Sustaining the nation beyond 2020

CHALLENGING TIMES:
Having the right science talent and good governance crucial to Malaysia’s survival

THERE is no denying that sustaining the nation is the country’s biggest agenda. All our planning aim for only one thing. And, that is to achieve sustainable growth and development with inclusiveness.

Inclusiveness means the nation’s economic success must reach all sectors of society. At the same time, future generations must not be deprived of the same opportunities we enjoy today. It is therefore imperative that serious attention is directed towards the major factors of growth. These include the need to have good talent, reliable and efficient infrastructure, strategic investment in lucrative ventures, accessibility to clean energy and water, and an efficient health infrastructure. Not to mention a vibrant natural ecosystem that continues to deliver the many intangible services we need.

How can we do this? The Academy of Sciences recently hosted a general assembly to discuss the topic, “Malaysia Beyond 2020”. With a panel comprising representatives from the government, academia and industry, the dialogue proved both constructive and educational. At the end of the discourse, the panel was unanimous on one thing. Unless we invest in the right strategy now, the road ahead can be bumpy and challenging.

All agreed on the fact that going by current statistics, the nation should not have much problem achieving the high-income target set for 2020. Recent growth numbers have boosted the optimism that we will soon be a fully developed nation. However, there is concern about the years after 2020. How can we sustain the country’s growth trajectory? By then, we would be a high-income nation. High income means high cost. As a high-cost country, gone are the days when we would compete only in the low-value commodity economy. As a developed nation, our competitiveness will have to be strengthened in the higher value products and services. This is where technology would be a key determining factor.

The question posed was: is the nation prepared to face the new era of competition? And, what should we do to make sure we will be ready come 2020? It is only a matter of five years. In fact, the next Malaysia Plan, which is the 11th, is a crucial period for the nation. Any misplaced emphasis for the period 2016-2020 will have serious repercussions on how the nation will perform after 2020. All the panelists and the audience, comprising mainly fellows of the Academy, could not hide their apprehension about the future of talent in science, technology and innovation. Going by the current declining interest among students to take up science, the future on the human capital aspect is quite depressing. How can we arrest this decline? One thing is for sure. We need to make the profession of research scientists more attractive to the young.

The government is already aware of this fact. The latest (Malaysia) Education Blueprint (2013-2025) has spelt out some possible remedial actions. The Academy has been pushing for more adoption of the inquiry-based learning for science. Unfortunately, implementing such measures has not been easy. Getting good science teachers remains a major challenge. It may be time to improve the service scheme for science teachers. It should attract the best brains to take up the teaching of science. The package should include not only attractive pay scheme but also better career opportunities. For example, they can be automatically supported for further studies and eventually become professors at the tertiary level.

If having the right science talent is crucial to sustain the nation beyond 2020, then good governance of science is critical. Without effective governance, it will prove difficult dealing with the efficient management of the investment in scientific research and development. Already concerns have been raised on the choice of projects that should be supported. Often times, they are not in line with the nation’s priority areas. The monitoring and evaluation of ongoing projects have also been criticised for their weaknesses. Investment in science is not cheap.

In order to maximise value for money, good governance is critical. Unless the issues of governance and talent are properly addressed, sustaining the nation beyond 2020 may be challenging.

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