

COMMENT

Nurturing community of scholars

CRITICAL: Their ideas, expertise can be used creatively for development



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THERE is talent in all fields among Malaysians of all age groups. The talent is often underutilised because of blind spots in leadership of mindset. The talent pool can be used to generate ideas on a whole range of initiatives for strategic development.

Conceptualising task forces, committees, brainstorming sessions and other channels to use such indigenous talent to solve recurring and emerging problems in the nation is one of the challenges of leadership for societal transformation. When such talent is not

used by the authorities, individuals with passions, will, nevertheless, still contribute as advocates in their areas of expertise through involvement in professional, civic or non-governmental organisations.

A case in point is the establishment of the Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers (Amer) and the Association of Behavioural Researchers on Asians (Abra). Since 2009, a small group of dedicated academicians has invested their time, energy, expertise in knowledge generation pertaining to human behaviour studies. They held 16 international conferences in Shah Alam, Kuching, Langkawi, Kota Kinabalu, Bandung, Fmagusta, Bangkok, Cairo, Hanoi, London, Berlin, Seoul and Istanbul. This year, four conferences will be held in Teheran, Jakarta, Barcelona and Izmir. All these conferences are self-financed.

The scholars had taken the initiatives under Universiti Teknologi Mara's (UiTM) Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies (cE-Bs) and later handed it to Amer and Abra. To date, more than 700 papers have been published in Elsevier's

Procedia Social and Behavioural Sciences with more than 400 of the papers indexed by Thomson Reuters CPCI (Conference Proceeding Citation Index; formerly known as ISI Proceedings).

The conferences under international collaborations have raised concerns relating to national development and quality of life. The multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches identified and studied problems such as fast-food consumption

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in relation to obesity, children's sense of attachment to the residential common open space, spiritual intelligence and food-hygiene practices, human-oriented designs in botanical gardens, environmental health in relation to neighbourhood planning, HIV/AIDS knowledge among young women in Malaysia, the effects of lively later life, and, young children's and teachers' behaviour as determined by classroom layout.

In view of the complex problems facing societies politically, economically, socially, culturally, religiously and developmentally, it has become more critical for changemasters to understand hu-

man behaviour. Scientific studies of human behaviours applying psychology, sociology, ethnography have existed for a long time. In the present era, such studies must embrace the built environment.

There have been studies of how rodent behaviour affect human behaviour in terms of gender and across stages of existence. Now, Malaysian academicians, together with their colleagues worldwide, have come to organise the community of scholars to do what they know to be important.

The scholarly exchanges are not just about knowledge sharing but also about joint research collaborations, and personal and professional bonding among the scholars. Beyond the collaborations is the nurturing of cross-cultural understanding for peace and cooperation. There is the potential of a critical mass of scholars who can influence the ruling elites in their societies and, in the region, to focus on national, regional and global development issues.

Academicians have begun to work across disciplines and supervise postgraduate students to conduct research in multidisciplinary areas, united by focus on in-built human behaviour and naturalistic environments. Increasingly, researchers are looking at problems and solutions from multidisciplinary perspectives. This research

attitude is gaining credibility, recognition, acceptance and support.

Such leading-edge knowledge, as contained in thousands of papers with imaginative and creative solutions to various kinds of problems, as well as ideas for strategic and operational initiatives, should not be left in conference papers and journals. Those who have responsibilities and resources and are in leadership positions to transform societies must use the talent available for quantum leaps in development. Not to do so would be to lose the opportunities of knowledge-based development initiatives and programmes through collaborations between administrators and academicians from all knowledge fields.

This collaboration will remain minimal for as long as the vast talent of scholars is not sought systematically and used practically with creativity and imagination. A new kind of leadership mindset, which uses the contributions of scholars seriously, is required if society is not to be left behind by others who are more proactive. Impactful transformation can only occur when changemasters understand the nature of human behaviour as the basis for driving real change.

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