

PERSPECTIVE

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Work and Wages of Malaysia's Youth: Structural Trends and Current Challenges

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- These are tough times for young workers (aged 15-24) globally, but Malaysia's youth face some distinct challenges arising from structural trends in the labour market and policy shortcomings of the past decade.
- While youths have increasingly attained tertiary-level education, they remain disproportionately employed in semi-skilled or low-skilled jobs, and their presence in skilled occupations falls far short of national goals. Most young adults are employed as service workers and many remain in elementary jobs, while the proportion holding professional or technical positions has barely grown in recent years.
- Wage growth for young workers shows a dual pattern, of sluggish gains in the 20-24 year bracket alongside higher rates for 15-19 year-olds, likely due to the minimum wage mandate. Nonetheless, young workers' wage levels remain low, and prevailing work conditions detract from the work-life balance, interesting jobs and the economic security valued by this generation of youths – which are aligned with national objectives.
- A growing proportion of young adults aspire to be self-employed and some will be poised for new ventures in the digital economy. They will need incentives and support to do so.
- The vast majority will however remain employees. Malaysia must substantially enhance skills, wages and economic security for all working youth.

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysian young workers face job and income predicaments as the economic fallout of Covid-19 continually unfolds, but the roots run deeper. Educational attainment of late teens and young adults has continuously grown in recent years. However, their aspirations for gainful employment and economic security have also been strained by particular labour market conditions now compounded by global pandemic.

Following international convention, Malaysia defines young workers as those aged 15-24 and reports statistics in five- or ten-year age brackets. Persons in the 15-24 range are pursuing upper- or post-secondary education, or transitioning to the labour market and subjected to entry-level wages. Referencing official data disclosures, this Perspective outlines the occupational profiles of Malaysia's youth and of employed tertiary graduates, examines their wage growth and wage levels, and evaluates how labour market conditions and policies are serving them.

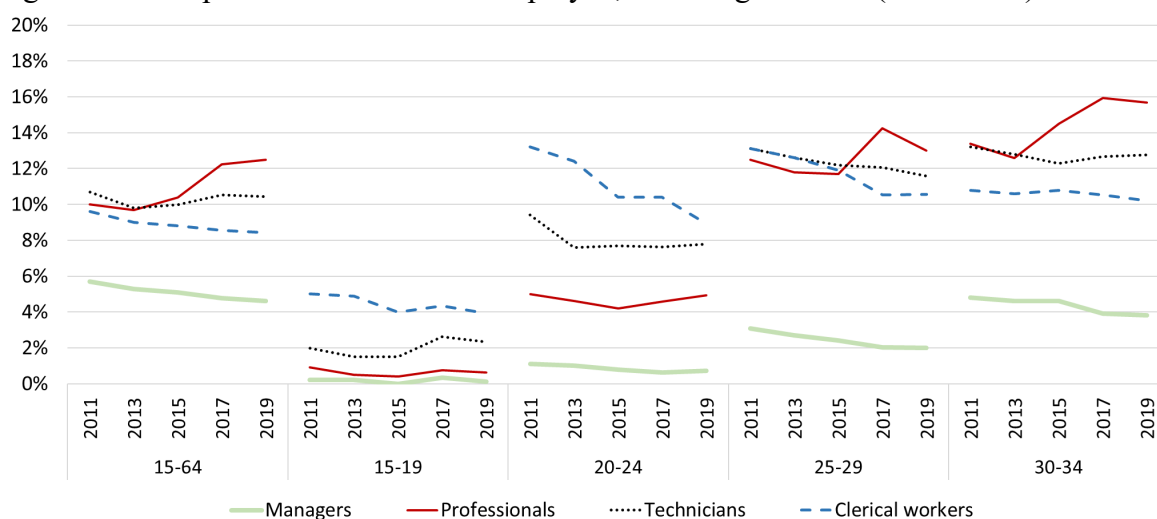
SKILLS, OCCUPATIONS AND SECTORS

Malaysia's youth are increasingly educated. In 2018, 32.7% of 15-24 year-olds had attained tertiary-level qualifications, compared to 24.7% of those aged 25 and above.¹ Keeping in step with these educational advancements requires accelerated the growth of highly skilled jobs, particularly in professional, technical and creative capacities.

However, the occupational profile of the employed does not paint such a portrait. Figures 1a and 1b, from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) Reports, break down the employed by occupation within age brackets. We should note that the LFS Reports applied a revised occupational classification from 2016, which may account for some sharp inflections before and after that year.

The share of high-skilled jobs in the young employed population barely rises. The percentages of professionals and technicians, which typically require higher education qualifications, hover in a narrow range for the 15-19 and 20-24 age brackets rather and do not show the expected upward trend, except for a slight rise of technicians in the 15-19 bracket. The proportions of clerical workers and farmers and agriculture workers substantially contract, while the proportion of sales and service workers most conspicuously expands. The percentage of artisanal/craft workers grows by a slight margin among 15-19 year-olds but holds steady for 20-24 year-olds, while elementary and production line jobs follow a net upward trend, amid some fluctuation.

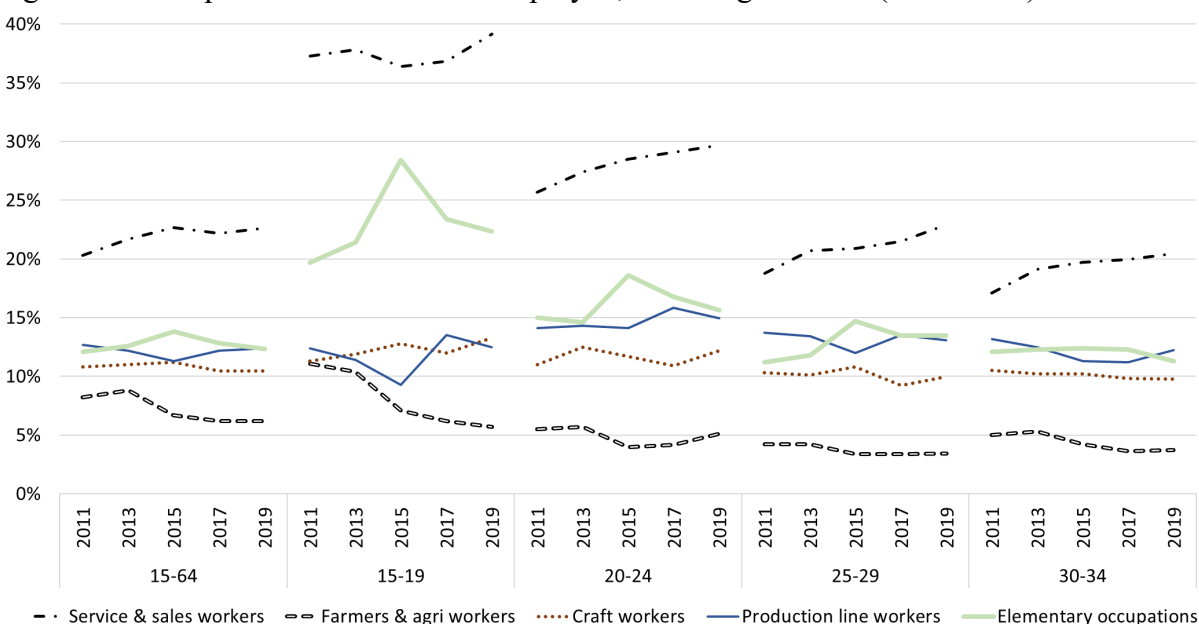
Figure 1a: Occupations' share of total employed, within age bracket (2011-2019)



Source: Author's compilations from Department of Statistics (2012, 2014, 2016, 2018a, 2020a).

Notes: 2011-2015 apply Malaysia Standard Classification of Occupations (MASCO) 2008, 2017-2019 apply MASCO 2013; technicians category includes "associate professionals" (supervisors, medical assistants, chefs, etc).

Figure 1b: Occupations' share of total employed, within age bracket (2011-2019)



Source: Author's compilations from Department of Statistics (2012, 2014, 2016, 2018a, 2020a).

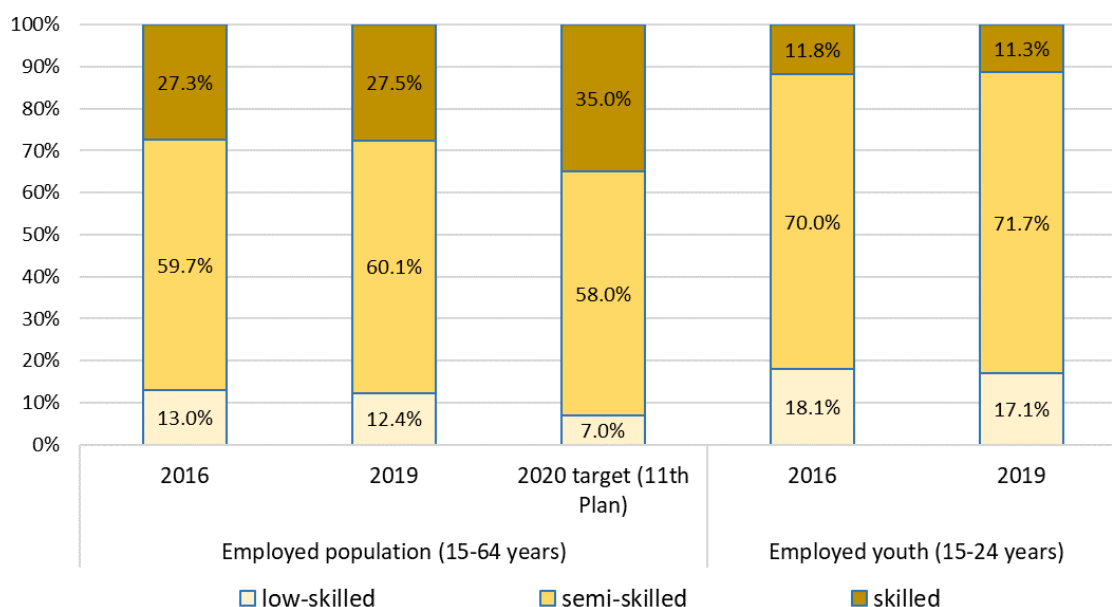
Notes: 2011-2015 apply Malaysia Standard Classification of Occupations (MASCO) 2008, 2017-2019 apply MASCO 2013; production line workers refers to the Malaysian classification system's "plant and machine operators and assemblers".

The steady decline in the share of clerical workers, from 13% in 2011 to 9% in 2019, matched by a four percentage point rise in service and sales workers, from 26% to 30%, captures economic shifts within the sprawling services sector. These reallocations of the

young workforce align with structural changes sustaining economic growth, but do not necessarily correspond with better wage prospects.² These developments also open new opportunity for self-employment, particularly in e-commerce, that suitably skilled youth can pursue.

The sizable presence of jobs requiring generic skills alongside static proportion of skilled occupations, embody Malaysia’s perennial problem of labour demand disconnected from supply. Notwithstanding concerns about the quality of some tertiary-level certificates, the quality of jobs strikingly detracts from Malaysia’s development aspirations to be a high-skilled and high-wage economy. In 2015, the *Eleventh Malaysia Plan* resolved that, by 2020, skilled jobs would constitute 35% of employment, with 58% of semi-skilled and 7% low-skilled. However, Malaysia has considerably fallen short (Figure 2). Moreover, the share of skilled occupations among employed youth backtracked from 11.8% in 2016 to 11.3% in 2019.

Figure 2. Distribution of employment by skill-based occupation tiers.

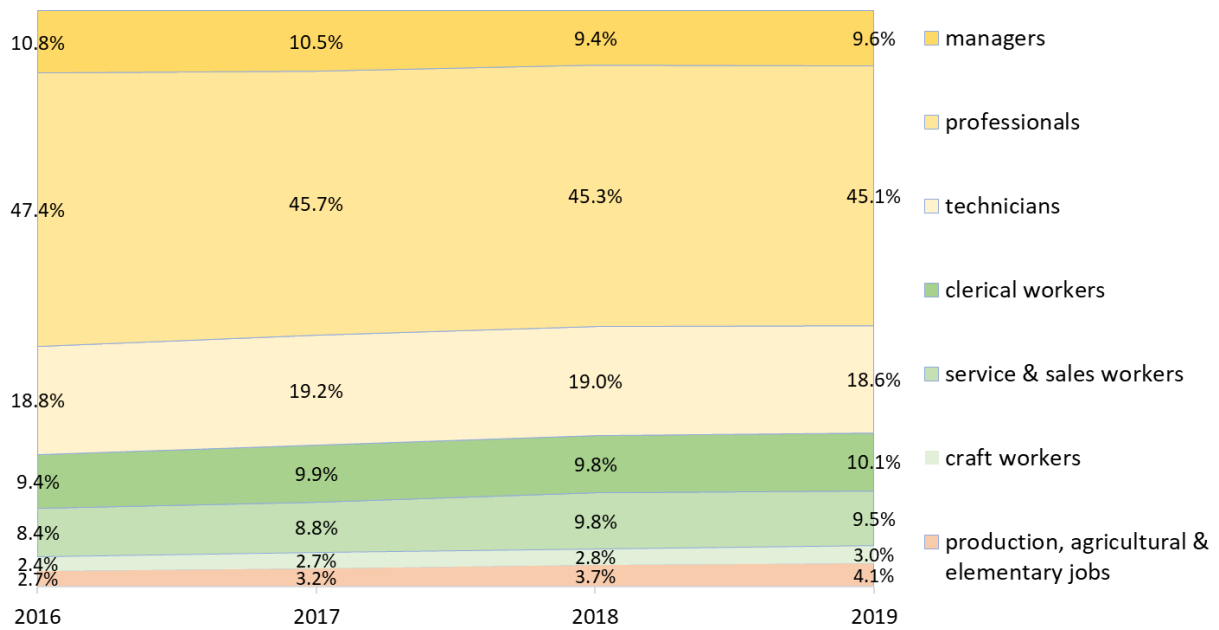


Sources: Author’s calculations from Department of Statistics (2012, 2016, 2020a), Malaysia (2015)

Note: ‘skilled’=managers, professionals, technicians; ‘semi-skilled’=clerical, sales & service, craft, agricultural, & production line workers; ‘low-skilled’=elementary jobs.

Increasing mismatch of labour force qualification and job type can also be seen in the occupational profile of the graduate workforce (Figure 3). These numbers exclude non-tertiary graduates but include all ages, unlike Figures 1a and 1b which disaggregate by age but do not specify occupation. Nonetheless, we can reasonably presume that changes across time are driven by new graduates entering the labour market. Across the interval 2016-2019, the shares of employed graduates working as managers, professionals and technicians – the ‘skilled’ occupations, by official classification – diminished, while that of ‘semi-skilled’ jobs and low-skilled or elementary jobs expanded. Workers holding tertiary-level certificates, diplomas or degrees are increasingly working in jobs that generally do not require such qualifications.

Figure 3. Employed tertiary graduates (all ages): Distribution by occupation, 2016-2019.



Source: Author's calculations from Department of Statistics (2020b).

The composition of job vacancies underscores the perennial preponderance of semi-skilled and low-skilled jobs. The government's portal JobsMalaysia is widely used, both as an online source and through branch service centres nationwide.³ Elementary jobs constitute the vast majority of listings, accounting for 68.4% of total listed vacancies in 2014-2015, and 76.9% in 2017-2018, followed by production line workers at 10-11% (Table 1). That elementary occupations comprise a disproportionately larger share on JobsMalaysia than the labour market may be due to the requirement that employers list jobs there before recruiting foreign workers and the preference of private sector employers for other portals. Nonetheless, this staggering concentration of low-skill occupations runs counter to Malaysia's goal of creating quality jobs in a high-skill, high value-added economy.

Table 1. Jobs Malaysia Vacancies, by Occupation Group, 2014-2018

	2014-2015	2017-2018
Managers	1.5%	0.6%
Professionals	3.1%	2.4%
Technicians	1.8%	1.4%
Clerical workers	1.9%	0.8%
Service and sales workers	9.5%	3.8%
Farmers and agri. workers	1.1%	0.7%
Craft workers	2.6%	2.3%
Production line workers	10.1%	10.9%
Elementary jobs	<u>68.4%</u>	<u>76.9%</u>
	100%	100%
Total vacancies per year	1,081,387	1,284,198

Source: Author's calculations from Department of Statistics (2019b).

Policy responses to this parlous state of the labour market merit a brief comment. One response is to ask if Malaysia is producing ‘too many’ graduates, especially university degree holders. This is difficult to answer conclusively, although in some fields, especially highly specialized and profession-specific qualifications such as doctors, over-supply can be more straightforwardly ascertained. Persisting concerns about ‘employability’ of graduates and shortage of TVET enrolment, and attendant issues such as inadequacies in their versatility, critical thinking and communication skills, warrant robust attention. However, tertiary education remains crucial for acquiring knowledge, ability and maturity for employment that are surely not adequately imbued in the vast majority of secondary school graduates. Moreover, Malaysia’s rate of tertiary achievement still lags that of economies in similar or more advanced stages of development, and from a national strategic standpoint, promoting high-skilled jobs rather than reducing the supply of skilled labour patently presents a more salutary path forward.⁴

Based on the ultimate outcome that matters – what jobs are being created – Malaysia’s youth are disserved by a convergence of labour demand and supply side problems largely outside their control. Concerns over deficient professional, technical and social abilities of graduates, including English language proficiency and communication skills, have swirled for over a decade, primarily in the context of youth ‘employability’ – coupled with complaints of unduly high wage demands. As discussed in a preceding Perspective on youth unemployment, there are elements of truth to these contending views, but reliable and objective sources confound the generalization that graduates hold unreasonable expectations (Lee 2020). Colleges and universities under-equip graduates in various ways, and while such systemic problems must be addressed, it is also a fact that swathes of employers under-provide training. A national survey of employers found that only 33% provide training for new recruits, ranging from 25% of family businesses and 44% of private limited companies, to 64% of multinationals and 71% of public listed companies (KRI 2018).

Intertwined with these structural issues is another consequential aspect of employment for young workers – their increasing engagement in self-employment (Lee 2020). Survey research captures this inclination toward starting a business rather than working for someone else. Khazanah Research Institute’s 2018 School to Work Survey (SWTS), which included a nationally representative survey of tertiary students and convenience sampled job seekers, generated some pertinent findings (KRI 2018). The STWS found 23% of tertiary students expressing a first preference for starting their own business, closely following employment in government (26%) and on par with those electing to work for an international company (23%).⁵ Job seekers remain keen on self-employment, with 20% indicating a preference for starting their own business, but they tend to turn more pragmatic than students, with 38% preferring to work in the public sector (compared to 26% of students) and 12% willing to take any job offered (7% of students). A much lower share of job seekers (7%) prefer to work for a multinational.

This trend presents opportunities that young workers with training, financing and enterprising spirit may pursue, but also carries risk of exposure to economic vicissitudes – and less social protection than conventional employment (KRI 2018). Registration for the SOCSO, which provides insurance for workplace injury or accident, is a case in point. It is compulsory for all private sector employers to provide SOCSO coverage for employees earning below RM4,000, and this mandate was extended in 2017 to e-hailing drivers, classified as self-employed persons in the passenger transport sector. Since January 2020,

the self-employed in general can also participate in SOCSO on a voluntary basis. However, until March 2020, only 8,000 self-employed persons had taken up this option. The total number of self-employed covered by SOCSO, including e-hailing drivers, is 50,000 or a paltry 1.8% of the 2.73 million self-employed population.⁶

LOW-WAGE WOES

Complaints of low wage levels and sluggish wage growth recur in Malaysia, and young workers are believed to experience the problem more acutely. Minimum wage, currently at RM1,200 a month in major towns and cities, while stepped up annually since 2018, is widely regarded as inadequate for a decent living standard. A noted Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM) report estimated a “living wage” of RM2,700 for an individual in Kuala Lumpur, and RM6,500 for a couple with two children (Chong and Khong 2017). Malaysia’s poverty line income has also just been reset at RM2,208 for a household of four; a minimum wage earner with dependents decidedly falls in the poor category (Department of Statistics 2020c).

Public discourse on stagnating youth wages gained further prominence under another BNM policy brief. The central bank’s *2019 Annual Report* found data showing entry-level wages had diminished in real terms between 2010 and 2018. This article referenced a Malaysian Employers’ Federation (MEF) data series based on voluntary, non-random surveys of its members (Murugasu, Mohamad Ishaq and Yau 2019). However, MEF itself disputed BNM’s claims, opining that its wage figures were limited to basic wage and excluded overtime, allowance, and bonuses.⁷ These contentions are technically correct, but MEF does not contest the claim of slow entry-level salary *growth*.

Is there broader and more credible empirical support? Comprehensive wages and earnings data, covering all forms of employment including self-employment, remain elusive, but some national surveys contribute to a fuller and more credible picture. We consider two sources that inform the state of wages of young workers, and fresh graduates.

First, the Salaries and Wages Survey (SWS) is the most authoritative and nationally representative data set encompassing basic wages plus regular allowances of private and public sector employees. The following discussion references the SWS Report – a published summary of findings. The data empirically confirm the phenomenon of low young adult wages. In 2018, the median wage stood at RM2,308 nationally, but only RM1,423 for 15-19 years and RM1,569 for 20-24 years, followed by a bigger jump to RM2,112 for 25-29 years. Simultaneously, average wages were RM3,087 nationally, RM1,429 (15-19 years), RM1,720 (20-24 years) and RM2,359 (25-29 years) (Department of Statistics 2019a).

There is a systemic aspect to the problem of sluggish wage growth. Table 2 shows changes in employment and real wages between 2010 and 2018. Overall, real wages grew 3.5% per annum, lagging 5.2% real GDP growth; in line with the established view that workers are under-remunerated for their contribution to productivity (Murugasu, Mohamad Ishaq and Yau 2019).

Age-delineated patterns are instructive – focusing, again, on the 15-19 and 20-24 brackets. Slow growth in the number of employed youth – indeed, a minute contraction in the 15-19 category – reflect the increasing propensity to remain in secondary education or to pursue higher education instead of joining the workforce. Employees in the youngest category

experience conspicuously high 6.5% annual real wage growth, compared to the next category, aged 20-24, whose wages only grew by 2.9% per year. Among the ten-year brackets, 15-24 year-olds record relatively high average wage growth, but this is driven by the higher gains of working teenagers. Labour market participants in the 20-24 age range, who likely hold higher education qualifications, have experienced distinctly lethargic wage growth – although we should note that the corresponding rates were even slower in the 25-34 category (2.4%).

Table 2. Number of employees and average real wage, by age group (2000 and 2018)

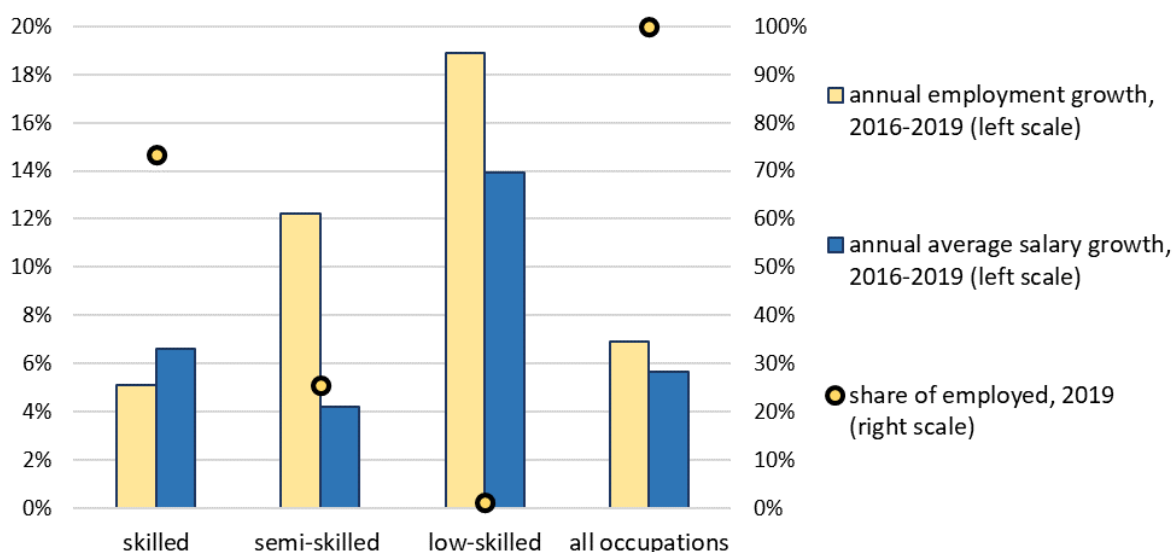
Age range	Number of employees (<i>thousands</i>)			Average real wage (<i>RM per month</i>)		
	2010	2018	Annual growth (2010-2018)	2010	2018	Annual growth (2010-2018)
15-19	241	239	-0.1%	860	1,429	6.5%
20-24	1,114	1,154	0.4%	1,414	1,780	2.9%
15-24	1,355	1,393	0.3%	1,316	1,720	5.9%
25-34	2,607	3,198	2.6%	2,236	2,696	2.4%
35-44	1,715	2,198	3.2%	2,773	3,705	3.7%
45-54	1,185	1,458	2.6%	3,030	4,021	3.6%
55-64	287	514	7.5%	2,581	3,924	5.4%
Overall	7,149	8,761	2.6%	2,336	3,087	3.5%

Source: Department of Statistics 2019a.

These patterns suggest the effect of minimum wage, which came into force in 2013-2014. The introduction, and subsequent upward revisions, of a legislated wage floor has boosted wage growth in the lowest paid jobs, which teenagers are more likely to occupy. The findings also concur with the view that wages offered to fresh tertiary graduates entering the labour market persist at low levels.

We can zoom in on tertiary graduates, drawing on other official publications that also utilize the Salaries and Wages Survey.⁸ Employed graduates aged 15-24 received a substantially lower median pay of RM2,112 in 2019; the next age bracket (25-34 years) registered a jump to RM3,510 (Department of Statistics 2020b). Following up on Figure 2, which showed increasing proportions of tertiary graduates working in semi-skilled jobs, Figure 4 juxtaposes employment growth with salary growth by the officially applied skill classification. Graduates in skilled jobs enjoy faster salary growth than graduates in semi-skilled jobs. These highly aggregated patterns will need to be investigated more in-depth, but one plausible implication that arises is that mismatch and over-qualification may impact adversely on earnings.

Figure 4. Employed tertiary graduates: employment and salary growth, 2016-2019.

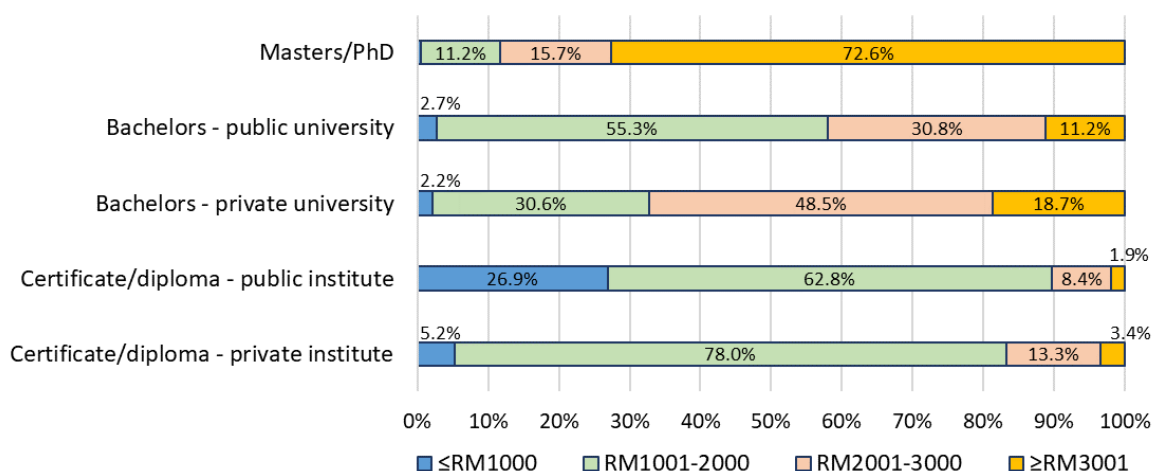


Source: Author’s calculations from Department of Statistics (2020a).

Note: ‘skilled’=managers, professionals, technicians; ‘semi-skilled’=clerical, sales & service, craft, agricultural, & production line workers; ‘low-skilled’=elementary jobs.

Graduate Tracer Surveys offer a further reference point. Official reports of these surveys, conducted at convocation ceremonies 3-6 months after graduation, sort working graduates into RM1000-wide wage bands. In 2018, a startlingly high 31% of certificate holders and 19% of diploma holders reported starting wages of RM1,000 or less. Vast majorities earn RM2,000 or less, specifically, 87% of certificate or diploma holders and 49% of degree holders. Figure 5 displays the concentration of low starting wages, further disaggregated by institution type, in which public institution graduates consistently receive lower wages than private institution peers. Notably, 58% of public university bachelor’s degree graduates, and 33% of private university counterparts, start working at or under RM2,000.

Figure 5. Starting monthly salary of higher education graduating cohort, by degree level and institution type (2018)



Source: Ministry of Education (2019a).

Workers struggling to get by may hold a second job, or undertake debt, and indeed it is not uncommon for low- and middle-income households to do so (World Bank 2019). The practice is perhaps less prevalent among young workers, who have fewer or no dependents to support financially, but it is still significant. The SWTS estimated that 11% of young employed Malaysians hold a second job, and 70% of them do so to earn extra income (KRI 2018).

Broader questions surrounding quality of life also enter the frame. The SWTS found that young workers principally value work-life balance and job security more than the pecuniary gains from labour. In response to a question about the occupational characteristics they prioritize most, a plurality of tertiary students selected “work-life balance” (25%), followed by job security (18%) and “having an interesting job” (16%). The proportions were similar among job seekers – 22% valued job security, 20% work-life balance, 17% interesting job – and young workers: 23% job security, 22% work-life balance, 14% interesting job. These preferences are in line with Malaysia’s economic advancement and development rhetoric, but labour policy has considerable catching up to do.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Labour markets have dealt low returns to most Malaysian young workers in recent years; their dilemmas are now compounded by Covid-19. While the economy has avoided mass unemployment, the challenge of providing quality, well-paying jobs and social protection will be both necessary and difficult. In anticipation of Federal Budget 2021, Malaysia’s Minister of Finance has expressed commitment to special programmes for youth, especially in self-employment and including financial literacy, and welcomed proposals from the public.

It is also important to consider where the young are located in the economy, how well their jobs match their qualifications and why mismatch is increasing, why low wages persist, and whether young workers’ needs and aspirations are being met. Promoting self-employment –and start-ups merits policy support, especially in providing credit and social protection. While e-commerce possibilities continue to stand out, prospects in other fields, notably technical, artisanal services, should also be explored. But the vast majority will continually be employees. Higher wage growth among the youngest workers, who are more likely to earn minimum wage, point to the impact of such interventions in bolstering income. At the same time, Malaysian workers’ aspirations are more aligned with the concept of a living wage, and the young seek not only more income but also secure and interesting employment, and work-life balance.

The continually low share of youth in professional, technical and artisanal occupations and large shares in production line and elementary jobs indicates the need for a dual approach of promoting skilled employment and improving wages and work conditions especially at the lower end. The Malaysian government has recently declared that foreign workers will only be permitted in construction, agriculture and plantations.⁹ Vast swathes of manual jobs in plantations and construction are clearly untenable for Malaysian workers, but even manufacturing and service jobs will likely remain unattractive, and may not sufficiently generate employment, given the ongoing uncertainties.

More direct interventions to promote employment, through public programmes, procurement or targeted subsidies, merit further consideration, particularly for non-tertiary educated youth. Importantly, in these programmes, the government should go beyond mere employment creation and lead the way in realizing living wage and decent work as national principles.

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¹ Author's calculations based on Ministry of Education (2019b) and Department of Statistics (2019c).

² In 2018, service and sales workers recorded a median monthly wage of RM1,695, compared to RM2,093 for clerical workers (Department of Statistics 2019a).

³ The 2018 Graduate Tracer Survey found that 21% of fresh graduates state JobsMalaysia as their main job search vehicle, with 55% stating "the internet" (which may also include the JobsMalaysia website) (Ministry of Education 2019a).

⁴ Some cross-country comparisons suggest that Malaysia's tertiary education, while it has rapidly expanded, still has room to grow. In 2017-2018, the tertiary enrolment rates were 45.1% in Malaysia, 55.2% in fellow upper middle-income country Costa Rica, 88.5% in Chile (a recent entrant to the World Bank's high income group), 94.3% in South Korea, and 75.1% on average in the OECD (<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>).

⁵ Interestingly, the proportion preferring to start their own business is also similar across the major ethnic groups: 22% of Bumiputeras, 25% of Chinese and 25% of Indians (Khazanah Research Institute 2018).

⁶ "More self-employed should be on Socso", *The Star*, 1 March 2020.

⁷ "Bank Negara's claim about falling entry-level wages puts employers in 'bad light' — MEF", *The Edge Markets*, 29 March 2019.

⁸ A graduate is defined as: holding either diploma or degree from a university, college, polytechnic, or equivalent institution, based on at least two years of study.

⁹ "Putrajaya limits foreign workers only to construction, agriculture, plantations sectors", *The Malay Mail*, 29 July 2020.

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