

Work-based learning can meet talent needs of the nation

By **JOHN ANTONY XAVIER** - February 26, 2024 @ 1:05pm



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At 3.6 per cent Malaysia has a low unemployment rate, denoting full employment. However, in terms of talent, all is not well.

While two-thirds of the workforce has a degree, only 70 per cent of them are skilled in their jobs. Some 42 per cent of graduates are in jobs that are unrelated to their academic qualification.

Additionally, graduate unemployment is close to four per cent while unemployment among youths is about 12 per cent.

These challenges stem from a lack of industry-relevant skills among job seekers. The New Industrial Master Plan hopes to rectify this situation. It seeks to elevate the skilled workforce from the current 25 to 35 per cent by the year 2030.

Work-based learning (WBL) emerges as a promising avenue to do so. By integrating industrial training with conventional classroom education, WBL endeavours to bridge the gap between academic education and industry demands.

As an approach to WBL, internships allow an intern, usually from a vocational or a higher education institution, to be attached to an industry for a limited period, either on a full- or part-time basis. There, they work on tasks related to their field of study. After completion, the intern returns to their institution.

Undeniably, internships impart skills to the intern. However, it is the full-time apprenticeship in an industry that offers multiple benefits.

First, the apprentice gets triple gains from the stint. One, the apprenticeship provides a student with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge to an industrial problem, acquire relevant skills and obtain much-valued work experience.

For another, upon successful completion, the apprentice obtains a diploma or a degree from a collaborating institution. Imagine what impact this would have on the apprentice's self-esteem! The academic recognition too would enable the apprentice to command a higher salary.

Second, apprenticeships benefit industries by providing them with access to specialised talent as they absorb the skilled graduates into their establishment.

Third, the economy gains too. Talent development and a better match between jobs and skills improves labour productivity, competitiveness and economic growth.

Given these immense benefits, here are three strategies to implement a robust WBL approach:

First, the WBL requires the direct participation of institutions of higher learning and industries. Traditionally, with the industry content to follow, it is the government that takes the lead in talent development. WBL would be no different.

Accordingly, WBL would need a government agency to helm its operations. That agency would have to ensure that the apprenticeship is relevant to developing the talent that the country needs.

It would also have to match the talent needs of the industries and the capabilities of universities in meeting them. The agency would also have to oversee curriculum development and financial support for the apprentice by way of scholarships or incentives.

The Academy in Industry (Ail) under the Malaysia Productivity Corporation emerges as a suitable candidate to execute such initiatives. The Ail is a mechanism for training employees with no formal qualifications to secure a skills certification.

Apprenticeships leading to an academic qualification would be a natural extension of Ail's operations.

Second, industry-relevant curriculums that help fill the talent gap must be drawn up jointly with the relevant industry and university or polytechnic.

As diploma and degree certification requires the approval of accreditation and professional bodies, such as the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), these agencies should be brought to the drawing board from the outset.

These bodies can advise the parties in the drafting and implementation of the curriculums.

Third, universities should expand beyond mere provision of academic courses. They could open another wing to offer vocational and technical training leading to an academic qualification.

Such is the case with a few universities in Australia. By diversifying their educational portfolio, universities can better cater to the diverse needs of students and industries.

Through forging a dynamic partnership between government, educational institutions and industries to implement WBL, Malaysia can effectively address its talent demands while offering a smooth transition from education-cum-training to gainful employment.

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