

KERATAN AKHBAR-AKHBAR TEMPATAN
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Bil	Tajuk	Akhbar
1	Crucial to restore momentum for R&D in budget	The Star

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Crucial to restore momentum for R&D in budget

THE year 2016 must count among the most challenging years for science and R&D in the country. It saw substantial cuts in the budget for R&D.

This has never happened before. Some put the cut at close to 70 percent. It was definitely a painful year for the R&D community. The research universities were especially badly affected not only by the drastic curtailment in R&D activities but also by the cuts in funding for their contract research professors.

Since R&D is an investment for the long term, such a drastic reduction in the financial allocation will have negative implications on the nation's resolve to use science and technology as the strategic weapon to prop up the nation's competitiveness.

Many are hoping for a reversal of the cuts in the soon to be announced Budget 2017.

Actually many among the science community were taken by surprise by the almost insane cuts in the R&D funding in 2016. This is especially crucial at a time when we want to use technology as the platform to spearhead our aspirations to become a fully developed economy.

The fact that technology supremacy breeds competitiveness and prosperity has been demonstrated many a time not only among the many developed economies but more so by the top businesses of the world.



It would be a serious mistake if we as a country do not recognise this fact. We are fortunate that the Prime Minister is a strong believer in the power of science and R&D.

We see clear evidence of this in the many science driven initiatives he has taken. One prominent action taken was the establishment of the Global Science Innovation Advisory Council, GSIAC.

A major outcome of GSIAC is the renewed vigour on STEM education. This is the education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics which is extremely

crucial in charting the nation's future in science.

A recent talk by a prominent futurist from the United Kingdom held at the Academy of Sciences highlighted the importance of science and technology in securing future opportunities in the global economy.

The drastic cuts in R&D spending in 2016 set back the nation by many years. All the hard work in R&D that was making good progress was suddenly stalled. It will prove more expensive to restart the whole process. A good example

concerned the funding that was allocated for high impact research hosted by the UM. Yes there was criticism about the poor coordination. But this could have been remedied. Closing the entire programme altogether is even more damaging.

We cannot afford to slow down the progress of science and in particular its R&D investment if we are to achieve our big dreams as enshrined in our New Economy Policy of high income with sustainability and inclusiveness.

In this respect we can look for

guidance from countries which have reaped the benefits of their long term commitment to R&D spending such as South Korea, Taiwan, Germany and the Scandinavian nations. Records have shown that all these countries would not slash their R&D allocations even during times of grave economic difficulties. This largely explains why these countries have scored enviable success in their pursuit of technology development and innovation.

Furthermore, we have yet to reach the international benchmark of R&D spending of three percent of GDP annually. So far our R&D spending has not even breached the one percent GDP barrier.

Reducing the allocation for R&D in 2016 did serious injustice to the momentum created during all these years. We must be reminded also of the fact that the spending in R&D caters for two important target objectives; developing innovation and building scientific talents.

Therefore, under Budget 2017, the science fraternity would like to appeal to the government to not only reinstate the R&D allocation according to the formula of the pre-2016 years, but also allocate more. It is in our long term interest.

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