

Cut the red tape for R&D funding

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TODAY is the last day for local universities to showcase their inventions and innovations. Under the new brand, "Pecipta", an acronym for International Conference and Exposition of Inventions in Institutions of Higher Learning, it aims to bridge the perceived gap between universities and the industry and community.

This could be an avenue for the discoveries to be adopted for commercialisation by the local industry.

Despite being commonly misunderstood, some of these discoveries took years to develop and are backed by numerous publications in internationally accepted journals.

Research and development is an essential component in bringing about novel inventions worthy of heightening the quality of life.

Neglecting R&D or having a poorly structured system, the aspirations of the government in spearheading national development driven by R&D will be defeated.

At the inaugural Anugerah Akademik Negara, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak announced the designation of four research-intensive universities.

This is an important milestone in the history of Malaysia's higher education, now that there are many more universities in the countries, both public and private. The time has come to expect our universities to be more focused on R&D, without neglecting the teaching role.

The more vibrant the research is, the more original the teaching materials would be, thus making the university more attractive and competitive. Such a university will also be more motivated to invent and make new discoveries that could be put to practical use by the society at large.

Some of these could be commercialised and thus act as a source of income to the university and/or the inventor concerned.

In short, a research-intensive university could be an active engine of growth for the creation of new wealth for the university.

Such are the expectations from today's universities, guided by a new mission of not just disseminating and generating knowledge, but also to translate them into products.

Many universities have adjusted to the new mission of transferring technologies, in addition to their traditional mission of research and education. This is no doubt a tall order but has been demonstrated to be achievable, provided some conditions are met.

Here is where the speech of the deputy prime minister during the occasion was important in ensuring that the designated research-intensive universities can play a meaningful role, unimpeded.

Najib was quoted as saying: "The present R&D system must be studied and revamped so that all researchers can be assisted and facilitated in one way or another into coming up with better ideas and innovations. Today, red tape has been an obstacle to them."(NST, Aug3).

Following this frank assessment, he received a rousing applause from the audience. Indeed, for a long time bureaucracy has been a source of constant grievance for many researchers. Not much has been done to improve the situation.

It is only appropriate that Najib insisted on getting rid of such obstructions so that the system will be more responsive, pro-active and more trusting of researchers. "We must make sure their enthusiasm is not dampened due to overwhelming red tape. This must be done or we will be left behind," he added.

That we are lagging behind in terms of R&D is not a new assertion. Similar statements have been made before, especially with regard to a knowledge-based economy where R&D is the driver to move up the value chain. Low innovative R&D capacity will most likely make the country unattractive and less competitive, a high price to pay, especially when Malaysia has a huge pool of untapped creative talents.

This is also typical of developing countries that lack a technologically conducive environment to undertake top class R&D.

As noted by Lester Thurow of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: "Realistically, many countries do not have any new technologies, and it is a mistake to think that they can create technological entrepreneurs

without them. To acquire new technologies requires investment in R&D. Taiwan and Korea make these investments but many in Asia do not.

"Without those investments, technological entrepreneurs cannot be created, regardless of individual attitudes or governmental support."



Datuk Seri Najib Razak presenting the products commercialisation and innovation award to Profesor Dr Asma Ismail of Universiti Sains Malaysia at the inaugural Anugerah Akademik Negara in Putrajaya on Aug 2. Najib says obstructions faced by universities in carrying out R&D must be removed.

Therefore, Najib's remarks will hopefully bring some changes so that researchers are given more freedom, autonomy and flexibility, apart from increased funding.

The Ninth Malaysia Plan focuses on producing more researchers, scientists and engineers, with a target of 50 of them for every 10,000 members of the labour force by 2010.

The plan focuses on the need for more research, providing further incentives for researchers. However, all these won't be sufficient if research-intensive universities continue to be inhibited with rigid old structures, physically and mentally.

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