

Better perks will attract more to take up science

August 24, 2023 @ 12:02am



The latest estimate suggests less than 30 per cent opt to do STEM. The earlier national target of 60 per cent has not been realised.- NSTP file pic

LETTERS: Despite years of promoting STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), we continue to see declining interest among students.

The latest estimate suggests less than 30 per cent opt to do STEM. The earlier national target of 60 per cent has not been realised.

Of the 30 per cent that have chosen STEM, a majority do so to become medical doctors and engineers — professions that promise better pay. Very few do science to be scientists, as in research and development and teaching.

The main reason for this low preference is very much attributed to the less attractive career opportunities for research scientists. This must change if we want to attract more students to take up STEM.

ADVERTISING

The service scheme for scientists, for starters, must be more enticing. For a long time, researchers and scientists have urged for change.

I remember in the 1980s, the late Tan Sri B.C. Sekhar, one of the country's prominent scientists, raised the issue of making a career in science more attractive. He proposed the establishment of a scientific civil service.

In view of the recent announcement by the government to review the salary scheme of civil servants, it may be timely to revisit the idea of creating a dedicated service scheme for research scientists.

Apart from improving the salary scheme, the service must allow the free movement of researchers across the civil service. This would facilitate better collaboration among the scientists.

Admittedly, there is too much duplication now. The proposal to formalise R&D alliance on the priority research topics, including energy, water, waste and digitalisation, has not been properly evaluated. Such an alliance would facilitate the movement of scientists under the scheme.

Few would dispute that all the grouses that have emerged in recent years can be attributed to the fact that the country has not risen above the middle-income economic trap. Apart from the rising living costs, most of the new jobs created are not high paying ones.

We have yet to embrace the high-income economy that we aspire to. The reasons are obvious. We lack the high-value, high technology industries. We are still very dependent on imported low-cost labour.

Our commodity business is more about the low value upstream than the added value downstream. We are not attracting the right foreign direct investments either.

Most are involved only in assembly, not design and marketing. Assembling is the lowest in the manufacturing value chain. No wonder, many of our talents have left for better pay elsewhere. Many are scientists.

At the same time, a low percentage of students opt for science. We mostly need graduates who excel in new technology such as digitalisation, biotechnology, robotics, automation, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence and renewable energy.

The research that they do must be market- and industry-driven, and not just for the sake of new knowledge. This can only happen if more students study to become scientists.

We cannot deny the fact that all students choose to pursue subjects that promise good careers. Therefore, it goes without saying that if we truly want to excel in the innovation-driven high-technology economy, the service scheme for scientists must be more attractive.

The new salary revision must seriously consider this.

PROFESSOR DATUK DR AHMAD IBRAHIM

Tan Sri Omar Centre for STI Policy, UCSI University