

Monash University Malaysia - Kenneth K. C. Lee, Head of School of Pharmacy



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Professor Kenneth K. C. Lee, Head of the School of Pharmacy at Monash University Malaysia, discusses the institution's position as a hub for health economics in the Asia Pacific region and explains the factors that will make the university a pharmaceutical leader.

There is a lot of competition in Malaysia when it comes to undergraduate education with 19 universities being established in total, 14 of which are private institutions. What makes Monash Malaysia different?

First of all, Monash stands behind an incomparable brand that has stood out for years. Monash Malaysia has a very clear edge over other universities in both research and teaching. We have very innovative teaching facilities for our students where we are replacing traditional laboratories. An example is the virtual practice environment (VPE) that uses software, projectors and keyboards to reproduce the lab environment. This means that when it comes to compounding, instead of going to the shelf, students can just move a mouse and select the ingredients of interest for testing. The software will then determine the outcome and grade the final result.

It is a very sophisticated piece of software, which illustrates the principles of compounding extremely well and Monash Malaysia is currently the first only Malaysian university to adopt it.

In February this year, the Monash University Malaysia School of Pharmacy received full accreditation for its four-year Bachelor of Pharmacy program. What opportunities has this opened?

The full accreditation we recently received is undoubtedly a very important milestone, as it puts the university in the right spotlight. This means that our program is fully recognized by the Pharmaceutical Board of Malaysia. A clear advantage that this has brought to the school is the fact that we are now able to expand our class sizes.

The recent introduction of the healthcare NKEA has brought a lot of changes into the Malaysian market and may have also stimulated an interest for pharmacy programs. What are your thoughts on this?

The healthcare reform has definitely opened up new frontiers and opportunities for all healthcare professionals, especially for pharmacists. In other parts of the world, patients know that pharmacists are the first contact when seeking professional healthcare advice. However, Malaysians traditionally turn to doctors even when seeking consultations for minor issues such as coughs and colds. With more pharmacists on the front line and an upgraded knowledge of the population, pharmacists will hopefully become the first stop for patients.

Malaysian students typically tend to aspire for a career in hospitals. What is Monash Malaysia doing to encourage a movement towards the industry?

I have been in academia for more than twenty years and I can say with confidence that not every student is suitable for a hospital career. Some students have very outgoing personalities and would not be suitable in the hospital environment. Pharmacists have diverse opportunities. They can pursue a career in government, community and most especially in industry, which has been expanding over the years both in terms of drug complexity and effectiveness.

When I came on board four years ago, I was very clear that industry engagement should be covered in a unique way here at Monash Malaysia, and over the years, there has been great industry collaborations established. Some key multinational pharma companies we've formed a partnership with include Pfizer, Abbvie, and more recently, Janssen. We are also actively engaging and speaking to local pharma companies such as CCM, to provide attachment opportunities for our students, to get exposure at their unique manufacturing facilities. We are also, at the moment, very close to finalizing the agreement that will allow our staff participate in the daily work of a private hospital. This ensures our teachers experience what it is like to be at the frontline in healthcare provision and in so doing, pick up the most up-to-date information in terms of therapies.

It is very important for our staff to refresh their knowledge in academia with real life experiences in hospital services and consequently apply this to their teaching methods. I am sure such diverse initiatives will further raise the profile of our institution.

Malaysia is currently in demand of international pharmacy courses that provide more qualified and adaptable graduates for the future. What does Monash Malaysia offer in terms of international exposure?

We fully believe that international exposure is extremely valuable for young graduates to get early exposure in their careers and Monash has various exchange programs set up with universities abroad. Each year we send a number of students to Monash Australia and it is always interesting to see the new ideas they bring back to the profession. Monash University has exchange agreements with a number of international universities. At the School of Pharmacy, we are currently liaising with schools in the US, UK, and around Asia, to accept our students on exchange. These programs are greatly beneficial not only to our students but to our staff as well, giving our graduates a true knowledge for the profession internationally.

When we last met you in 2011, you predicted that the reforms proposed by the former Minister of Health, Dato' Sri Liow Tiong Lai, would “*change the dynamic from a system focused solely on price to one making the value of treatment paramount.*” What are your views on this today?

Malaysia has taken a big step forward over the past three years. The Minister of Health has started to use evidence-based approaches, based on health economics data. They have started to accept that the value of a drug is determined by different factors, rather than solely by its cost. First comes the clinical effect of a drug, then its unit cost but, most importantly, the quality of life of the patient, during and after treatment. In other words, the frequency of its recommended intake, and the method of administration are some other aspects that contribute to the real value of a medicine.

Being a research-led university, these changes are very important to us and now that our brand is well established, our next step will be to expand the research team. I had never expected to reach these levels in only three years, but this only confirms the caliber of academic staff at Monash. There are definitely challenges. For instance, I believe that the government could be more specific on their intentions to introduce health economics into the system, which would be particularly relevant for Monash Malaysia as we are recognized to be the hub for health economics in the Asia-Pacific region. Our reputation in this area definitely precedes us and we are committed to

maintaining it this way.

Where do you see Malaysia in the next four years and what role will Monash Malaysia play in its development?

The development of Malaysia will depend on a number of factors. Of course there are the financial and political aspects to consider, but especially, from a health economist point of view, the potential is great in this area. At the moment, there is still a gap in the market for talent in Malaysia, and a larger amount of experts are needed to match these goals. Here at Monash Malaysia, we have already taken on a number of PHD students, boosting our research profile, and I am confident our research will make an enormous impact in the near future. I am very encouraged by the view I have for the future and Monash Malaysia's role in the regional healthcare landscape.

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