

Newspaper	New Straits Times
Date	25/6/2014

Grads' job dilemma

NST-25/6/2014

CHALLENGE: With the advent of the Asean Free Trade Area, graduates must be prepared for job opportunities beyond Malaysian shores

LIKE it or not, our graduates will soon have to find their own jobs. Their choices will no longer be the paid or salaried jobs but rather those that require some entrepreneurial skills.

From cited statistics showing how our graduates have fared in the various skills-set expected by potential employers, technical skills and soft skills are very much lacking while mastery of English and leadership skills is very satisfactory.

Recognising this, the government has introduced entrepreneurship studies at various levels in schools and universities.

Extra incentives have also been announced by the government last year. With an allocation of RM200 million, a Graduate Employability Task Force has been set up.

Another RM440 million has been set aside to establish a Skills Development Fund Corporation.

Looking at the job market, however, it seems to favour the science and technical studies graduates with 16 per cent and 27 per cent of them remaining unemployed respectively, compared with 44 per cent of the arts and social science graduates. Generally, the increasing number of unemployed graduates has worried the government, around 40 per cent last year. This number includes mismatched unemployment.

Perhaps the time has come for the government to review the curriculum of the subjects taught under this category. Or the number of students enrolled in such courses could be requested to take subjects from the sciences and other fields.

In the same way, it is not clearly understood why diploma holders find it much easier to obtain jobs. Two reasons can be suggested.

One, the employers do not have to pay very much to hire these graduates. Two, these diploma holders usually have some job experience or internships, capabilities that make them more employable than the others.

A key problem that demands solutions is the need to change the mindset of graduates. Malaysians

are by nature less willing to venture out of their so-called *kampung* or the equivalent of a "comfort zone" in management.

It is, therefore, difficult to get our graduates to move out to other parts of the country, let alone to go and work in Sabah and Sarawak.

It is quite remarkable though, that there are more and more workers from these two states crossing over to the peninsula. Likewise, there is also less willingness to go north or south or vice-versa to seek jobs. As a result, in areas where graduates are needed the most — especially in the designated Growth Corridors, including the Iskandar Development Zones — employers are hard-pressed to get Malaysians to work for them.

Most of the graduates tend to gravitate around the Klang Valley, with Kuala Lumpur as their main destination. Here, the competition being much more intense, the graduates could ask for better salaries to meet the demands of city-living.

Come next year, the labour market is going to boom out with the advent of the Asean Free Trade Area and the onset of free movement of goods, services and labour in the region and beyond.

Our graduates must follow suit and think of job opportunities beyond Malaysian shores.

"Think Asean" must soon govern the mindset of our graduates to meet job demands overseas and look at building careers abroad at least. This can surely be a better remedy to fix the current low employability prospects of graduates.

A look at the local job scene revealed that back home, the situation has not quite cleared up yet.

There have been confusing signals and messages coming from the government side lately.

On a positive angle, its associated agencies, such as Unit Peneraju Agenda Bumiputera (Teraju) and Iskandar, have been saying that there will be more jobs created in their respective projects. Teraju has said it would begin a mentoring project for entrepreneurs.

On the negative side, it has been heard that the recruitment of doctors, nurses and teachers would be reduced. If this were to happen, the cutting back will further take away the jobs available for our graduates.

Finally, to make matters worse, the government's agency for the disbursement of loans for higher education, the National Higher Education Fund Corporation, has recently said that it would be cutting back on its loans programme drastically. The move will impact on the whole job security exercise for the country indeed.



Dr Azhari Karim is a former diplomat and associate professor



Visitors at a job fair on June 17. "Think Asean" must soon govern the mindset of our graduates to meet job demands overseas and look at building careers abroad at least. Pic by Iqmal Haqim Rosman