1,000 jobs to be created for biologics industry over 3 years

By Wong Siew Ying | Posted: 05 Dec 2014 14:37 | Updated: 05 Dec 2014 23:55

A five-year plan to grow the industry’s workforce will focus on meeting the high demand for skilled manpower, improving the relevance of training programmes and talent attraction and retention.

SINGAPORE: A five-year plan to increase and develop the workforce for the growing biologics manufacturing industry was launched on Friday (Dec 5).

The plan, called the Sectoral Manpower Development Plan, aims to create close to 1,000 high-value jobs for the industry over the next three years. Biologics are commercial products such as vaccines derived from biotechnology.

The plan was jointly developed by the Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA), the Economic Development Board (EDB) and the Biopharmaceutical Manufacturers’ Advisory Council. It will focus on three priority areas – meeting the high demand for skilled manpower, improving the relevance of training programmes, and talent attraction and retention.

In a joint statement, EDB and WDA said the biologics manufacturing industry has attracted S$2.7 billion in investment over the past five years. This includes investments from companies like AbbVie, Amgen, Baxter, GlaxoSmithKline, Lonza, Novartis and Roche. The nine manufacturing facilities set up by the companies will employ close to 2,000 workers, it said.

The biologics manufacturing industry accounted for 20.5 per cent of Singapore’s total manufacturing output in 2013 - the second largest contributor after the electronics sector.

TRAINING PROGRAMMES TO BOOST MANPOWER SUPPLY FOR INDUSTRY

Ms Nurfaridah Feroz Khan, 20, is among a pioneer batch of 24 Singaporeans who have benefited from the Biologics Overseas Training (BOOST) Programme. She joined the programme after graduating from Temasek Polytechnic with a Chemical Engineering Diploma in May this year.

She will head to the United States in January 2015 for a year-long training stint at a Novartis biologics manufacturing facility at Holly Springs, North Carolina. WDA said a second batch of 23 locals started their training last month.

"The thing that I look forward to is the cell culture itself - how it is produced, how the cell grows from one cell to multiples and from there, how to get the antibodies to make the drug. I am interested in that particular process," Ms Nurfaridah told Channel NewsAsia.

Programmes like BOOST are aimed at increasing the supply of skilled manpower for the biologics manufacturing industry, and will go some way to support the expansion plans of industry players in Singapore.

Mr Mario Henke, project director of BiopharmOps Singapore at Novartis, told Channel NewsAsia: "BOOST for us is a unique opportunity to get some new fresh talent into the pipeline, especially for Novartis; we are investing US$500 million ($658 million) into a new site, which is soon to be live in Singapore.

"But it is a challenge to have the right talent in place at the right time, and therefore BOOST is a unique opportunity."

Apart from BOOST, there are also other programmes like the Development and Apprenticeship (DNA) Programme and the Professional Conversion Programme (PCP) for Biologics Associates, Engineers and Specialists.

Another initiative under the manpower development plan is the Subject Matter Experts Exchange to make sure training programmes remain relevant. This will be piloted in early 2015.

Mr Ng Cher Pong, chief executive of WDA, said: "Academics and staff from ITE, the polytechnics and universities will be attached to the biologics plants to work on industry projects, while industry practitioners will lend their expertise in our educational institutes to share their practical experiences and knowledge with students."

WDA added that the Singapore Institute of Technology will also be launching Singapore’s first undergraduate programme in Pharmaceutical Engineering next September.

To attract and retain talent, the industry has also developed a digital career guide to provide more information on career opportunities in the sector to students and jobseekers.

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