



Harnessing Talent

After much brouhaha, the government has finally confirmed the actual number of unemployed graduates in the country and their profile. Rather than pointing fingers as to where we have gone wrong, it is time we take stock and see how the potential of these young men and women can be maximised.

SO, AFTER much argument about the actual number of unemployed graduates, the Economic Planning Unit finally confirmed, based on a survey, that 59,250 graduates are unemployed. The profile of the unemployed shows that the majority are female, Malay, from a public university majoring in Business Administration and Information Technology (IT) and from poor backgrounds with a family income of below RM1,000. Eighty percent of them had obtained education loans from the National Higher Education Fund. It is no surprise that the main reasons cited for their joblessness are a poor command of the English language and a lack of communication skills, courses taken which were not relevant to the jobs available and, of course, a lack of work experience. The majority of them (over 85%) had applied for jobs both in the public and private sectors. Some as many as 10 times.

I am sure the survey was intended to find out not only the number of unemployed but also the reasons. The findings have raised a number of questions. Business Administration and IT are the two majors chosen by these unemployed graduates. Rather surprising, considering extensive talk about how many qualified IT personnel we require to leapfrog into the knowledge-based economy. Perhaps, these unemployed IT graduates are considered casualties in the output of the public universities. Or maybe, their lack of communication skills and poor command of English have made them unwanted products. That being the case, it is not so much the IT field but more the poor command of the English language which is a hindrance, and since the majority of them come from poor families, they cannot possibly afford to polish their English language at their own cost. Now, the Government is conducting retraining programmes, including for English. It would be interesting to see whether employers hire these retrained graduates.

As for Business Administration, literally, every public university is offering programmes in this subject, including the supposedly specialised universities. The perception must be that it is much easier for Business Administration graduates to get a job since there are at least 300,000 active companies registered with the Companies Commission of

Malaysia. Wrong. Either the companies have nothing to offer or they are not hiring those without a good command of English again.

Implicit in this whole issue of unemployment is the question of manpower requirements planning. Whoever or whatever department is responsible for this planning needs to look closely at their basis of estimates for the future. It is quite amazing how sometimes the estimates are able to pinpoint the requirements in certain sectors to the last digit. Perhaps, the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority (MIDA)'s way of monitoring the number of employees in various categories in the application of manufacturing licences is a good example to follow in estimating the manpower needs of the country. MIDA monitors the numbers given and changes have to be reported to it every six months.

It is quite simple to adopt the attitude that no educational system makes job promises, and getting a university education is one thing and getting a job is another. After all, universities abroad do not coincide their student intakes with their respective manpower requirements. That attitude fits well with the developed countries, but for us, we will have a few hundred thousand unemployed graduates on our hands if careful planning is not prioritised, especially since we are trying to be a fully industrialised nation by 2020.

Students too must be blamed for this predicament. They should try to get sufficient information on the prospects of the programmes being offered. Most would say that they choose a certain subject out of interest, but interest alone is no guarantee of getting a job. They should also be given proper counselling before entering universities. At the moment, it is a last-minute decision or a complete rush to file the papers for admission. What is lacking is a good guide to the various options being offered by the universities. Most students do not have an idea of what they intend to do after they graduate, even after nearly completing their degrees. They let themselves be totally exam-oriented, trying for high grades wherever possible. Academically, they are good but when it comes to interacting with real people in the outside world, they fall apart.



Others may not be serious in their approach to studies, preferring to take short cuts in their assignments, skipping lectures and allowing themselves to be caught in the unbearable environment of sharing a house with 30 to 40 other students. Studies are not as important to these students as motorbikes and handphones are. They do not want to grab the opportunity of obtaining a tertiary education.

Some may still think they are living in the past, at the time when a degree was the passport to securing a job. As the numbers graduating from universities increase, jobs become scarcer. With a handicap such as a lack of proper communication skills and a poor command of the English language, it becomes obvious that in the competitive world of today this group will lose out.

It is sad to say that, partly, the problem lies in the choice of the system that the country has decided to adopt. Those in the mainstream education system use Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction right up to university level. Lecturers and professors have to translate their lectures from English to Bahasa Malaysia, and when they deal with the outside world, they have to translate it back into English again. Now, we realise that as a nation, we are losing out to countries which were once weak in English and are now trying slowly to reintroduce English into the system, with the teaching of Mathematics and Science in this language.

As an alternative, the unemployed graduates may wish to consider getting into business. After all, most of them graduated in business. Since there are numerous programmes being offered in entrepreneurship for those interested to become entrepreneurs, it would be a good choice for these young graduates. They will probably struggle for a few years, but the struggle will be good for their future. Most successful entrepreneurs fail a few times anyway. It is better for them to suffer while they are young and with fewer responsibilities than when they have more commitments. The Government has also been emphasising on the importance of human capital to progress and the nation needs more enterprising young minds anyway. mb

**The writer is the former president of the KLSE
(now Bursa Malaysia).**