; therefore all knowledge should be studied by Muslims. That is the position we take. So we are offering courses like medicine, dentistry, science and technology, ICT and so on, because this is knowledge for the good of human beings.

Also, a lot of modern knowledge comes from Muslim scholars. That forms the basic foundation. We are currently striving to improve in all aspects, including student intake, the quality of students, language proficiencies and our lecturers' abilities as well as qualifications and our teaching and learning facilities, research and student amenities. We are looking at the same things that other regular universities are looking at. Some are making better progress, and others are a little bit slower.

For example, with teaching and learning we are now looking at OBE (outcome based education) and we send our lecturers to upgrade their qualifications and obtain PhDs. We want 60 to 70% of our lecturers to have PhDs.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: There is a misconception amongst many people that Islamic education must indicate that one's faith is also Islamic in itself. One of the most interesting things at the moment is of course Islamic finance. After the economic downturn, many people are looking for alternative regulation or another set of guidelines where future catastrophes can be avoided. In your opinion, have you seen an increase in the amount of people who are willing to study this? For example, the UK is integrating Islamic finance into the regulatory system.

PROF. DATO' DR. MUHAMED MUDA: Islamic finance in the international arena is industry driven. It is because of incidents over the last few years that the funds from Muslim countries were shifting from the West to other places, particularly over to the East. That is the driving factor for Islamic finance. But Malaysia has been doing this since the early 1960s because we had the first Islamic Pilgrimage Fund. We were involved in this way back. That followed through with Islamic banking. But the catalyst was not funding, but it was because of the needs of Muslims.

Given what is happening now in the Middle East and North Africa with the political issues, we are not sure who is controlling those funds and where they are going to be channeled. I think if they are channeled back to the West then people will forget about Islamic finance, but Malaysia will not. It is a way of life – we have to have this, regardless of where the funding comes from. Therefore, we are looking into the needs of providing education that can develop good global citizens and leaders at this university. We believe that Islam is relevant for everybody. We are looking into development now, after what has been happening in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa region). There could be a shift in the landscape once more. We are providing education because of the needs of Muslims.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: The globalization of education is becoming increasingly prevalent. It is becoming more and more important for the student to have the ability to interact with different people around the world. What is the most attractive feature of coming to USIM or one of the universities located in Sheikha Mozah's Education City?

PROF. DATO' DR. MUHAMED MUDA: Malaysia as a whole has been involved in education for quite a long time I think. Many of our people are trained overseas, so we have western up-to-date knowledge. I did my PhD in Manchester. People are looking over here now because the world map is changing and we are in the middle of the world map now. It used to be Africa and then it moved onto America, and now they are putting China and Southeast Asia as the center of the world map. In that sense, I think that the quality of our teaching and the abilities of our lecturers to provide education is on par, if not above.

We are adopting the curricula from the best universities in the world and the textbooks are the same. But the image is slightly different. Although we are using the same textbooks as some universities in the US for example, those universities are better than the Malaysian universities. I think that time may change this perception, and we are seeing this as a lot of Middle Eastern students are coming here and even Bosnia-Herzegovina. People are beginning to see the values of Malaysian education that can be applied overseas. I think this will improve over time.

I think people are starting to see Malaysia with their own eyes as they visit, study or work here. They can see what Malaysia has in terms of the environment, the people and the quality of education as opposed to what they have in other countries. It is unique in the sense that we are quite peaceful here in Malaysia and our government is very honest in terms of improving the social environment and poverty, crime and public transport. These are clearly laid out. I think once these things are successfully implemented, we will have a better environment.

USIM is quite unique because we are close to the airport (about 10 to 15 minutes away). We like to look at ourselves as the gateway to Malaysian education because whoever comes to Malaysia will come and see our campus and when they leave they will also see it. Ministers from Middle Eastern countries come to visit. This afternoon we have people from Jordan coming over to talk about student and staff exchange programs. It is a gateway.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: I read an article which stated that USIM is currently trying to create more of a balance between its graduate and postgraduate students to push research and development up the agenda. Our goal is to create 60,000 PhDs by 2020. This being the case, how can USIM contribute to this?

PROF. DATO' DR. MUHAMED MUDA: We have adopted it as one of our major strategic initiatives. We are beginning to work on this project. This is part of our business plan because we have to look at how we position the university. As you know, there are other universities in Malaysia that offer Islamic studies at an undergraduate level, so we are looking at a blue ocean perspective in the sense that why should we compete to get students who are very limited, who have qualifications in Arabic and Islamic Studies. Everybody is competing to get these students from a small pool. There is a government policy that limits the intake of foreign students at the graduate level as well, so there is not much room to move.

At the same time, we want to look at how we can contribute to improving the well-being of Muslims over the world. Based on World Bank data, most of the poor countries where people earn \$2 a day are Muslim countries. We could contribute here for the betterment of the world. We thought that a lot of improvements in terms of improving knowledge and the image of Islam should come from graduate studies. They study at a higher level and look at different perspectives, as opposed to undergraduates. This is what we are focusing on. We hope that we will have about 20% of graduate students by 2015 and about 40% by 2020.

Currently, the country as a whole is in a dilemma. We think that Malaysians are not good enough in terms of knowledge, but thousands of Malaysians are currently working overseas, and what does that mean? At the same time, we are trying to attract these people to come back with all sorts of things including talent management, to ensure the future development of Malaysia. Therefore on the one hand we are saying that our education and knowledge are not very good, but yet people perform very well abroad. We have to look at this objectively. We can develop talent here. We need Malaysians here to work for the future development of Malaysia. It creates an image that we want however.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: You said before that you did your PhD in Manchester. What made you return to Malaysia and invest in education as opposed to staying overseas?

PROF. DATO' DR. MUHAMED MUDA: Economic considerations are not my priority. I think it depends on the individual. The cost of living is slightly cheaper in comparison. Maybe some of the goods are cheaper relatively. This is the thing that is missing. There is too much focus now on economic rewards such as salary, etc. I totally agree that if Malaysians are looking for more pay with foreign companies, if those foreign companies come here, they will pay foreign salaries. So there is a way to normalize the situation. We can attract Malaysians to come back and attract foreign companies to be based over here. This is the strategy that they are adopting.

Islamic education is relevant when it comes to instilling values. There are other things you should look at, such as contribution to society, well-being and so on. This is what we here at USIM try to do. We want our students to be ready for industry, but beyond that, they have to be good citizens and love their people, country and the environment and live in peace and harmony. That is what USIM is trying to do.

We are seeing that if leaders focus too much on economic well-being and so on, they will not last long, and there are too many examples of this nowadays. I think it is beyond just the economy. With what is happening around the world, I have more examples to go back to my students with and instill these kinds of things. But because of commercialization, they tend to be more convinced that that is the objective. If doctors join a private practice for example, they can earn up to three or four times more. It is not easy to convince them.

At the end of the day, we need to do this and we have to find ways to instill this. I think if everybody followed this, the world would live in harmony and peace. But as they do not, then there are problems. We are trying to bring these things back so that people have a balance.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: If you had one message to send to our international readership, what would it be?

PROF. DATO' DR. MUHAMED MUDA: I am concerned that education is being commercialized. This is my main concern. This can pose problems with funding and attracting good people. I think Malaysia is feeling the pinch as well. I believe that this could happen to any country. Many developing countries are doing the same as Malaysia and are increasing their budgets for education. Why is this happening? The commercialization of education is actually a western practice (open market, fees based on the demand and market factors). But then again, many foreign universities are funded by alumni. I think England is the same. In the American model, everything is funded by the market. At the end of the day, I think the Government will feel the pinch.

I think the task is to retain the talent. In a globalized world where international companies are recruiting from anywhere, there could be a brain drain. We may produce good students, but if they are elsewhere, we may not get the returns. I think the payback period is longer than what it used to be. They either go to other countries, or it takes longer for them to get jobs so they have to study more. As a result the holding period for the Government is longer, but that is another matter.

UNIVERSAL NEWS: Thank you very much.