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Let's make Biotechnology 2.0 priority



Biotechnology 1.0, our first attempt to embrace biotechnology, was launched in 2005. The initiative was lauded by scientists and the people as a new business opportunity for the country. - NSTP file pic

LETTERS: Biotechnology 1.0, our first attempt to embrace biotechnology, was launched in 2005. The initiative was lauded by scientists and the people as a new business opportunity for the country.

It created a lot of excitement among science students as the promise of biotechnology jobs sounded convincing. It was natural for many Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia graduates to enrol in biotechnology courses, believing that there would be a plethora of job opportunities.

The government established the Malaysian Biotechnology Corporation to helm that big agenda for the nation. Three biotechnology laboratories were built to host the nation's R&D in genomics, agricultural biotechnology and pharmaceutical biotechnology. They were placed under the management of the National Institutes of Biotechnology Malaysia.

It was unfortunate that Biotechnology 1.0 did not deliver much of what was promised. The biotechnology industry, which was supposed to provide jobs for graduates, never materialised.

At that time, there was already talk about Malaysia becoming an active player in vaccine research. 9Bio was formed under the Health Ministry to coordinate that. It never saw the light of day. Biotechnology graduates mostly ended up doing entirely different jobs.

The wrong companies were given biotechnology status, which was used to access government grants. The three biotechnology laboratories had sophisticated equipment but not much funding for research.

Recently, the (now caretaker) prime minister launched a new biotechnology policy called Biotechnology 2.0. Some new elements of the policy talk about creating a biotechnology network alliance among centres in the country.

This is a great idea to build collaboration among parties in biotechnology. The fact that the new policy calls for stronger collaboration among ministries is also the right move.

I suggest putting the new policy under the Economic Planning Unit (EPU). The newly established Research Management Unit of the EPU should be given the task to coordinate the implementation of Biotechnology 2.0.

There must be stronger participation by industry players. International collaboration with technology partners in biotechnology should be a key feature of Biotechnology 2.0.

Reviving the nation's biotechnology agenda is the right move for the economy. Biotechnology is spreading its wings into many areas of human endeavour. Vaccine development is what many have become familiar with because of the pandemic. There are many other areas such as food production, sustainable manufacturing, agriculture and even the circular economy that the world is now discussing. Energy biotechnology is also a hot research topic with the rise in interest in renewable energy, not to mention the world's increasing engagement on the issues of waste and the environment. The topics of hydrogen, biomass and the blue economy under the 12th Malaysia Plan also involve much biotechnology.

There is no doubt that biotechnology will continue to impact many sectors of the global economy. Biotechnology 2.0 should be a priority on our national agenda as we continue to diversify our economic base.

It is also the right sector to invest in as we pursue a high-income status. But we should not repeat the mistakes of the past.

We should have closer collaboration between academia and industry, more interministerial partnership, and tap the best talent available both locally and internationally.

The EPU would be the right body to move this agenda forward. Let's make Biotechnology 2.0 happen!