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Linking academia with industry

THE great majority of academics and industrial leaders will agree that universities and industry should collaborate. Most realise that for research and education to have relevance and a positive impact on the nation, economy and society, direct industrial engagement and collaboration is not just good to have, but a fundamental necessity.

The benefits are tremendous, with inter alia enhancement of research and innovation through joint research projects, delivery of innovative commercial products, improvements in teaching, learning and enrichment of students' knowledge and their employability, as well as providing new streams of funding to universities.

Structurally, the agenda of academia-industry collaboration is embodied within our education system. The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) has highlighted the need to take collaboration between universities and industry to the next level by including the global prominence of universities as one of the 10 shifts in our higher education system.

Traditionally, universities have formalised collaboration with industry in the areas of curriculum development, teaching and learning, research and development, consultancy as well as securing suitable industrial placements for students as part and parcel of a university's core responsibilities.

But, there is room for improvement. For instance, there are mismatches in output from universities and industry expectations. Some industrial players find a great deal of the output of R&D from universities incomprehensible at best, and not relevant and obscure at worst. The mismatch in terms of the knowledge

and skills of graduates and what the employers expect are still prevalent in certain industries.

This could be due to the fact that many academic and research entities are structured to serve academic and predetermined research disciplines rather than the needs of industry. This may be accentuated further if programmes are not governed by professional bodies. Some faculties may not be responsive enough. Industrial engagement is a "nice to have" rather than a central part of some faculties' mission.

To address this deep-rooted problem, the structure, management and governance of universities and faculties need to be examined. And, an assessment has to be made to determine how many have the capability, capacity and drive to dedicate time and resources to create structural, systematic and institutionalised relationships with industry. The most appropriate place to begin is to think about the value that a faculty has for industry, namely the expertise of its human resource and its research and educational services. A lifetime in academia often means that academic staff have little or no direct experience of negotiating and delivering work to industrial players. Their skills and competencies need to be developed so that they understand and are able to work with industry which works at a faster pace. In addition, sporadically appointed staff from industry should be seen as an asset to a university. Training can be provided to equip academic staff with the skills to fit research requirements with business engagement priorities.

Although significant, it is still a small step compared with the need for full-blown institutional relationships between academia and indus-



try in the research and teaching domains. Best practice examples of faculties where there is a much closer relationship between practitioners and those who teach and undertake research can be developed.

Universities and faculties need to ensure that they have structures to support business ventures with industrial players. Committed teams that can introduce companies to a range of expertise are needed. There could be a number of routes to supporting a company, from relatively quick-fix student placements and projects, to longer-term research and development collaborations. The faculties need to be linked to all departments, including other faculties, placement offices, career service and research and commercial teams.

Each faculty within a university is in a unique position to support businesses by helping them to grow so that they can contribute to local and national economies. Universities cannot adopt a wait-and-see approach for these ventures to come to them. Resources should be channelled to meeting businesses and industries and utilising industrial networks through professional bodies, successful alumni and established industrial partners. Strategies should be boosted in terms of searching for partners, building trust, a shared knowledge base, organising the network, providing complementary resources and active cooperation. The concept of incubators in universities and industry moving their operations and business to universities should be an integral scene in our universities.

Universities can achieve more if they communicate directly with industrial players and take the trouble to understand the type of support these ventures need. An advisory board that allows each faculty to have top-level engagement with

business is vital. These boards must include members of the business community which they serve, as well as professional bodies, alumni and student representatives. The Advisory Boards Network is useful to showcase exemplars and best practices.

Fundamental changes must be made to the way that academic entities in universities are structured and the skills demanded of their staff. This way universities will ensure that collaboration with industry is at the heart of the action, from teaching to research.

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ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT: Universities need to have structures to support joint ventures with industrial players

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