

Wake-up call for universities

THE Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) report titled *OECD Reviews of Innovation Policy: Malaysia 2016*, which was released recently, made rather scathing observations on the performance of our local public universities.

While the report admitted the fact that the number of university graduates and postgraduates has increased, it maintained that the overall quality was questionable. Meeting industry needs, for example, remains an area of concern.

Achievements in research and development (R&D) were also brutally criticised. According to the report, R&D in Malaysian universities increased 11-fold between 2000 and 2012. At the same time, the number of researchers expanded five-fold between 2006 and 2012 from 12,152 to 64,962.

Research and innovation capabilities in our public universities show signs of improving but mostly in terms of quantity of publications rather than quality and impact. The report noted that although there has been an "unprecedented surge" in the number of publications, their impact measured by citations has been "very low".

Similarly, though the number of patents from tertiary institutions

jumped rapidly, the intellectual property created by research remained lacking in commercialisation value. The attractiveness of university patents to industry, especially on their practical applicability, seems weak. This may be due in part to the lack of relevance of research to industry and poor communication between the two sectors.

The quality of these patents remains a concern given the high costs of patenting and renewing intellectual property rights.

The report noted that only a few universities have started to collaborate with the business sector in R&D, research efforts remain fragmented both across and within universities, and there is lack of effective strategic prioritisation. In short, the silo mentality is still alive and well in our universities.

The report also highlighted the lack of a national policy on research infrastructure which, it said, affected the research excellence of the universities. It concluded that the quality of Malaysian universities must improve in order to effectively contribute to research and innovation as well as produce talents in line with the needs of industry. The report also emphasised the need for the collective use of research infrastructure and

equipment to ensure cost-efficiency.

The sharing of such facilities has never been the norm in most universities even though a competitive and well-managed research infrastructure is critical to fostering research excellence, enhancing the quality of research and attracting talented young researchers, including from abroad.

A check with a few academics in some of the universities involved revealed that there were mixed feelings about the report. Some have hailed it as a wake-up call for public universities in Malaysia. They argue that cost inefficiencies are still rampant and suggest new initiatives to trim what they refer to as excess fat.

At the same time, there are also those who are still in denial mode, pointing out that the claim of low quality in the publications is unjustified, among others. They say a number of local researchers have received recognition recently as being highly cited in their research publications.

Some also blame the poor performance to the growing uncertainty around the funding of R&D.

Unlike developed nations where R&D funding has always been consistent, the situation here is the opposite. Ours has always been

short-term in nature. One good example is the funding given for high impact research. The funding stopped just after one phase despite the prolific achievements of the research.

The OECD report has clearly articulated the fact that R&D should always be considered a long-term investment. The commercialisation of R&D cannot be just an overnight affair. There are many examples of the innovations that are currently disrupting global businesses which took years, if not decades, to come to fruition.

A few of the academics interviewed have also expressed concern over the recent sudden drastic budget cuts. They say the situation will get worse going forward.

Whatever it is, there is a need to pay serious attention to the report. We need to evaluate it objectively and initiate the necessary steps to address some of the shortcomings mentioned. This may be a good time to start considering a recent indication that a National S&T Master Plan is being worked out at the Academy of Sciences Malaysia.

**PROF DATUK DR AHMAD
IBRAHIM**
Fellow Academy of Sciences
Malaysia
UCSI University