

Headline **Structured collaboration**  
Date **22. Dec 2008**  
Media Title **The Edge**  
Section **NetV@lue 2.0**  
Circulation **21864**  
Readership **100000**

Language **ENGLISH**  
Page No **1,6**  
Article Size **985** cm2  
Frequency **Weekly**  
Color **Full Color**  
AdValue **15247.79**



(From left) Zaini Ujang of UTM, Mohd Nazalan of USM, Iskandar, Abu Bakar Salleh of UPM, Zaharudin, Datuk Sulaiman Md Yassin of UMT, Datuk Ghauth Jasmon of UM, Mohamad Kamal Harun of UTM, Datuk Syed Arabi Iddid of IIUM and Che Ab Rahim Nik of FRIM

## Structured collaboration

| BY KARAMJIT SINGH |

**T**wo years before the start of the commercialisation phase of the National Biotech Policy in 2011, Biotech Corp is busy rolling out programmes to meet the objective of Phase One — capacity building.

Its latest initiative on this took place last week when it signed up seven leading public universities and one research institution in what it termed a “groundbreaking public-private agreement to increase access to high-end research in Malaysia”. This comes under a programme called BioNexus Partners (BNP).

Biotech Corp’s CEO Datuk Iskandar Mizal Mahmood says the agreement is groundbreaking in the sense that previous efforts to get universities and the private sector to collaborate were piecemeal and “without the guidance of a government agency that understands the science and business side of things”. He feels this was why previous efforts did not have too much success. “We now have a structured platform with milestones where we will continuously monitor how our partners do,” adds Iskandar.

For entrepreneurs and private firms sceptical of the programme — and there are already cynical comments — there is one key difference. Biotech Corp is putting money on the table in the form of a yearly cash payment which the partners can use for maintenance of laboratories and, more importantly, training and developing their people. This is smart use of funding because one of the key complaints of industry is that university labs are not well maintained and the quality of talent leaves much to be desired.

Iskandar says the yearly renewal of BNP is not automatic. “We will closely monitor our partners, looking at metrics like how many collaborative agreements they have done in the year, for how many hours the labs have



**We will closely monitor our partners, looking at metrics like how many collaborative agreements they have done in the year, for how many hours the labs have been utilised in the year and the number of interactions the programme partners have with the private sector and entrepreneurs — Iskandar**

been utilised in the year and the number of interactions the programme partners have with the private sector and entrepreneurs. Renewal will be based on performance,” he says. In return, these laboratories will be required to guarantee BioNexus companies and other relevant commercial entities access to the

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## GLCs and tech parks to be roped in too

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facilities and services they offer.

If the BNP goes on as envisioned, it will be a great boost for industry and will ultimately be a boon for the BNP partners too as their researchers will get more exposure in the private sector.

Because of the financial element involved, it is not automatic for any university or research institution to come in and become part of the BNP. They have to first prove to Biotech Corp that they already have a certain number of collaborations in place.

The BNP is not restricted to publicly funded institutes of higher learning and research institutions. Technology parks, incubators and government-linked companies (GLCs) will also be roped in, says Iskandar.

Biotech Corp is talking to the large GLCs, specifically those involved in agriculture, biotechnology and plantation sciences.

Thus far, Biotech Corp has 20 partners in the programme. Its target is to



increase this pool of partners in 2009 and achieving 50 partners by the end of its "capacity-building phase" in 2010. Incidentally, some of the seven universities involved have more than one research laboratory, which is why Biotech Corp claims 20 partners at present.

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— Zaharudin

ways in which industry can tap into the knowledge base that has been generated by these leading institutions in related science fields. Given the magnitude of this programme, it is very important for us to then work with institutions of the highest standards in terms of expertise and professionalism," says Tan Sri Ahmad Zaharudin Idrus, chairman of Biotech Corp.

The BNP programme has several key objectives:

- To fulfil the BioNexus Bill of Guar-

antee item No 8, concerning "access to shared laboratories and other related facilities".

- To provide a mechanism for laboratories and units from qualifying public institutes of higher learning, research institutions and many others to "plug in" to the BioNexus network and support, and at the same time to collaborate with BioNexus companies and other relevant commercial entities.
- To support and develop laboratories and facilities that are of particular use to the BioNexus companies and other relevant commercial entities. This is done through targeted financial and non-financial incentives.
- To maximise the visibility and utilisation of key facilities, equipment and services within institutes of higher learning, research institutions and many others.
- To provide an avenue for human resource development through institutes of higher learning, research institutions and industry partnering.

The seven public universities and the research institution appointed in 2008 are: Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM).

It is noteworthy that Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Universiti Sarawak Malaysia are not partners yet. Iskandar says they both applied later than the current batch of partners.

Other institutions with research facilities which are interested in being a BNP partner can visit the BNP section of Biotech Corp's Triple Helix portal [www.biotechcorp.com.my/triplehelix](http://www.biotechcorp.com.my/triplehelix). Direct online enquires or booking of facilities, equipment and services with respective BNP laboratories are also available via the portal. ■