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CAREER CHOICE AMONGST GENERATION Y TOWARDS SELF-EMPLOYMENT IN THE OIL PALM PLANTATION *

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ABSTRACT

Generation Y has the role of the successor to the continuity of development and is a vital source of labour in the future especially in agriculture. This study investigates the perception of 175 final year students of an agricultural institute toward self-employment in the oil palm plantation as their future career. Using questionnaire as an instrument for data collection, reliability analyses revealed that all studied variables, namely, perceived occupational status and perceived occupational package, demonstrated a Cronbach's Alpha values higher than 0.7. The findings of the study demonstrated that students had positive perceptions towards employment in the oil palm plantation, and the same (employment) was not influenced by gender. Factors such as children education welfare, convenient scope of work, and medical facilities were topmost priorities for choosing a career in the oil palm plantation. Contrary to one of the missions of the agricultural institute, only 7.4% students chose to be self-employed and 6.8% decided that they were not keen to be employed in the oil palm industry. The findings of this study provided vital information to the agricultural institute to revise its curriculum. On a similar note, the findings of the study suggested that industry players design more acceptable and dynamic-related jobs in the oil palm plantation, as indicated by the respondents. The limitation of the study and the suggestion for future research were also highlighted.

Keywords: Malaysia. Generation Y; Gender; Self-employment; Oil Palm Plantation

INTRODUCTION

The world population has reached seven billion in 2015, of which the size of the older population would further increase to reach 1.6 billion by 2050. The world population were categorizes in five generations that are Traditionalists (born before 1946), Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1964 and 1979), Generation Y (born between 1980 and 2000), and Generation Z (born after year 2000). Each group has its

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own characteristics, such as set of values, view of authority, orientation to the world, loyalty, expectations of their leadership, and ideal working condition. Every generation is uniquely shaped by its own location in history, and this formative influence has enduring effects and brings something new and important to the workforce. Thus, it is so important for high level managers and executives to understand, respect, and regularly address generational differences manifesting in the workplace.

Malaysia's total population is about 28 million, of which 49.76% are active workforce. Malaysia is a multi-racial country, and the main ethnic groups are Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Other groups are the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak, namely Kadazan, Dusun, Bajau, Murut, Bugis, Iban, Orang Ulu, Bidayuh, and Melanau. Since the last ten years, the country's unemployment rates have been consistently between 2% - 4%. The male labour force participation rate stands at 80.5% as compared to female, at only 49.5%. Evidently, the Y generation constitutes a total of 10,395.69 or 35% of the total population of Malaysia in 2015 (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2015) and are expected to dominated the Malaysian workforce in the next five years period.

Generation Y, whose age group is between 15 and 34 years are groups of young people who were born after 1980, are seen as the successor to the continuity of development and as a vital source of labour in the future especially in the agricultural sector cannot be ignored (Zaki et. al., 2015). Researchers use different terminologies to describe those born after 1980, such as Millennials (Borges et. al., 2010), Echo Boomers (Dwyer, 2009), and Internet Generation (Voorveld & Goot, 2013). Cara (2006) indicates that the characteristics of generation Y include an inflated self-esteem, a very high sense of entitlement, the belief that anything is possible, are educated and tech savvy. Dhawan (2012) describes generation Y as always stirring up new ideas, are creative, and innovative. In terms of job preferences, they have high preferences for permanent positions that would guarantee job security, prefer to work in prestigious firms, are very concerned about work-life balance, and attentive to career opportunities (Soulez and Soulez, 2014). As such, this generation needs to be understood, and nurtured; and their interest needs to be geared towards the agricultural sector, as they are the assets and future leaders of the country, especially in leading the management of the country's potentials of agriculture.

The pertinent role of agricultural sector to the continuity of the country's development as a whole was depicted in the Malaysia Education Development Plan (2015 – 2015). Through this 10 years planning, the government intends to change the mentalities of graduates, namely from job seekers to job creators, and to be balanced citizens with entrepreneurial mind-sets. The government education policies aim to promote self-employment as an alternative job creation to formal employment. One major initiative by the government to encourage participation of generation Y in the agricultural sector is through formal education in agricultural related fields of study. Universiti PUTRA Malaysia, Institute of Agriculture, Malaysia, and polytechnics are among several educational entities that emphasise on agricultural related formal educational programmes. One of the institutions' objectives is to produce self-employed graduates in the agricultural sector. However, employers were complaining that the local workforce avoided this sector as it involved difficult, dangerous, and dirty jobs (Rammolai, 2009). In other words, employment in the agricultural sector is not that attractive to this generation.

Plantation sector, specifically, the palm oil industry has grown to become Malaysia's very important agriculture-based industry, where the country is today the world's leading producer and exporter of palm oil. Besides being an important contributor to the country's GDP, palm oil industry provides employment and raises the income level among rural areas dwellers. Due to the fact that workforce in the sector is dominated by migrant labour from

neighbouring countries (Ming & Chandramohan, 2002), this study aims to investigate the career choice among the Generation Y by gender in this sector.

The study of gender is important because society's perception, challenging and dangerous nature of its environment as well as the masculine nature of this sector reflects male domination rather than female. This research would also identify their psychological contract that is their mutual belief and expectation that employers in the plantation sector should offer to make employment in this sector to be attractive and secured. The findings would provide some useful insights to the related authorities, such as agriculture institutes and key industry players in developing strategic approaches to encourage the participation of this generation to achieve the government objectives to produce self-employed students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For a sustainable agricultural development, especially in the oil palm plantation in Malaysia, there is an urgent need for a more rapid transformation from labour intensive to mechanisation processes. The purpose of the transformation is to reduce the high dependence on the use of foreign labour in all plantation activities. Therefore, the focus on the labour that produces high productivity must be given due attention, and as such, the presence of Generation Y in the labour market is very timely.

Generation Y are the most digitally sophisticated generation to date and they are looking for a sustainable environment offering a social structure within both physical and virtual environments (Controls, 2010). The needs of this generation must be given attention by employers although the oil palm plantation nowadays needs professionals who are innovative, have good management style, and are risk takers. As such, the labour source needed by the oil palm plantation today are those who are well trained with practical skills and ready to take challenges in order to assist the oil palm plantation to be sustainable by ensuring the production of hygienic and safe food through good agricultural practices (Hamid & Auwal, 2012).

Empirical evidences (e.g. Abdullah & Sulaiman, 2013) revealed that the local workforce were reluctant to be employed and has low interest in the agricultural sector. This low interest level is mainly due to perceptions that agriculture is seen as a low wages category of employment, perceived as low job status, not considered as the appropriate type of employment especially among graduates, and the pessimistic view of the future development of the sector. It was also argued that today's generation are more attracted to the modern controlled environment of new manufacturing plants (Ming & Chandramohan, 2002). However, the Generation Y's perception towards the agricultural sector needs to be understood as they would be the main labour force in the next five years (Zaki et.al, 2015). Moreover, Karen et al. (2012) predicts that the agricultural sector would be the main source of employment for the younger generation in the next decade because high value agriculture would use services more intensively and create job opportunities.

The involvements of students have been investigated by several researchers (such as Abdullah & Sulaiman, 2013; Farah & Samah, 2014; Ismail, Muhamad & Rak, 2013; Uli, Hayril & Bahaman, 2010) reflecting their integral roles in the agricultural sector that have direct impact on a country's GDP. Majority of those who intended to work in the agricultural sector were being influenced by their families and educational backgrounds. In similar context, the level of behavioural attitudes, subjective norms, and social valuation and inclination towards agricultural entrepreneurship were found to be high among students whose educational background was related to agricultural fields of study (Farah & Samah, 2014). Samydevan et al. (2015) revealed that culture and good cultural values influenced the intention to be self-employed among pre-university students. In terms of career, most students expect that their future careers and jobs should provide opportunities to work in

teams and friendly environment that they are able to enhance their skills, experience, and knowledge, and to have feedbacks from the results of their work (Spena et al., 2009). In addition, Ismail (2013) argued that the perceptions towards agricultural sector as offering non-professional career which do not guarantees a bright future among the younger generations can be diminished by preparing them with relevant knowledge and skills.

Agriculture has an important function to ensure food security and livelihoods, and even when coupled with training and learning, production, added values, marketing, and long-term development policy, yet many would still not consider pursuing further in agriculture (Aissetou et al., 2011). This is due to the perception that employment in agricultural sector fails to provide the prestige and luxury one desires as compared to the likes of engineering, medicine, and information technology. Subsequently, many avoid agriculture as a career option. Therefore, employment and job opportunities for graduates of agriculture are limited by their perceptions, as well as, social influences, but not by the sector itself.

Malaysia is not alone in facing the problem of graduate unemployment, because it is a global phenomenon (Zaliza et al., 2014). Bahaman et al. (2010) noted that economic crisis pose challenges to youth to find suitable job or to build successful careers. In line with this, several higher learning institutions were encouraged by the government to offer agricultural related tertiary education. One of its main objectives is to produce self-employed graduates in agriculture sector. In addition, from the projected increase in the country's GDP through commercial plantation and the agricultural sector, more agricultural related job opportunities are to be created as a strategy to minimise the country's unemployment rate. On a similar note, the government encouraged higher learning institutions not only to provide ample knowledge but also to mould them to be self-employed as modern farmers or entrepreneurs of agriculture (Marinah et al., 2013).

METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study was based on data collected in an agricultural institute located in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. One of this agricultural institute's objectives is to produce self-employed graduates in the agricultural sector. A total of 175 final year students attending a two-year courses for certificates in agriculture, voluntarily participated in this self-administered survey. The students were equipped with the knowledge and practical training related to agricultural activities before they entered the realm of employment. All measurements in this study were adopted and adapted from Christina (2012) and Yim et al. (2014). The questionnaire comprised of four sections. Section A aimed to collect the respondents' demographic profiles. Section B measured their job preferences. Section C measured the respondents' psychological contract using Likerts Scale with a range of 1 to 5, which represents "lowest priority" to 'highest priority'. Student's psychological contract was measured using three dimensions, namely, compensation and benefits, career development, and job security. Meanwhile, section D requires the respondents to rank their perception on agricultural sector as an occupational status.

A pilot study was conducted to determine the reliability of the questionnaire used. Thirty respondents participated in the pilot study. The results of the pilot study revealed that Cronbach's Alpha values for each question, namely, psychological contract, and perceived occupational status were 0.951, and 0.805, respectively, and demonstrated a good level in terms of reliability (Sekaran, 2011).

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the demographic data of the respondents. Out of 175 respondents, male respondents constituted 65.1 percent, and female 34.9 percent. All respondents are in the age

group of 19-22 years old, which conforms to the definition of 'Generation Y'. A large number of the respondents had families with agricultural backgrounds, i.e. 55.4 percent (97), of which 72.2 percent (70) were male and 27.8 percent (27) female. Respondents who were not of agricultural backgrounds comprised 56.4 percent (44) male and 43.6 percent (34) female. All respondents were Malays. A total of 4 were diploma holders of non-related to agriculture and the remaining 171 respondents had SPM certificates.

TABLE 1
Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	114	65.1
	Female	61	34.9
Family Background	Agriculture	97	55.4
	Non Agriculture	78	44.6
Ethnic Group	Malay	175	100
	Chinese	0	0
	Indian	0	0
	Others	0	0
Education	Primary	0	0
	Secondary	171	97.7
	University	4	2.3

Table 2 indicates the respondents' levels of acceptance towards working in the plantation sector upon graduation by gender. The findings demonstrated that male and female students mostly had positive perception towards employment in the oil palm plantation. A total of 97.4% of male respondents and 85.2% of female respondents had chosen working in the oil palm plantation. These data also indicated that gender did not affect the decision to choose jobs in the plantation sector. This finding is in line with of Durosaro et al. (2012) who empirical demonstrated that there was no significant difference between gender and career choice among senior students in agricultural sector.

TABLE 2
Gender and Self-Employment

Variables	Gender	N	Percentage
Employment in Plantation	Male	111	97.3
	Female	52	85.2
TOTAL	Agriculture	163	93.1
Self-employment	Non Agriculture	11	91.6
Ethnic Group	Malay	1	8.4
	Chinese	12	6.9

TABLE 3
Final Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.992 ^a	1	.046		
Continuity Correction ^b	2.836	1	.092		
Likelihood Ratio	4.924	1	.026		
Fisher's Exact Test				.059	.038
Linear-by-Linear	3.969	1	.046		

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Association					
N of Valid Cases	175				

Note. 1 cell (25.0%) has expected count fewer than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.18.

TABLE 4
Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.151	.046
	Cramer's V	.151	.046
N of Valid Cases		175	

Note. Not assuming the null hypothesis. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Chi-square test was conducted to examine if there was any association between genders with self-employment. The finding showed Chi –square test for independence (with Yates Continuity Correction) indicated significant association between gender and self-employment. (Table 3 and Table 4).

It was also demonstrated that only 7.4% of respondents preferred to be self-employed, compared to 92.6% who intended to be employees. Only 11 males and one female chose to be self-employed in the plantation sector. These results were almost similar with the report by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2014), that Malaysians' tendency to become entrepreneurs stood only at 11.6%. In addition, the study found that the majority of the respondents preferred to be job seekers rather than job creators. This is contrary to the Malaysian government intention to produce many entrepreneurs among graduates, or in other words, the institute objective to produce student to become self-employed still yields low result.

As shown in Table 5, students with agricultural family backgrounds had the intent to pursue careers in the oil palm industry, which is 93.8% and only 6.2% were not interested to pursue employment in the plantation sector after completing their studies. Nnanna et al. (2014) in his study found that students who tended to work in the agricultural sector were those whose parents were engaged in agricultural activities. These findings demonstrated that family backgrounds do influence the students' intention to further their studies in the field of agriculture and subsequently work in this sector.

Students without any family agricultural background were also keen to participate in the oil palm industry upon graduation. About 92.3% chose to work in the plantation sector, compared with 7.7% who had no such interest. Learning experiences also had influenced the perception of students to work in the oil palm industry as an employee, but not as self-employed.

TABLE 5
Cross tabulation between students' family backgrounds and working in the plantation sector
(n = 175)

Family background	Keen to work in the plantation sector	Not keen to work in the plantation sector
Agricultural	91 (93.8 %)	6 (6.2 %)
Non agricultural	72 (92.3 %)	6 (7.7 %)
Total	163(93.1 %)	12 (6.9 %)

This study also investigated their psychological contract that is their belief and expectation towards employer in fulfilling their needs or requirements if they were to work in the plantation sector. Three main elements were presented to students for them to prioritize their needs, namely compensation and benefits, career development, and job security.

Table 6 shows the students psychological contract towards compensation and benefits, in terms of higher wages, provision for housing facilities, loan, transportation to work, and children education and welfare. The results of this study indicated that the children education and welfare (mean = 4.09) was identified to be the most important benefits that employers should provide as compared to other component of the compensation and benefits package.

For career development, the respondents preferred a 'convenient scope of work' (mean = 4.05) as the top priority and followed by 'type of work appropriate with academic qualifications', 'opportunities not limited', 'enhancement of career opportunities', and 'provision for training' should be in place if they are to work in this sector..

For job security, the students favoured 'free medical facilities' (mean = 4.15) compared with 'security through insurance' (mean = 3.93), 'the use of mechanised work environment' (mean = 3.96), 'job security' (mean = 4.03), and 'good pension plan' (4.07).

TABLE 6
Student's Psychological Contract

Statements	Mean	Standard deviation	Ranking
Compensation and Benefits			
a. Children education/welfare	4.09	1.030	1
b. Transportation to work	3.98	1.027	2
c. Provision for house	3.97	0.943	3
d. Provision for loan	3.82	1.085	4
e. Offer of lucrative salaries	3.08	1.104	5
Career development			
a. Convenient scope of work	4.05	0.975	1
b. Type of work appropriate with academic qualifications	3.90	1.013	2
c. Unlimited opportunities	3.87	1.016	3
d. Enhancement of career opportunities	3.83	0.957	4
e. Provision for training before starting work	3.66	0.952	5
Job security			
a. Free medical care	4.15	0.937	1
b. Good pension plan	4.07	1.122	2
c. Job security	4.03	1.024	3
d. Appropriate working environment	3.96	0.922	4
e. Security through insurance	3.93	0.833	5

Table 7 demonstrates the respondents' perceptions towards the oil palm plantation in terms of occupational status. It was revealed that respondents associated plantation sector with hot work environment associated with high risk of accidents. The results also demonstrated that, they also disagreed with the statement that there was no opportunity for career advancement in the plantation sector. Overall, the respondents revealed positive perceptions towards the oil palm plantation as an occupational status.

TABLE 7
Perceived Occupational Status

Statements	Mean	Standard deviation	Ranking
a. Hot working environment	3.19	1.035	1
b. The risk of accidents at work is high	3.10	1.033	2
c. Inheriting the family work	2.95	1.219	3
d. The salary on offer is unreasonable	2.82	1.099	4
e. No basic infrastructure such as kindergartens, place of worship	2.73	1.210	5
f. Qualification not equivalent / higher	2.62	1.039	6
g. No uniform provided	2.56	1.073	7
h. Susceptible to disease	2.44	1.027	8
i. Influenced by family / friends	2.42	1.043	9
j. Low status to work in the plantation	2.29	0.946	10
k. Last job options	2.29	1.131	11
l. Lagging the latest technology such as the internet	2.21	1.124	12
j. No opportunity for career development	2.13	0.902	13

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

Findings of this study showed that students have chosen to work in the oil palm industry after completing their studies, either as an employee (93.1%) or to be self-employed (6.9%). This proved that the educational curriculum offered by their institution managed to build trust and confidence towards employment in the agricultural sector. Findings of this study accords to the principle where learning experience can impose strong influence on students' career choices (Kochung et al., 2011). Moreover, findings of this study is congruent with Anisa et al. (2013) who demonstrated that the choice of career was strongly influenced by the type of courses or field of studies that they embarked.

In contrast, findings of the study revealed a small percentage of the respondents (6.9%) were interested to be self-employed or entrepreneurs as compared to those who prefer to be an employee in the agricultural sector. This finding is not unfamiliar as local researchers (e.g. Norhasni, 2007) revealed that graduates prefer to be employed rather to be self-employed. This is due to several factors such as, the wage earner mentality with the private or public sector, and the lack of encouragement and support from family and society, has caused them to keep away from choosing self-employment. Moreover, most entrepreneurial educational curriculum is only available in the tertiary educational level in which most students view the subject as totally new in their life development Hence, The Malaysian government through it related ministries has to ponder whether entrepreneurial educational curriculum should be introduce at a lower educational level. In addition, the present entrepreneurial educational curriculum should be revised and enhanced the curriculum in order to eliminate discrepancies and negative perception towards self-employment. Moreover, creating awareness at the early state of individual development may be able to produce positive impact towards self-employment concept. As emphasized by Rasli et al. (2013) indicated that the Malaysian government and university policy makers need to find the best formula in order to develop and nurture potential entrepreneurs at a younger age.

In this study, gender has been empirically demonstrated to have no significant influence in selecting a career in the oil palm industry where almost 98% male students and 85% female students were willing to work in this field. However, male students were more

confident to be potential entrepreneurs, reflected by the 11 (91.6 %) male students as compared to only one (8.4 %) female student. The masculinity nature of the industry might influence their choice. In addition, male students are fond of challenges and eager to try new activities in comparison to female students, who prefer stable and feminine work related environment. Sarwoko and Nurdiana, (2013) in their studies revealed that males were courageous to face the risks, accept change and they had the tendency to take the challenge.

Students also chose the elements of their main needs and children education welfare, convenient scope of work, and free medical care as top choices if they were to work in this field. However, employers also cannot ignore other requirements, such as transportation to work, provision for house and loan, and better salaries, because they could also affect the willingness of students to participate in this work. Students found to have been willing to work in a hot environment because they already know that employment in the oil palm plantation is in the open space areas. These study findings indicated that it was crucial for the industry to restructure the jobs to be more acceptable and dynamic. This statement was also supported by a study conducted by Soulez and Soulez, (2014). The students have high preference for a permanent position that will guarantee job security, very concern about work life balance and attentive to career developments.

This study also had its limitations. The number of respondents which was limited to one institution is an insufficient representation to describe the whole Generation Y student opinions. This suggests that future research is expected to extend this research by including more higher learning institutions with a balance of representatives. The study of factors that may influence students to choose their own careers also needs to be done in the Malaysian context, so that the level of entrepreneurship in Malaysia can be increased in the future.

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