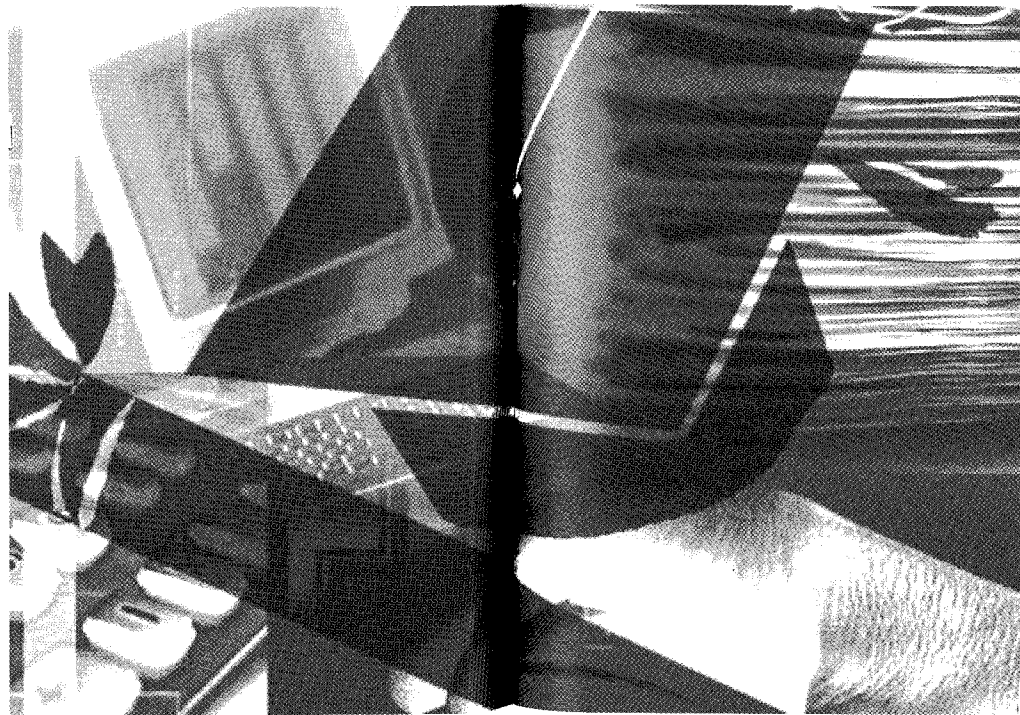


# Help academia to grow and excel

I have been told that many R&D projects are there for the taking, but because of the lack of funds and weak mechanisms for commercialisation, many of these research findings are not taken to the final step. Going forward, this is going to be one of my priorities at the Ministry of Higher Education – *Mustapa Mohamed*.

**I**N the last six weeks I have had discussions, dialogues and consultations with various stakeholders in higher education. As I get more immersed in my new role, it dawns upon me how critical higher education is, as our country moves into the second half of achieving Vision 2020. Expectations are high for changes to be made soon.

A report I had the privilege of being involved with back in 2002, raised a number of observations. Malaysia is now on the brink of becoming an upper middle-income country. However, the much higher incomes we want for our people on our journey to First World status, can only be achieved and sustained, if the Malaysian workforce can produce much higher value added outcomes. All developed countries today are services-dominated economies. At the



same time industrial enterprises are becoming more technology intensive, and both of these require a much higher calibre workforce. As global competition increases, the greatest economic value will be in phases of the supply chain, that place a premium on creativity, innovation and knowledge-intensive work.

We have to approach this new paradigm differently, since the functions of higher learning institutions in society have changed. The public is more demanding. They want the best for their children, and the returns of their educational investments must be justifiable. In other words, universities and other institutions of higher education today, are meant to serve society, in promoting the quality of life of citizens. They are the institutions that will produce the workforce of the nation and determine its position in the league of nations. Throughout this, they are also being intensively scrutinised by the media, NGO's, and the public at large.

We want our higher education institutions, to be well known internationally. We want the work of our professors, to be cited by intellectuals globally. We want our universities to be world class resource centres, which would extend the frontiers of knowledge, and contribute towards human development.

## TIGHT GRIP

The Ministry of Higher Education was established in 2004, with a vision of making Malaysia a centre of education excellence. I believe, that in order to achieve this, we will need to focus on strong research, effective leadership and management, and impeccable academic standards.

There is a perception that the Government has a tight grip over

universities, its teaching staff, and students. I am aware that there has been a lot of debate on this subject in the past few years. We have taken note of the many views on this matter, and are presently reviewing procedures and legislation, to find ways of giving universities more room to flourish academically. It is my intention to empower these institutions, so that they may take direct control of their actions, needed to realise the many targets we must achieve.

Naturally, for empowerment to work well, we must also ensure good governance, and provide certain regulations, to ensure national policies are delivered. But I believe, that leadership and creativity should not be stifled by too many rules, or suffocated by too much red tape. We must allow for innovative leadership to take place, if we want to nurture an environment, that is conducive for intellectual development. Indeed, our universities and colleges must be free of cumbersome bureaucracy, if they are to focus, on being centres of educational and intellectual excellence.

We must also attract able scholars to our universities. I have been told that our universities are not able to attract 'the best and brightest', and may even have problems luring the 'reasonably intelligent and above average' scholars. It should be recognised, that without a strong and committed academic profession, higher education cannot provide effective teaching, or top quality research. In knowledge-based economies, universities must have academic staff that are well qualified, well trained, and committed to academic and research work. We must also aim for staff to student ratios recommended by international standards, so as to achieve

the best possible results.

We must help our academia to grow and excel. By doing so, we can expect, not only excellence in teaching and learning, but also in research and development. Combined, these are some of the core products of any institution of higher education. Indeed, we need to encourage eminent lecturers to stay longer in our universities, so that their expertise is not lost. This can also partly address the problem of shortage of lecturers, faced by some of our universities.

In addition, we will need to ensure that there is focus by our universities, if they are to channel their available resources, towards attaining excellence. To this end, we will ensure that our universities excel in certain niches, whereby each of the 18 public universities in Malaysia, concentrates on a number of flagship programmes.

In moving forward, we will also convert a select number of universities, into research universities, which will pay specific attention, in pushing the frontiers of research, in both the applied and basic sciences. Such attention by these institutions, should inject greater advancements not only in research and development, but importantly for the growth of our economy, through commercialisation. There is a missing link here. I have been told that many R&D projects are there for the taking, but because of the lack of funds and weak mechanisms for commercialisation, many of these research findings are not taken to the final step. Going forward, this is going to be one of my priorities at the Ministry of Higher Education.

A related area of priority is that of greater collaboration between universities and industry, which would help ensure that curriculum and research are abreast of current needs. I have been told, for example, that companies from around the region, in a broad range of sectors, are finding it quite difficult to source the required expertise in the workplace, from

among university graduates. This underscores the importance of establishing such smart partnerships. Besides smart partnerships between universities and industry, there is a need also, for the various branches of government to be talking more to each other, so that there is better coordination in our policies and programmes.

There is a need, too, for our universities to be part of the global network. The way forward lies in fostering stronger linkages through measures like credit transfers, and further collaboration in research. Internationalisation in our universities, will go a long way towards producing more rounded graduates, and by meeting our goals of student and faculty exchange, we will ensure that our universities benefit from the resulting 'brain gain'. Such exchanges will also bring benefits from exposure to global perspectives, cultures and languages.

In this respect, we have to be ambitious, and visualise the possibility of turning our higher learning institutions into global institutions. They must:


- have meaningful representation, of international students in the institutions;
- incorporate more international content, into their research and teaching; and
- form strategic partnerships, with reputable higher learning institutions overseas.

I also feel strongly, that we must beef up entrepreneurship programmes in our universities. We need to encourage more graduates to be self-employed. More of our graduates have to be involved, in small and medium enterprises. By developing an entrepreneurial culture, graduates will instill in themselves, the characteristics of risk-taking and perseverance. This will make them more competitive and dynamic, and in the long term, will make them more self-sufficient for their economic well-being. Towards this end, current entrepreneurial programmes will

be strengthened. In this, we will engage the various chambers of commerce and captains of industry, to develop a more sustainable model of entrepreneurship training in universities.

With regard to languages, it is true that the standard of fluency in English among our university graduates, has deteriorated over the years. This issue requires urgent attention. Some short term programmes will have to be put in place, in order to rectify this situation. Proficiency in other languages such as Mandarin, and a number of other international languages, is also an important skill our graduates must acquire. Needless to say, for Malaysians to enter the global workforce, mastery of languages will be a pre-requisite.

There are many challenges facing higher education in Malaysia. We have to deal with these challenges head on. We have to prepare to make some radical changes, otherwise the revolution that the Prime Minister suggested in 2004 will never materialise.

Human capital development is a very important agenda, going forward. In this, universities play a very important role, and unless we are able to produce graduates of the highest calibre, our objective of being a fully developed nation by 2020 will be in jeopardy. Early last year, my predecessor commissioned Tan Sri Wan Zahid to have a comprehensive look at higher education in this country. Two weeks ago, Wan Zahid submitted the final version of the report to me. In the next few weeks, a number of intensive workshops will be held, to deliberate on this report before its submission to Cabinet. This report will certainly be one of the key inputs into our review of higher education in Malaysia. 

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Datuk Mustapa Mohamed is Malaysia's Minister of Higher Education Malaysia. The text is an abridged version of his keynote speech at The 10th Malaysian Education Summit 2006 on March 27