

## Time to learn from the Saudis

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Comment

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SAUDI Arabia is at it again.

This time it had successfully attracted more than over 300 universities from more than 30 countries to participate in its inaugural International Exhibition for Higher Education in Riyadh last week.

Some 30 Saudi Arabian universities also took part, including the recently founded Princess Nora Bint Abdulrahman University situated in Riyadh, the first women's college in Saudi Arabia the country.

It was only a few years ago that the number of universities in the Kingdom was less than 10.

Currently, the equivalent of about RM40 billion has been invested in training its citizens.

All these point to the generosity of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah Abdul Aziz whose name is now immortalised in what is dubbed "the university of tomorrow", that is, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) built on the fringe of the Red Sea.

The King, who realises the vital role of education and knowledge in putting the Kingdom ahead of other developing countries, has allocated funds which amount to RM10 billion to establish KAUST in the shortest possible time.

At the same time, existing universities are expanded and new centres of higher education and research are being set up.

During the exhibition, KAUST — despite being new — stood out as a symbol of hope.

To quote Dr Charles M Vest, president emeritus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the United States: "KAUST has been founded in order to be a different kind of institution to serve the purposes of an emerging Knowledge Age in Saudi Arabia, and indeed throughout our interconnected and interdependent world."



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak and his wife Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor on a recent visit to KAUST.

This stands in contrast to the many other nations in the developing world, which are busy replicating the purchased model of the yesteryear.

Vest, who served MIT for more than 17 years, should know because MIT, which was established in 1865, was "founded as a new and different kind of institution to serve the purposes of the emerging Industrial Age in the US."

At the same time, President Abraham Lincoln and the US Congress chartered the National Academy of

Engineering Sciences, which later evolved into the National Academy of Engineering in 1964 in recognition of the centrality of Engineering to the Technology Age!

Quite visible from a distance at the exhibition were the words: A new "House of Wisdom" painted on KAUST's domineering eye-catching yet simple whitish booth.

The words obviously referred to the well-known institution in Baghdad during the heights of the Golden Age of Learning, just a thousand 1,000 years ago!

The House of Wisdom then was also "a new and different kind of institution" to serve the purposes of the emerging age of the time following the Greek and Roman civilisations that had just collapsed. As a result, the House of Wisdom served as an active centre of learning and translation that eventually made the Renaissance of the West possible.

It did not only seek to engage the present but also to understand the past and more importantly it dared to shape the future.

Like the House of Wisdom of the time, "KAUST has set its compass in order by consulting widely and learning lessons from the experiences of great research universities throughout the world," says Vest, who also noted "its engagement with the world community and its orientation towards the future".

KAUST founders understand the importance of making a fresh start and the unique opportunities it represents.

For example, they must be bold to break old results rules before new opportunities can be found.

The Malay proverb underscores this in a the saying *kalau tak pecahkan ruyung mana kan dapat sagunya*.

But this is not so easy to do because it demands the initial step of "breaking" the mindset! And especially so, if it is perceived to be a source of power.

With regards to this, perhaps it is appropriate to quote Vest yet again: "The wisdom and perspective of senior scholars are important but most dramatic new insights and innovations come from brilliant young men and women.

"The freshness that comes from young faculty and the continual flow of students to the institutions is the key to a great research university."

This should be coupled with maintaining an intellectually open management which requires a high degree of autonomy and protection from political and ideological forces."

Unfortunately, the Malaysian education system has suffered from an overdose of political and ideological forces for years.

Saudi Arabia's experience holds invaluable lessons for Malaysia, which is in the midst of introducing drastic changes to its higher education landscape.

The sooner Malaysia overcomes its challenges, the sooner the environment will be more conducive to creativity and innovation.

Through KAUST, the Saudi Arabian government seems to have learned that lesson well. We must be prepared to do the same.

\* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at [vc@usm.my](mailto:vc@usm.my)

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