

Creating biotech talent pool

Mar 06, 2006

It is important to create a learning program in the area of biotechnology and its ancillary fields.

Dr Krishna M Ella

CMD, Bharat Biotech International Ltd (BBIL)

Indian biotechnology is gathering momentum. After decades spent in debating its tangible benefits, the scientific world, rediscovered its immense potential only in the last one and half decade. Indian biotech industry is expected to grow to \$1.45 billion shortly.

The single-minded and dedicated efforts of illustrious scientists such as Dr RA Mashelkar and Prof. G Padmanaban and others, have brought this science that can develop life-saving vaccines to combat infectious diseases and path-breaking therapeutics to counter congenital and acquired disease patterns of the world, to the forefront of scientific research and development.

Over the next few years, India is slated to become a major center for custom research, and clinical and biological services. It is already the second largest manufacturer of vaccines used by children and these are exported to over 100 countries.

Biotech firms in India have prepared themselves for an intense phase that would test the ultimate enterprise and intuitive knowledge of Indian scientific and industrial community in the product patent era.

Human resource issues

The rate at which, the biotechnology industry in India is progressing is heart-warming. But the same cannot be said about the human resource in biotechnology. There are several issues that need to be tackled to ensure the progress that has been made in this sector.

The issues can be divided into main aspects:

Biotech curricula

Training in practical aspects

Forging industry-academia partnerships

Creating policy framework

Creating awareness about biotechnology

Nurture and promote bioentrepreneurship

Biotech curricula

The course content of biotechnology as a subject in India needs an immediate relook. Unlike pharma education, which is historically well established with organized syllabus, adequate lab exposure and training, Biotechnology curricula is still evolving. Due to lack of exposure, many colleges and universities in the country offering biotech courses are not offering a standardized content material. The course content seems to swing between being either too academic or too general without any specific, well-planned practical training or lab exposure.

The faculty, too seem unaware of the revolutionary changes taking place in industrial biotechnology in the areas of production, R&D, GMP guidelines among others.

A look at the student output in biotech reveals this:

1,50,000 M.Sc

3,50,000 B.Sc

Fewer post-doctorals compared to the US

Majority have no exposure to industrial research

This puts biotechnology students at a disadvantage when they set out to carve their career path in the industrial sector.

To fulfil the above requirements, it is important to create a learning program in the area of biotechnology and its ancillary fields. The need of the hour is to envisage a multidisciplinary curriculum that will cover all aspects of

biotechnology including understanding process principles, experimentation, animal and plant technologies, bioinformatics, basics of project management, IPR issues, business values and finances in BT.

Separate modules for students and corporates, which will focus on different themes, are needed. The student course will emphasize on practical hands-on training, teaching the ethics of GLP and a fundamental know-how of BT management.

Training in practical aspects

Unlike IT courses where lab exposure is minimal, it is imperative that we understand the significance of providing hands-on experience for biotechnology students.

The BSc course in biotechnology, started in a few colleges in the country, about a decade ago, as a vocational program of the UGC, with UGC's syllabus, guidelines and financial support. But subsequently, several colleges in the country were given affiliation for BSc, biotechnology, ignoring UGC's norms regarding sanctioning vocational courses, with the same regulations and syllabus. This needs to be addressed immediately.

Creating vocational courses will ensure a steady stream of HR for biotech industry. This spark off another essential aspect – entrepreneurship.

The state governments and the Department of Biotechnology, with the certainly feasible support from and collaboration with the industry, establish instrumentation and training centers in a few key locations in different states, where students can get trained and research workers can get instrumentation services on payment of prescribed charges so that expensive facilities required for most of education and training in biotechnology need not be duplicated.

Taking one step further, it is imperative to create educational opportunities for professionals from related fields such as pharma to hone the necessary skills for creating their career path with biotechnology industry. The council could actively create educational resources, self-training modules, information about advanced courses, research and fellowship opportunities, and links to various conferences and meetings around the world.

Forging industry-academia partnerships

In the last two decades a new entity has emerged on the campuses of America's research universities. This entity is known as the University-Industry Research Center or UIRC. Such centers are composed of research groups whose focus is on problems that have relevance to a particular sector of industry; often the centers receive support from that industry. In 1990, more than 1,000 existed and involved more than 35,000 faculty and researchers and 17,000 PhD students. Many more exist today. Why are universities creating such centers?

Strictly speaking, universities are not creating them. In an extensive survey of UIRCs, it was determined that individual faculty members, not university administrations, typically provide the impetus for the center. Motivations vary, but the need to create funding alternatives to declining or uncertain federal support is important, as is the desire to turn research efforts to a practical end. Additionally, nearly one quarter of all US PhD recipients in the sciences are finding positions in industry; so students are looking for training that is relevant to their career prospects.

In India, Bharat Biotech has set such an example. The Bharat Biotech Foundation is recognized by the JNTU, Hyderabad to execute academic research through a doctoral program in biotechnology.

From an institutional viewpoint, centers like the above cited ones represent one way that the value of academic research can be realized to benefit the institution.

Nurture and promote bioentrepreneurship

Despite the efforts of thinkers, biotechnology in India, for a long time, remained in the safe waters of premier, academic and scientific institutions. Thoughts of one scientist illustrates this - "Scientists are not supposed to think about the economic perspective on research and development projects. A scientist's work is supposed to provide scientific knowledge. Economics is quite another discipline..."

This mindset has to change. This decade, which is all set to see a biotechnology boom, will belong to those who have the power to convert their dreams into reality. In other words, it will see the rise of the bioentrepreneur. The ones who will move away from the safe waters of the laboratory and convert a patentable/testable research dream into a viable business proposition.

India has the potential to become very strong in biotechnology. There has been a phenomenal increase in the number of start-up companies in this area in the last five years. While the current size of the industry is \$1 billion, it is expected to grow at 25-30 percent. India ranks third in Asia in patent filings.

Every bioentrepreneur must thoroughly understand the grassroots features of the biotechnology sector such as

research, collaboration, infrastructure, technology and commercialization capital and come up with an alternative business model to achieve success.