

Career opportunities of local graduates in the plantation and commercial agriculture sector in Malaysia

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Abstract

The involvement of local graduates in the agriculture sector and in farming activities of the country is most crucial to boost the position of this sector as it is now ranked as the second largest contributor to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), after gas and petroleum. A study was initiated to gauge the current status of career opportunities and job vacancies available in the plantation and commercial agricultural sector while at the same time obtaining views from undergraduates of local universities of their expectation which can motivate them to venture into the agriculture sector upon graduation. This study was conducted on 20 leading plantations and commercial agricultural growers in Malaysia. The study involved conducting interviews with human resource managers through a survey questionnaire basically to identify issues and problems faced by the industry with regard job applicants from graduates of local institutions of higher learning and the vacancies made available by this particular sector on the job market. From the analyses made the study revealed that there exist a steady supply of vacancies but limited in number as positions in the managerial and professional field are far in between unlike the menial jobs commonly associated with the plantation industry. From the students perspective the acceptance level in the agricultural industry are not different from that in the manufacturing industries as graduates would prefer to seek jobs with the government or government linked companies. The findings from this study should be a basis for the policy makers especially MOHE to formulate a relevant recommendations in an effort to encourage more graduates to involve in the agriculture sector. The results of the study should assist the private sector to relook at their policies and initiate new guidelines on attracting more graduates into their companies and thereby indirectly help the country to expand its agriculture base and move towards achieving the target of making the agriculture sector the third engine of growth in the economy of the country.

Keywords: *plantation industry; commercial growers; private sector; third engine of growth*

1.0 Introduction

Graduates are a valuable human asset as they are an important source of trained labour who are the heirs of the present generation who will inherit to continue the national economic development of a country. In the past energy resources has been the pillar of growth for Malaysia at the expense of agriculture which has backslided to become the third engine of growth. The workforce must now be geared towards producing skilled manpower for the agriculture industry to correct the imbalance. In this direction the government has taken steps to give greater prominence to produce larger number of agriculture graduates to meet the demand of the expected increase in the workforce in the plantation industry and commercial agriculture. Career opportunities for graduates are not hard to come by as the graduates can obtain jobs as employees in the private sector or work on their own as modern-day farmers or entrepreneurs

Agriculture encompasses a broad field which include livestock, crop production, aquaculture and various downstream industries. Commercial agriculture refers to agricultural activities encompassing private sector plantations involving rubber and oil palm cultivation, smallholder farms like cocoa, pepper and big commercial growers of fruits and vegetable crops. The plantation industry particularly that of rubber and oil palm was the mainstay of the economy since 150 years ago when foreign capital investment was brought in by the British colonial masters to meet the world demand for natural rubber and palm oil. Soon after the other commodities followed like cocoa, pineapple, tea and pepper as world demand for them grow. Foreign capital investment flowed in and commercial giants like Sime Darby, Socfin, Guthrie, Golden Hope and Cameronian were already well established and synonymous with the country's agricultural landscape. Needless to say, these companies and some other big players in the plantation industry provide employment opportunities for our agriculture graduates. The Incorporated Society of Planters asserts that many professional career opportunities in commercial agriculture and smallholder farms are offered by several private plantations with various incentives and benefits which may not be offered in other economic sectors, like manufacturing, etc. Despite the generous schemes on offer, most of the commercial farms are still experiencing a shortage of skilled labour to take up managerial and professional positions in their companies

The graduates, particularly those from the agriculture background, who have decided to venture into commercial farming either as employees or as budding agricultural entrepreneurs should be commended for making the bold decision. They could have well chosen to opt for other more popular and cushy jobs like their peers who are equipped with Diplomas and Degrees considered a ticket towards a professional career. These set of graduates are now ready to face the real challenges on the field and are prepared to work on the farm or plantations after acquiring relevant knowledge and skills for they are more confident as they can now adopt modern farming techniques to achieve their desired goals. What is more important is for them to dismiss the often misconceived perception among family and community members that the agriculture sector do not offer a professional career that guarantees their future.

A study is urgently needed to obtain information from the industry in the plantation sector and commercial growers the actual picture on the career opportunities available on the job market as well as getting their point of view regarding the competency of our local graduates. The other aspect of the study should also look into ascertaining the perception amongst the local undergraduates as to why opportunities available in this sector are not that popular and what really do they look for as a professional agriculturists which this sector should offer them upon graduation.

The other objectives of the same study should include the job status and positions offered by the sector, the steps taken by the industry to ensure vacancies are filled and that there are no occurrence of dropouts and the industry's perception of the courses offered in tertiary education locally to suit their needs.

2.0 Literature Review

The government is trying its best to attract the younger generation to engage in several agricultural activities and programmes it has embarked on by specifically training youths and particularly encouraging students to take up agriculture courses offered by the local institutions of higher learning. This is to address the present labour shortage in the plantation and agriculture sector as well as turning some of them into agricultural entrepreneurs. This

approach is similar to those practiced by many developed countries where agriculture has become a choice for their young generation when during their secondary education the students were sufficiently exposed to programme of studies in agriculture and that was followed through to the university level. Results from a few studies have shown that a majority of the students had a mind positive perception of enrolling in an agricultural education course (Scott and Larvergne, 2004; Yahya and Mahadhir, 2010; Rohana, 1996). In Malaysia, currently there are a number of successful young entrepreneur in the agriculture industry which can attest to the fact that agriculture is a profitable business although the percentage involved in this area is too small. This was believed to be due to the notion or perception amongst students who see farming or agricultural activities as outdated occupation, less glamorous and often involved hard work in the sun and which does not guarantee their future (Utusan Malaysia, 2008). Students view agriculture as a field which will not guarantee high income but merely to produce enough food for the whole family per cropping season (refer to cycle from planting until harvest). They do not see that agriculture can be a vocation to produce successful businessmen or entrepreneurs. They see agriculture which their parents engaged in as something which they should inherit rather than an activity or employment that can be profitable given the right ecosystem. The narrow or often misguided perception of many of these students who view agriculture as an activity which involve the use of limbs and draught animal with traditional tools for tillage has to be debunked. They ought to be told that in modern agriculture expertise in various fields are needed to drive the agenda of the country towards sustainable agriculture and for this to happen many more graduates in these fields are needed.

Agriculture can be turned into a successful career which can bring in immense benefits to the operators or entrepreneurs. The agriculture industry today is very different to that in the past where it now requires professionals with new ideas, who are risk takers, ready to look at various approaches and are innovative with new production processes to increase productivity and earnings. Graduates that are needed by the agriculture industry today are those graduates well trained with practical skills, ready to accept challenges, helped the industry to prosper by ensuring to provide clean and safe food through modern farming methods (Hamid and Auwal, 2012; Chiu et al., 2010). The notion that agriculture is a traditional occupation engaged by village folks, is unprofitable, often involved menial work and is dirty has to be relooked by the present generation. The present day agricultural profession require well trained graduates from institutions of higher learning who are sufficiently exposed to modern production

technology so that a new generation of modern farmers or entrepreneurs are produced to meet the demand of modern day agriculture when expertise in many fields are needed to ensure the sector become productive and can contribute to the national economy significantly (Aidit & Husnizam, 2005).

The Ministry of Agriculture and Agro Based Industry (MOA) has reported that there are large number of job vacancies in the agricultural sector waiting to be filled by local graduates especially those who are unemployed (Utusan Malaysia 2005). The involvement of local graduates in the agriculture and farming sector is crucial to boost the sector's position currently the second largest contributor to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) after gas and petroleum. The trouble is, these unemployed graduates are least interested and placed the agricultural sector as the last resort. In its earnest effort to develop and modernize the agro-based industry in Malaysia, the Ministry of Human Resources' Department of Skills Development together with MOA conducted a study to analyze the job profile in the agriculture & agro based industries sector. The study found that there were proposals for 192 job titles that may be offered through three sub-sectors and eight terms of reference. These sectors are Fisheries (terms of reference: aquaculture and capture fisheries); Food Crops, Floriculture & Industrial Crops (field work: planting materials, operations); and Production (the job: food, production, health and abattoirs). This study clearly goes to show the determination of the government and the private sector trying to help the graduates secure a career in this sector. All is left to the graduates as to their willingness to serve in the rural and remote areas away from the city lights for which most graduates these days would prefer to be stationed.

The mindset of the present generation would have to be conditioned right from the very young age to accept that the working environment in the agricultural sector is as important and more productive if not rewarding just as in the other sphere of economic activities. Education has a prime role to play here in molding the minds of the students beginning at all levels that agriculture and related courses be viewed positively. The parties involved, the government and the private sector, must give some serious thought on how to develop a more acceptable course in agriculture offered by those institutions of higher learning to meet the issues and the needs of the present graduates. Hopefully, this study will try to provide some answers on most of the issues and reduce the unemployment problem faced directly by the graduates and

shortage of trained manpower badly needed in the plantation industry and commercial agriculture industry.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 The creation of a research instrument

The methodology employed was the use of a questionnaire designed and developed through discussions with all members of the research team based on the objectives of the study which were to determine the current status of vacancies available and career prospects, views of industry employers with regard to competency of local graduates and the steps taken by them to prepare so as to meet the needs of the students in the agricultural sector. This instrument was first tested in a pilot study to ascertain its 'validity' and 'reliability' before they were distributed and face to face interviews were conducted. The questionnaire format comprised three parts: i) demographic and employment status, ii) measures to promote career in the plantation sector, and iii) the industry's perception of local graduates.

3.2 The pilot study

A pilot study was conducted using a questionnaire that was designed to test its reliability and five questionnaires were sent out in Kelantan. From the pilot study conducted some improvements were made in the sentence structure that was easily understood to facilitate ready answers from the respondents. The pilot study was used to produce the reliability coefficient to determine the internal consistency of the instrument. Table 1 shows the calculation of Cronbach's alpha for the entire industry, that is 0.552, which indicates an efficient data to continue the analysis. The purpose of this analysis was conducted to test the correlation between the items in each construct. The other purpose was to ensure there was no conflict in the correlation values between the items in the questionnaire.

Table 1

Cronbach's Alpha

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.552	.309	19

3.3 Sampling Method

Twenty big plantation companies and commercial growers were chosen for the survey and although the number of samples was relatively small this was of no significance since these companies have a huge commercial value and of reputable standing. Only one respondent representing the company's top management were sought. In addition to the questionnaire which was sent out, information was also obtained through interviews conducted with senior human resource personnel in these companies within the agricultural sector. Amongst them were the Kelantan Biotech, Kesedar Perkilangan Sdn Bhd, Cabaran Indah Sdn Bhd, GM Peladang, Pertubuhan Peladang Negeri Pahang, Genting Plantation Research Centre, Lembaga Kemajuan Pertanian Muda, Agricultural Chemicals(M) Sdn. Bhd, TM Organic Farms Sdn Bhd, Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM), Symbient Corporation Sdn Bhd, Premium Food Corporation Sdn Bhd, Sime Darby Research Sdn Bhd, Wisma Felcra, Starfresh Agro Park, Bioblooms Sdn Bhd, Phytotech Sdn Bhd and UK Farm Sdn Bhd. For further study the formula for determining the sample size for an unknown population is given below.

$$\text{SAMPLE SIZE} = \frac{\left(\frac{\text{RANGE}}{2}\right)^2}{\left(\frac{\text{ACCURACY LEVEL}}{\text{CONFIDENCE LEVEL}}\right)^2}$$

<p>Confidence Levels:</p> <p>α</p> <p>$\alpha/2$</p> <p>.10 level = 1.28</p> <p>.05 level = 1.64</p> <p>.01 level = 2.33</p> <p>.001 level = 3.09</p>	<p>Accuracy Level:</p> <p>Range X Desired Level of Accuracy(expressed as a proportion)</p> <p>1.64</p> <p>1.96</p> <p>2.58</p> <p>3.29</p>
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3.4 Data analysis

This research is a study on the form of a survey in accordance with standard practices and methods that can provide high levels of confidence. The method for the data analysis used was the quantitative approach from the primary data collected through the survey made.

Some of the analyses used were also those of descriptive analysis, frequency analysis and cross tabulation analysis. Descriptive analysis provides simple summaries about the sample taken and about the observations that was made. Such summaries may be either quantitative, i.e. summary statistics, or visual, i.e. simple-to-understand graphs. Frequency analysis is the study of the frequency of letters or groups of letters in a ciphertext. The method is used as an aid to breaking classical ciphers. The first part of this data analysis use descriptive analysis and frequency analysis to obtain demographic profiles and an overview of the status and career scenario in the agricultural sector as well as issues and challenges. In addition to the detailed analysis performed to support the findings of the descriptive analysis, further analysis is used to investigate the cross tabulation of the relationship between the two categories of variables. Each variable can have two or more categories. All the methods used was to answer the objectives that have been submitted.

4.0 Analysis and Results

Firstly, the analysis of the frequency of the data submitted by the respondent was made to obtain basic information on the types of crops cultivated, the current number of employees, status of job applications, gender and ethnicity of graduates preferred . Frequency analysis is a very important tool to obtain an overview of the actual situation occurring in the plantation industry and the commercial agriculture sector with regard to the supply and job application.

As we all know, the main activity within the agriculture and farming sector in Malaysia is the cultivation of oil palm and this is not contradictory to the findings of this study. Results from the analysis showed that the most popular crop is oil palm and about 47% of the respondents were involved in the cultivation. This is because oil palm is a hardy crop and can thrive in the tropics and sub-tropics suited to a variety of soils from peat to mineral soil with a range of pH between 4 -7.5. In addition, the oil palm crop has many uses derived from palm oil and the kernel oil. The processed kernel shells are used as animal feed and non-food items such as lauryl alcohol, detergent ingredients and essential fatty acids. Refined palm oil is used to make food products such as margarine, fatty compound, cream, ice cream and cooking fat while the unrefined crude oil is used to make cooking fats or ghee. The smallholder sector usually those who own less than 10 hectare are also involved either in combination with rubber or with some fruit orchards while the other farming activities as depicted in Figure 1 are about 7% of the total cultivated crops.

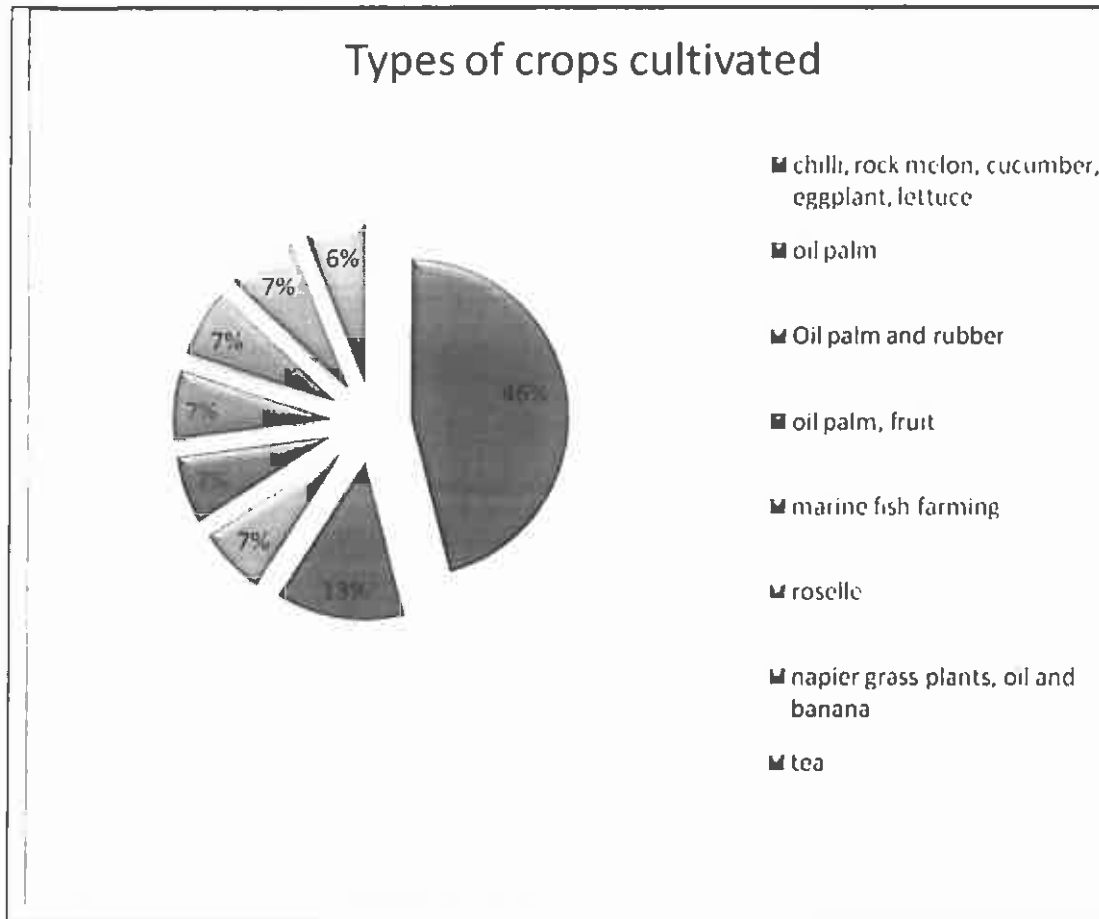


Figure 1

Distribution of the types of crop cultivated by the plantation industry and commercial agriculture in Malaysia

Most of the industry players in the plantation and commercial agriculture prefer more non-graduates than graduates just like those seen in the manufacturing sector, oil and gas where the bulk of the employees or operators require no specific or specialised skills, work competencies or knowledge which graduates would have acquired during their stint at the institutions of higher learning. Figure 2 portrays very well where the graduates stand amongst the total workforce that the plantation sector hire. The 9.3% graduates that were hired are those that are required to fill management and managerial positions in the company. Their number may be small but their contribution to the plantation industry and commercial agriculture farms in the country significant as they are the ones which drive the sector to what it is today.

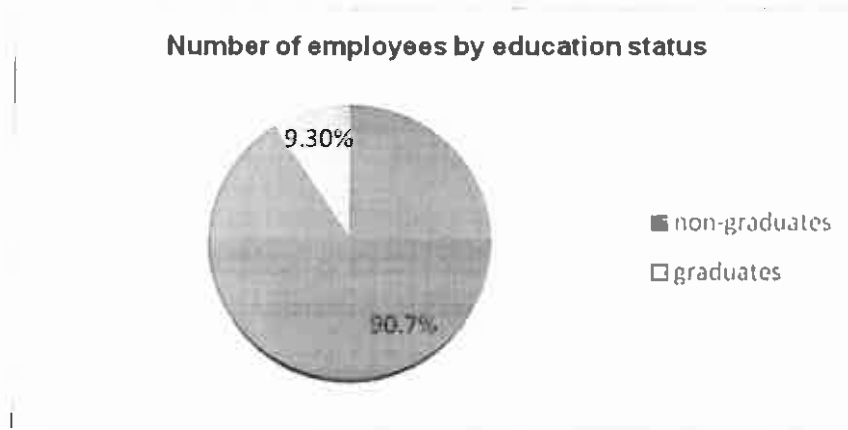


Figure 2

The proportion of graduates to non-graduates employed by the plantation industry

Frequency analysis was also conducted to gather information about the number of companies which accept job applications from local agriculture graduates. The result shows that 85% of the companies in the plantation industry and commercial agriculture received job applications from this group while only 15% did not (Figure 3). This goes to show clearly that this sector in the country's economy are an important niche for students majoring in agriculture for them to begin work and build their career from then on. However, whether they are recruited or not is another matter for usually the number of available vacancies for managerial and professional positions may be limited to begin with. The opportunity to work in big well-established plantation companies is a starting point for them to contribute towards developing the agriculture and the commercial farming sector further while some may go on their own later as agricultural entrepreneurs.

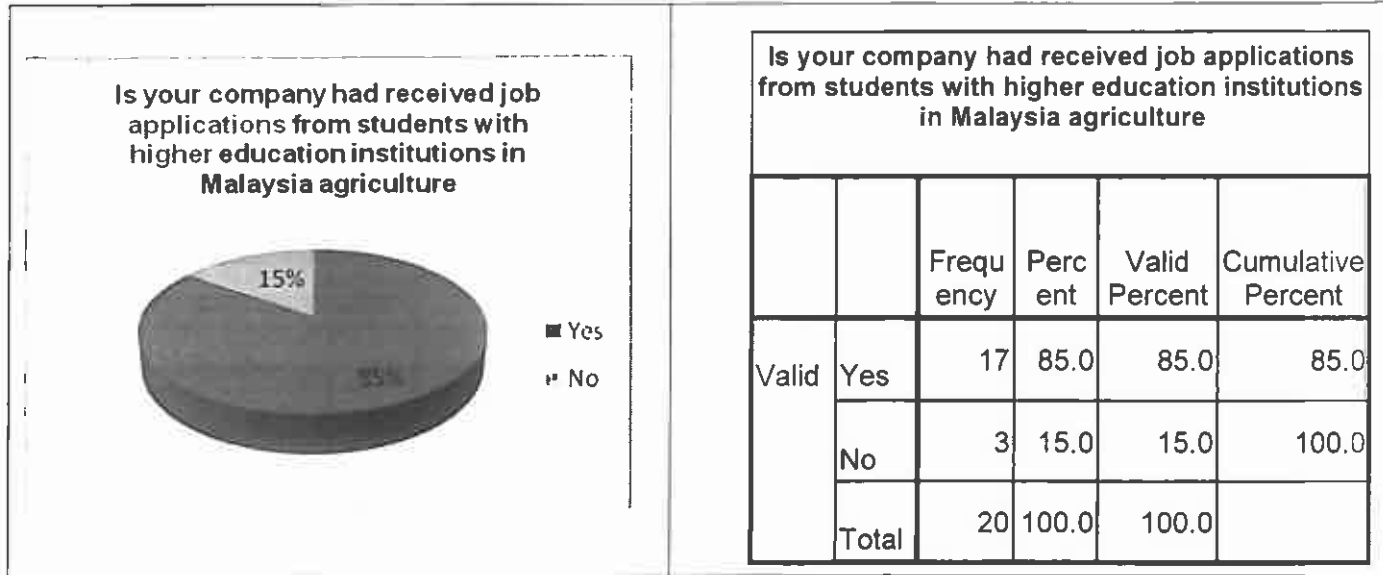


Figure 3

Status of job applications from graduates of agriculture in the Industry farming and commercial agriculture in Malaysia

Although the number of employees at the graduate level hired was only >9% (Figure 2) the number of graduates applying for positions in the agriculture sector remained large accounting to about 85% (Figure 3). Despite the fact that a large majority of the work in the agriculture and farming does not require a tertiary education a large number of graduate students do apply for the job in this sector mirroring the fact that the students were very much interested to secure work here but then the vacancies available were limited.

Based on the demographic pattern, results from this study showed that the majority of ethnic groups working in these companies are Malays representing 90% while the Chinese and others was only 5% (Figure 4). The graduating students of ethnic Chinese origin showed little interest in the agriculture sector, as they prefer doing business and residing in urban areas just like their forefathers who have gone into business right after the country achieved

independence. The void left was filled up by the Malays who became more dominant in this sector given that they were raised basically from the agriculture background.

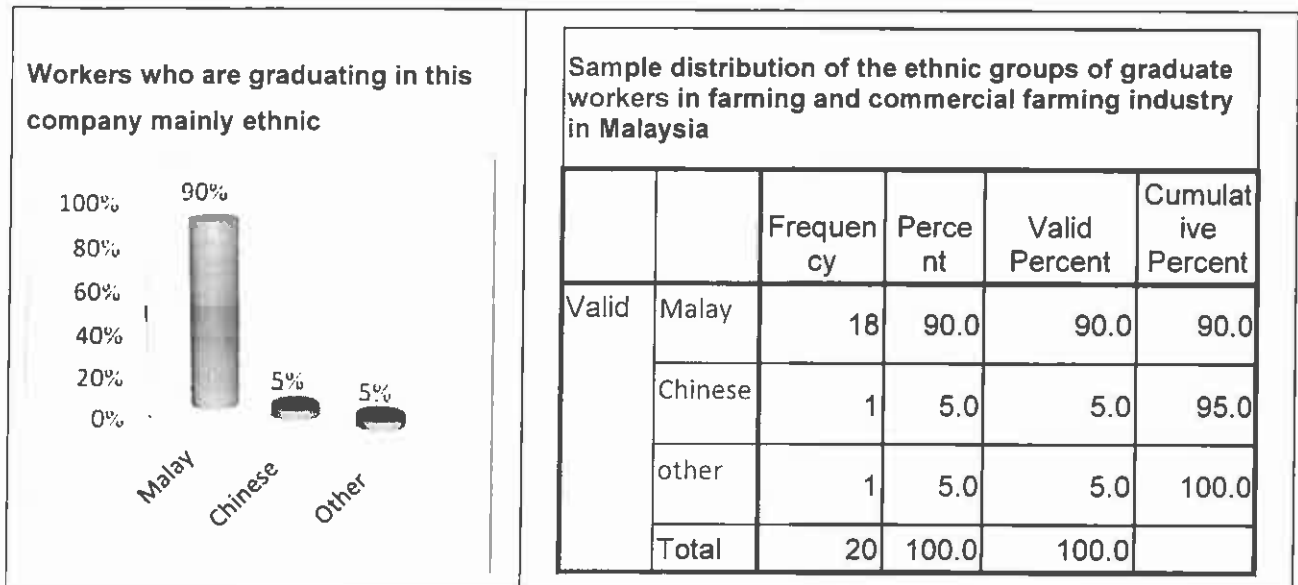


Figure 4

Sample distribution by ethnic groups of graduate labour in the plantation industry and commercial farming industry in Malaysia

It was already pointed out that the plantation industry and the farming sector was open to graduates in Malaysia to begin a career here but further analysis is needed to determine the actual status of the current career opportunities available. For this a frequency analysis was carried out to identify the number and types of positions were offered annually by each of the company surveyed.

Table 2 shows that although the number of vacancies offered had increased but about of 25% of the companies still did not offer any position in a year. On the other hand, there was another 25% that offered jobs with five vacancies. Generally, 50% of the companies surveyed did offer various posts for either for 1, 2, 10, 15 or 60 vacancies available. This goes to show that the number of vacant positions in the plantation industry and commercial agriculture sector has always existed for the local graduates in agriculture. Furthermore, the sector also

offered various positions on the job market for the graduates to pursue their career here as shown in Table 3. Positions that were readily offered were for farm workers and supervisors each group showing a frequency of 6 or 13.33% of the various jobs available. What is meant here is that the companies within this sector were in dire need of workers particularly in the factories especially from those who are less well educated.

Table 2

Frequency distribution of the number of vacancies available annually in the plantation industry and commercial agriculture sector.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0	5	25.0	25.0	25.0
	1	3	15.0	15.0	40.0
	10	1	5.0	5.0	45.0
	15	1	5.0	5.0	50.0
	2	2	10.0	10.0	60.0
	5	5	25.0	25.0	85.0
	60	1	5.0	5.0	90.0
	by vacancy	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

In addition to these categories of workers, there were also a number of managerial positions offered by these companies such as senior executives, station, plantation or company managers, cadet planters and others as given in Table 3. This is the category where the companies desperately seek graduates to fill the positions offered. More often than not vacancies available were not filled by the young graduates as senior positions usually require those with sufficient skills and neither can they be filled with non-graduates. The companies usually faced this dilemma when filling up posts. In other words, the study showed that the availability of vacancies for executive or managerial positions offered by the companies to the graduates would be more suited to someone more experienced or showed keen interest in this sector for their career advancement.

As to the steps initiated by the industry to ensure that appropriate measures were taken to fill the vacancies available and that no dropout occurred a descriptive analysis of the data to compare the mean values for the four measures adopted by the industry to promote careers in the plantation sector was made. The four measures were advertising of vacancies in the local media, has the companies any linkages with the local institutions of higher learning, road show for for recruiting agriculture graduates into their workforce and taking part in career exhibitions organised by the government or local agencies.

The results in Table 4 showed that all mean values were different. Among the four measures taken, the highest measure was the road show with a mean value of 1.70 and was followed by career fairs or exhibitions with a value of 1.50 while company's linkages with institutions of higher learning in Malaysia did not fare well either (mean value of 1.30). Advertising vacancies in the mainstream media are somewhat less favourable to the graduates with the lowest mean value of 1.20. From this survey, clearly road shows would be the most effective measure to attract agricultural graduates to venture into the plantation industry and commercial agricultural sector.

Table 3

Type of job vacancies offered in the company.

Type of job vacancies offered	Frequency	Percentage,%
biotechnology	1	2.22
chemist	1	2.22
farm manager	3	6.667
agribusiness manager	1	2.22
senior executives	3	6.667
trainee account	1	2.22
management trainee	1	2.22
management	4	8.889
clerk	4	8.889
administrative assistant	1	2.22
farm workers	6	13.33

assistant farm	1	2.22
general engineer	1	2.22
supervisor	6	13.33
Mandore	2	4.44
producers	2	4.44
beauty consultant	1	2.22
marketing	1	2.22
technicians	1	2.22
plante	4	8.889
Total	45	100

Table 4

Descriptive analysis programs to promote careers in the plantation sector

	N	Min	Max	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Is this the vacant posts advertisement in a newspaper or news media	20	1	2	24	1.20	.410
Does the company has alliances with any institution of higher education in Malaysia	20	1	2	26	1.30	.470
Does this company make a 'road show' for workers among agricultural graduates	20	1	2	34	1.70	.470
Does the company take part in career fairs organized by the government or certain agencies	20	1	2	30	1.50	.513
Valid N (listwise)	20					

Further analysis was attempted and this time by making cross tabulation of the distribution which was used to analyze the relationship between each of the four measures taken by the industry with the selection of workers from agriculture graduates. What can be observed from Table 5 is that generally 35 percent of those employed were agriculture graduates, while the remaining 65 percent were mostly not from agriculture. Those who responded to advertising

in the media, 50% of the employees were non-agriculture graduates and only 30% agriculture graduates. For those companies which did not advertise their vacancies in the news media, again a higher proportion of the graduates employed were from non-agriculture background (15%) while that from the agriculture stream was only 5%. Even though advertising was the favourite route taken to entice graduates to work in the plantation industry and the commercial agricultural sector those with agriculture background fell well below that from those who received no agriculture education. In short advertising for available vacancies through the local mainstream media is of little help to encourage graduates in agriculture or related disciplines from the local institutions of higher education to venture into this important sector of the national economy.

Table 5

Cross tabulation between vacant posts advertised in the local news media and the employment of agricultural graduates

			Graduates are employed mainly from agriculture		Total
			Yes	No	
Are the vacant posts advertised in the local mainstream news media?	Yes	Count	6	10	16
		% of Total	30.0%	50.0%	80.0%
	No	Count	1	3	4
		% of Total	5.0%	15.0%	20.0%
Total		Count	7	13	20
		% of Total	35.0%	65.0%	100.0%

Table 6 shows that those companies that have links with institutions of higher learning and that of recruitment made of their graduates who received their education from either the agriculture or non-agriculture streams were only 30% for the former and lower when compared for the latter at 40%. For the case where no such links were established recruitment of workers with agriculture background from these companies in the agriculture sector were much lower when compared to those of other background in their education at the local institutions of higher learning. No matter what, whether the companies established links or not with those local institutions offering agriculture courses the recruitment into the workforce were those from the non-agricultural background.

Table 6

Cross tabulation between industry linkage with any institutions of higher education and the recruitment of graduates from agriculture background

				Graduates are employed mainly from agriculture		
				Yes	No	Total
Does the company has alliances with any institution of higher education in Malaysia	Yes	Count	6	8	14	
		% of Total	30.0%	40.0%	70.0%	
	No	Count	1	5	6	
		% of Total	5.0%	25.0%	30.0%	
	Total		Count	7	13	20
			% of Total	35.0%	65.0%	100.0%

Table 7

Cross tabulation between road shows held to attract young agriculture graduates and recruitment made by companies in the plantation and commercial agriculture sector

			Graduates are employed mainly from agriculture		Total	
			Yes	No		
Does this company make a 'road show' for workers among agricultural graduates	Yes	Count	3	3	6	
		% of Total	15.0%	15.0%	30.0%	
	No	Count	4	10	14	
		% of Total	20.0%	50.0%	70.0%	
	Total		Count	7	13	20
			% of Total	35.0%	65.0%	100.0%

The cross tabulation made between the road shows held to attract young agriculture graduates and recruitment made among graduates with agriculture and non-agriculture backgrounds are shown in Table 7. The result showed that irrespective of whether the road shows were held or not by the companies 65% of those graduates employed were from the non-agriculture background. When the companies had their road shows there was an even response from the two different educational backgrounds of 15% apiece and those that did not held their road shows paint a different picture altogether when only 20% of the agricultural graduates obtained employment compared to 50% from the other backgrounds. Only when roadshows were held was there stiff competition for job vacancies in these companies of the agriculture industry.

Table 8

Cross tabulation between vacant posts advertised in the local mainstream news media and employment preference of agricultural graduates from public and private institutions of higher education.

			Companies prefer to hire workers from agriculture graduates		Total
			Public higher education institutions	Private higher education institutions	
Is this the vacant posts advertisement in a newspaper or news media	Yes	Count	15	1	16
		% of Total	75.0%	5.0%	80.0%
	No	Count	4	0	4
		% of Total	20.0%	.0%	20.0%
Total	Count	19	1	20	
	% of Total	95.0%	5.0%	100.0%	

The results in Table 8 shows very clearly that the companies preferred to take in agriculture graduates for their workforce from the public institutions (95%) rather than from the private sector institutions. Whether the posts were advertised in the media or not was irrelevant as company managers would prefer to solicit graduates in agriculture from the public colleges and universities.

5.0 Conclusion

A study which was undertaken on 20 leading plantations and commercial agricultural companies in Malaysia involved conducting interviews with human resource managers through a survey questionnaire. The study was basically to identify issues and problems faced

by the industry with regard to job applications from graduates of local institutions of higher learning and the vacancies made available by this particular sector on the job market. From the analyses made the study revealed that there exist a steady supply of vacancies but limited in number as positions in the managerial and professional field are far in between unlike the menial jobs commonly associated with the plantation industry. From the students perspective the acceptance level in the agricultural industry are not different from that in the manufacturing industries as graduates would prefer to seek jobs with the government or government linked companies.

The study also revealed that most of the employees working in the plantation industry and the commercial agriculture sector are non-graduates as this particular sector do not depend entirely on highly qualified personnel for the daily operations in the field. Graduates who worked in these companies account for about 9 – 10% of the total workforce occupying executive and managerial positions. It was made known that the agriculture industry do received numerous applications for jobs commensurate with the students' qualifications but vacancies available for management positions were relatively limited.

The number of vacant positions in the plantation industry and commercial agriculture sector has always existed for the local graduates in agriculture and there has been an increasing trend annually yet the number of vacancies available is still far short to meet the demand of some these graduates who aspire to make agriculture their vocation. Although the industry has played their role in offering more places for the local graduates but more often than not the graduates that come on to the job market are not of the right choice for mostly they lacked the soft skills required if they are to work in a private sector environment.

The findings from this study should be a basis for the policy makers especially MOHE to formulate relevant recommendations in an effort to encourage more graduates to involve in the agriculture sector. The results of the study should assist the private sector to relook at their policies and initiate new guidelines on attracting more graduates into their companies and thereby indirectly help the country to expand its agriculture base and move towards achieving the target of making the agriculture sector the third engine of growth in the economy of the country.

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