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# LETTERS



Nur Adlyka Ainul Annuar is among a group of astronomers who discovered the evidence of black holes. BERNAMA PIC



Dr Hafizah Noor is among a group of scientists who contributed to the study of gravitational wave detectors through her GEO600 experiment. FILE PIC

## SCIENCES

# MALAYSIA NEEDS A NOBEL PRIZE

**P**OST 14th General Election (GE14), it is an opportune time to revisit the idea of a Nobel Prize for Malaysia.

In 1998, then prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had challenged the scientific community to win the Nobel Prize by 2020. We have the same Dr Mahathir as prime minister today, but are we any nearer to a Nobel award?

We need a paradigm shift. If we can achieve the apex in sports, healthcare, airline and others, why not the sciences in the form of a Nobel laureate to top it all?

We have a bigger chance to reach that goal in the sciences as there are more areas to choose from, and our scientific community is gaining strength in research. We have young scientists coming to the fore with new research areas, such as the discovery of black holes (by Dr Nur Adlyka Ainul Annuar) and detection of gravitational waves (Dr Hafizah Noor).

Winning a Nobel Prize is important for Malaysia because it is an embodiment of a successful strategy in individual fields of new knowledge. It is a testament that we are in the realms of excellence, abreast with the world's best, capable of original research

with useful technologies that stimulate global economies.

We cannot be importing technologies forever. We should attempt to reverse the royalties paid for such by having home-based innovations and exporting them instead. It would also translate that we have the best universities in the world, capable of producing Nobel laureates.

I believe Malaysia has a better chance to be a global contributor in science and technology as the infrastructure is in place with vast options to choose from. However, there are two issues that must be addressed.

First is that our local universities are not among the top in rankings, and second is the neutral attitude on science, causing a fall out in interest in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects among students.

In Asia, universities in Japan, South Korea, China and India have reached the top 100 in the world. Each of these countries have Nobel Prize winners among them. Being among the top in ranks can create confidence among other countries in our education system. It is like a magnet that can draw world talents to our shores.

Achieving this would earn us

respect and prestige. We would be counted for preference in academics, research, trade, policy making and more.

How can we improve our rankings?

We should review the philosophy of Research Funding Agencies to fund as many research submissions with the limited budget that Malaysia has, and collaborate more with successful research universities. No university seeking excellence should work alone. The exploration in knowledge and discovery is so immense that knowledge sharing is essential. Hence, cross breeding of research and sharing should be encouraged.

On talents, they should be incubated locally and abroad.

Homegrown talents can reinforce their research in specialty areas, while those abroad can pursue disciplines that are rarely found locally. We have not yet developed our homegrown brands of innovations, technologies and professional training programmes, including clinical specialties. The dictum of "foreign is always best" should no longer hold.

Next, facilities. We need to build more research centres of repute, the likes of Pasteur Institute, Paris, and the Howard

Hughes Medical Institute, the United States. The centres would have to be optimally staffed, and house advanced and modern equipment for their research. Universiti Sains Malaysia's Advanced Medical and Dental Institute and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Molecular Biology Institute are apt examples.

The need for Malaysian icons to be recognised with prestigious awards in various disciplines is most welcomed by the scientific community. In order to do that, we need to create local awards in more disciplines, in the likes of the National Academy of Science Awards, US (in Biology, Medicine, Engineering and Applied Science, Physical Science, Mathematics, etc.) and Royal Society Awards of the United Kingdom. The prize should be substantial enough to reflect its true value.

Malaysia has yet to have an icon in science whom students can emulate.

We have not created any Watson and Crick (discovery of the DNA helix) or a Louis Pasteur (in microbiology). As schoolchildren, we loved to read biographies of scientists and their discoveries and to identify with one of them. That was how the generation of yester-year was at-

tracted to science.

The youth of today would likely look up to well-endowed icons, such as Datuk Lee Chong Wei (badminton) or Robert Kuok, Malaysia's billionaire. This is because the outlet for science is limited to being a teacher, laboratory scientist or engineers with average pay.

Although doctors are remunerated more for the unearthly hours they have to endure, the inability to incorporate all medical graduates as housemen sends negative signals to graduates.

The portrayal of high-end remuneration of corporate or the entertainment world or sports is more appealing. Hence, it would be fashionable to pursue non-science courses.

We have to show that Malaysia has the attributes of a developed nation comparable to the best — with unlimited potential for world-class excellence.

Winning a Nobel Prize for Malaysia would be the most coveted prize, and, it would add value to Malaysia if it aspires to be in the ranks of a developed nation.

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