KUALA LUMPUR: A Malaysian researcher played a key role in a global research project which shows that reduced sodium intake can lead to health problems, potentially leading to death.

UCSI University vice chancellor, Senior Prof Datuk Dr Khalid Yusoff is a member of the Prospective Urban Rural Epidemiological (PURE) study's global steering committee. He oversaw the running of the study in Malaysia which involved 15,000 people, around 15pc of the global sample size.

The PURE study is the largest international study on sodium intake and health outcomes to date and adds considerable strength to the contention that a moderate sodium intake is optimal.

Its findings have been published in the New England Journal of Medicine, the world's leading medical journal. The study, which tested 101,945 people from 18 countries for almost four years, shows that while a low sodium diet does indeed reduce blood pressure modestly, it comes with side effects.

This includes an adverse elevation of certain hormones like the renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system that regulates the body's water and salt balance, increasing the risk of strokes, heart attacks and other cardiovascular complications. The PURE study also shows that a diet high in potassium, one with fish, fruits, beans and vegetables, is essential to the normal functioning of the body, including the function of nerves, heart and the kidney.

On his involvement with the PURE study, Khalid said Malaysian academics could play key roles in international research and more should seek to advance the pursuit of knowledge.

"For the past few years, much emphasis has been given to research," he said. "This, in general, is great but let us not do research for the sake of it. Regardless of the field, research should focus on pertinent matters that ultimately benefit humanity."

Sharing Khalid's passion for research, UCSI's deputy vice chancellor (Research and Postgraduate Studies) Prof Datuk Dr Nizam Ismail does much to bolster the university's research credentials.

Much of it has to do with his presence alone. A specialist in genomic medicine and human genetics, Nizam's pioneering work in the field has garnered him many "firsts": including being the founding director of the first Human Genome Centre in Malaysia back in 1993.

In that capacity, his work has paved the way for the future of genomic medicine in Malaysia—something that he calls his "vision and legacy for the future of Malaysians to advance in human genetics". "What research I could not do at the time due to technological constraints, the lack of research funding, or the lack of public awareness, the path has been paved for others to pursue it now," he said, adding that the centre is still pursuing advanced research in genomic medicine.

Nizam points out that UCSI is already making an impact in research that matters. Many of its staff members are experienced researchers with notable projects and respected publications that have been funded by local and international research grants.

For example, Khalid's PURE study was funded by international grants including from the Hamilton Health Science. Other active researchers from the university have secured research grants from Malaysia's Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MOSTI) and Ministry of Education (MOE), such as the eScience Fund and the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS).

Research within the university covers various fields including applied sciences, medicine, pharmacy, business, information science, engineering, and nano technology, just to name a few.

According to Nizam, it is a common misconception that UCSI is new to research—its substantial body of research projects and international publications by staff members clearly prove otherwise. The Office of Research and Postgraduate Studies plans to change that by consolidating and highlighting such achievements.

"The team's aim is to harness these talents and projects, and to channel them to the relevant national and international authorities to support grant acquisitions," he said, adding that the funding will further support quality research work.