

Academic research: Try the stick approach instead

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I REFER to the article "Paper chaste amid paper chase" in Learning Curve (NST, Oct 2) by Dr Koh Aik Khoon.

No system of evaluation is perfect and Koh seems unduly apprehensive about the possible pitfalls when universities use scholarly publications as an important evaluation criterion for career advancement.

The fact that academic staff are paid handsomely for publishing in leading journals adds to his concern.

It would appear that some academics look upon the reward-for-publication scheme with disdain since, to them, academia is all about "selfless search for truth without undue (sic) regard for financial incentive".

One wonders if the reason universities offer material incentives is that there are too few of such principled individuals.

Nevertheless, other avenues are available to encourage productivity and scholarship without offending the lofty ethos and principles that Koh speaks of.

Lest the many highly principled academics be affronted by the offering of carrots, the administration may want to consider the alternative: the stick.

If incentives are really something academics frown upon, then try disincentives. With this approach, it would not even be necessary for universities to set aside budgets to get the job done.

In many renowned universities in the West, tenure with the university is denied to underperforming academics.

Here, an overly short publication list looms among the major demerits that slackers need to guard against. Denial of tenure is just the start.

If they continue with the lacklustre performance, they are likely to receive from the universities invitations they cannot refuse: invitations to resign. Malaysian universities should consider a similar low-cost yet highly effective option.

We are told that physicist Richard Feynman won the Nobel Prize despite having only 47 papers to his credit.

My understanding is that, in staff evaluation, many universities apply the Hirsch Index that balances the number of publications with the frequency such publications are cited by others. Hence, the quality of research output is moderated against quantity.

In any case, should a Malaysian professor win the Nobel Prize, I have this feeling that the university

administration would not quibble too much about the number of his scholarly papers, even if that total is 47.

As regards to academic misconduct, another of Koh's concerns, this seems overblown. Issues about integrity in research publications are like plane crashes. They get in the news precisely because such events are so rare.

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