

Research - It's not what it used to be

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THE South Korean stem cell research scandal continues to hog the headlines. Last week, the country's top university announced the suspension of Dr Hwang Woo-Suk and six other professors who helped him fabricate the research.

The dean of academic affairs at Seoul National University was quoted as saying: "They are immediately banned from teaching and engaging in research."

This, however, may not be the final sanction. The university president had earlier called for "heavy punishment" for those involved in the scientific scandal.

In fact, Hwang has confessed to misusing part of the research funds which amounted to more than 35 billion won (RM142 million) showered on him by the Government.

In addition, he allegedly made donations to politicians.

For all these, Hwang said he was blinded by work and the drive for achievements.

The university reportedly is still looking into the misconduct in research and alleged breach of ethical standards.

"The level of punishment will be decided in accordance with the results of on-going deliberations," said the dean.

Formal dismissal from their posts is still possible. This would render him unemployable for any government-financed jobs for up to five years, including teaching and research.



STILL REVERED: A South Korean, carrying portraits of the disgraced stem cell scientist, taking part in a rally supporting Hwang.

What is more stunning is that this episode may be the tip of the iceberg in academic circles. Barely a month after the scandal, a similar scandal hit a Japanese top university.

According to a spokesman from the University of Tokyo, a professor may be disciplined after as many as 12 of his genetic experiments could not be reproduced.

This raised questions about the veracity of the experiments carried out by his team. They had allegedly managed to coax the E-coli bacteria to produce a human enzyme.

The work was internationally accepted for publication by prestigious scientific journals between 1998 and 2004.

The professor has denied the allegation but the university is continuing with its investigations.

To make matters worse, about the same time last month another case was reported in Scandinavia.

A Norwegian doctor, a specialist in mouth cancer, was suspected of fabricating research published in a major international scientific journal, according to a spokesperson from a famous hospital in Oslo.

The work was supported by a 70 million Norwegian krona (RM37 million) grant from the US National Cancer Institute.

The research purportedly described the association between mouth cancer and the use of anti-inflammatory drugs.

"He published an article in The Lancet in October last year. The data is totally false, actually totally fabricated," the director of external relations at the hospital was quoted as saying.

"His database had been completely fabricated on his computer" since the 908 volunteers who were supposed to be involved in the study were non-existent.

An investigation on the specialist's previous work is said to be on the way.

Meanwhile, state officials are considering jail terms of up to a year for researchers who fake scientific data.

Are all these just a coincidence following the Korean recent global expose? Apparently not.

Based on a US field document, there were 274 scientific misconduct complaints in 2004. This was a 50 per cent increase compared to that in 2003, as documented by the US Department of Health and Human Services.

It is the highest since 1998 when the Government established a programme to deal with scientific misconduct.

There are indications that this is but a small fraction of all the incidents of fabrication, falsification and plagiarism.

In a survey published in June last year in the journal Nature, about 1.5 per cent of 3,247 researchers who responded admitted to falsification or plagiarism.

(One in three admitted to some type of professional misbehaviour).

Last year, author Jennifer Washburn meticulously narrated in her book, *University Inc - The Corporate Corruption in Higher Education*, how corporate intrusion is undermining academic freedom and the foundations of scientific inquiry within the US' most prestigious institutions of higher learning.

How vulnerable are Malaysian researchers in this regard is anyone's guess.

This perhaps is not unexpected as the ethics of science and technology is beginning to mirror itself with that of the marketplace.

In fact, the world view on education and scholarship is being gradually supplanted by market forces.

As education becomes more and more commodified into a tradeable product, it is increasingly difficult to differentiate a university from a business entity.

The mission, too, is less to do with education and more about business.

To quote David L. Kirp, a professor of public policy at the University of California at Berkeley: "The language, the way people talk about higher education, has changed."

Moreover, he added: "The precarious balance between "the bottom line and the life of the mind" has been disturbed.

Of late, even the authorities at the level of the ministries are trapped in the jargon of "marketable" and "unmarketable" courses.

The former is encouraged based on market demands, while the latter face the risk of being ditched or at least being marginalised.

It follows that science, technology and engineering are being given overwhelming emphasis at the expense of

the humanities and the social sciences as though the two are mutually exclusive.

In the words of E. O'Sullivan (2001) in his book, *Transformative Learning - Educational Vision for the 21st Century*: "Our universities today flounder for want of a larger and more comprehensive context.

"Having no adequate larger context in which to function, our higher educational institutions operate within a splintered and fractionated world view."

To offset this, he suggested this: "One of the most common solutions to this vacuum is in the reinstatement of past forms of humanistic studies in a core curriculum, a curriculum which includes philosophy, ethics, history, literature, religious studies and some general science."

It means we need to urgently nurture a new world view on education - one that is not artificially compartmentalised in a way that it churned out "products" that are devoid of the basic ethical values of humanity.

All because someone wrongly dubbed it as "unmarketable".

In short, without strong ethical consideration, knowledge can be rendered useless if not harmful.

For this reason, the world view on education must be revisited as soon as possible.

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