



The Malaysian campus shows the significant progress made by Xiamen University to achieve its goal of becoming a world-class university. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY

Top of the class in higher education

Two years on, Xiamen University's Malaysian campus serves as a shining example for other Chinese institutions to go global

By **YANG HAN** in Kuala Lumpur and **IRIS DENG** in Xiamen

Two years after opening its doors to a pioneer batch of 200 Malaysian students, Xiamen University Malaysia (XMUM) is now home to more than 2,700 students from 17 countries and regions. It is an international campus for academic communication and cultural exchange.

XMUM, which began official operations on Feb 22, 2016, is the first overseas campus established by a Chinese State-owned university. The move marks a new chapter in China's efforts to take its higher education system global.

The Malaysian campus, covering 60 hectares in the country's western Selangor state, currently offers 13 undergraduate degree programs. These include Chinese studies, finance, new energy science and engineering, marine biotechnology, chemical engineering and traditional Chinese medicine.

It also offers two foundation programs — in science, and in arts and social science. With the exception of Chinese studies and traditional Chinese medicine, which are taught in both English and Chinese, all other programs are conducted in English.

"The Malaysian campus shows that Xiamen University has made significant progress in globalization to achieve the goal of 'double first-class,'" said Wang Ruifang, XMUM's president.

Double first-class refers to a "world-class university" and "world-class discipline," which were approved by the Chinese authorities in 2016 as a new impetus for the development of China's higher education sector.

"Some say that we are walking towards the world, but I'd rather say we are marching into the international arena," said Wang.

"In an overseas environment that

uses English as the teaching language, we can compete with other universities, especially Western universities on the same platform."

With its Malaysian campus, Xiamen University, or Xia Da, also aims to repay a debt of gratitude to its founder, the late rubber magnate Tan Kah Kee, and to continue with his efforts to promote education.

Back in 1921, Tan, a renowned patriotic leader of overseas Chinese, returned to his hometown in East China's Fujian province to establish Xia Da after building his business empire in Malaya, as Malaysia was then known.

Tan continued to support the university financially until his death in 1961. Ever the philanthropist and educationist, he left his remaining wealth to the university and other schools.

"XMUM is a historic reciprocity," said Wang.

Of XMUM's 2,600-plus students, more than 60 percent are from Malaysia. The majority of Malaysian students at the campus are from the ethnic Chinese community, Wang said.

However, as the university develops, XMUM hopes to attract more students from Malaysia's other ethnic communities and foreign countries.

"Our target is to grow the number of students enrolled to 5,000 by 2020, and eventually, to reach the maximum capacity of 10,000 students," said Wang.

The majority of students will be from China, Malaysia and other member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The university will provide scholarships to attract talented students.

"XMUM is a university from China, but it should not be a university only for Chinese. It is an inclusive and global university with diverse cultures, so we hope to embrace more students from different countries and



Wang Ruifang, president of Xiamen University Malaysia.

different ethnic groups," said Wang.

"Through their three or four years' study, students can learn to appreciate each other's culture and build up friendship," he said. Wang added that such interactions will allow them to acquire not only professional knowledge but also appreciate multiculturalism.

Aaron Shawn Aloysius, who is majoring in marine biotechnology, is one of the few non-Chinese Malaysian students in XMUM. He chose the university because it offered him a 50 percent scholarship and is also one of the few institutions of higher learning in Malaysia to offer the subject as a major.

"When I graduate, I want to start off with doing field work in marine biotechnology in Malaysia, and my hope is to go overseas," said Aloysius. "When I saw the program of XMUM, I found that they focus on field and lab work, so I found it very interesting."

Apart from providing highly qualified academic staff, XMUM also aims to excel in the area of research. More than 80 percent of teaching staff have PhD degrees. While 30 percent of the lecturers are professors from Xia Da, the rest are from around the world.

Yap Teck Lee, a senior lecturer in finance at XMUM, noted that many Malaysian students do not know much about China. Thus, for his classes, he often adds some Chinese business cases along with examples from Malaysia and the West.

For example, after noticing his Malaysian students' interest in China's Internet industry, Yap shared cases that involve Chinese tech giants such as Alibaba and JD.com.

Yap, a Chinese Malaysian, completed his PhD degree in China and previously worked for Huawei, a leading Chinese tech company.

"As Xiamen University, we are very special. It is our strength that we know China well," said Yap. "But at the same time, we need to integrate it with local and international education."

Wang, the campus president, said XMUM will add more majors for bachelor's degree students to meet the demand for talent in Malaysian and Southeast Asian markets. It is also preparing to launch master's programs this year.

The university will take advantage of its China-ASEAN College of Marine Sciences, a college established with the support of the China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund, to speed up the preparation of its master's and PhD programs. XMUM is already working with universities like the Universiti Malaysia Sabah and the University of Malaya on joint research.

Even though it will be some time before its pioneer batch of students graduates, Wang said many Malaysian companies are already showing interest. Last year, professional services provider Deloitte Malaysia selected 20 freshmen majoring in business to join its long-term internship program.

"(Those companies) hope our students can bring something different as they value our international

education with Chinese elements," said Wang.

Zhang Jianlin, who has been working to facilitate the construction of the new campus since 2012, said: "It is a historical process for Xiamen University to set up a new campus abroad, since the university has a special bond and good reputation in Malaysia."

Zhang, who is also the assistant president of Xiamen University and director of the Office of Campus Construction, attributed the Malaysian branch's success to the local Chinese community.

"The majority of the Chinese community in Malaysia originated from China's Fujian and Guangdong provinces, where they feel their roots are. Because of this, they are very supportive of the project and contributed a great deal to it," said Zhang.

Wang said XMUM is a new venture for a Chinese university, and he hopes Xia Da can serve as an example for other universities to go overseas.

"The timing is good too," said Wang, adding that the university can also support the China-led Belt and Road Initiative.

The core principles of the initiative include the "five areas of connectivity" — policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds.

Wang said XMUM can enhance people-to-people connectivity through education. "We can also nurture international and multicultural talents that are needed in different industries related to the construction of the (Belt and Road) initiative, including trade, finance and politics," he added.

Echoing a similar sentiment, Zhang said: "The best talents are those educated jointly by two countries."

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