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Cheap regard for arts studies

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RESEARCH grants have just been announced at a university which I know very well and a number of researchers in the arts faculty are discovering that they have been given small grants of a few hundred ringgit. These researchers are naturally upset as it is pointed out that perhaps a student assignment would incur more cost if it were typed by a professional typist.

Bear in mind that a fortnight ago Malaysians read in the newspapers that science researchers were being urged by the Science, Technology and Environment Minister, speaking at Universiti Malaya, to take full advantage of the RM100 million grant scheme launched last month (New Straits Times, April 8).

The news report went on to point out that this allocation was itself a part of the huge RM1 billion IRPA fund for the intensification of research in priority areas. A close examination of these priority areas will show that the main focus is science and technology with the social sciences taking a peek in. But basic arts and humanities research is by and large left out.

Let us be more sensitive to the needs of the arts researchers. When such piddling grants of a few hundred ringgit are given to arts researchers in a situation where millions or hundreds of millions are earmarked for scientific research, the implied position is clear - humane studies are unimportant and only scientific studies are highly prized. The insult to the arts and arts research is obvious.

Arts research should perhaps be catered for by an Arts Council such as exists in the United Kingdom or a National Endowment for the Humanities as in the United States.

The National Endowment for the Humanities is a federal agency that funds learning in literature, history, philosophy and other areas of the humanities. It sponsors research, education, documentaries, preservation, museum exhibitions and other activities.

If Malaysia were to have a grants body like the National Endowment for the Humanities it should ideally be managed by a group of respected professionals in the humanities who will have oversight over the disbursement of a pool of research and development money specifically set aside for the arts. This arrangement will rightly signal that the country as a civil society takes seriously the importance of cultural discourse and arts research.

But even before a national body is established, funds within universities should be earmarked for the humanities and these should be managed by arts researchers. I don't think it is the best situation in which scientists who are unsympathetic to the humanities are entrusted with all the funds for research and proceed to dole out little grants to the arts researchers.

For many, though thankfully not all scientists, the only culture that is significant and which they will agree should be funded may be agriculture. But culture in the form found in the arts and humanities departments of universities is a thing of indifference to them. It has been granted for at least 200 years that scientists are doing important work. But this understanding should not eclipse the emphasis placed on the development of cultural learning throughout the history of civilisation both in the East and the West.

Plato long ago said that the unexamined life is not worth living (Apology. 38). Surely the development of intellectual culture and a civil society in which the citizens are enabled to be sophisticated in their appreciation of social issues does not need to be rejustified in the late 20th century. Are we as a society not concerned that we should not only have a materialist paradise of an existence filled with technological amenities but also a society alive with concern for the pressing social issues which constantly impinge on our existence, not least those issues which are generated by developments in science and technology?

The time has come for the emergence of a breed of Malaysians who will imitate the philanthropy of the Simon Guggeneheims of the United States. In the original letter of gift to set up the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the former US Senator wrote that "it is Mrs Guggenheim's and my desire, in memory of our son, through the agency of this Foundation, to add to the educational, literary, artistic, and scientific power of this country, and also to provide for the cause of better international understanding" (Letter, March 26, 1925).

A second letter is more explicit in stating the purpose of the foundation. The funds would be used to assist "men and women devoted to science and liberal studies, great teachers, creators of beauty, and generally to those devoted to pursuits that dignify, ennoble and delight mankind" (Second Letter of Gift, June 7, 1929). We see here a due concern for the pursuit of science alongside the humanities. There is no question of the one swarming the other. Both cultures are duly emphasised.

A few years ago I had the opportunity to pose a question on this double concern for the development of science and technology as well as cultural discourse to the Prime Minister at a dialogue session in Universiti Malaya.

I asked him what the thinking of his government was in the matter of taking Malaysia from the status of developing nation to that of developed country. "How," I asked, "was Malaysia to progress from being consumers of technology and forms of discourse to being creators of technology as well as forms of discourse?"

In reply the PM talked about how in technology we can weed out the weaknesses of a process when we repeat it many times, how we can master something through many repetitions. In his interesting response he did not have time to touch on the topic of developing forms of discourse. That I suppose is the challenge to be taken up by the academics in arts and humanities departments of universities and the think-tanks which have been set up in the last 10 years with the active support of the Prime Minister himself as well as the Deputy Prime Minister.

But the challenge cannot be met if arts research is fobbed off with small grants. To develop sophistication and expertise, researchers in the arts need to confer with fellow researchers not merely at conferences but also for more extended periods at locations where more advanced research is already ongoing and where great libraries are. If the scientists need their labs, the humanities researchers need their visits to great libraries and established research centres.

I am not merely talking of limited contact at seminars and conferences which the scientists too have the benefit of. I mean attachments to the locations of excellence and distinction where these arts researchers can sharpen their skills of developing discourse and intellectual culture generally.

Some colleagues, I am reliably told, have been allotted RM400 in grants, others a little more. A number have decided to turn down the allocations.

I myself have been given a generous grant of RM704 for my proposed project on Shakespeare. I will not mention this honour to my colleagues on

the executive committee of the International Shakespeare Association when we next meet lest they form unwarranted opinions of Malaysia as a society indifferent to intellectual culture. I merely intend to return the significant grant to the one-billion-ringgit pool so that no cash-strapped scientist will be in need of petty cash to buy a beaker, Bunsen burner or a bunch of rubber bands.

I am left only with the melancholy contemplation of this question: "How cheap is arts research?"

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