

TACKLING GRADUATE UNEMPLOYMENT ONE STUDENT AT A TIME

ACADEMIA and industry experts had been talking about how AI and robots might replace humans in jobs for years now – but no one foresaw a pandemic.

Throw a coronavirus, several lockdowns and a reeling economy into the mix, and graduates have found themselves facing a very tough job market.

Take Taylor's University culinary graduate, Nurul Nadhirah Abdul Azis, 24, for example. After being unable to secure a job in a patisserie she interned with last year, she started her online business, Gooti Pastries.

"During lockdowns, I finally had the time and freedom to experiment, and decided, why not start a business now? I slowly began by selling a few cakes, and a few months after, the business surprisingly took off!" said Nurul Nadhirah.

According to the latest labour report from Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), there were 728.1 thousand unemployed people in the country in May 2021.

Coupled with the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) Graduate Tracer Study 2020 stating that over 40,000 unemployed were fresh graduates, much has been said on providing enough job opportunities to Malaysians.

Taylor's University, however, saw 99% of their graduates employed or gaining means of income within six months, according to survey data by the same tracer study.

The institution also retained its position as Malaysia's leading private university in the QS Graduate Employability Rankings 2022, ranking 16th in the world for the Graduate Employment Rate indicator, placing the university at the top of the table for three consecutive years.

Interestingly, the number of Taylor's graduates being "self-employed" increased significantly in 2020, which meant that many were pivoting to set up their own businesses, like Nurul Nadhirah – a result that did not surprise the university's deputy vice chancellor and chief academic officer, Prof Dr Pradeep Nair.

"Taylor's has been reinventing the curriculum pedagogy and developed a Taylor'sphere ecosystem in order to prepare students for a post-pandemic world where, more than ever, academic intelligence is not the most important factor for success," said Prof Pradeep.

"The ecosystem aims to nurture the three intelligences of Intellect, Craft and Practical Wisdom to ensure they have the right knowledge, life skills as well as networks and resources to put into practice what they have learnt to find solutions to real-world problems."

He believes that students need broad-based, multidisciplinary learning to pick up as many skills as possible, and collaborate with academics and peers of different disciplinary backgrounds to help them quickly adapt to the working world.

“The reality is, we will face complex problems that require more than one solution, and that graduates these days will work in at least 15 different jobs in their lifetime.

“So we should not limit a student. At Taylor’s, they can take up an IT or culinary degree, as well as pick up marketing or psychology modules. And throughout their degree even from year one, students will have to be involved in interdisciplinary projects, which mimics how professionals work in the industry,” Prof Pradeep adds.

These frameworks in place have catalysed synergies previously hindered by faculties working in silos.

It is now possible for business students to work on a marketing strategy to sell products created by biotechnology students, while a design student works on the packaging and a communications student proposes a promotional plan.

And realising that soft skills is absolutely critical in enabling students to tackle challenges not just in their careers but also life in general, Taylor’s built in compulsory life skills modules in every degree.

Students pick up a myriad of skills from mindfulness and time management to goal setting, taught by a specialised team of life skills facilitators to teach these modules.

“For many employers, intellectual intelligence – or rather the skills needed for a job – is assumed to be a given. So what sets a graduate apart from the thousands of other degree holders entering the job market each year? Employers tell us that it’s soft skills,” said Prof Pradeep.

“Life skills are so important that I embarked on ensuring our university could measure it, because ‘what gets measured, gets done’,” he added.

In a first for a university in Asia, the Taylor’s Graduate Capabilities (TGC) covering skills such as communication, critical thinking and leadership are assessed in every module, with students receiving a second transcript alongside an academic transcript when they graduate.

In line with measuring the TGC, skills such as entrepreneurship and design thinking come into play in the Craft pillar of intelligence.

Every Taylor’s student takes up a social innovation module where they find solutions to current real-world problems, and also engage in final year projects.

Students also have the opportunity to realise their entrepreneurial dreams, and receive guidance with ideation, prototyping, funding and product commercialisation under the mentorship of Taylor's Me.reka Makerspace (TMM), BizPod and Research & Enterprise.

Some examples of student start-ups receiving the mentorship and support of Bizpod include a parking app called Arrivo that is now currently valued at RM5mil, and Cultiv8, a brand that specialises in ready-to-eat meals and gourmet sauces, developed by Taylor's own culinology students.

"As more businesses these days are struggling financially and attempting to reinvent themselves, entrepreneurialism will fetch a premium.

"Employers will increasingly prefer graduates who demonstrate a growth mindset who can identify business value, take risks, innovate to seize business opportunities, and strengthen the businesses' competitive advantage," said Prof Pradeep.

Nurul Nadhirah agrees. Certainly, the ingrained entrepreneurship edge in her degree helped her launch her business.

"During my four years at Taylors, I got to participate in many hands-on entrepreneurship activities, and learnt team dynamics, marketing, content creating and sales management.

"I also built connections with many friends of the same interest, and chefs, who still provide me guidance even until today," she shared.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/10/07/tackling-graduate-unemployment-one-student-at-a-time>