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Creating future Nobel Laureates

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PUTRAJAYA, Wed. - The greatest challenge Malaysia will face in trying to produce a Nobel Laureate by 2020 is the creation of "an environment of creativity" to nurture students and scientists, National Science Award 2001 winner Prof Mohd Ali Hashim said today.

The director of Science and Technology in the Science, Technology and Environment Ministry said Nobel Laureates typically came from universities that provided creative milieus for their students, encouraging them to discuss findings and interact daily or weekly.

"For anything creative to happen, these people need to communicate, to belong to one or several networks where they can exchange knowledge, experience and ideas. The possibility of frequent meetings between individuals is therefore an important feature of these milieus," he said.

He said the Nobel Prize Centennial Exhibition, to be held at the National Science Centre from March 20 to June 27 next year, would highlight the individual creativity and milieus that led to amazing discoveries by 747 laureates.

"The exhibition deliberates on the question, 'What creates a culture of creativity, that in time would produce a Nobel Laureate?'. Visitors would not be able to derive clear cut answers from the exhibition but rather be given food for thought as to whether creativity comes from the individual or the milieu," he said in an interview.

The "must-see" exhibition is aimed at inspiring Malaysians to strive for scientific excellence and produce a Nobel Laureate by 2020, a challenge thrown by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1998.

Themed "Cultures of Creativity: Individuals and Milieus", the exhibition will have two different theatres at its core, one dedicated to individual creativity with 32 different short films produced by archival footage and the other theatre showing 10 longer movies on creative milieus.

Ali said the exhibition would highlight several aspects of individual creativity, such as courage, that brought recognition to the Nobel Laureates.

"The courage to go one's own way and explore new paths as well as challenge established theories should be backed by the persistency to continue one's work according to one's beliefs," he said, adding that other important aspects to creativity were the ability see an old problem in a new way, the element of chance and years of hard work.

He said it was clear that the environment in which a Laureate was nurtured was one thriving with research in fundamental sciences. Hence, it was important to give high priority to investments in developing the field.

There also had to be a critical mass of human resources in science and technology, he said, and a love for science nurtured in schools.

The organisers of the exhibition hope to attract around 300,000 school children to the exhibition itself.

"Programmes like the National Science Quiz and Robofest are all leading towards the Nobel dream. We have 15 scientific researchers per 10,000 workforce and our target for 2010 is 60 per 10,000. It is an ambitious target and we really have to work hard," he said.

As the ministry realised that everything started in schools, about RM100,000 to RM200,000 had been allocated yearly for the Science Innovation Project for secondary schools, he added.

Ali said the Government realised the importance of research and development and had increased allocations for it over the years, with the establishments of special laboratories and more universities.

"Some of our researchers are also working with top-notch scientists in laboratories worldwide. Under the ministry, we have science and technology agreements with more than 20 countries and we are very selective in choosing our partners."