Leading the way

As one of the first private universities to form strategic collaborations with institutions of higher learning around the world, UCSI University is now able to offer increased learning and research opportunities to its students.

By ANN-MARIE KHOR

SETTING foot into Harvard University had never crossed third-year medical student Cherish Chong Chiu Wern's mind, but as she was one of the top students in her faculty, she was shortlisted, by UCSI University vice-chancellor and president Prof Datuk Dr Khalid Yusoff, for the Harvard Medical School Global Clinical Scholar Research Training Programme in which selected students are given the chance to spend a year at the prestigious institution.

"At first, attending Harvard University just sounded so far-fetched. It never occurred to me that I would ever get to go there," said Cherish in an interview conducted before she left for the programme in October.

The aspiring clinician-scientist passed a rigorous selection for her place in the programme, which has a full enrolment of only 100 students.

"I remember asking myself if I were good enough for this programme. I may have the theoretical knowledge on lab work, but I have not had experience with the basics of research and specific lab techniques," she said.

Nonetheless, the 22-year-old stressed that UCSI University had been nothing short of supportive of her endeavours in this programme, giving her the opportunity to undergo lab training here in Malaysia before she left for the United States.

"My preparation for the research training programme was rigorous! Aside from lab training, I also had to read many journals and medical articles and get acquainted with facts and advanced lab techniques," she added.

When asked if she felt like she would be at a disadvantage compared with other students who have more research experience than she did, Cherish said she now felt that she was sufficiently equipped to undergo the challenging programme.

"Really, our country in general might still be 'young' when it comes to research, but opportunities like these are exactly what we want.

"I will put in the effort so that by the end of my stint at Harvard, I will be able to come back with knowledge that can help bring advancement to the field of research here," she said.

Training methods

The Harvard Medical School Global Clinical Scholars Research Training Programme seeks to provide clinicians and clinician-scientists advanced training in the methods and conduct of clinical research.

Typically, the research training does not provide any academic credits, but enables clinician-scientists (with the equivalent of a medical degree) around the world to apply for the golden opportunity to learn from some of the world's finest in medicine.

Although she has yet to obtain her degree, Cherish's work thus far qualified her for a place in the programme.

This is the first time that a private university in Malaysia is involved in such an arrangement with Harvard University.

During her time at the university in Boston, Cherish will be involved in cutting-edge research under the tutelage of Prof Dr Gordon H. Williams, who leads the Hormonal Mechanisms of Cardiometabolic Injury Programme at Harvard's Brigham and Women's Hospital.

While she is mostly looking forward to working with Prof Williams, Cherish is also appreciative of "the opportunity to travel halfway across the world":

"I haven't had the opportunity to travel overseas in a long time even though I love travelling.

"This will be a good chance for me to 'study overseas' and learn from the people in the research training programme, too," she said.

Cherish, who has been a Public Service Department (JPA) scholar ever since she started her A-Levels, is also grateful that her university has given her a grant which will cover the cost of her year overseas, allowing her to focus on the tasks at hand instead.

While she will not be given the privileges usually given to Harvard students, Cherish still considers this a golden opportunity as she will be able to learn through lectures, workshops and webinars at the prestigious education institution.

"Harvard is at the forefront of research and I'm sure this exposure will help me in my aspirations to be a clinician-scientist after I graduate."

UCSI University vice-chancellor and president Senior Prof Datuk Dr Khalid Yusoff said that building on the university's research capabilities was his main focus.

"Public universities, in general, get a lot more (research) funding from the government, but that's now changing.

"People need to ask themselves how a certain task is best performed – who does it shouldn't really matter," said Prof Khalid, who has served in the public higher education sector since 1983.

Moving forward

Helping the government work towards achieving their goal of transforming Malaysia into a regional hub of higher education is also something Prof Khalid hopes to work towards.
"We are working towards a vision for Malaysia to be a higher education hub in this region. So, we need our public and private universities performing at optimal levels.

"To do that, we must push these universities further than ever before," he said.

He dismissed the naysayers who remain convinced that public and private institutions of higher education cannot work together.

"There are, of course, cynics and sceptics, who don’t think that we can move towards achieving this goal, but no country or civilisation has ever been built by these cynics and sceptics.”

One of the biggest challenges he foresees, though, is that private universities often don’t consider that their focus should be beyond disseminating information to the students.

"Even though private higher learning institutions often feel like research is not their forte, innovation is a requirement for a university to advance. There is more than just teaching at universities," he said.

"Universities need to behave more like universities – there should be more focus on research, aside from shaping ourselves as the powerhouse of knowledge," he shared.

"The university is looking toward extending its linkages overseas.

"Right now, aside from Harvard, we are also working to form ties with various top universities, such as Imperial College, London, Cambridge University, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and Massachusetts Institute of Technology,” he said.

This move comes on the back of a number of strategic tie-ups and exchange programmes between UCSI and leading universities in the Russell Group, Universitas 21 and Australia’s Group of Eight.

Cherish is one of the first Malaysian students from a private university to benefit from these tie-ups and she hopes that more students from our shores will be given the chance to join similar programmes.

"Since Malaysia is still growing in terms of research and advancements, I hope that more programmes like these will be made available to students so that they can, in turn, help boost our country in these areas. “I’m definitely looking forward to making a contribution to our nation,” she said.
Golden opportunity: Cherish is currently undergoing a research year at Harvard.