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# Lighting K-economy's fire

BY HARIATI AZIZAN

STUDENTS today, facing the challenges of the knowledge-based or K-economy, can learn a lot from Shakespeare, says University of Nottingham Chancellor Prof Yang Fujia.

"In this rapidly changing world, students now not only must learn how to know and how to do, but also learn how to be. To be or not to be, that is the question," quotes the distinguished Chinese physicist and academic who is the university's first Asian chancellor.

Hence, for students to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world, he says, they must have a broad knowledge and be liberalised in their thinking. More importantly, he adds, as Shakespeare said, in the quest for knowledge, one must first learn to think.

Higher education is the key for students in equipping themselves for the new forces of the K-economy. And the best education, according to Prof Yang, is one that allows students to learn how to be, which is to let them have personal interests in life and be curious about things around them, as well as be creative.

Prof Yang, who was in Kuala Lumpur recently for a public lecture organised by Inti Foundation, says the university is a vital entity in sparking off economic development.

He says Malaysia has moved from an agricultural-based economy to a digital industrial economy, and this dynamic shift towards a knowledge-based economy has brought about a remarkable change to the role of the university today as the catalyst for economic development.

The man who introduced the concept of knowledge-based economy to China remarks: "In a knowledge-based era, for profound exchanges and communications, every country has to cherish an insight into others' culture, history and social background, and the internationalisation of higher education will help reach this goal."

## An international scholar

With Nottingham University as his base, Prof Yang commutes to China from England regularly throughout the year, as well as travels to universities and institutions of higher learning around the world for talks and knowledge exchanges.

Currently in his second year as the university's chancellor, he is relishing his role as an "international scholar".

"I think it's because I have a philosophy in life," he says with a smile. "I still feel very Chinese. But my mission is to learn from the Western countries. I am very proud of my country, especially since we found our own way. We made a lot of mistakes before 1978; there was very little life in China, but now we have opened up. I think our future looks great."

Since graduating in physics from Fudan University in 1958, Prof Yang has been attached to various institutions around the world in pursuit of discoveries in nuclear physics research. He has served in the Neils Bohr Institute in Copenhagen, Denmark, as well as with various universities in the United States and



QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE: The pursuit of knowledge is a collective undertaking and students should be willing to work with others as team players, says Prof Yang.



MEN OF HONOUR: Prof Yang Fujia (right) receiving a gift from Inti International Group of Colleges president Dr Tan Yew Sing.

Japan.

He says: "The different universities in the world are getting to work together while concrete steps are being taken to revamp higher education. For example, there have been three major advantageous developments of the British education system - namely, strict regulation over university administrations, student-oriented policies and emphasis on the globalisation of higher education. However, they would still need to adapt to future changes and work with other universities in the world."

At Nottingham, his main tasks include developing the university's international activities in teaching and research and development.

According to Prof Yang, the K-economy is fundamentally education-based, and higher education is extremely important as it is designed to cultivate talents, enrich human knowledge and develop

new technologies to serve society.

Acknowledging the similarities in the region, Prof Yang opines that one task for developing nations is not revolution but helping the economy grow, which depends largely on education. "Take China for instance, its economy is growing very fast."

Citing another example, Prof Yang expounds on how a small country such as Japan is able to set a landmark signature in the world economy by exporting cars to the United States. He says the growth of small companies and the emergence of successful CEOs from universities have led Japan to be a world leader in the automobile industry.

The three key elements - knowledge of the economy, understanding the use of capital or operation of monetary systems and being well-versed in regulatory conditions - are contributing factors to Japan's success, he adds.

Prof Yang also cites Finland's progress. Through Nokia, Finland has rapidly developed its higher education and consequently become a global pioneer in information and communications.

As most of the small companies established by graduates are IT-related, he acknowledges that small and medium enterprises not only play an important role in the economy but are also high in creativity.

## Curiosity and enthusiasm

Curiosity and enthusiasm are hallmarks of a good student, says Prof Yang. Curiosity will raise questions that will in turn lead to the development of new ideas and complex problem-solving.

"So, to me, when I teach, the concrete facts are not important; more important is whether I can make students curious and interested. I used to teach four hours a week but now I teach only two, while the other two I ask my students to teach," he says.

Prof Yang also emphasises the need for students to be bold in facing hardships and diligent in doing research. Since the pursuit of knowledge is a collective undertaking, students should be willing to work with others as a team.

Leading by example, the University of Nottingham, which is noted for its medical research, is collaborating with Shanghai-based Fudan University and Jaotong University to jointly set up a genetic research centre in Fudan.

Hard work, however, is not the be-all and end-all of higher education. "In China, university students work so hard that they suffer low quality life; many have no interest and curiosity for life or opportunity for creativity. But curiosity is the

source of invention," adds Prof Yang.

Students have to learn to adapt as the new knowledge economy replaces old industries.

"They are now expected to try new things when they join the work market. When they are asked to do something, they cannot say they cannot do it because it is different from what they learnt in university. Instead they should say, 'I'll try, let me try'. There is no place for 'I'm afraid I cannot,'" he advises.

In Cambridge or Oxford, there is a story about an academic in the 15th century, he shares.

"Let us smoke," the man said. "Smoke from cigarettes will ignite the spark in students' minds." Similarly, another philosopher said, "A student's mind is not an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge but is space wherein a spark waits to be fired up; an academic's duty is to ignite it into fire but for tutors, parents, and students themselves, they have to try find their own potential. Unfortunately, different people have different fires; different potential."

## A changing world

More importantly, students need to understand what we are facing as the world is changing rapidly. Prof Yang warns.

"I like this story I heard about Bill Gates. When, during an interview, journalists congratulated him on his marriage and speculated that he would get a son to be his heir, he said, 'When my son grows up, I don't know where Microsoft will be.' That is so true. That is the future. So, students must ensure they understand the easiest concepts and be versatile; in the K-economy you need to adapt to changes quickly."