More efforts needed to address shortage of skilled workers

BY SYAHIRAH SYED JAAFAR

KUALA LUMPUR: One of the major factors driving an economy towards high-income status is the development of its human capital. With just three years remaining in Malaysia's ambition to become a high-income nation by 2020, have the country's human capital resources been utilised and prepared for this purpose?

In a report released in October 2016 by JP Morgan Malaysia and Singapore Management University, it was highlighted that a shortage of industry-ready skilled workers presents one of the biggest challenges for core members of the Asean — Malaysia included — as they strive to realise their economic visions.

The report entitled *Managing skills challenges in Asean-5* provides country-specific skills challenges and recommendations for member countries to strategically position itself to become a major growth engine in the region and maintain East Asia's pivotal position in the global economy.

It states that the main skills challenges being faced by Malaysia are those related to the gap between what the educational and training institutions produce and what the industry needs, with regard to technical and soft skills. This gap has more commonly been known as the school-industry gap.

In its proposition to address the school-industry gap, the report makes three recommendations, which include revamping the curriculum to emphasise on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education, soft skills and English proficiency. It also mentions tightening coordination among government, industry and education institutions. Thirdly, it proposes to expand sources of skilled workers, which entails tapping into highly skilled talents at home and abroad.

The science, technology and innovation ministry (Mosti), which is principally tasked in improving competitiveness in the fields of science and technology, acknowledges the need for greater efforts to be made to upskill workers in these fields.

A representative from the minister's office says ongoing efforts are being undertaken. Recently, Mosti established The Malaysia Board of Technologists (Mbot) which was founded as a professional body to recognise technologists and technicians as professionals, and elevate the discipline of technology, and technical and vocational education (TVET).

She says Mbot supports initiatives under the 11th Malaysia Plan to create 1.5 million new jobs by 2020 of which 60% of the new jobs will require TVET education. To achieve the target, the interest of students towards TVET must be raised, she adds.

"Malaysia needs to increase its yearly intake of students in TVET schools. This is done in stages, from a total of 164,000 students in 2013 to 225,000 students in 2020," she says.

Meanwhile, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) Malaysia people partner Pauline Ho (*pic*) cites the need for stronger involvement from the public sector. She explains that as it is, many colleges and universities already collaborate with industries to provide opportunities for their undergraduates to gain world experience and business perspectives, and to understand the needs of employers.

PwC places importance in collaborating and lists initiatives such as participating in industry advisory panels, organising guest lectures, workshops and mentoring student bodies as a few examples to exemplify its seriousness.

"I would personally like to see more involvement from public universities, including from the TVET and diploma programmes," she says.

Additionally, PwC Malaysia works with TalentCorp to recruit Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam scholars under its scholarship talent attraction and retention programme. Pauline says she hopes to see more resumes from the programme and more stringent measures to encourage scholars to serve the nation.

Asked whether she thinks Malaysia is on the right track in producing

more high-skilled labour as intended by the Economic Transformation Programme, Ho says the government will do well to focus its efforts in addressing the skills mismatch in the nation's talent demand and supply.

"The intakes and types of degree programmes at universities should be better matched with the skills employers need. This also includes the courses our government decides to fund or award scholarships to," she adds.

Meanwhile, TalentCorp chief executive officer Shareen Shariza Abdul Ghani says Malaysia has a diverse and educated talent pipeline, which has been instrumental to the competitiveness of our sectors, such as engineering.

"A good example is our electrical & engineering (E&E) industry, where many multinational employers have moved up the value chain from pure manufacturing to design and development activities on the strength of our local talent pool," she says.

According to a December 2015 report by PwC, Malaysia accounted for 2.8% of the world's E&E exports in 2014, making the country the 11th-largest E&E exporter globally.

On a broader scale, Ho believes with the advancement of technologies like automation, robotics and artificial intelligence, jobs will evolve. She explains that knowing some functions or processes will be replaced by automation in the future, there is still a need for people who are able to work with and leverage these new technologies to produce higher-value results.

She recommends the government to take a few concrete steps to prepare the workforce, one of which is to get more students into STEM, especially women. She also suggests relooking into the field of study with greater emphasis on data science and analytical skills and for the government to work closer with businesses to prepare graduates with the digital skills needed to adapt and stay relevant.

Moving forward, Shareen says a critical success factor to producing a critical mass of highly skilled labour is collective action.

"This means that all stakeholders ... must actively take ownership to address talent issues impeding our nation's growth and development."