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Firing up the innovative minds

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LAST November when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad issued a challenge for the scientific community to produce a Malaysian Nobel Laureate, a group of Malaysian students in Cambridge University in the UK held a group discussion on the Internet.

"Can we or can we not have our own Nobel Laureate?" they asked each other. They were certainly fired up on the matter especially having Amartya Sen in their midst. Sen, the head of Cambridge's Trinity College, was named a Nobel Prize winner for economics last year.

Last week, Dr Mahathir made yet another call to the scientific community. He told them not to be complacent and satisfied with their inventions. They should try to be more creative to innovate their products and new technologies to keep them one step ahead.

"The invention should not be at a static level but should be further improved and developed without any limit. If it is good, it can be made better. Even though others may duplicate them, we will always be one step ahead by further developing on our inventions," he had said when launching the UKM-MTDC Centre of Smart Technology in Bangi.

In the discussions on the Nobel Laureate, many of the students were optimistic. "Yes, we will one day produce our own Nobel Laureate," they said, giving their own ideas as to how the country can achieve this. Others were skeptical. "Yes, a Malaysian Nobel laureate but not in Malaysia but probably a Malaysian in other parts of the world." They cited Sen, an Indian, as an example.

They argued that one does not get enough support to be creative and innovative in the country. Bureaucracy gets in the way, too.

They are not wrong. Some of these post-graduate students have faced stumbling blocks when they were doing their own research locally. "You can say that some scientists, creators and innovators are weird people.

"They cannot be confined to office hours. This is not a 9 to 5 (9am to 5pm) thing. Ideas do not come between these times only. They need to work at their own time and pace," a post-graduate student said in his e-mail.

The head of one of the country's leading research institutions had once lamented to this newspaper that he is governed by the rules and regulations of the civil service in running his organisation.

"My hands are tied sometimes...my people come in during office hours and I know they also come in after office hours, often midnight, to work on their research. I can't tell them not to do it. That is probably the best time for them. I would just have to justify the costs," he said.

Dr Mahathir also stressed the need for local inventors to master the skill of upgrading and innovating imported technologies to strengthen the country's economic and industrial development.

"Our ability to acquire and invent technologies and new products is essential in our aspiration to become a developed nation by 2020.

"We need to acquire or produce new technologies which are relevant to the country's industrial need to enable us to compete globally. But at the same time, we also need to have the skill to improve or innovate imported technologies," he said.

Malaysia has made much stride in the research field.

Recently, national broadcasting station, RTM, aired a documentary on Nata de Coco, a white or cream-coloured gelatinous film of polysaccharide produced by a fungus known as *Acetobacter aceti* subpecies *xylinum* grown

from coconut milk.

Nata de Coco was developed in a laboratory and has since found its way to the shelves of supermarkets both in and outside the country. It is said to be excellent on its own or as topping for ice-creams, jellies, fruit cocktails, cold cakes, yogurt and alike.

Another research is being carried out by the Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute (Mardi) on this organic high fibre food.

Instead of using coconut milk, Mardi is experimenting on using residue of pineapple juice.

Another home-grown aeronautical maintenance company, Airod, has offered to value-add the "made for war, not for displays" Russian helicopters. These and many more add feathers in the country's cap for excellence.

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