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It's time we did our part

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I READ with pleasure your article in the education section 'A Must For Technology' (MB, March 1). All this while, Malaysia has been successful in attracting manufacturing multinational companies to site their plants here. We have been able to do that because our labour and land costs were low. However, that scenario is changing rapidly. Our cost of labour is not as low as the cost of labour in Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and China. It is time Malaysia moved forward into high value-added skills. High value-added skills like research and development, problem solving skills and creative skills are difficult to acquire. They have to be 'cultured' into the society.

Malaysia has looked to the East and West for technology transfer. Through the establishment of the German Malaysia Institute we tried the world-renowned German 'dual system' in training up our technicians. We also tried the Japanese system by looking at their education and work ethics. We learnt about On the Job Training and Off the Job Training from successful Japanese companies like Matsushita. From the Americans we learnt about people relationships, teambuilding and what we call soft skills as practised by multinational companies like Komag USA and Hewlett Packard. But all these firms are in the industrial and manufacturing sector.

What do we lack? We have failed to look at the educational area. All our successful Malaysian personalities have one common trait: a good education from the very start. All this time we have concentrated on their glory and success. We ask questions like: What makes them successful?, and search for secrets like hard work, determination, etc. But no one told us that their early years of quality education equipped them for mega success. To get the best, one has to learn from the best. The engagement of Massachusetts Institute of Technology to work in Malaysia under Malaysia University of Science and Technology (MUST) is one way of getting the expertise to help to train our undergraduates. MIT's reputation is a competitive advantage that could make MUST very successful. Firms are more willing to sponsor researches because of the reputation of MIT.

The system of linking applied research to universities is not a new idea. Perhaps our local universities, especially the established ones should consider marketing the idea to the commercial sector. The reputation of an institute is not the only criterion for success. MUST will probably sell by itself and score a runaway success. But have you wondered why MIT choose Malaysia and not Singapore or any other country? I believe the reason why MIT choose Malaysia to share its expertise is because of the approach taken by our leader. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is a hands-on leader. The fact that he personally took time to visit the people at MIT several times goes to show that our leader is serious about the project. Likewise, our leaders in firms and institutions should adopt such a noble and humble example as set by our prime minister.

If MUST proves to be a big success in tailoring research and education to commercial applications, then we should extend that system to all the other universities in Malaysia.

Complementing MUST is another big project known as SIMC (Sarawak International Medical Centre). It is said that a world-renowned clinic in the US - speculation is that it is the Mayo Clinic - is coming in to lend

its expertise to SIMC.

It is envisaged that with all the world-renowned institutions and expertise in Malaysia, we should be able to tap their skills and knowledge. And that can only come with the right culture - that is, the attitude to learn, train and adapt to the world's changing environment. Mahathir and his team have done their part. Now it is up to you and me and our children to prove to the world that we can be the region's best.

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