

YOU WILL ONLY SEE IT WHEN YOU UNDERSTAND IT

EDUCATION 

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By PROF SIBRANDES POPPEMA



THE first time I came to Sunway was in 2017 and I had been invited to give a lecture on “Building a leading university: From regional roots to global significance” in the Jeffrey Cheah Distinguished Speakers Series.



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I was the president of the University of Groningen, a more than 400-year old university in the Netherlands, from 2008 to 2018, and spoke about the path my university took to become a solid top 100 university.

The central themes were that universities must focus on major societal challenges, such as healthy ageing, transition to sustainable energy and a sustainable society and on productive collaboration with industry and that there is no substitute for quality in education and in research.

What I saw in Sunway was the vision of Tan Sri Dr Jeffrey Cheah, from an abandoned tin mine wasteland to a smart and sustainable city wonderland.

I shared his vision that education is by far the best way to escape poverty and create a sustainable society. That is the reason why Sunway City with its 200,000 inhabitants boasts three universities.

Sunway University is a private, not-for-profit university and it is only nine years old. However, it has already achieved a top 2% ranking in the QS World University Ranking.

A recent analysis from Web of Science data shows that Sunway University is already the 10th largest producer of scientific papers in Malaysia and only trails Petronas University among the private universities. Sunway University also made a decision to focus its education and research on the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

During that first visit, Tan Sri Cheah asked me to become a member of the International Advisory Council of the Jeffrey Cheah Institute on South-East Asia.

During the next meeting of the Advisory Council in 2018, when I had just retired as president of the University of Groningen, he asked whether I would be interested to become a Tan Sri Jeffrey Cheah Distinguished Professor and his advisor.

In that capacity, I have helped in formulating a plan to develop a new medical school at Sunway University with a number of unique features. The curriculum will be science intensive and developed together with the University of Cambridge to train a generation of clinician scientists and specialists that can enhance the medical research profile of Malaysia.

The medical school will use the facilities of Sunway Medical Centre, which will make 400 beds available for public use and will endeavour to train the medical students, house officers and specialists to help alleviate the capacity problem in medical training in Malaysia.

Another aspect of my work is to promote the collaboration between scientists at Sunway University and our partners in Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard and MIT.

Examples are the collaboration with researchers at the Jeffrey Cheah Biomedical Institute in Cambridge on genetics and state-of-the-art bioinformatics analysis of the viral sequences of Covid-19 patients in Malaysia and on the development of peptide based vaccines for Covid-19.

Sunway University and Harvard Medical School are developing a Centre for Global Health Delivery



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other parties for communicable as well as non-communicable diseases prevalent in Malaysia and Asean.

We are also working with partners in Singapore to develop the Asean Microbiomics Centre. The microbiome is the community of organisms living inside humans.

These include bacteria, fungi, and viruses and these have a very strong link with health, not just of the digestive system, but also immunological resistance and even mental health. There are strong links between the microbiome and food intake and between the microbiome and health in children, especially in children with so-called stunting, which is impaired growth through suboptimal food intake, digestion and infections.

Stunting is a frequent condition in Malaysia with more than 20% of children affected.

At the other end of the spectrum, the microbiome also plays a major role in ageing and much research focuses on foods that may promote healthy ageing. There are great opportunities to work with urban farming initiatives and the food industry to develop healthy food and so-called probiotic foods that will improve health through improving the microbiome.

Together, these initiatives in genetics, in global health delivery and in microbiomics provide the core for a strong research focus in Sunway Medical School and directly provide benefits to the people of Malaysia.



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About Prof Sibrandes Poppema

Prof Sibrandes Poppema joined Sunway Education Group in January 2019 as a Tan Sri Jeffrey Cheah Distinguished Professor and advisor to the chancellor, especially on the establishment of a new medical school at Sunway University.

A medical expert on Hodgkin's disease, Prof Poppema has published more than 200 articles that have been cited more than 17,000 times.

Prof Poppema studied medicine at the University of Groningen before specialising in pathology and defended his PhD thesis on the immunopathology of Hodgkin's disease in 1979.

He was a postdoc at Harvard University and became the first J.K. de Cock Professor of Immunopathology at the University of Groningen in 1985.

Next, he served as the director of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at the Cross Cancer Institute and the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada from 1987 until 1995.



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Ranking of World Universities and 73 in the Times Higher ranking.

Prior to that, he was the dean of medicine and later vice-president of the University Medical Center Groningen for nine years.

As the University of Groningen's Faculty of Medical Sciences dean, he introduced a problem-based, competency oriented curriculum called G2010. He played an instrumental role in the merger of Faculty and Academic Hospital into the University Medical Center Groningen in 2005.

In 2007, he was appointed Knight in the Order of the Netherlands Lion to recognise his vast scientific achievements and in 2011, he became Honorary Consul General of the Republic of Korea in the Northern Netherlands.

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