

# Need for Science Act

I RECENTLY attended a discourse among Fellows of the Academy of Sciences Malaysia on the state of science in the country.

Many Fellows came to share their views and opinions on how to resolve some of the outstanding issues. There are areas which can do with some constructive change.

Suggestions have been made on several occasions in the past and implementing the suggestions would have had a more positive impact on science and innovation for the nation. They would have certainly translated into better returns from our investment in science.

Unfortunately, despite various attempts to lobby for change, obstacles remain.

Two presentations were made at the meeting that set the tone for the discussion. One conveyed the message that everything is okay with science while the other presentation gave a much less optimistic picture.

The take-home message from the second presentation was that unless some of the current inherent shortcomings in science governance are addressed, science in the country may be heading for more challenging days ahead.

We may even end up as a regional innovation laggard. Neighbouring countries including Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia are showing more positive signs of progress in science.

Some of the disturbing trends include the low rate of research commercialisation, little research done in industry, weak industry academia linkages, research talent leaving the country and scientists growing disillusioned with the ecosystem for research.

There was agreement that serious action is needed. We should no longer be in a denial mode.

The issue of governance was flagged as one which needed urgent redress. There was concern all round that policies and strategic plans made earlier had not been properly implemented.

A more worrying matter is that many among the science fraternity are not even aware that there is such a national policy. This became evident in a survey done by the Academy as part of its recent Science Outlook exercise.

The Science Outlook report also mentioned the weak monitoring of research projects approved for funding.

Since the Science Policy has not

been properly implemented, monitoring of the many recommended actions and thrust areas is almost nonexistent.

This simply means feedback was totally absent. No feedback make it impossible to truly bring improvements to the policy.

This is in stark contrast to countries such as South Korea, Taiwan and even China. In South Korea especially, science governance is effectively managed through a dedicated legal framework for science.

Like Malaysia, South Korea started out as a country without a vibrant R&D and innovation culture.

However, through the deployment of various legal instruments, R&D and innovation have now become a normal business culture there. The issue of governance is thereby automatically taken care of.

There was an attempt earlier to improve science governance through the Science Act. The Academy together with many other relevant stakeholders participated in a national exercise to prepare the draft Act. This was coordinated by the Science, Technology and Innovation

Ministry (Mosti). It took almost three years to produce the draft. In its final form, the draft Act had all the ingredients needed to transform science governance.

Many in the science fraternity were looking forward to the eventual formalisation of the Act.

Sadly, the fate of the Act remains in limbo to this day. This does not bode well for the future of science in the country.

The only consolation for science is the Government's decision to push ahead with the establishment of the Research Management Agency (RMA) which was also highlighted in the draft Act.

The nation is on the verge of embarking on the all important 11th Malaysia Plan. This is the Plan that will take the nation to that all important year 2020.

It is still not too late for us to revisit the Science Act. The Act is what the nation needs to make science truly work in nation building. It will mark a historic occasion for science in the country.

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