

M'sian talent in high demand overseas
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Aidila Razak and Wong Teck Chi

The New Economic Model report's emphasis on attracting talent home is most timely - there is a global war for skills, and Malaysian professionals are happy to go where the grass is greener.

According to a 2008 Towers Perrin survey, Malaysian workers are very flexible and willing to change jobs in the face of attractive offers, even if it means moving abroad.

foong wai fongHappily for Malaysians professionals, said trend analyst Foong Wai Fong (left), international demand is strong.

Language capabilities figure high on the list of reasons why global employers favour Malaysians, with other attributes like resilience and reliability also cited, she said.

Inti Education Group President Tan Yew Sing added that Malaysians are also valued for having a wider worldview.

"Malaysian workers tend to be more approachable and don't give the impression that they are only sordid merchants," he added.

Signaling adaptability, the Australian Parliament Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2007 report noted that "Malaysian born people are one of the best groups in Australia for integrating into the community".

Australia has indeed been one of the top destinations of choice for Malaysian emigrants, with 5396 permanent residency visas awarded to Malaysians in the past two years.

australia media visit 290107 sydney opera houseTopping the list of Malaysian emigrants to Australia are pharmacists, accountants and doctors-the type of talent pivotal to realise Malaysia's high income dreams.

Next door in New Zealand, two-thirds of Malaysians awarded permanent residency visas last year were skilled workers.

Western countries have been the traditional favourites of Malaysian emigrants.

The United States 2000 Census noted 45,459 Malaysian-born residents, the figure in the United Kingdom in 2001 was comparable at 49, 886 people.

But an Asian Migrant Centre study as far back as 1995 approximated 250,000 Malaysians working in Japan and Taiwan, proving that East Asian economies are also in the mix.

Overseas studies a path to migration

In neighbouring Singapore, most of non-Singapore born residents come from Malaysia, with pull factors including Singapore's world class universities.

National University Singapore is ranked 10th in the QS Asian University Rankings 2009, far surpassing Malaysia's best university, Universiti Malaya, which ranked 39th.

The international student path of migration has long been popular among Malaysian emigrants.

A study in 1994 found that 43 percent of Malaysian and Singaporean students who furthered their studies in Australia were motivated by future migration.

Notable Malaysians who have followed this path include fashion powerhouse Zang Toi (left), the inventor of the single-chip USB pen drive Pua Kian Seng, and former Curtin University chancellor Eric Tan.

But Tan believes that the student migration path does not explain the exodus to East Asian countries like China.

Emigrants to countries like China, he said, are more likely to be young professionals who are taking up the diverse and challenging opportunities that such rapidly developing economies can offer.

Migration path

The student migration path is likely to strengthen with global education players offering easier pathways to permanent residency and citizenship for international graduates.

Mimicking Australia, in 2008 the UK began giving international students immediate access to work permits upon graduation, if employed, paving the way for subsequent high-skilled migration.

A 2008 report by the Association of Pacific Rim Universities also noted that even major US employers are lobbying their Congress for automatic provision permanent residency to all foreign doctoral graduates.

Singapore is also quick to capitalise on its international students by offering scholarships and ensuring a promising career path to retain its international graduates, said Foong.

"If a graduate who is able to earn RM2500 in Malaysia can earn 3000 SGD in Singapore and have that increased to 5000 SGD after three months of confirmation, why would he want to leave (Singapore)?" she asked.

But easier access to a work permits and visas is hardly the main factor for emigration.

Nor are higher wages, which many, including Malaysian Employers' Federation executive director Shamsuddin Bardan, claim to be the main driver for professional emigration.

Migration agents, researchers, and emigrants, cite a culmination of many reasons, including dwindling freedom of expression, concern for children's education, increased conservatism and a general lack of faith in institutions like the judiciary and the police force.

Another is a common reason cited even by members of the National Economic Advisory Council (NEAC), which was behind the NEM report.

In an interview with a Malaysian radio station last week, London-based Malaysian-born economist and NEAC member Danny Quah said that he would consider relocating to

Malaysia if policies were more equitable.

Such changes could only occur if the NEM proposal to do away with ethnic-based affirmative action does come to fruition.

But with strong resistance already mounted by pressure groups who claim such policy is the right of the bumiputera, Malaysia might need to wait longer still for its talent to return home.

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