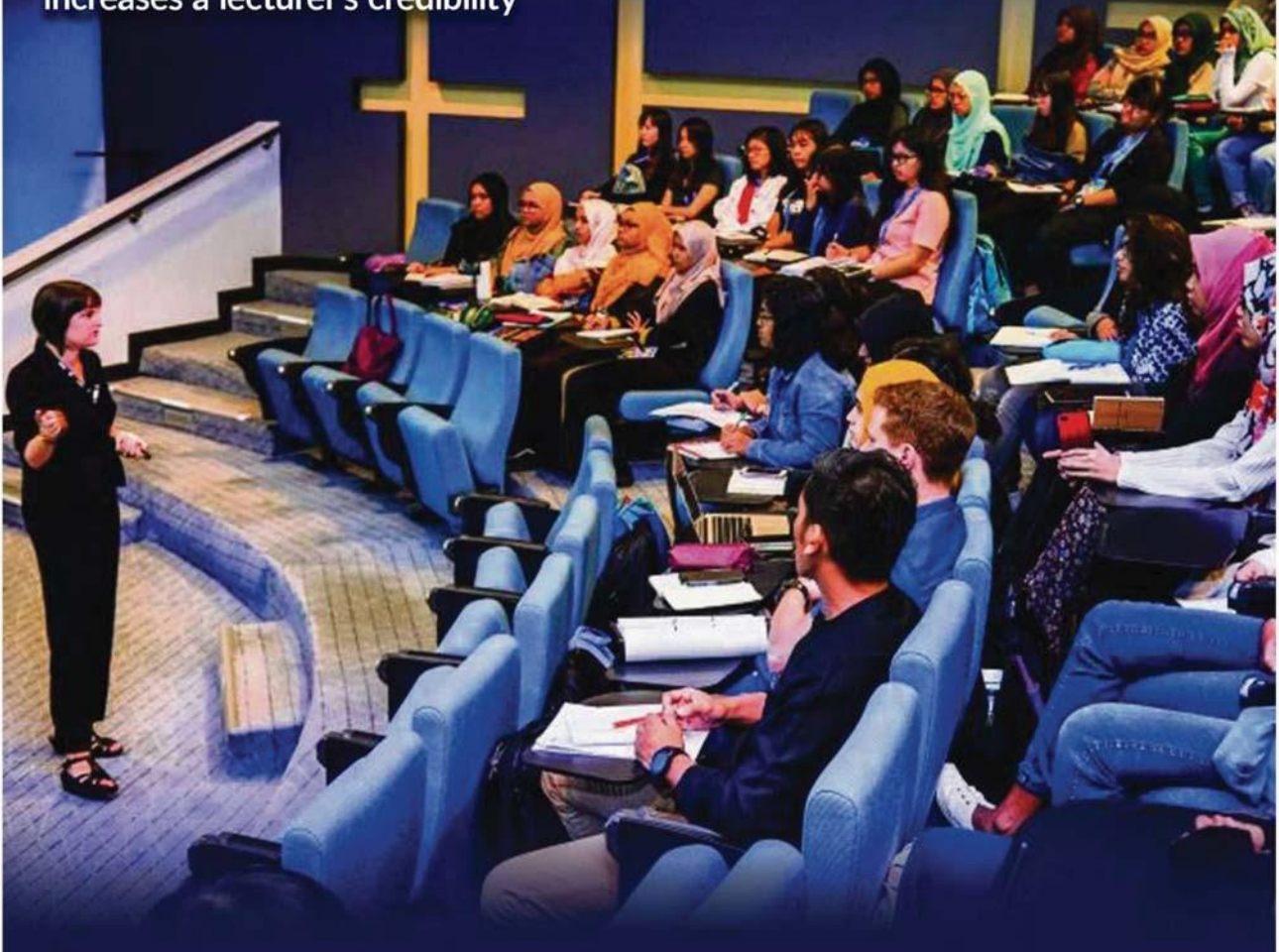


Bringing real-world experiences into classrooms

Academic qualifications are important, but possessing work experience in the field of their expertise increases a lecturer's credibility



INDUSTRY 4.0-relevant; future-proof students; producing graduates who are job makers instead of job seekers.

These are terms often thrown at institutions and students to remind the former of the importance of moulding the latter into multi-skilled assets.

But how do lecturers translate the constantly evolving demands of the industry to students, if they do not have sufficient work experience themselves and thus, aren't up to date with current, practical and relatable content?

Malaysian Society for Higher Education Policy and Research Development deputy chairman Prof Dr Rosna Awang-Hashim said having paper qualifications alone is not enough for lecturers.

Based on her interactions with Malaysian undergraduates over the years, a large number expressed their preference to study with lecturers who were industry practitioners.

"They said it motivates them when they learn from experts.

"Lecturers with industry experience bring insights from industry and real world projects into the classroom," she said, adding that often, these lecturers tend to have better industry networks that may help boost students' career opportunities.

Striking a balance between both qualifications is imperative and lecturers who were industry practitioners must continue to keep themselves updated with the

latest changes.

Some, Prof Rosna said, may lose touch with the field once they join academia, thus, making their industry experience no longer relevant to the current job landscape.

"So, academics must always maintain good relationships with professionals from the industry".

While Sunway University School of Hospitality Assoc Prof and programme leader Dr Chong Ka Leong does not dispute the importance of obtaining relevant academic qualifications, he said the transfer of knowledge has little to do with how highly educated a lecturer is.

Knowledgeable lecturers without passion, he said, are not contagious in their

teaching.

"If a lecturer is able to bring to the table the workings of the real-world to complement students' theory-based learning, it will undoubtedly inspire students.

"This will then translate into the institution producing graduates with character and passion, which is exactly what the industry wants," he added.

Agreeing, Prof Rosna said whether a lecturer with high academic qualifications will be able to deliver the necessary lessons to ensure students are employable depends on individual lecturers. - By SANDHYA MENON

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Industry practitioners bridge knowledge gap

Lecturers who join academia with relevant academic qualifications and work experience are a boon to students

Stories by SANDHYA MENON
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THE industry-academia relationship isn't a new one.

While industry experts remind higher education institutions to produce students with real-world skills, varsities have had various programmes over the years to do just that.

But merely encouraging students to enrol in apprentice-based programmes is not enough, experts insist.

More needs to be done. Varsities need competent lecturers with industry experience to transfer real-world knowledge to their students.

In a document launched early this year, the Education Ministry called on private higher education institutions (PHEIs) to bring in more teaching staff with industry experience or to improve the quality of their programmes.

Dubbed 'The Way Forward for Private Higher Education Institutions: Education as an Industry (2020-2025)', the document had also recommended PHEIs work closely with industries to set-up industrial scale facilities on campus for teaching purposes.

"There is diversification in the quality of teaching staff with proper academic qualifications in PHEIs.

"Faculty members in PHEIs are largely those with postgraduate degrees, which show that PHEIs will continue to provide quality higher education to its students," the document read.

It is vital for universities to align themselves seamlessly with the needs and developments of industries, Datuk Dr Parmjit Singh said.

The Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities (Mapcu) president explained that it's crucial for universities to also have a body of instructors and lecturers with solid industry experience.

"Their real life experiences are invaluable in providing the depth required to achieve learning outcomes and competencies sought after by employers.

"Varsities cannot exist in silos and define their purpose in their own convenient ways.

"They must realise that they have bigger responsibilities to students who have enrolled in universities to pursue a chosen field of study which will lead them to attaining a qualification with the sole purpose of fulfilling their career aspirations."

Employers look towards universities to supply talent with the requisite levels of knowledge and competencies to perform on the job.

Private universities especially, Parmjit said, will not be able to sustain their operations in the long term if their graduates' employability track records are dismal.

The alignment with industries, he added, is pivotal if universities aspire to ensure that

their graduates are employable and marketable.

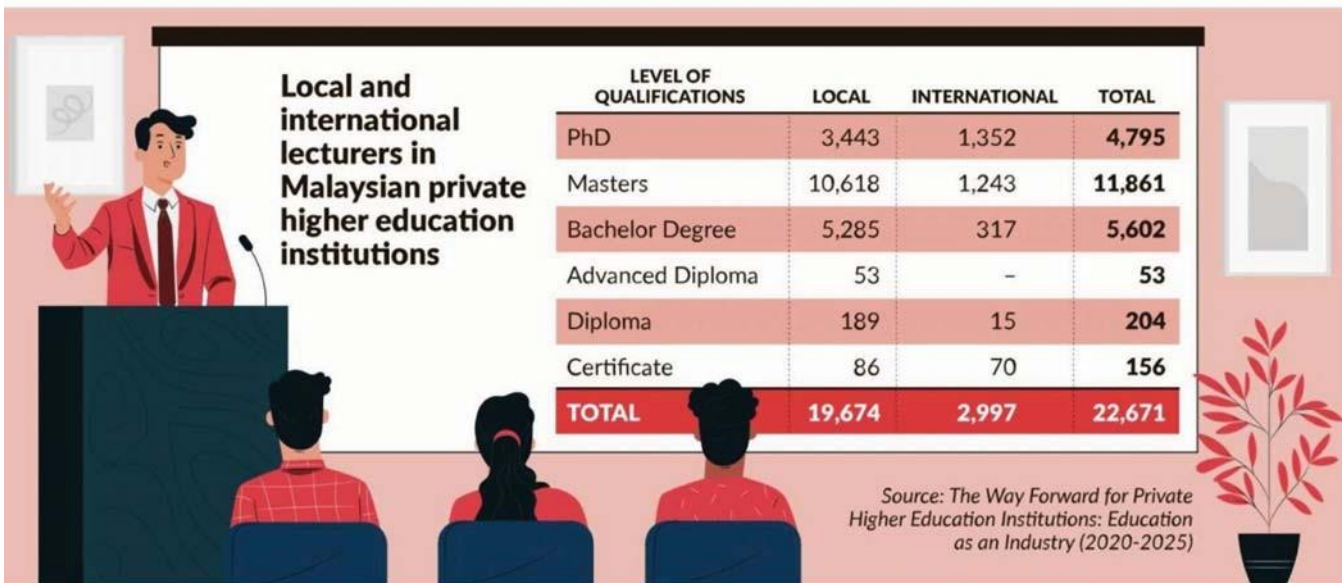
He noted that for private universities, they are neither funded nor aided by the government and are entirely dependent on the fees paid by students.

Therefore, they have to continually ensure that their courses and programmes are relevant to industry needs both locally and globally.

It is also essential for universities to remind students throughout their studies, Parmjit said, of what employers expect from them once they graduate.

"Academic staff play a very important role as they are expected to develop students to be ready for the industry, and to be able to translate theory to real-world practice.

"For this to happen effectively, the staff themselves must have first-hand experience of what it's like to work in the industry."



What the lecturers say

Public and private varsity lecturers with industry experience share their insights with *StarEdu* on the importance and need to complement academic qualifications with real-world experience.

Academia-industry work hand-in-hand

Mohamed Jamil Ahmad retired in 2011, armed with over 34 years of experience in the urban planning industry.

After his retirement, he was invited to deliver part-time lectures by Universiti Malaya at the Department of Urban and Regional Planning Faculty of Built Environment.

He is currently an Associate Professor at the department.

"While most of my colleagues and contemporaries have sunk into retirement doing things they had dreamed off in their working life, teaching and disseminating knowledge in urban planning has always been in my 'shopping cart'."

"Imparting essential urban planning knowledge to young students of the Built Environment course has been very fulfilling and satisfying."

"Practical experiences add colour to your lectures and sharing sessions as lessons can be interspersed with real life examples. More often than not, this creates extra value in your presentation during lessons," he said.

By giving real life practical experiences, he said, the "authenticity" and "authenticity" in the deliberation will make an academic's lessons more interesting and believable.

Having this extra skill is important because as a former industry practitioner, he said, educators will be able to achieve better academic results and add value to their students' pursuit of real work experience.

"You also tend to be more apt at problem solving and imparting street smart qualities on your students. Going into academia also opens up new doors for your career as you are now part of a global community of researchers and scientists."

For urban planning to improve, a cooperative relationship between industry and academia needs to be established and flourish.

Thus, both need each other, he added. Decision making in urban planning must be evidence based, and planning policies and products need to be tested from time to time to remain relevant.

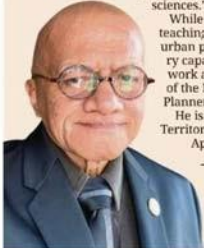
Universities must prepare and undertake empirical research into formulating future planning methodologies, he said.

"The industry needs to provide funding towards that end as there isn't enough research-based studies being funded by the urban planning sector."

"There are many university-industry collaborations in the fields of technology, medicine and science, but there is a lack of similar collaboration in the social sciences."

While Mohamed Jamil's focus is on teaching, he is still involved in the urban planning industry in an advisory capacity. He does consultancy work and is a co-opted exco member of the Malaysian Institute of Planners.

He is also a member of the Federal Territory Planning Urban Planning Appeal Board.



Mohamed Jamil: Real life examples add colour to lectures and sharing sessions.

Industrial exposure is crucial for lecturers

Dr Siva Kumar Sivanesan uses his seven years of experience working in the engineering industry as a catalyst for his lessons.

Armed with 15 years of experience as an educator, the Taylor's University School of Computer Science & Engineering head teaches subjects such as Engineering Statics, Dynamics, Engineering Mathematics, Theory of Machines, Manufacturing Processes, and also supervises post-graduate students.

From witnessing the processes involved in employing technology that allows for efficient creation of systems and products, and being involved in the design, implementation and operation stages of manufacturing lines, to monitoring the mass producing television sets, he has done it all.

"These served as a platform for me to witness real time implementation and application of science and technology."

"Being able to describe in detail and channel the minds of young learners to align with industrial needs are among the many factors that have allowed me to create an environment that makes learning fun and thought provoking."

Industrial exposure, he said, is crucial for those aspiring to enter academia, as it will serve as a platform to gauge the level of a student's readiness in academic and interpersonal skills before they step into the real world.

It encapsulates the nurturing of soft skills such as effective communication, teamwork, and leadership qualities.

The teaching of soft skills to students can only be effectively executed, he believes, if a situation based on real time industry related challenges is carried out in the classroom.

"Academia serves as a platform for students to build and sustain the growth of knowledge, skills and attributes."

"When academia gets 'too academic', real world solutions mooted by learners from such an environment become vague and hard to perceive."

"Developing solutions for real world or industry challenges today require more rigorous analysis of norms and uncertainties which cannot be statistically calculated."

Academia should remain academic intensive, he said, when the fundamentals underlying a certain concept is put forth.

However, it needs to widen its scope and include aspects such as emotional intelligence and soft skills.

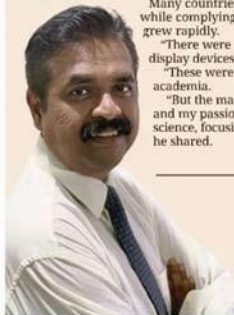
At the time he left engineering for academia, Malaysia's manufacturing sector was significantly impacted due to the rapid growth of trade globalisation.

Many countries manufactured products at lower costs while complying to strict quality requirements that grew rapidly.

"There were also swift changes in the production of display devices."

"These were among the catalysts for me to consider academia."

"But the main pull factor was my ability to teach and my passion to delve deeper into the application of science, focusing on the niche areas of Engineering," he shared.



Siva Kumar: Industrial exposure is crucial for academics as it will serve as a platform to gauge the level of a student's readiness in academic and interpersonal skills before they step into the real world.

Staying industry-relevant

Becoming a lecturer was a calling for Dr Chong Ka Leong. He had already spent eight years in the hospitality industry when he made the career switch.

Growing up with learning difficulties, the Sunway University School of Hospitality Assoc Prof and programme leader wanted to help students who are weak learners.

But before he dove into the teaching world, he wanted to ensure that he had the relevant industry experience first.

"I did not want to join academia without having practical knowledge and industry experience; it is important for us as lecturers."

"We teach according to global standards and ideal practices. But teaching according to international benchmarks do not necessarily mean that the knowledge is suitable for the local scenario."

"Having industry experience fills such knowledge gaps. We must be able to relate whatever is taught to the local scenario so students are able to understand the challenges better. We must strike a balance and relate theories with the practical world."

The advantage of having both academic qualifications and industry experience, he said, will help educators stay industry-relevant.

This ensures that lecturers will be able to produce graduates who embody sustainable values and business ethics and are industry ready.

"Over the years, academia has been criticised for being 'overly academic'."

This is a term Chong disagrees with but he does not blame industry practitioners.

"It serves as a reminder to academicians to continue staying connected with the industry be it through direct involvement via projects and research, or indirectly through case studies, collaborations and internships."

The pros of staying academic focused is that educators are research informed, in touch with global good practices and able to continue educating students about ideal business work ethics and sustainable values, he said.

However, the cons that come with it, Chong said, is that academia will continue to be labelled as impractical, and be perceived as producing inflexible graduates with unrealistic and critical mindsets and an inability to adapt.

"There are many university-industry collaborations in the fields of technology, medicine and science, but there is a lack of similar collaboration in the social sciences."

While Mohamed Jamil's focus is on teaching, he is still involved in the urban planning industry in an advisory capacity. He does consultancy work and is a co-opted exco member of the Malaysian Institute of Planners.

He is also a member of the Federal Territory Planning Urban Planning Appeal Board.



Chong: Having industry experience complements gaps that exist in academia.

Sharing realistic experiences is an advantage

It's an advantage to be able to share personal and realistic experiences with her students, Dr Chin Phaik Nie said.

This is especially so with students who do not have working experience or those at the early stages of their career.

The Universiti Sains Malaysia Graduate School of Business senior lecturer has worked in various multinational corporations involved in the manufacturing and sub-contracting sectors for nine years.

She has an additional 10 years of voluntary work experience with NGOs in dealing with children and teenager's with special needs therapy.

"It is not only work-related experiences, but also the life experiences that we as lecturers have accumulated from our working life, that make us better educators.

"Most of my students work in multinational corporations and having been in such corporations, the understanding of the big picture and how things work in factories allow me to relate to their work better, know them better, be empathetic when it comes to their work schedules.

"I get to create more relevant examples, and explain the applications of theories in their actual working environment," she explained.

Chin, who holds a doctorate in Economics, said having these skills as an educator is an advantage, she said, as it has trained her to be disciplined, detailed, firm and quick in decision making. It also equips her with good presentation skills.

This in turn allows her to improve her teaching methods and impart knowledge more effectively.

Explaining how she made the jump to academia, she said it was the death of her colleague that spurred her to become an educator.

"It made me think about what I really want to do until the day I retire and after much consideration, I entered academia in 2017 when I joined USM as a full time researcher and lecturer."

Chin: It's an advantage to be able to share personal and realistic experiences with students.



The benefits of having academic staff with strong industry experience:

- The output of projects, case studies and assignments given to students would be closer to the work expected by industry.
- The ability to share their own real-life experiences, anecdotes and insights as to what employers expect of graduates – not just in core skills areas, but also in terms of professionalism and ethics.
- The continuous enriching and evolving of the course curriculum and content.
- The relevant exposure of students to real world problems to meet industry expectations.
- The ability to go beyond textbook knowledge to a more functional knowledge when they design classroom activities or projects.

Source: Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities president Datuk Dr Parmjit Singh and Malaysian Society for Higher Education Policy and Research Development deputy chairman Prof Dr Rosna Awang-Hashim.