

Churn out problem-solvers, analytical thinkers

By Mazlena Mazlan

MODERN JOBS AND SKILLS TRAINING: Graduates must be able to make decisions in unpredictable situations



AT his sundry shop, Ameer is busy checking newly-arrived stock with a device that resembles one of those carried by traffic policemen. Meanwhile, his cashier uses a computerised point of sale system, interfaced real-time with the stock system. At the end of each week, Ameer prints out a stock summary and decides whether to make new orders.

Beng, who has two hectares of farm using crop rotation and fertigation methods, is also a moderator of an online discussion board, exchanging views on various methods of farming.

A mother of three, Citra, an IT consultant, works on a project basis, mostly from home. She meets her clients to discuss their business requirements and decides how to match these within the limits of the system's capabilities. She then writes functional specification documents -- translating layperson requirements into technical language -- before e-mailing them to her colleague who will write the programming codes.

These are fictitious names, but very real people who have something in common. They work in modern jobs, which are the focus of the latest edition of the Malaysia Economic Monitor.

What are modern jobs? They not only exist in modern sectors such as ICT and financial services. Modern jobs also exist in traditional sectors, as exemplified above.

What differentiates modern from traditional jobs are the use of skills, both technical and soft skills, and high productivity. They are complementary to the use of technology. As a result, modern jobs yield higher pay.

Traditional jobs are routine and standardised, and as such are easily automated, whereas modern jobs are complex and involve differentiated tasks. Modern jobs, therefore, require problem-solvers and analytical thinkers.

Modern jobs take place in a modern labour market. The latter is flexible, and accommodative to a large segment of the population, especially women and young people, alongside the existence of a good social safety net. Modern jobs require quality human capital and, therefore, demand quality education and human capital development.

The World Bank, which produced the report, says that foreign workers, at all skill levels, should be welcomed especially the highly skilled. At the lower skill level, they are replacing young people who have gone into tertiary education.

So, it argues that Malaysia should not worry too much about reducing unskilled foreign workers, but instead work towards creating more modern jobs for local workers.

In order to do this, Malaysia should have ready a pool of skilled human resources. The quality of skills produced by the tertiary system must increase in tandem with the increase in the number of tertiary

graduates. But more importantly, the type of skills produced must also match the demands of modern jobs.

So what do modern jobs mean to the skills training sector? For starters, it needs to churn out more graduates with high analytical and problem-solving skills.

At present, 70 per cent hold the Malaysia Skills Certification (MSC) at levels one and two, which prepare production and operation level workers associated with routine and predictable tasks. Needless to say, having these levels of certification is insufficient, if not inappropriate, to fulfil the needs of a modern job. Instead, what we need is a good proportion of graduates of MSC level 3 and above.

These upper levels produce supervisors and managers, who apart from having the skills mentioned, are also expected to be competent in complex and non-routine jobs, guide others and make decisions in unpredictable situations.

They will be complementary of, or better, a favoured substitute for unskilled foreign workers, especially in light of a dim prospect for an effective policy to reduce foreign workers.

This brings back the discussion on the Basic Vocational Education programme, currently running in a pilot stage. Students are being encouraged to participate by informing them that having an MSC level two at the age of 15 provides them at least some qualification to join the labour force. That sounds promising.

But if the Education Ministry is to take this edition of Malaysia Economic Monitor seriously, then the approach must differ. It should actively discourage students from stopping at level two.

The same applies to other skills training providers. We are seeing efforts to encourage progression to higher levels, but efforts to discourage a premature halt of skills acquisition has so far been lacking.

Let's hope that the policymakers share the same view. Otherwise, in a few years time, news of unemployed skills training graduates will bring a sense of déjà vu, just like the unemployed nurses of today and the unemployed IT graduates of the early 2000s.