



# STRATEGIC ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN NATION BUILDING

By

**Professor Dato' Dr Ahmad Ibrahim**

Fellow, Academy of Sciences Malaysia

Department of Chemical & Petroleum Engineering

Faculty of Engineering, Technology & Built Environment (FETBE)

The nation has been through a lot these past few years. It started with the devastating episode of the 1MDB scandal which rocked the nation to the core. How could such a thing have been allowed to happen within a system which has always boasted of having all the checks and balances? Many could not believe what they were told at first. But it was enough to humiliate the then government, which saw an almost landslide win for the newly minted opposition. The manifesto which promised a lot was also instrumental in the impressive win. The electorate took the bait. The vote was overwhelming for the opposition. A new government was sworn in. There was a kind of celebration all around the country.

There was that general feeling that after 60 years, the government is now truly serious about nation building. A nation which promises prosperity for all Malaysians regardless of their ethnic, religious and social background. The positive feeling was further boosted with the launching of the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030. It is meant to replace the earlier Vision 2020 which has failed to fully materialise. But as time went by, after assuming office, there was a noticeable restlessness among the people. The changes that were promised did not fully see the light of day. Very few of the manifesto promises could be fulfilled. Apparently, the high debt level inherited from the previous government has left very little room to manoeuvre.

The government which was made up of many conflicting groups was not stable. It soon became clear a split is unavoidable. This later became worse. Through some regrouping of the political parties of the new opposition, somehow a new alliance emerged and took power from the elected government. Despite some people claiming that the new government came through the backdoor, all those familiar with the laws agree that it was all done within the constitution. But not long after the newly minted government assumed office, the nation was hit with the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has dealt a severe blow not only to the nation's health system but also to the economy. Add to that the fact that the oil price has dropped to historically low level of less than US\$30 per barrel, it is a double whammy for the country. This is because oil is a major revenue earner for the nation.

With all such threatening developments confronting the nation, saving the nation from an economic catastrophe has become even more urgent. All the experts are prescribing that a major change will take over the world after Covid-19. Many are now talking about the emergence of new economic sectors taking over the world. There is no doubt that we need to be prepared with the necessary talents to carve a decent share of the new economic pie. The health industry is predicted to be transformed. There will be that rising demand for talents in the public health and infectious disease sector. Digital based manufacturing is also set to assume greater importance, especially in the areas of robotics and AI. What has become clear from the pandemic is that future talents must have multidisciplinary skills and knowledge.

Obviously, the private sector will continue to be the engine of growth. The government will also have to craft new policies to drive the new demands of business. No doubt, the GLCs also have their role to uplift the nation's economy, especially in the newer riskier areas where private sector participation is still low. Universities will be called upon to support the development of new talents. During the Covid-19 pandemic, universities have also not been spared from the business disruption. We are fortunate that our universities, through years of experience, have developed the maturity and resilience to deal with such threat. UCSI university is among those in the country which has effectively responded to the disruption. In just a matter of weeks during the CMO, the university has been able to put together an efficient digital learning platform to replace the normal classroom lectures. The success has been attributed to the excellent understanding between staffs and students.

As a praxis university, UCSI university has undertaken extensive consultation with the business sector and the professional bodies, to make sure that the digital learning model meets all the quality requirements of the major stakeholders. Notwithstanding, the constructive engagement with the relevant government education regulators has been of immense help in shaping the new learning model. What is important is that we in the university will continue to produce the right professionals to help in the very important area of nation building.