

Covid-19 Sparks Interest in Science

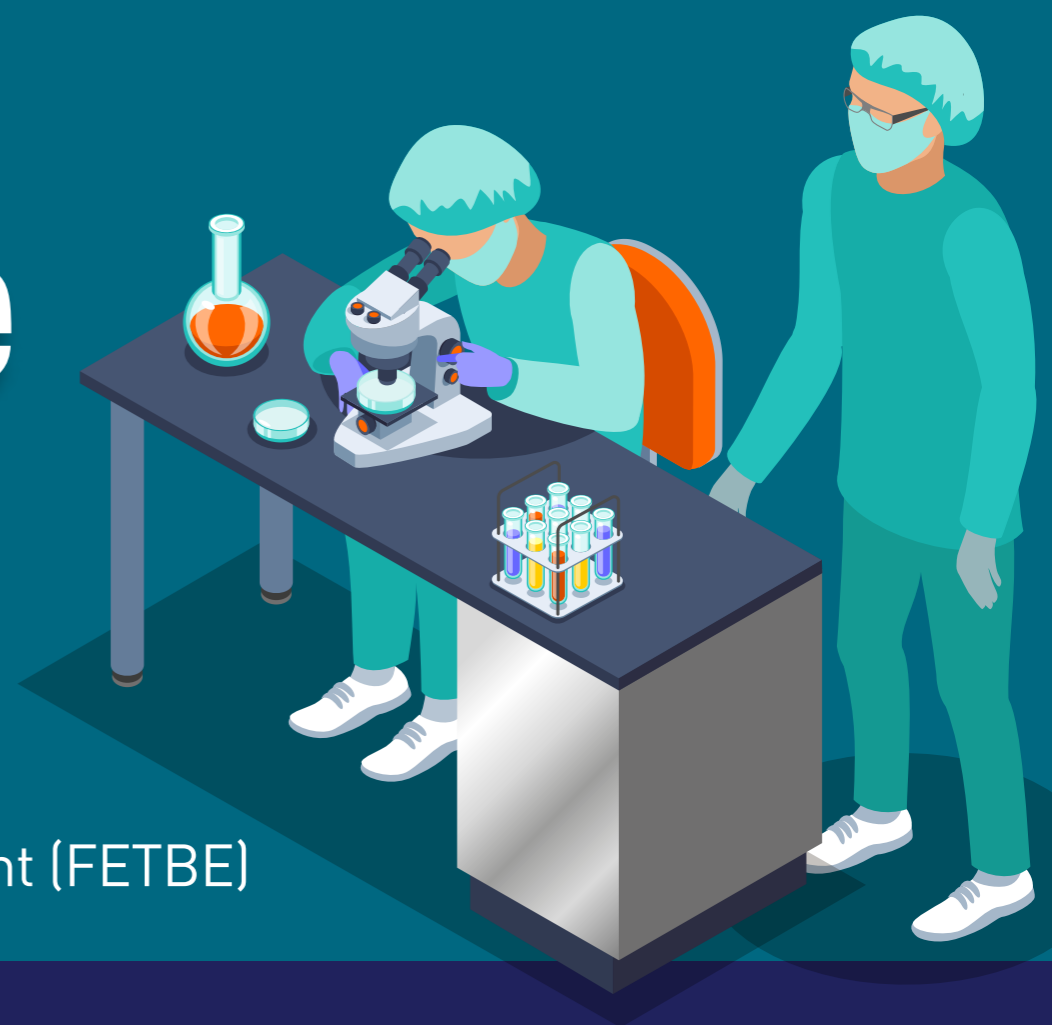
By

Professor Dato' Dr Ahmad Ibrahim

Fellow, Academy of Sciences Malaysia

Department of Chemical & Petroleum Engineering

Faculty of Engineering, Technology & Build Environment (FETBE)



Science has been under the microscope throughout the Covid-19 pandemic as scientists are busy doing research on the virus. Some share their findings in journals such as Lancet. They observe how the virus mutates, making testing challenging. There are articles elucidating on the disease-causing mechanism of the virus, with debates on whether the virus attack is targeted at the lung or other organs of the body. While recent evidence on the thickening of the blood has been shared by some researchers, a conclusion on such finding has yet to be drawn. Many research discussions are also shared on social media. This is healthy as creating science literacy among society is a big global agenda. The public now has a chance to witness the complex process of generating scientific knowledge. It is good that science is under such public scrutiny. Many now agree that science is among the tools vital in managing the Covid-19 outbreak.

Malaysia is among countries that have delegated the management of the pandemic to science. Malaysian Director General of Health, Datuk Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah, who has been receiving international praise for his leadership in managing the health crisis, has shown excellent articulation in his daily briefings. He has communicated well even to a lay person on the science of the pandemic, which has helped persuade the general public to follow the many recommendations on social distancing and hygiene. The Malaysian government's wise decision in calling for scientists to lead the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic is indeed something worthy of an applause. Countries including South Korea, Germany, Singapore, China and Japan are among those that also place science professionals in the leadership position, as they work closely with the World Health Organization (WHO) - an entity that has also been relentless in finding the right solutions. The world should salute the people at WHO for their honest work and vigilance. Many agree the criticisms against them have been unfounded and uncalled for.

What has become clear during this unfortunate episode is the growing respect for science. Science has never enjoyed such credit. The interest among students to pursue science has also been declining. In Malaysia, the target to achieve 60% enrolment in science has never been achieved. It is now lingering at below 30%. Covid-19 may be a saviour for science. There is greater urgency among world leaders to invest more in science and its research and development (R&D) department. This way, more students may be interested to learn science. This augurs well for a world that faces many uncertainties in dealing with various unforeseeable forces, which can threaten our livelihood and derail the world sustainability agenda.

One such force is climate change, which may be a bigger threat to humanity than the current pandemic. Scientists have so far produced evidence that show how global warming can disrupt world climate. All the data showing the destructive impacts of climate change are convincing, such as human displacement caused by rising sea levels, diseases being unleashed from disturbed habitats, and disruption of food production caused by weather disturbances. Unfortunately, there are still a number of world policymakers who dismiss such warnings as a hoax. Those who are sceptical are not putting in enough collaborative global effort to collaborate on the key measures to rein in climate change. The UN has been trying hard to mobilise global actions through their international climate agreements. However, success continues to be elusive because of a lack of trust in science by few world decision makers. Despite the setback, many are now confident this may change after the Covid-19 pandemic.

At this current rate, with many economic activities being put on pause because of the lockdown and other measures, various documented evidences have shown the healing of the natural environment, especially the positive signs of improved air and river quality. For a long time, in many parts of the world, the quality of air has been in serious decline because of pollution caused by industries. The same is true for the rivers and seas. This further corroborates the scientific reasonings that we are basically to blame for the worsening of the global environment. Again, the solution lies in science. We can only hope that more people will start having more confidence in it.

And what better place to study the discipline than at UCSI University itself, where it offers excellent opportunities for students to learn? These areas of study include engineering, applied science, medicine, pharmacy, environment, and computer science. More importantly, as a praxis university, UCSI places a lot of emphasis on the practical applications of science, which will not only benefit students, but also the society as a whole in the long run.

