

PRIME NEWS

PM hears universities' concerns

BUDGET CUTS: Be aware that the govt is preparing 2017 Budget, says Najib

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THE prime minister has assured public universities in the country, worried about their finances, that he has heard them loud and clear.

Datuk Seri Najib Razak said he took note of the fact that academicians in the country's institutions of higher learning had been asking the government to increase allocations for their research and development (R&D) activities.

"I understand, I read the newspaper today (yesterday). Perhaps, they are all aware that the government is in the midst of preparing the 2017 Budget.

"I understand, I hear you. I get the message," he said before officiating Universiti Teknologi Mara's 60th anniversary celebration here yesterday.

Present were senior representatives from other public universities, Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh and his deputy, Datuk Dr Mary Yap Kain Ching.

The 5,000-strong members of the higher-education community were



in stitches when Najib, who is also the finance minister, said: "In the (NST) report, they (university heads) were lobbying the finance minister to increase the allocation for R&D".

They responded with a loud applause when Najib proceeded to assure them that their plea had not fallen on deaf ears.

The *New Straits Times* yesterday

front-paged a story, headlined "Public varsities' cry for help".

It touched extensively on the slashing of operational budgets, which had brought many to their knees, with some having to abandon their research.

In exclusive interviews with the NST, several university heads said the allocation cuts they faced last year alone had led to a host of prob-

lems, leading to massive adverse cascading effects.

Their cases were supported by the Malaysian Academic Association Congress, which said many faculties had seen scores of their researchers abandoning their studies.

The congress said the limitation was not only due to the tight university budgets currently available to them, but also because of the in-

sufficient financial incentives for research assistants.

The event was also beamed live to 30,000 viewers through the university's live streaming portal.

Najib told them that access to quality education was the benchmark for a developed nation which enjoyed an advanced economy.

The prime minister's statement was well received by industry leaders. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Dr Wahid Omar, who thanked Najib for his positive response, ensured that the university would do its part to produce talents of high calibre.

"We are rapidly preparing ourselves to adapt to this new reality, to change our business model to be more financially sustainable."

National Council of Professors chief executive officer and secretary-general Professor Datuk Dr Raduan Che Rose said in general, academicians would need a higher budget allocated for R&D in order for the sector to be competitive and increase its gross domestic product from 1.2 per cent to 1.5 per cent.

"I hope there will be no further reduction in the budget allocation. At the same time, all higher learning institutions will have to start generating income of at least 30 per cent from the total operating budget."

Universiti Putra Malaysia vice-chancellor Professor Datin Dr Aini Ideris thanked the prime minister for placing great importance on the country's higher education and his support for the R&D sector.

The front page of the 'New Straits Times' on the budget cuts in public varsities yesterday.