

Sunday January 2, 2011

Master of numbers

By KANG SOON CHEN
educate@thestar.com.my

Statisticians not only collect data, they need to interpret it and tell the stories behind the figures.

AS of 2010, the total population of Malaysia stands at 27,565,281. Selangor is the most populous state in the country with 5,411,324 people — 19.63% of the country's population. There are 105 males for every 100 females in Malaysia.



Wan Ramlah says statistics play a part in contributing towards the nation's development

These are the numbers released from the preliminary count report of the Malaysia Population and Housing Census 2010 — and while dealing with vast amounts of data and figures may be daunting to some, a statistician's job is to make sense of it all.

Malaysia Statistics Department chief statistician Datuk Wan Ramlah Wan Abd Raof says that these figures have a story to tell.

"Statistics is all about data and figures with information.

"Key statistics such as the above are very useful in helping the Government to plan for schools, create job openings and distribute aid for welfare purposes," she says.

"There is a lot to tell from the numbers. For instance, people in the 18-24 age bracket belong to the youth group, of the child bearing age and they are probably going to start their careers," she explains.

Being in charge of collecting and interpreting the data, statisticians in the public service are consultants to the Government in economic and development planning.

"Besides working at the department and its state branch offices, statisticians are also stationed at the different ministries as cadre officers and liaison officers," says Wan Ramlah.

My job involves...

... compiling statistics.

I have to ensure that the methods used adhere to the standards set by the United Nations Statistics Division and the data collected is accurate, in time and comparable internationally.

This is especially important when the data is used for trade negotiations in the export and import of goods between the countries.

I also oversee the operation of the department and attend meetings abroad to exchange ideas and experiences in the international forum.

My morning starts with ...

... checking e-mails and attending to matters that demand my immediate attention. After that, I will read the newspapers and peruse the *Letters to the Editor* section to know about the comments and complaints from the public.

It is necessary for statisticians to constantly keep up with current affairs in order to gauge the direction the country is moving into.

We need to be very sensitive to the development and needs of each sector.

From there on, we get a general idea of the kind of statistics required and this will lay the groundwork for the planning of the next statistical study.

To qualify, you need ...

... a degree in mathematics, statistics or economics. Graduates from other disciplines are also accepted with the condition that they have completed 15 credit hours of mathematics and statistics.

Knowledge of statistics is crucial in sample design.

Besides using a reliable method for the study, statisticians need to be adept at selecting a sample that is not biased and represents a general picture.

The best person for the job ...

... is someone who has a head for figures and an analytical mind. They must also not be bored by numbers. A statistician's job involves more than just collecting data — they need to interpret it and tell the stories behind the numbers.

Those who want to venture into this profession should also be prepared for the long working hours ahead as statisticians need to work within very tight deadlines.

I love my job because...

... I have always had a love for numbers. Having worked in the field of statistics for close to 35 years, I still find a passion in those figures and facts.

Information is power. I find immense satisfaction in the work I do as the statistics that we have worked on play a part in contributing towards the nation's development.

I especially have a soft spot for the national population census. Planning for this project began three years ago and my proudest moment was during the release of its preliminary report recently.

The data collected from the census is meaningful to everyone, from the general public to the policy makers.

What I dislike most...

... is the distrust that some people have for the work that statisticians do. There are those who do not see the rationale behind the studies conducted and complain about the long time that we take to publish the statistics.

What they do not understand is that statisticians are often dealing with thousands of samples, companies and departments at a time.

Data cannot be processed and released immediately due to the validation steps that we need to take to ensure that the information is accurate.

Prospects for the future...

... look promising. I always receive requests for the placements of statisticians in the various ministries as statistical work is needed to support the rapid development of the country.

Currently, there are over 300 statisticians in the department and we definitely need more of them in the future.

Statisticians can also work in the private sector and they will usually be involved in market research.

A millionaire by 30?

Thirty might be too young an age as statisticians still need to gather some experience before they can be truly competent in this field. Nevertheless, statisticians can progress up the ladder and go very far if they are keen to learn and work hard.



Internet Explorer cannot display the web

More News

Education Headlines

Go