

# Audits on research funding

IN her letter "Rot in pursuit of research" (*The Star*, May 16), Dr Jaspreet Kaur made some observations on research conducted by postgraduate students in the medical faculties of public universities. We would like to respond to two of the observations made. The first is the lack of responsibility of academics in conceiving, monitoring and publishing their research, with many of them passing these matters onto their postgraduate students. The second is the channeling and use of research funds.

In medical faculties of public universities, postgraduate research constitutes a full research degree, namely a Master of Science (MSc) or Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree (which typically entails a research project that runs the course of two to four years, culminating in a written thesis and *viva voce*) or a Master of Medicine (MMed) degree (a structured training programme of four years for medical specialisation), which includes a dissertation component involving original research.

Research dissertations for the latter are typically narrower in scope and conducted in a shorter period of time compared to MSc and PhD research degrees. The aim of the research component within MMed programmes is to encourage critical thinking and expose medical trainees to scientific practices to advance their areas of specialisation.

We recognise the fundamental need for good supervision in research. It is also important to recognise that research is an apprenticeship and a continuous process. It is neither a subject that can be taught in a classroom nor within a short period.

Research skills are acquired, sharpened and perfected over time and gained from experience. It encompasses knowledge, acquisition of scientific skills and expansion of scientific intellect. It is this that can make research bewildering and frustrating.

With this understanding, many steps are taken to guide postgraduate students in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and other public universities, from the initial enrichment with relevant knowledge to the gradual development to conduct sound research.

Postgraduates take a research methodology course for a strong foundation on experimental design and statistics. Their research proposal is evaluated by a panel of experts to ensure a sound study design and execution of the research.

Postgraduate students also take subjects within their area of specialisation to equip themselves with the latest relevant knowledge. Online evaluations are conducted every semester by the student and supervisor to monitor progress, along with personal meetings with the supervisory team to identify

any emerging problems during the term of study.

Postgraduate studies are also governed closely at the faculty level, especially in handling academic-related problems during the candidature, providing periodic scholarships, monitoring students' progress and conducting regular seminars and training to develop their skills in research. At our faculty, we also provide tailor-made training and conduct manuscript writing and research clinics to assist students all year round.

It is necessary to clarify the second issue raised by Dr Jaspreet with regards to research fund management by academics.

Procurement and use of research funds is closely monitored by both the funding bodies and universities. At the university level, research funds are managed by research management centres that administer and govern grant expenditures. Progress of funded research projects have to be periodically reported to the university and the funding bodies.

At the faculty, expenditures of research funds involve at least two tiers of control, one at the department level and the other typically at the office of the deputy dean for research. This gives a near zero chance for misuse and misappropriation of research funds.

In the occasion of lack of research funding, the university provides small-scale funds to post-

graduate students for sustaining their research.

Universities are essential hubs for research in Malaysia, whereby academics generate research ideas and procure funding while postgraduate students execute the research with the guidance of their supervisors. The two-way interaction between academics and postgraduate students are well governed by the university.

In order to sustain this symbiosis, firmly regulated systems are in place to ensure the proper execution of postgraduate supervision and research expenditure. Nevertheless, the student-supervisor relationship operates on good practices and sound ethics of both academics and postgraduate students.

Bearing this in mind, there are indeed instances where the norms of the process are breached by less than ethical individuals, who are the actual "microscopic minority" of the university ecosystem, and there are reporting mechanisms in place for such instances.

Excellence in research practices are not achieved instantaneously. They are improved upon steadfastly, and with commitment.

In short, it is a continued pursuit of excellence.

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