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Search on for Malaysian Einstein

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LAST Saturday, I had to push and shove my way through an army of reporters and onlookers at InventQJaya (IQJ), a new state-of-the-art scientific research centre set up to become the premier vehicle of international standards. It is also aimed at attracting top Malaysian scientists and researchers working abroad to return.

The new centre is to make sure that the talents, knowledge and experiences of our scientists and researchers can be used to put Malaysia in league with other advanced nations in the field of science and technology.

At IQJ, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad flagged off the MeVictory, a 100-per cent battery-powered car running on "metal fuel", in its attempt to break the world record in covering a distance of more than 600 kilometres on a single charge.

This might be just the thing to jump-start the local scientific and research community to come up with more revolutionary ideas. The Prime Minister expressed the hope that one day we may have our own Einstein or Edison.

Ingenuity is an abstract and conceptual process in nature.

As Dr Mahathir mentioned, there have been times that great ideas were thought to be ridiculous before they were proven. I am glad that we are finally taking this gigantic leap of faith and taking the risks that come along with it. Looking back on the local scene, I guess the big question would be: where are we today?

We had a Malaysian team that went to Thailand for the international Robocon 2003 robot tournament, where robot teams clashed to put takraw balls in designated baskets for points. Twenty teams from 19 countries took part.

How did we fare? Well, the finals held on August 24 saw the top prizes going to Naihoi Tamin (Thailand), Yuppicide (Thailand), Kirin-San (Japan) and BKCT (Vietnam).

The Malaysian team managed to get the Toyota-sponsored award.

What is the big deal? In terms of robotic ingenuity, the Malaysian team has proven to be a serious contender and will be the team to watch for in the next Robocon in Korea.

Similar efforts by Sirim via Robofest, held in Kuala Lumpur last month, discovered talents and sparked public interest. Schoolchildren, college and varsity students took part and some even entered on their own accord.

We can compete in robotics, given enough time to mature and with adequate exposure.

It is sad to know that the potential in our youth is not realised or discovered because of a "little" factor called money. Who knows how many undiscovered "dormant geniuses" are among us?

The Aini (Artificial Intelligent Neural-network Identity) "robot" was a result of Associate Professor Goh On Sing's pondering over Alan Turing's question of "Can Machines Think?". He took the challenge to create an artificial intelligence natural language chat robot, giving computer users the ability to communicate with computers in natural language.

Goh, who is from Kolej Universiti Teknikal Kebangsaan Malaysia in Malacca, is an authority in this field. However, it is surprising to find out that he is better known abroad than locally.

His Aini-bot was downloaded by more Singaporeans than Malaysians after

the story was featured recently in Computimes.

Are we so unaware or too slow to realise the potential within? Do we have doubts over our own ability? Is it unimaginable to be ahead in some fields of science and technology? We have to do away with these ideologies. In the end, it may well prove to be our greatest folly to build our own "glass wall" around us.

To some, it is easier to believe that the Japanese can build a humanoid robot like Asimo than having a Malaysian robot that can behave like and interact with humans in a natural way.

Although the future of AI is uncertain, Goh is not alone as the Centre for Artificial Intelligence and Robotics (Cairo), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, has prepared AI technology for commercialisation and research.

The Expo Science & Technology 2003 event hosted in August by the Science, Technology and Environment Ministry, and organised by the Malaysian Institute for Nuclear Technology Research (MINT), Malaysian Association of Research Scientist (MARS), and Sirim, is in the Malaysia Book of Records as the country's largest annual science and technology gathering. The event even attracted entries from the United States.

According to Dr Wan Manshol Wan Zin from MINT, the exhibition is held annually to deliver and educate the public about what locally-bred innovators and inventors have to offer.

Dr Amir Feisal of Universiti Malaya was one of the exhibitors featuring bio-informatics, a collaborative effort between the university and the University of Tokyo.

The search engine is query-based and tailored for searching bio-information, for example, so that you do not get "Tiger Woods" listed in your results instead of a certain "tiger" species that you wanted.

The "Sun Clock" by engineer Syed Ahmad Tuan Syed Nasir offers a new method of telling time based on the sun's movement and effects of seasons in a 24-hour format. It also gives the Muslim prayer schedule for 166 cities. What if we work more efficiently based on our time compared to the rest of the world?

Some ideas might now seem downright simplistic to the unimaginative, but as proven in history, necessity is the mother of all inventions.

"Imagination is the mother of Innovation. If we strive hard to sow the seeds of imagination to our youth, with enough attention, practice, failure and exposure, we just may find our Malaysian Einstein," Goh added.