Taylor's strengthens its research agenda

HAVING earned its reputation as a teaching university of high standard, Taylor's University is now progressively moving into research and scholarly development.

"A university cannot become world class by just engaging in teaching. The application of research and innovation in the curriculum will further enhance the learning aspect," says Taylor's University President and Vice Chancellor, Professor Datuk Dr Hassan Said.

"We need to have activities that nurture, disseminate and challenge knowledge to bring it to the forefront. We want to be known as not only the best in teaching, but also in research."

Dr Vikneswaran Nair, Director of Research and Development at Taylor's University, or projects that have commercial viability. It also assists staff in securing industrial, national and government ministries, local councils, the hotel and tourism industry, business and financial sectors, and the computing industry, among others.

"We are happy that last year 42 per cent of our applicants successfully received grants from the Ministry of Higher Education's Fundamental Research Grant Scheme," he says.

Many of the university's research projects are also supported by the industries, he maintains. "Bringing in the industries makes our research more relevant. The industries can give advice on the curriculum in terms of what is relevant and applicable in the marketplace."

"In fact, when a staff member is constantly engaged in research, he or she will become a better teacher who has more relevant and current knowledge and skills. Research enhances teaching, as it is applicable to the industries," adds Dr Vikneswaran.

Taylor’s research capabilities will be strengthened with the increase in the number of staff with PhD degrees. It also plays a key role in the growth of the university's research culture.
Dr Vikneswaran Nair, Director of Research and Development at Taylor’s University

The first strategy is to identify clear research priorities by defining clear policies and establishing clear procedures for management of research.

Secondly, the university aims to recruit qualified and competent researchers recognising research excellence via career advancement, awards and incentives.

Third, to encourage cooperation in research through further developing Taylor’s research centres and encouraging collaborations with external research partners.

Dr Vikneswaran, who has a doctorate in Systems Engineering (Ecotourism), specialises in research on Sustainable and Responsible Tourism, Ecotourism Management, Environmental Management, Community-based Tourism and Poverty Alleviation via Tourism.

He says Taylor’s Centre for Research & Development, that oversees and manages Taylor’s research operations, consists of two main units — Taylor’s Press, and the Research Commercialisation and Grant Unit.

Taylor’s Press handles all the academic and research publications for Taylor’s and also acts as a repository for researchers in getting their articles published in the top rank journals,” explains Dr Vikneswaran.

The Research Commercialisation and Grant Unit handles all potential projects for patent filing or projects that have commercial viability. It also assists staff in securing industrial, national and international research grants.

“Besides getting more grants, we plan to give more space for research within the university by creating more research centres and making innovation more visible,” adds Dr Vikneswaran.

Funding for research

To strengthen its research culture, Taylor’s University invests and allocates a substantial amount of funds for its research endeavours.

“We provide internal grants for fundamental and applied research that has clear research output. Each year we allocate RM300,000 for academic staff to jumpstart research projects,” says Professor Hassan.

“For this year, RM1.4 million has been allocated for research-related activities, such as presenting research papers at overseas conferences, publishing books and filing for patents,” he adds.

He says the university is also working to get international grants through existing international partnerships. Taylor’s has had many successful partnerships with many research papers jointly funded by partner universities in Australia, the UK and Europe.

The vice-chancellor hopes to have more collaboration in research and consultancy projects with other public universities in Malaysia, projects are also supported by the industries, he maintains.

“Bringing in the industries makes our research more relevant. The industries can give advice on the commercial viability in terms of what is relevant and applicable in the marketplace.”

Contribution to knowledge

Meanwhile, Dr Vikneswaran says ‘s besides commercialisation, a main goal of academic research is the contribution to the corpus of knowledge. Hence, publication in relevant journals and books should be a target for many researchers.

“Of course, academic research should also have the objective of contributing to society and the industry,” he continues.

“It is pointless to be a top scholar who has published in the top ranked journals if one’s findings have no significance to society or industry. For a private university like Taylor’s, the significance of the research output and the commercial viability of the research outcomes are important,” he says.

He maintains that although R&D support in Malaysia is skewed towards science and technology, the role of research in social sciences has become more important and governments have expanded to encourage more fundamental research in social sciences.

Teaching and research

Both these academics believe that the emphasis on research would not jeopardise the quality of teaching at Taylor’s, whose academic staff have a contractual obligation to undertake research, whether within the institution, or in collaboration with the

projects are constantly engaged in research, he or she will become a better teacher who has more relevant and current knowledge and skills. Research enhances teaching as it is applicable to the industries,” adds Dr Vikneswaran.

Taylor’s research capabilities will be strengthened with the increase in the number of staff with PhD qualifications and the increase in the number of PhD programmes.

Currently, the university has almost 25 per cent of academic staff with doctorates and it aims to increase the figure to 40 per cent by 2015. It also hopes to double the current 150 full-time postgraduate students by the end of the year.

Fostering a research culture

Finally, in what ways can research culture be encouraged in universities?

Professor Hassan says, “First of all, one must have people who can deliver and provide leadership. Next, there must be a properly developed system with clear policies, research structures, incentives, promotions such as providing means to climb the ladder to professorship, allowing sabbatical leaves to conduct research overseas and providing flexible teaching hours.”

“Last but not least, there must be proper support in terms of having the infrastructure and facilities for research to be carried out.” The Vice-Chancellor concludes by saying that the time is ripe to build research capabilities but if the culture is not early and correctly, universities can succeed in their research endeavours.
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