

# Being a Lutheran University in an Islamic Context – Challenges and Opportunity

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## 1. Background

With the population of 228 million and 90 % of them are Muslim, Indonesia is the largest Islamic country of the world. However, there are some areas with majority Christian population in this country. One of these areas is the high land of North Sumatra. Nine out of eleven Lutheran churches of Indonesia, which are member of Lutheran World Federation (LWF) established their head quarter in this area to serve 6 million church members. Most of these Lutheran churches originally evolved from one church (Batak Church – HKBP) which was grounded by a German mission in 1861.

## 2. The History of Nommensen University as a Product of Mission Work

I.L. Nommensen, the German Missioner who introduced Christianity to the Batak people, placed education as an important component of his mission work. Inspired by Jesus works – preaching, teaching and healing, I.L. Nommensen always established church, school and health care clinic as one compound in every congregation he built, as a form of holistic human resource development.

Historically, the objective, vision and mission of Christian education were changing contextually. In the early years of his mission work, I.L. Nommensen set the objective of education to liberate Batak people from foolishness and isolation as pre condition to succeed evangelization. In his view, Batak children, who already possessed ability in reading and writing will be easier to accept Bible stories, learn to pray and to accept the moral lessons.

In the era of missioner i.e. as the Batak Church was growing (1861 – 1940), the development of schools were also very fast (if there was any school, there was a congregation or vice versa) to prepare teacher preacher, local leader as well as civil servant to hold certain position in the lower level of colonial bureaucracy .

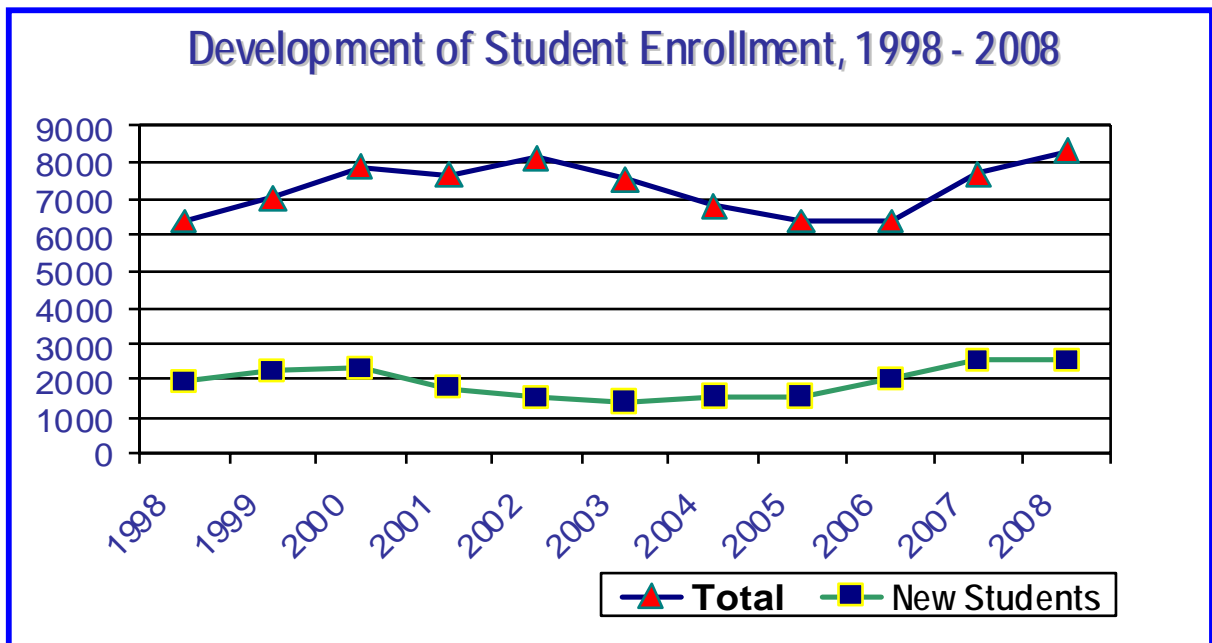
After the independent, in line with development policy of the country to pursue progress in economy, Batak Church (HKBP) established Nommensen University in 1954, to prepare experts to participate in the development of the new country. It is interesting to perceive that in the first year of its establishment, Nommensen University consisted of three different faculties and each with special purpose:

- (i) Economic Faculty, to prepare “thinkers” which are expected would be able to influence policy and direction of economic development, as the core of the developmentalism that time.
- (ii) Theological Faculty, to produce pastors to serve congregations which were growing so fast at that time and also to produce “thinkers” to guard the development from moral and ethic point of view.

- (iii) Teacher Training Faculty, to continue the basic principle of the *Barmens-missiongesellschaft* (mission society, which sent I.L. Nommensen), namely "congregation is the mother of education in all perspectives" (*die Mutter der Erziehung*).

Albeit experiencing up and down, up to 1980s Nommensen University was the most favorite private university in Sumatra. In the last 15 years, this university lost its famous due to the internal conflict of the Batak Church. The situation worse by the matter of the facts that competition among higher education institutions getting harder (270 higher education institutions exist in North Sumatra, 2008).

Nowadays, Nommensen University consists of nine faculties and 31 study programs offer different levels of graduate from Diploma up to post graduate (master program). In 2009, a medical school will be launched, as the Ministry of Education of Indonesia has issued a decree that Nommensen University is able and capable to establish a medical school. The development of student enrollment is presented in the following chart.



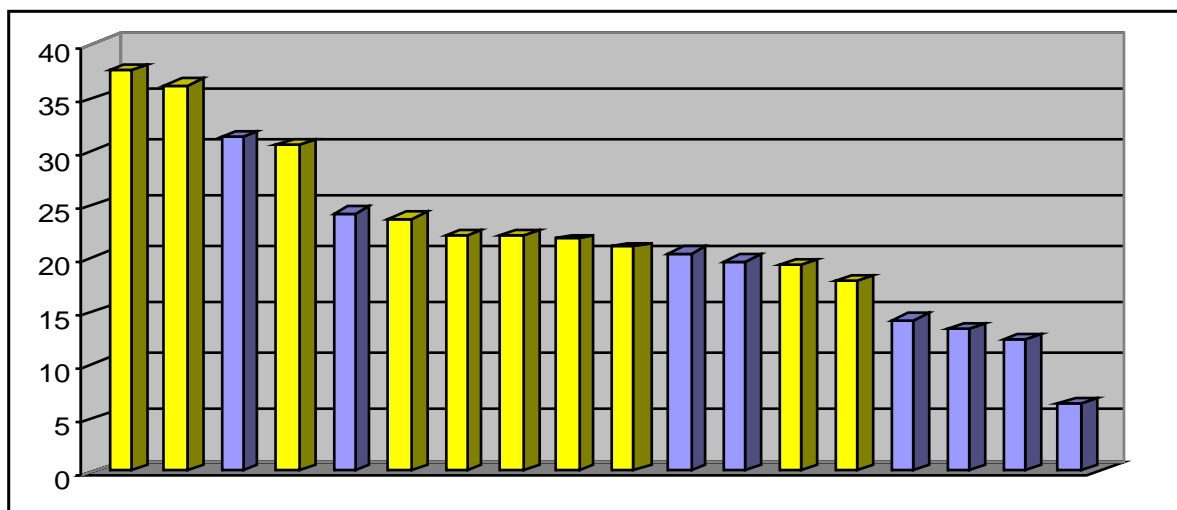
### 3. The Role of Nommensen University in the Community

Beside its core task in academic field, Nommensen University has renewed interpreted its role and responsibility as following: (i) to actively participate in regional development in North Sumatra, especially for the benefits of high land area, through advocacy, (ii) to serve Lutheran Churches of Indonesia as their arm to cooperate on non-theological issues, and (iii) to promote and propagate understanding of multi-culturalism, tolerance and solidarity within a plural society.

### 3.1. Advocacy of Regional Development

Geographically, the settlement region of Christian community in North Sumatra is situated in the high land more than 500 meter above sea level and administratively consists of 10 Districts. The population of this region is 90 % Christian (an exception for Indonesia as the largest Islamic country of the world). Eventhough this area is rich on natural resources such as mine, agriculture and tourism, Batak land in the high land of North Sumatra is well known as a map of poverty in Indonesia, where 20 – 40 % of the population lives under poverty line. Nommensen University set the priority of its studies on development of this area.

**Percentage of Population Under Proverty Line in 18 Districts of North Sumatra**



Note: Districts order from left to rights; South Nias, Nias, Central Tapanuli, Samosir, South Tapanuli, Pakpak Bharat, Dairi, Humbang Hasundutan, North Tapanuli, Karo, Mandailing Natal, Langkat, Simalungun, Toba Samosir, Labuhan Batu, Asahan, Serdang Bedagai and Deli Serdang.

### 3.2. Instrument of Lutheran Churches for Non-Theological Issues

As a higher education institution established by the church, Nommensen University considers that the churches, especially Lutheran Churches as part of its stakeholder and recognize them as important partners. Therefore, according to the availability of its expertise and infrastructure, Nommensen University offered itself as an instrument to unify the Lutheran Churches of Indonesia and to channel their interest to face domestic issues as well as to communicate with their Lutheran partners globally. During 2008, there are three events in which Nommensen University participated for the interest of the churches: (i) Nommensen University provided lawyer (academic staff of Faculty of Law) to advocate HKBP Church on their dispute with a local government on a church building, (ii) Nommensen University provided expert to accompany Mentawai Church (GKPPM)

to formulate a development plan to be submitted to the local government of Mentawai Islands and (iii) Nommensen University develops a Center for Disaster Risk Management and Community Development Studies (CDS) as a training center for churches' workers in diakonia, and plans to develop extension stations in three isolated areas manage by local churches (Nias, Pakpak Bharat and Mentawai).

To institutionalize the position of Churches as stakeholder of Nommensen University, the University holds an annual meeting with the church leaders, especially the member of common secretary of United Evangelical Mission. In that annual meeting, the Nommensen University leadership presents the progress report of the University to the Church leaders.

### **3.3. Center to Promote and Propagate Multi-cultural Awareness, Tolerance and Solidarity**

As a high wave of radicalism and fundamentalism is growing in Indonesia recently, Nommensen University aware of its task and responsibility to promote and propagate the way of thinking to respect multi culturalism and pluralism as well as openness. In this aspect, the Teacher Training Faculty plays a strategic role, since tolerance and solidarity is easier to be spread out through formal education. In the last three years, the student enrollment at Teacher Training Faculty increases continually so that in 2008/2009 academic year it becomes the biggest faculty in term of new student enrollment (1,400 new students, 2008). In this faculty are many students studying to be prepared to be teacher in the public school, catholic school, Islamic school as well as Christian school not only in North Sumatra but also in Indonesia generally.

Further more, Teacher Training Faculty is selected as one among 76 higher education institutions in Indonesia which get authority from the National Education Ministry of Republic of Indonesia to conduct certification for 2.5 millions teachers in Indonesia up to 2016.

## **4. Challenges and Opportunities**

A universal problem among higher education management in Indonesia is the consumer demanding a high quality of service from higher education institution without willingness to pay more (to get more for less). Nommensen University also faces this paradox. As a private institution, this university has to be self-finance to conduct its academic activities and the financial source is solely tuition fee.

In term of financial policy i.e. to determine the rate of tuition fee, Nommensen University has to put many aspects in to consideration, which include: (i) 60 % of students come from lower middle class family and 35 % of all students even come from the poor high land area. Regarding the quality of education services provided by the university it is reasonable to increase the tuition fee, however, based on moral and social mission of the

university, it has not been considered as an option. High number of student enrollment with moderate rate of tuition fee should allow Nommensen University to manage a sustainable self-financing, (ii) on the early year of its establishment there were only two Universities in North Sumatra, recently, 270 higher education institutions already exist lead to harder competition among institution to provide service. The competition becomes even worse as Indonesia is now facing a situation of a growing primordialism based on ethnic and religion, which is to some extent influence the management of higher education institutions. For example, there are three Christian University in North Sumatra, 2008, Methodist University, Catholic University and Nommensen University.

Consequently, to be able to run the university and to fulfill its mission to promote and propagate multi-culturalism, openness and tolerance as well as solidarity, Nommensen University has to provide high quality of higher education service, but should also be affordable by economic level of community it serves and relevant with the employment market demand.

To face those challenges, Nommensen University has been rich with a long year of experiences (54 years) to manage private university. Further, as a big university with 31 Departments (study programs) equipped by reliable academic and administrative staffs (in term of number, education background and expertise) and with support from faith based local and international partners, Nommensen University should be able to positioning itself flexibly in this changingsociety. With all these attributes, Nommensen University should involve and could not be neglected in coloring the development process in Indonesia.

Finally, to be able to hold its position as the foremost University in Indonesia as stated in its vision and mission, Nommensen University has to maintain the quality of its service through following program: (i) sustainable capacity building program (post graduate formal education or expert exchange), (ii) continually of curriculum development (updating for the existed departments or establishment of new study program), and (iii) continually improvement and development of infrastructure.

In this point, it is worth to note and underline the recent experience, that external support in form of expert exchange (especially senior guest lecture from abroad) contribute significantly to the staff and curriculum development. We extent our gratitude to LCA/LEA for a such good cooperation in this program.