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Sharifah helping to promote a science-cultured society

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IN AN effort to become a developed nation by the year 2020, the Government is making efforts to promote the formation of a science-cultured society.

The building of the RM80 million National Science Centre is one of the ways which the Government is hoping will help to inculcate such a society.

The centre is headed by Prof Dr Sharifah Barlian Aidid who oversees its various activities and programmes.

"Science teaches you to be analytical. We want a society that has better thinking skills. Through their own creativity and innovativeness, people can then think of ways to better develop the society.

"We find that society, in the past, had shirked away from arts such as sketching and designing but it is through these activities that creativity and innovative skills can be developed," she told Business Times.

The mother of three has been involved in the National Science Centre project since she was still lecturing at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

She was appointed the director of the centre when it was opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in November 1996.

The centre is in fact the brainchild of Dr Mahathir himself.

Now that the centre is fully operational, she has to ensure that the exhibition gallery is running well to continuously attract a steady stream of visitors.

She also oversees the materials that are exhibited at the centre, which are developed, designed and fabricated by its own engineers and technicians.

The centre also develops and fabricates exhibits for other science centres in the country.

Sharifah Barlian, who will be retiring next year, said most of the exhibits at the centre are interactive.

"People think that the centre is like a museum and that there is nothing new for them. The exhibits at the centre are very technical and we have physicists, engineers and technical staff handling them.

"When we first started the project, we appointed foreign consultants and worked with them but now we do the fabrication and maintenance wholly on our own," she added.

The exhibits at the centre costs RM36 million.

Last year, a total of 250,000 visitors visited the Centre.

The centre also promotes its exhibits through tour programmes.

Last month, the centre organised a trip to Bagan Lalang in Selangor to bring its exhibits to the rural people there.

Under its various tour programmes, its exhibits have attracted an additional 100,000 people.

Apart from that, the centre also conducts exhibitions at public places such as Sunway Lagoon and the Putra World Trade Centre.

To get people to be more involved in science, Sharifah Barlian said a change in the education system is vital to get the students to be more creative and innovative.

"If students are encouraged to be creative and innovative, they will develop better thinking and analytical skills," she said.

She also added that the centre also provides guidance for teachers on how to present ideas or science concepts to their students in an interesting and creative manner.

"We have started a programme called 'saintis tunas' for children aged

between two to six years. We teach kindergarten teachers how to convey science topics to children that will attract their interest," she said.

The centre also conducts a three-month training programmes for local graduates who will later become teachers on the creative method of teaching science.

Sharifah Barlian also commended efforts to commercialise scientific findings but added that they are hindered by the lack of marketing efforts and strategies.

Citing an example, she said, if the exhibits at the centre are not fabricated and sent out to other exhibition centres in the country, they will still remain unknown to many Malaysians.

"Marketing and promotion, directly or indirectly, is crucial for new scientific inventions as well as for the development of science itself.

"If we compare the contribution of our local universities in the development of science in the country with other developed nations, we can said that we are still relatively new in this area.

"The existence of institutions of higher learning and research institutes in Malaysia run into only a few decades compared with in the US or the UK where they had existed since the 18th Century," she said.

She pointed out, however, that our local universities and research institutes have contributed a lot in its scientific findings for the development of the palm oil industry.

"Experts in the industry have even produced derivatives from palm oil which can be used as fuel for car engines ... but unfortunately it is quite costly to commercialise the product on a large scale," she said.

Sharifah Barlian said science development in Malaysia should be tuned to the needs and to what is relevant for the country.

"We do not have to compete with the advanced nations but instead focus on the scientific advancement that will be useful to our country.

"It is our job to scientifically improve our potential resources in the country just as the West will only create innovate technologies which benefit their own needs," she stressed.

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