

Academic Eulogy for Royal Professor Ungku Abdul Aziz Ungku Abdul Hamid

Malaysia lost an intellectual giant when Royal Professor Ungku Abdul Aziz Ungku Abdul Hamid passed away on 15 December 2020 at the age of 98. Fondly known as Pak Ungku, he was a pathbreaker and created many 'firsts' in the Malaysian higher education scene.

Royal Professor Ungku Aziz holds the following distinction as

- The Founding Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Administration in the University of Malaya (1966-1968)
- The longest serving Vice Chancellor in Malaysia, serving as the Vice Chancellor of the University of Malaya between October 1968 and February 1988
- The first and only Royal Professor awarded by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong in 1978

Royal Professor Ungku Aziz was also instrumental in establishing two important institutions in the socio-economic development in Malaysia. One is the federation for cooperatives, commonly known as *Angkatan Kerjasama Kebangsaan Malaysia* (ANGKASA) and two, *Lembaga Tabung Haji*, which is the fund board that acts as the savings facilities for hajj pilgrimage. The establishment of these two social institutions were strongly driven by his overarching interest of alleviating poverty in society and demonstrated his tremendous efforts of translating his intellectual socio-economic knowledge into tangible forms of contribution to the Malaysian society (Rajah, Norma, & Chandran, 2015).

However, there are some interesting facts about Royal Professor Ungku Aziz that were less mentioned. Among these was that he was the last vice chancellor of a public university in Malaysia to be appointed by the University Council. This appointment was significant as it fully reflected the autonomous standing of public universities to self-govern without external influences. The amendment to the Universities and University

Colleges Act in 1975 has since stripped public universities of such autonomous privileges in the appointment of their own vice chancellor. Furthermore, it is interesting to also note that Royal Professor Ungku Aziz once headed the Malay Publications Bureau (that later became *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*) on a part-time basis (Khoo, 2005).

Yet, what has been less mentioned about Royal Professor Ungku Aziz was the fact that his vice-chancellorship presided over two watershed national events that subsequently changed the course of development of Malaysia, especially in higher education. The first was the May 13 incident in 1969, which was followed by the affirmative action of an ethnic quota in universities in 1971.

Important to this article, the second was the implementation of the National Language Policy. Although the National Language Act was enacted in 1963 and amended in 1967, the policy on the implementation of Bahasa Malaysia in the University of Malaya was only published by Royal Professor Ungku Aziz in November 1970 through *Berita Universiti Malaya* (No. 5/70). This delay of implementing the national language in the university has been pointed out as a factor that divided students according to racial lines by the Committee appointed by the National Operations Council to "Study Campus Life of Students of the University of Malaya", more famously known as the Majid Report of 1971, in the aftermath of the racial riots.

Royal Professor Ungku Aziz, despite his instrumental role with *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* which was the institution set up to champion and uphold Bahasa Malaysia as the national language, has demonstrated his openness, maturity, and wisdom in laying out the policy on the switch to the national language in three aspects. The first concerns the fundamental objective of the usage of Bahasa Malaysia in the university. The

second provides the details of the implementation, including allocation of financial resources to develop the capacity of staff and students. The third, then, outlines the short to medium term targets of the implementation by suggesting a ten-year framework as realistic.

While the position of the university was clear that Bahasa Malaysia was recognised as the official language, Royal Professor Ungku Aziz emphasised the need to distinguish between the usage of a single official language in all ceremonies, functions and correspondence, and the medium of instruction in lectures. On the latter, he defended the need for the university to continue allowing other mediums of instruction such as Arabic, Mandarin, Tamil, and English to be used due to the appropriateness to teach these subjects. "For instance the Koran and Hadith in the Islamic Studies Department may be lectured in Arabic for students specialising in that stream" (Ungku Aziz, 1970, p. 162).

On the implementation, Royal Professor Ungku Aziz also pointed out that, while the fundamental objectives of the Language Policy Implementation Programme (LPIP) were explicit and easily understood, it was crucial that the objectives did not interrupted the core function of the university, which was "to train and teach prospective managers, administrators and Malaysian leaders for the future" (Ungku Aziz, 1970, p. 163). Elaborating on this, he argued the need for LPIP to be implemented gradually rather than hastily because it would have been unfair to the students and staff and detrimental to the university as a whole if done hastily. The guiding principle for implementation instead, as he argued, should be "based on the assurance of the right of those who have entered into contract with the University so that the contract is not altered unilaterally" (Ungku Aziz, 1970, p. 164). Not only was he referring to the staff who were employed into the university based on their proficiency in English but would now be assessed based on the usage of Bahasa Malaysia to teach, he was also referring to the students who were accepted into the university on the conditions that their education and examination was to be done in English.

Furthermore, he outlined the problem of terminology, especially in the faculties of sciences, that would require time and effort to smoothen the change of language and medium of instruction. The LPIP further provided various initiatives to enhance the implementation including pre-university programmes with schools and prospective students,

experimental examination on the proficiency of Bahasa Malaysia as well as intensified interactions and exchanges with universities in Indonesia. Yet, equally important, Royal Professor Ungku Aziz cautioned the overzealous view that the implementation of LPIP would cause the English language to disappear from the campus as erroneous and clearly reiterated the decision of the Senate that continued to require every undergraduate in all faculties to pass an English test.

In conclusion, although the implementation of the policy on Bahasa Malaysia was seen as an important agenda to Malaysia immediately after a racial riot, the statement by Royal Professor Ungku Aziz as the Vice Chancellor of the University of Malaya demonstrated the maturity, long-term thinking, pragmatism, openness, and fairness in translating such an important policy in the university. More importantly, the statement also demonstrated vast understanding on the part of Royal Professor Ungku Aziz and his management team that they understood the fundamental role, purpose, tradition, and unique characteristics of a university. Therefore, implementation of a national policy should not be done hastily but needs to be adjusted accordingly to the context of a university.

As we mourn his demise, let us be reminded of the wisdom and insight illuminated by the statement of Royal Professor Ungku Aziz as we chart the present and future development of higher education in Malaysia.

References

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