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## **UNSTOPPABLE: FSG WON GLOBAL PROMINENCE AWARD 2020 & THE AWARDS UiTM 2021**



# Thriving in Research during Pandemic

**An Interview with Professor Ts. Dr Mohd Nazip Suratman, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation), Universiti Teknologi MARA**

**Interview by Dr Norashirene Mohamad Jamil**

Professor Ts. Dr Mohd Nazip Suratman is a Professor of Forestry at the Faculty of Applied Sciences, UiTM Shah Alam, Selangor. His research interests include the use of satellite remote sensing for forest resource management. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Forestry from Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (UPM) and a Master of Science in Forestry from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) in the United States of America. In 1998, he was awarded a Canadian Commonwealth Fellowship Program Scholarship to pursue his PhD studies at University of British Columbia (UBC), Vancouver, Canada. Throughout his academic career, he has been recognised as Universiti Teknologi MARA's Best Researcher in the Science, Technology, and Medical cluster, most recently in 2015. He served as Rector of UiTM Pahang campus from 2017 to 2018 and later was appointed Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research & Innovation) of Universiti Teknologi MARA. He has also contributed to developing several national strategic plan documents, including the Ministry of Higher Education's National Higher Education Strategic Plan, Innovative Human Capital, National Forestry Education, and a national blueprint for the Central Forest Spine (CFS).



In this virtual interview, Prof Nazip discussed on thriving in research in the wake of a global pandemic. He also shared the university's and research community's response to the ongoing challenges and disruptions. In addition, several key characteristics and the roles of creativity and innovation in research were explored. Prof Nazip noted that despite the COVID-19 pandemic's challenges, it also demonstrates the value of research and how it has heightened the urgency for collaborative efforts and knowledge sharing.





**Dr Norashirene:** The COVID-19 pandemic's disruption may influence the progress and momentum of ongoing research projects. What can universities offer in terms of resolving issues and assisting researchers?

**Prof Nazip:** We are cognizant of the researchers' needs and the critical challenges they face. We share and express the same concern during this unprecedented period by providing any assistance necessary to ensure that the research project can continue. Extending the deadlines for reports and deliverables is one of the first steps. The period of extension was granted twice due to the current restrictions imposed by this pandemic. We hope that with the extension and remaining duration available to the researchers, the principal investigators can carefully plan which research objectives can be accomplished, despite the travel and social constraints. Certain modifications or adjustments to the research objectives may also be made, depending on the field, as long as they continue to address the project's research questions. We recognise that some research projects (such as biological science, biochemistry, and chemical engineering) are time-sensitive, heavily reliant on equipment, and subject to biosafety regulations that require physical laboratory presence. As a result, as long as established standard operating procedures are followed, the researchers or postgraduate students are granted access to the laboratory under specified guidelines.

## **"Researchers must adapt to their circumstances and devise alternative methodologies to accomplish their research objectives"**

**Dr Norashirene:** Perhaps due to the pandemic crisis, researchers are more aware that there is never a straight line in conducting research, and unexpected challenges may arise along the way. What are the key characteristics that researchers should have in times of crisis?

**Prof Nazip:** I believe that researchers must adapt to their circumstances and devise alternative methodologies to accomplish their research objectives. With today's network technology, the sky is the limit in terms of bridging communications. For instance, social studies interviews can still be conducted via a variety of online platforms. However, there may be a bias (in sampling) because some respondents from rural areas may lack access to the internet. These disadvantages should not be overlooked. While it is critical to ensure that research advances, we must not jeopardise scientific research methodology. Additionally, researchers should be opportunistic and take advantage of this time to establish international research collaborations and re-connect with former supervisors or colleagues. Perhaps this is an excellent time to collaborate on a grant application or co-write a paper for publication. Similarly, researchers must be resilient and creative in order to thrive during this trying times. It can be as straightforward as broadening or deepening your understanding of your research subject through reading various types of literature and writing a review paper in your area of expertise. A well-written review article published in a reputable journal can result in new and valuable insights and frequently receives a high number of citations.

**Dr Norashirene:** The pandemic may have caused some impacts on the funding landscape for research. What is your comment on this matter?

**Prof Nazip:** Without a doubt, funding is a critical component of research. As has been the case with the university, major international and private research funders are also impacted, and as a result, some allocated funding may have been suspended as a necessary consequence of the pandemic crisis. Nonetheless, we can assure you that, while research funding may decrease in the future, it will always be available. One of the key initiatives in the UiTM 2025 Strategic Plan to become a globally renowned university is to encourage and support Early Career Researchers (ECRs) in establishing their career path. As a result, numerous grants with varying schemes and criteria are available, including the Young Talent Research Grant (YTR), the *Geran Penyelidikan MyRA* (GPM), and the *Geran Insentif Penyelidikan* (GIP). Additionally, the Lestari SDG@Triangle 2.0 Research Grant is being offered in support of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) initiative. The pandemic has demonstrated the critical nature of research and the urgency with which we must address the SDGs. As a result, I believe it is critical that we seize this opportunity to design research projects that are complementary to these global goals.

**Dr Norashirene:** While the pandemic may have limited the research study to the essential ones or may have halted many laboratories and field works, there must be some positive outcomes. What are your opinions on this?

**Prof Nazip:** There is no doubt that the race to understand and combat the coronavirus has accelerated research output and fostered unprecedented global collaboration. Despite these constraints and obstacles, the pandemic has facilitated scientific communication. The magnitude of communication technology advancement has increased. With the continuous enhancement of functions and features on various web conferencing and video conferencing platforms, meetings, conferences, examinations, and even viva voce can take place at any time and from any location. When conducted effectively, I see no apparent disadvantages to virtual meetings versus in-person meetings. Perhaps this practice should be maintained post-pandemic, as it has been both time and cost effective. This, I believe, is a blessing in disguise, and when properly utilised, it can be a highly effective mode of communication.



***Prof Nazip conducting field research with his collaborators, Dr Vivek Venkataraman (in the middle) from Harvard University and Dr Thomas Kraft from University of California, Santa Barbara.***



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