

07/04/1999

R&D: High time for an overhaul

IT has been said that while winners in the 20th century are those who invented new products, the winners of the next century will come from interfacing of new product and process technologies. Needless to say, countries in the forefront are those which are strongly committed to research and development.

In the case of Malaysia, there appears to be no lack of awareness on the part of the top leaders that it is imperative the country adopt a pattern of growth led by improvements in productivity brought about by introducing new technologies and developing a more skilled workforce. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is one leader who never tires of reminding the nation of the need to move in this direction if the plan to become an industrialised nation by the year 2020 is to become a reality. It has in fact been his clarion call that Malaysia has to possess the capabilities to innovate home-grown technology to manufacture products for local and foreign consumption.

This week in a speech launching Kolej Ikram, Dr Mahathir deemed it necessary to express his disappointment over the nation's overall research and development effort. He lamented that allocations are not fully utilised and while a lot of progress has been made in the agricultural field, the nation is very much lagging in the technical fields such as mechanics, electronics and medicine. He had some months ago called on officials in charge of R&D funds to be less bureaucratic and be more imaginative when considering applications.

Given the urgency to change the highly unsatisfactory trends relating to our R&D effort, the Science, Technology and Environment Ministry must immediately take on the task of rectifying the situation. For far too long, we have been hearing that although Malaysia has research institutes and universities undertaking substantial R&D, these have little commercial relevance. Conversely, the private sector is not undertaking sufficient R&D. Meanwhile, the public and private sectors each appears to have its own tale of woe.

Dr Mahathir made a pertinent point in saying that one of the problems in under-utilisation of the R&D funds is that "people who are controlling the money cannot appreciate what the research centres or the researchers want to do." They place too much emphasis on direct returns. Such lack of understanding coupled with the long wait for these funds have caused much frustration among our budding innovators and scientists. It is the nation's loss if these people leave for greener pastures outside the country.

It is heartening that the Government is targeting to spend more on R&D in the Eighth Malaysia Plan. From a low of only 0.3 per cent of the gross domestic product, the amount will be increased to an average of one per cent. In reviewing the relevant policies to meet such a vital goal, the Ministry should place on top of its agenda, the nation's R&D programme. Clearly, an overhaul of the whole system, particularly relating to priority areas and disbursement of the available funds is long overdue. Different criteria with more flexibility will have to be used in giving out the funds.

For applicants to be more forthcoming, there must be clear guidelines and more alacrity in fund disbursements. It is so true that nobody has a monopoly of the skills of inventing. If the facilities and the funds are

available, then the results can be quite predictable.  
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