

40 golden years

With four decades of excellence behind it, Kolej Tunku Abdul Rahman (Ktar) is looking at a bright future while remaining steadfast to its founding mission.

By **RICHARD LIM**
educate@thestar.com.my

EDUCATION is full of what-ifs but few areas are as intriguing as those surrounding Kolej Tunku Abdul Rahman's (Ktar) rise to prominence.

Commencing operations on February 24, 1969, the college began with a school of pre-university studies with a pioneer intake of 320 students.

Four decades – and many accolades – on, the college has become a household name with over 25,000 students across its six campuses nationwide.

Factor in the 150,000-odd alumni that have been enriched by the Ktar experience and we're talking about some nifty social engineering.

Although the metamorphosis does sound like a fairytale, the leap from good to great was anything but easy and much of the change stems from the values that led to the college's formation.

First proposed by former MCA president Tun Tan Siew Sin in 1968, Ktar was established with the objective of providing higher education – at affordable prices – for all.

It was the 70s and deep-set and pressing concerns were bubbling to the surface. Malaysia was shifting focus from agriculture to manufacturing and more technical and professional training was required to create a workforce that would be up to task.

There was also a dire need for greater access and equity in higher education and under the given circumstances, the proposal for a college made perfect sense.

Then Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman assented to the college being named after him and the dream was realised.

However, providing greater access was only half the battle won as college fees were a heavy cross to bear for many families. And without support from the public, it would be a tall order for a fledgling college to stay afloat.

To get the project going, the government gave the green light for dollar-for-dollar aid – as well as recognition of Ktar's diplomas.

The 50% subsidy is still ongoing today, enabling students to enjoy quality education at reasonable prices.

Footprints in the sand

A significant part of the college's ascendance was witnessed first-hand by its principal Dr Tan Chik Heok, a Ktar stalwart.

His affiliation with the college goes back to 1982 when he became a lecturer at the college's School of Arts and Science.

Zeroing in on teaching and leading the curriculum planning of microelectronic programmes, he developed the Diploma, Advanced Diploma and Degree in Microelectronics, which were introduced in 1987 – the first



Dr Tan says that although the times may change, the core values of the college will always remain the same.

courses of its kind to be conducted in Malaysia.

He was later appointed as Ktar's Head of Microelectronics and Physics Division in 1995, the Deputy Head of School in 1999 and subsequently Head of School in 2000.

After playing a part in the formation of Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman in 2002 – where he would ultimately become vice-president – Dr Tan returned to Ktar as principal in August, last year.

And it was déjà vu all over again. Well, almost.

"It was nice to return to familiar ground but my Ktar experience made me very thankful," he said, thoughtfully. "I had no first-hand experience in setting up a varsity I had to start from scratch.

"Upon my return, I really appreciated the facilities and programmes which were up and running in Ktar and I constantly advise college staff to do the same."

Onward and upward

Much of this had to do with the college's continuous development and the same upward mobility was reflected in the college's premises – most notably its parking lot.

In the past, bicycles and motorcycles were the archetype of a student's "ride" but today, many students drive their own cars and there are some fancy models.

The upside is that there will be no funding quagmire and student loan funds can be allocated to those who really require aid.

However, the same concept could work in reverse. More affluent students have more options to choose from – making it more likely that they will up sticks if the college doesn't meet their expectations.

"We have to take stock as times are changing," said Dr Tan. "Most of our students' families are above average – financially – and affordable education is no longer a decisive pull factor.

"These students are not looking solely at affordable education.

They want quality and we had to ask ourselves whether we were still relevant."

The motivation – and need – to change with the times has seen Ktar incorporating first class facilities and a new Communication and Information Technology Centre is set to be the new head turner on campus.

Boasting a built-up area of more than 100,000 square feet, the cyber centre is designed to facilitate innovative ICT practices and applications to nurture the creativity of individuals and the college as a whole.

Also, a new six-storey administrative building is set to be completed in mid-2010. Apart from being Ktar's administrative nerve centre, the building will also house an auditorium and an exhibition hall.

The Ktar family

A tour of the main campus indicates that the new additions will be of good use and devotees of a fluid, wholesome education will savour life at Ktar.

The campus is a hive of activity and groups of students are often seen mingling under the gazebos, sweating it out in the sports complex, savouring finer pleasures at the campus eateries and, of course, studying at the library.

And while it may not be the norm



Members of the Kolej Tunku Abdul Rahman's orchestra ensemble playing during a charity campaign.

elsewhere, many stay back after college hours to participate in various clubs, sports and team building activities.

"The idea is to provide an unforgettable campus experience where students develop their character," mused Dr Tan.

"Many acquire a strong sense of belonging and perhaps this is why our alumni association is strong."

It is worth noting that around 40% of Ktar's student loan funds come from the alumni, and the intimate alumni-student relationship between has also empowered students with internship and employment opportunities.

The alumni is intensifying its student assistance vis-à-vis the changes

in the job market.

Career guidance and talks are now a staple for Ktar students and this boils down to the college's core value – service.

"Although the times may change, the core values of the college will always remain the same," continued Dr Tan.

"Our president Tan Sri Ong Ka Ting has constantly said that no students should leave the college because of financial difficulties and we'll ensure that this is so. We pride ourselves on our service to the community and we want to continue making an impact."

And judging from the 40-year track record, it'll take a brave man to bet against this declaration of intent.