

Factors influencing employability of agricultural skills training graduates

(Faktor yang mempengaruhi kebolehpasaran graduan latihan kemahiran pertanian)

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Abstract

In recent times, the younger generation have access to a variety of training institutions to acquire talent or skill in a particular industry. However, the employment prospects for their graduates remain dubious. In the majority of developing nations, particularly in the agriculture sector, graduate employability has long been a significant problem. A number of studies have revealed that agricultural employment has been declining around the world. This declining trend is believed to have occurred because of the shift of employment from agriculture to non-agriculture sectors such as manufacturing and services. Despite having more students in tertiary education who study for agriculture courses, the number of graduates who consider agriculture as an ideal sector to work remains smaller. Other factors that could also affect employability in the agriculture sector are the 3D (dirty, dangerous and difficult) elements in agriculture and perhaps a mismatch between graduate employability skills and the needs of the industry. Therefore, this study aims to identify the factors that affect the employability of National Agricultural Skills Training Program (PLKPK) graduates as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of this program. This study involved 441 graduates who completed their studies from 2015 – 2019 across Malaysia using a structured questionnaire. The survey was conducted using face-to-face and online survey. The data were analysed using descriptive and cross-tabulation analysis. The results showed that 63% of graduates were employed including self-employment. On top of that, some of the graduates choose to further their studies. Among the graduates who have worked, 43% were working in a similar field of their study while others were working in a different field. This PLKPK programme has the potential to create trained agricultural workers as well as agricultural entrepreneurs. Although they are capable of beginning their own firm, the biggest obstacle will be lack of funding. Therefore, a key element that might foster graduate capacity building, the driving force behind the development of soft skills, is the strengthening of the graduates through the institutions and closer collaboration with industry.

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Introduction

The National Agricultural Skills Training Program or Program Latihan Kemahiran Pertanian Kebangsaan (PLKPK) is a Technical and Vocational Education and Training Program (TVET) in the field of agriculture coordinated by the National Agricultural Training Council (NATC) which is also known as the Agricultural Capacity Building and Training Development Division (BPLKP), Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MAFS) in accordance with the approval of the cabinet on 24th of July 2002. PLKPK is implemented based on National Occupational Skills Standard (NOSS) with the provisions of the National Skill Development Act 2006 (NASDA). This TVET program is a free education program for youth aged between 18-25 years at 14 training centres consisting nine courses. The courses are subjected to some agricultural field commissioned by the Skills Development Department (JPK), Ministry of Human Resources (KSM). This program is one of the government's initiatives to increase agricultural production through a model to develop skilled people in the field of agriculture.

The development of this program is based on good agricultural practices with latest technology in collaboration with the industry. The core of the program is the current market demand for qualified workers needed by the industry. NATC is working to provide a new stream of skilled labour in the agricultural sector (UNEVOC TVET Country Profiles Malaysia, 2019). In line with UNESCO's strategy within the International Center for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (UNEVOC), where it supports the member states' efforts to increase the TVET system. All youth and adult with the necessary skills for employment in agriculture, employment skills, entrepreneurship and lifelong learning, could contribute to the 2030 Sustainable Development Achievement Agenda with education and skills development will be in place as well.

PLKPK for all agricultural field consists of various levels commissioned by the Skills Development Department (JPK), Ministry of Human Resources. As in the field of agriculture under the PKLPK it was based on these skills (competency-based skill training) with a ratio of practical training to class training of 60:40. The PLKPK which was implemented is based on the National Occupational Skills Standard (NOSS) with the provisions of NASDA. NOSS is a module framework developed by the industry in collaboration with expert in their respective fields. Since its inception in 2002, this programme has produced graduates with Malaysian Skills Certificates and Malaysian Skills Diplomas in nine listed agricultural field.

Graduate employability has long been a serious issue in majority of developing countries, especially in the agriculture sector. Numerous studies have shown that there has been a global decline in agricultural employment. It is thought that the job transition from agriculture to non-agricultural industries like manufacturing and services is what led to this downward trend. Although there are more students taking up agriculture courses in tertiary education, there are still fewer graduates who view agriculture as their ideal field of employment. The 3D (Dirty, Dangerous and Difficult) components of agriculture and maybe a mismatch between graduate employability skills and the needs of the industry are additional issues that could impact employability in the agriculture sector. Thus, this study was conducted to identify the factors that affect the employability of PLKPK graduates as well as to determine the graduate's perception on this program.

Literature review

Definition of employability

Graduate employability has long been a major issue in most developing countries, which led to many definitions of employability (Harvey 2001). The

definition of employability is based on how we measure it. Most study defines employability as the ability for a person to gain initial employment, maintaining the job and obtain new employment, or simply the ability to get and keep a fulfilling job with a steady salary (Bridgstock 2009; Fátima 2016; Osman and Murdad 2020). However, the definitions can also be elaborate based on type of job, being employed within a specified time after graduating, attributes on recruitment, further learning and employabilities skills (Mohamad Sattar et al. 2009; Storen et al. 2010; Harvey 2011; Maripaz and Ombra 2016).

Employability status in Malaysian agriculture sector

Malaysia falls under the ASEAN region that consists of 13 states and three federal territories. Shortly after independence in 1957, the agricultural sector became the main growth engine for the country's economy. At that time, our country had ample natural resources underutilised especially land which contributed to the development of primary commodities. The country's rich natural resources and underexploited land drove economic development through the production of primary raw materials. Agriculture was the main source of livelihood for many Malaysian citizens as the sector provided source of food.

Many local commodity companies emerged and contributed extensively to the development of the sector. Small farmers continued to be key players for crops such as rice, fruit and vegetables (Zaremohzzabieh et al. 2021). While the structure of the sector has evolved over the past fifty years, agriculture remains a critical sector of the Malaysian economy, contributing RM34.8 billion to GDP (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2021).

The number of employed persons in 2021 amounted to 15.06 million persons. Out of the total, only 10.3% were involved in the agriculture sector. This number

showed a decrease compared to the previous year. The employed persons in the agriculture sector were still dominated by Malaysian with 63.6% while others were non-citizens which showed the largest share of foreign workers in the agriculture sector. (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2021)

According to Nor et al. 2015, youth participation in the Malaysian agricultural sector was 26% in 2007. By 2014, the number had fallen to 15% (Abdul Kadir 2014). In 2015, 2,180 fresh graduates were employed in the agricultural sector compared to 15,085 in manufacturing, supporting the claim that the agricultural sector is less attractive to Malaysian youth than other industries (Abiddin and Irsyad 2012; Nor et al. 2015). Concerns of Malaysian Government about youth participation in farming have led to the implementation of several initiatives to increase interest in farming careers (Abdullah et al. 2012). However, most college graduates preferred to be employed in non-agriculture related sector either public or private sectors (Dlamini 2017). Additionally, many job opportunities in the agricultural sector for new graduates remain vacant (Ridha and Wahyu 2017).

Issues on employability in Malaysia

Issues on employability among graduates in Malaysia have been studied by some researchers such as follows:

No.	Author (year)	Respondents	Objective/ methodology	Conclusion
1.	Ismail (2012)	Employer (Company in Malaysia)	Analysing factors and criteria for marketability from an employer's perspective employers using the gap analysis method	The result of the study found that there is a gap between the actual performance of the graduates and the expected performance by the employers for all the marketability features studied
2.	Yusop and Umar (2018)	Graduates of Kolej Komuniti Kuala Langat (KKKL)	Analyse the employability status of the graduates	Results found that the level of employability of KKKL graduates increased by 6%, which is from 93% in 2013 to 99% in 2017
3.	Ridzwan et al. (2019)	Agriculture lecturer, leaders of agricultural training institutions, agricultural instructor of Institut Pertanian Malaysia	Identify characteristics of a high skilled and knowledgeable worker in the agricultural industry	There are 10 characteristics of K workers required in order to have high employability for skilled labour. This result can be used to measure the employability level of the labour market in the agricultural sector in Malaysia
4.	Haron et al. (2019)	Employer (Company in Malaysia)	This study has been conducted to identify the employability potential of Malaysian Vocational College (KV) graduates based on the current employer perception	Communication, thinking and problem-solving skills were perceived, hence it was stated as an important factors by industrial employers
5.	Osman and Murdad (2020)	Employer (Company in Malaysia)	To explore the employers' expectations towards the agriculture graduates using CareerEDGE model.	This study showed an inverse relationship between employer expectations and graduate perceptions. The results suggested that the collaboration between institutions and industry is crucial to narrowing this gap.

Methodology

The study involved 441 graduates. Data was collected face to face and through an online survey using a structured questionnaire. The list of PLKPK graduates was compiled from 14 agricultural training centers across Malaysia that graduated between 2015 and 2019. The Malaysian Skills Certificate (SKM) and Malaysian Skills Diploma (DKM) have produced a total of 2,889 graduates. From the total population of graduates $N = 2,889$, 15% from total graduate population were chosen for this study, and 441 graduates agreed to participate. The stratified random sampling method ensures that the subgroup of the population is represented in the N population.

A few sections of a structured questionnaire were created. Section A focuses on the demographics of the respondents. This section discusses the demographic profile, graduation year and field of study. Section B covers graduate employment information related to the current job, income and the relationship between the current job and the field of study. All of the questions in these two sections were closed-end questions. The final section includes the graduate's impressions of the training center's facilities as well as suggestions for future improvements. This section include items that were classified using a five-point Likert scale (1: Completely disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Neutral; 4: Agree; 5: Completely agree).

The data was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The descriptive analysis were used to calculate the percentage, frequency, mean, mod, median and standard deviation. This study also used cross-tabulation analysis to identify the pattern, trend and correlation between the parameters. Cross tabulation method is to determine how two or more categorical variables are linked (Dass 2010). A crosstab is a table that shows the relationship of two or more variables similar to a frequency distribution, but it

combines the counts of different values of two or more variables. The cross-tabulation table, also known as a contingency table, can be used with two variables (bivariate cross-tabulation) or three variables (trivariate cross-tabulation) (three-variable cross-tabulation). Crosstabs are useful for providing information about how the values of the two variables are related, which cross classification respondents prefer the most, and how those cross classifications differ from each other. The summary data presented in cross-tabulated form can then be used for many statistical tests most of which follow a distribution called chi-squared distribution (Momeni et al. 2017)

Results and discussion

Demographic profile

From the 441 respondents, 57.6% were male and the rest were female. Most of the respondents, 79.8%, were between 20 and 25 years old and 16.6% were between 25 and 30 years old. There are also respondents who were under 20 years old, which is 2.5% and over 30 years old accounted for 1.1%. Majority are Malays (93.7%), Bumiputera (4.8%) and the rest are Chinese (1.4%) and Indians (0.2%). There are nine courses offered under the PLKPK program, in which 18.6% of respondents are from food processing, 15.4% ruminant, 14.7% marketing, 12% crop, 9.5% marine aquaculture, 9.3% fishing technology, 7.5% rice production and 6.6% freshwater aquaculture and 6.3% poultry. 86.8% of the respondents graduated in *SKM* (Level 3) and 11.8% in *DKM*. There are only 0.9% and 0.5% respondents whose graduated in *SKM* (Level 1) and *SKM* (Level 2), respectively.

Table 1. Demographic profile

	Category	N	Percent (%)
Gender	Female	187	42.4
	Male	254	57.6
Age	< 20 years	11	2.5
	20 – 25 years	352	79.8
	25 – 30 years	73	16.6
	> 30 years	5	1.1
Race	Malay	413	93.7
	Chinese	6	1.4
	Indian	1	0.2
	Bumiputera (Sabah/Sarawak)	21	4.8
Course	Crop	53	12
	Fishing technology	41	9.3
	Ruminant livestock	68	15.4
	Poultry livestock	28	6.3
	Rice production	33	7.5
	Marketing	65	14.7
	Food processing	82	18.6
	Freshwater aquaculture	29	6.6
	Marine aquaculture	42	9.5
	Educational level	Sijil Kemahiran Malaysia (Level 1)	4
Sijil Kemahiran Malaysia (Level 2)		2	0.5
Sijil Kemahiran Malaysia (Level 3)		383	86.8
Diploma Kemahiran Malaysia		52	11.8

Graduate's status

More than half of the graduates (63%) were employed, including self-employed, while others were unemployed (*Figure 1*). These results showed that the employability of skilled graduates was at moderate level. However, the positive impact was that the skilled graduates were able to compete with others academic graduates to get employed or start their own businesses. One of the main reasons why graduates are still not employed is that they continue their higher studies after graduation, which corresponds to 73% (*Figure 2*). From this, it can be assumed that they are taking positive steps to advance their education and expertise in

order to compete with other graduates in the future. There are also graduates who are awaiting job offers (10%), not ready (7%), married (6%) just graduated (3%). The 6% who were married in this study are all females. According to Halim et al. 2016, fewer female graduates than male graduates participated in the labour force. Graduate women are more likely to be full-time housewives who remain at home.

The study also revealed that 43% of graduates were working in fields similar to their studies, while 57% were engaged in unrelated fields (*Figure 3*). However, majority (97%) of the graduates are interested in being employed in their field

(Figure 4). For example, if they have a skill certificate in crop production, they will try to find a job relating to crop production or start their own crop business. Selection of subject during study follows the graduate's own interests without being forced by

anyone and therefore, most graduates were interested in their areas of skills as their working environment. However, due to limited job opportunities in selected localities, graduates might not be willing to live far away from their hometown.

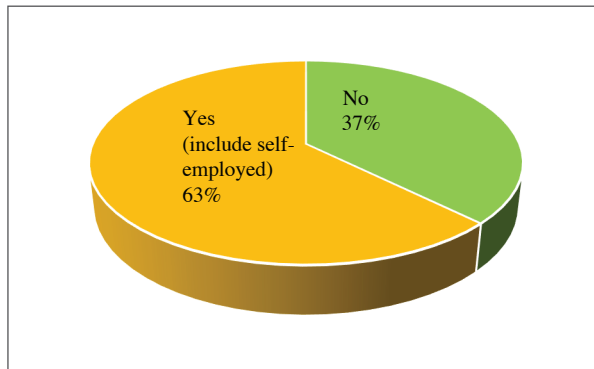


Figure 1. The status of graduates

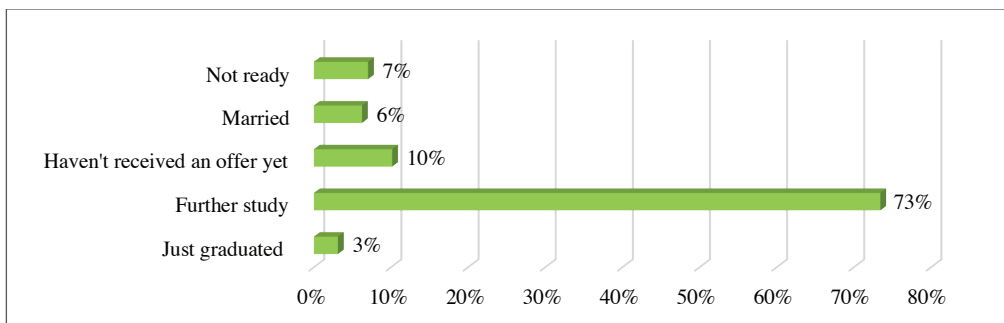


Figure 2. Category of graduates not working

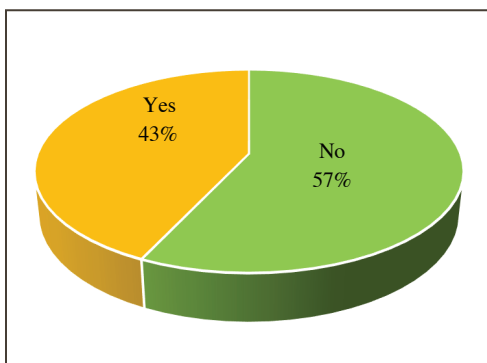


Figure 3. Graduates employed in their field

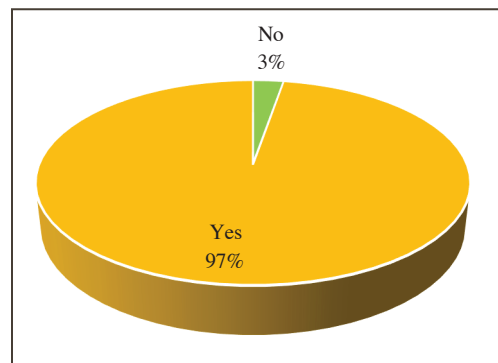


Figure 4. Graduates interested in field of employment

Cross-tabulation analysis between employed graduates and courses is shown in *Figure 5*. Ruminant livestock is the most employable sector (24%) followed by food processing (18%) and marketing and rice production at 13% each. This result indirectly shows that only a few courses encourage graduates to work in their field of study. Agencies should play an important role in improving the modules' or strengthening the graduates' skills in line with industry demand.

Overall, more than half (58.6%) of the employed graduates had a permanent position, 26.7% were appointed as a contract based employers and 14.7% part-time (*Figure 6*). Food processing sectors showed the most graduates with permanent positions followed by ruminant livestock and marketing. As for contract positions, most graduates were in rice production, followed by crops and fishing technology. Graduates who work as part-time are among those who take up the field of ruminant livestock, food processing and freshwater aquaculture.

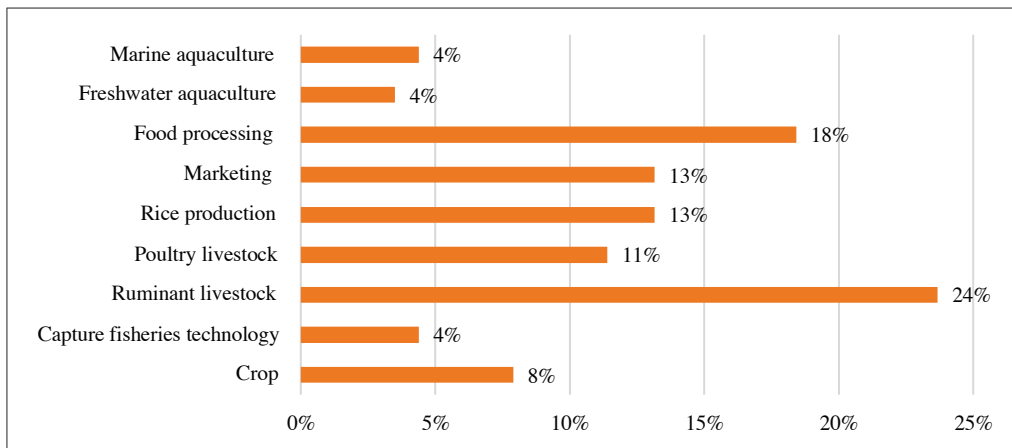


Figure 5. Graduate employability status based on their field of study in PLKPK

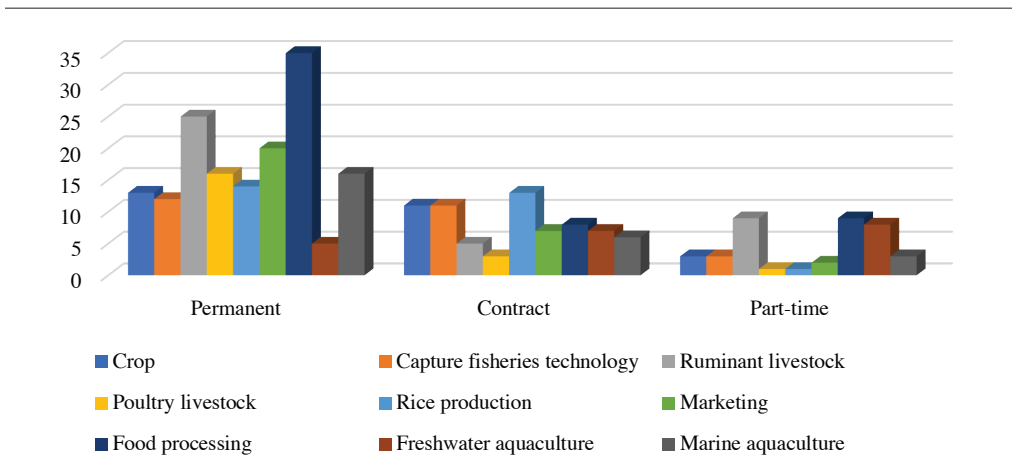


Figure 6. Job scheme of the employees based on their field of study in PLKPK

The impact of the program

The income range was between RM1000 to more than RM5000 and most of the graduates received a salary between RM1001 to RM2000 which is about 75.9% followed by 19.9% of them earning less than RM1000. However, there is a small proportion of them earning between RM2001 and RM3000 which is at 3.4% while 0.4% are respectively RM3001 – RM4000 and above RM5000. Its clearly shows that with a skill certificate, they are able to earn income mostly at the average of RM2,000/month and indirectly dispel the general public’s perception that a skill certificate qualification does not guarantee an adequate income (*Figure 7*).

Graduate’s perception on the PLKPK program

The increase in skills training centres throughout Malaysia is a government’s initiative to provide opportunities for youth to get education that is focused on the practical and open up job opportunities. Graduate evaluation is important in evaluating the effectiveness of this program in Malaysia. In general, the perception of graduates towards this program is good with an average scale between 2.82 to 3.07 (*Table 2*). Most of the respondents agreed that the allowance received by the graduates greatly helped them to cover their daily life expenses with an average scale of 3.07. In addition, experienced lecturer (3.05) and effective practical training (3.05) are among the attractions for graduates to continue their studies in this program.

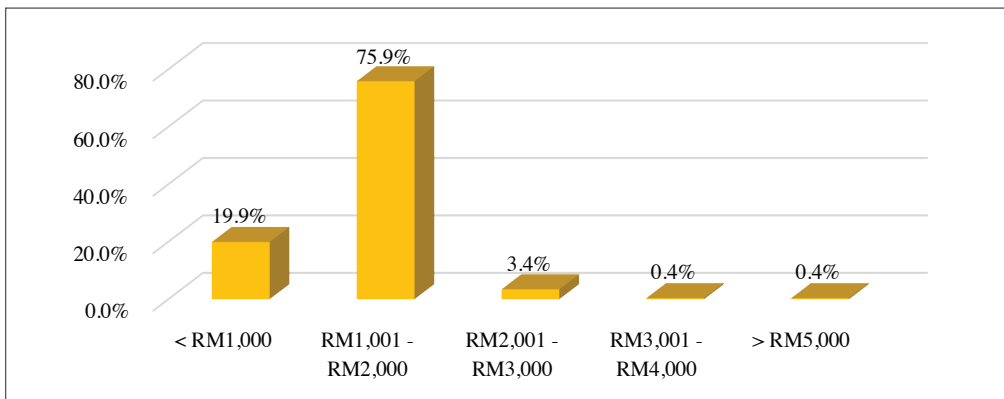


Figure 7. Graduate’s monthly income

Table 2. Perception of the graduates on the PKLPK program

No.	Statement	Mean	Standard deviation
1.	The daily allowance received helped the trainees in daily life	3.07	0.87
2.	The existing lecturer has knowledge in the taught area	3.05	0.86
3.	The practical training gives an insight into the real world of work	3.05	0.89
4.	Skills certificate certified by MQA	3.05	0.9
5.	The planned study time is sufficient	3.04	0.84
6.	The existing lecturer has teaching skills	3.03	0.86
7.	Knowledge that is useful in everyday life	3.0	0.86
8.	Programs/activities organised by the training center can help with learning/skills	3.0	0.84
9.	Programs/activities organised by training center help increase self-confidence	2.99	0.85
10.	Occupied course help trainees to start their careers	2.97	0.88
11.	Training centre provide career guidelines related to the field	2.97	0.87
12.	Sufficient practical training period	2.91	0.89
13.	Promote admission to the extensive National Agricultural Skills Training Program (PLKPK).	2.91	0.88
14.	Skills certificates can be used and accepted by external companies/ employers	2.91	0.9
15.	The modules are widely used in real work	2.90	0.86
16.	The technology used in learning corresponds to the current developments	2.88	0.83
17.	The course offered meet the current job market	2.82	0.84

Note: Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree

Conclusion

More than half of the responden were either employed in the public or private sector or self-employed. The main reason they are still unemployed is because they are continuing their studies. Among the graduates who have been employed, it showed that 43% were working in a similar field of their study while others working in a different field. Though their skill is comparable to others in starting their own business, lack of capital will be the main issue. Hence, the strengthening of the graduates through the institutions and working more closely with industry is an important factor that could develop capacity building among the graduates which is

the catalyst for soft skills improvement.

The overall graduate's perception towards this program is good especially the expert lecturers and effective practical trainings that influences graduates to continue their studies in this program.

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Abstrak

Pada masa kini, golongan muda mempunyai pelbagai institusi latihan untuk memperoleh bakat atau kemahiran dalam industri tertentu. Walau bagaimanapun, prospek pekerjaan untuk graduan masih meragukan. Di kebanyakan negara membangun, terutamanya dalam sektor pertanian, kebolehpasaran graduan telah lama menjadi masalah yang ketara. Beberapa kajian telah mendedahkan bahawa pekerjaan pertanian telah berkurangan di seluruh dunia. Trend kemerosotan ini dipercayai berlaku kerana peralihan guna tenaga daripada sektor pertanian kepada sektor bukan pertanian seperti pembuatan dan perkhidmatan. Walaupun mempunyai lebih ramai pelajar dalam pendidikan tinggi yang mengikuti kursus pertanian, bilangan graduan yang menganggap pertanian sebagai sektor yang ideal untuk bekerja kekal lebih kecil. Faktor lain yang juga boleh menjejaskan kebolehpasaran dalam sektor pertanian ialah elemen 3D dalam pertanian dan mungkin ketidakpadanan antara kemahiran kebolehverjaan siswazah dan keperluan industri. Oleh itu, kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi kebolehpasaran graduan Program Latihan Kemahiran Pertanian Kebangsaan (PLKPK) serta menilai keberkesanan program ini. Kajian ini melibatkan 441 graduan yang menamatkan pengajian dari 2015 – 2019 di seluruh Malaysia menggunakan soal selidik berstruktur. Tinjauan dijalankan menggunakan tinjauan bersemuka dan dalam talian. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis deskriptif dan penjadualan silang. Keputusan menunjukkan 63% graduan bekerja termasuk bekerja sendiri. Selain itu, sebahagian daripada graduan memilih untuk melanjutkan pelajaran. Di kalangan graduan yang telah bekerja, ia menunjukkan bahawa 43% bekerja dalam bidang pengajian yang sama manakala yang lain bekerja dalam bidang yang berbeza. Program PLKPK ini berpotensi melahirkan tenaga kerja pertanian terlatih dan juga usahawan pertanian. Walaupun mereka mampu memulakan firma mereka sendiri, halangan terbesar ialah kekurangan dana. Oleh itu, elemen utama yang mungkin memupuk pembinaan kapasiti graduan, penggerak di sebalik pembangunan kemahiran insaniah adalah pengukuhan graduan melalui institusi dan kerjasama yang lebih erat dengan industri.