

Thumping to a new beat



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"WHAT do you want to be when you grow up?"

This rather common question posed to schoolchildren is sometimes one of the most difficult to answer. Even some grown ups are still having trouble deciding on their career!

But while the reasons may vary, more graduates are taking up positions that are unrelated to what they studied in college or university.

Some equipped with professional qualifications like medicine, law and engineering find themselves pursuing more artistic and entrepreneurial jobs after realising their true passion.

Experts believe that this is not necessarily a bad thing as the skills developed from their studies can be beneficial and applicable in certain jobs.

Such a trend of graduates diverting from their field of study is also expected to grow due to another factor - the poor economy.

Malaysian Employers Federation executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan acknowledges the growing phenomenon of graduates pursuing different fields.

"When the economy was stronger, graduates were privileged to have the option to turn to other professions because opportunities were more plentiful during good times," he says.

But today, graduates make the same switch, but for a much different reason - because it is not as easy to find an appropriate or suitable job in their field of study," he says.

Shamsuddin explains that this may cause some graduates to veer off from the expected path to pursue other available careers.

"This was more apparent last year. As for this year, we expect it to be even more common since there are fewer job openings," he says.

More graduates are trying their hand at jobs unrelated to their field of study, with some "changing lanes" after finding their true calling or gathering courage. This trend is expected to grow with the slower economy dampening opportunities.

Citing the example of the recent retrenchments in the oil and gas, as well as the aviation sectors, he says those who have been laid off will have to find work in other disciplines.

"The situation is also compounded by the Government's hiring freeze for civil service positions, shutting 14,000 to 15,000 vacancies," Shamsuddin adds.

He notes that the private sector has also slowed down in hiring for new positions.

"Last year, about 26,000 people were retrenched across all sectors. We expect

more job cuts this year if the economy does not improve," he says.

The extension of the retirement age - from 55 to 60, with those originally set to retire in 2013 only being able to do so in 2018 - has also contributed to the weak labour market.

"Hence, the rate of replacing jobs is slower," Shamsuddin explains.

While he admits some employers find it a challenge to accept candidates with qualifications that do not match their requirements, Shamsuddin says other qualities matter as well.

"The ability to communicate well, especially in English, and the right attitude are definitely strong points that employers consider," he says, adding that new hires can always be trained to perform the duties.

But of course, not all graduates are forced

into other professions because of the economy and have chosen to wear different caps based on their free will and interests.

To these people, Shamsuddin says some may even have an advantage over others who have been trained in the field.

"For example, if you have an engineering degree and you get involved in administration or management, you would tend to be more meticulous in nature," he says.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia lecturer Prof Dr Ruzy Suliza Hashim agrees that there is an increasing number of graduates who

are in fields unrelated to their study.

However, she believes it is not necessary for students to be confined to their field of study when they go out into the working world.

"Educators in the country try to develop well-rounded students. We train them so

that they can do things beyond what they learnt in university.

"We want to develop students who are not just armed with degrees, but also have other skills that let them excel beyond their field of study so that they are more marketable," she says.

Dr Ruzy Suliza, who teaches English literature, says many of her students do not end up becoming literature teachers

because they have acquired skills that are transferable to other jobs.

She says some of her students work in human resources, or as journalists, event organisers and script writers.

"Anyone can obtain university books and read its contents. But what lecturers do is not only confined to the books, they equip students with the ability to think," she points out.

Dr Ruzy Suliza shares a personal example: her son is about to graduate in Islamic finance but wants to work in social welfare.

"Hence, such a phenomenon is not unusual. It is typical of young people. If you focus on a narrow job market, there is a higher risk of being unemployed," she says.

An education counsellor who wishes to be known only as Gijay, also notices that it is becoming more common for graduates to take up other jobs which differ from their course of study.

"Some students take up certain courses due to parental and peer pressure. Some youths take up medicine because their parents are doctors, among other examples.

"When they find it is not their cup of tea, they then push aside their degree and pursue their true passion.

"Such pressure from parents and friends is still one of the main problems faced by students in career decisions," he says.

Nonetheless, Gijay also believes there is a silver lining in switching career paths, saying that all is not lost.

"Of course, you cannot gain back the time lost. But you can take advantage of the experience you have gained.

"For example, my training is in human

HE studied to be a lawyer but was called to a different kind of bar - a coffee bar, to be exact.

Joachim Leong Ming Yoong, 30, traded his law books for beverage recipes when he decided that law just wasn't his cup of tea.

Initially, he studied law after being told that it was a more "realistic" career option compared to his other interests in psychology and economics.

"I think in Asian societies, we tend to prize these three professions - law, medicine and engineering. And so, I naively went with that," says Leong, who hails from Kuching.

However, after nine months of chambering, Leong knew law just wasn't his calling.

"I wanted to learn more and meet more people. So I joined a start-up company selling software to lawyers to help run their firms.

Then, I fell in love with coffee and everything that follows from it and joined a cafe in KL.

"I fell in love with the flavours, stories, people and places that revolve around coffee," relates Leong, who now works full-time with Awesome Canteen at Sekeping Victoria, Penang, to help them run their drinks bar.

The bar, called Spacebar Coffee, was started by Leong and his business partner Shean Tan.

Leong admits that at first, his family had a tough time accepting his decision to quit law but they were eventually supportive.

"I am definitely happy with my job now. I get to work with the best roasters and baristas in the country and I look forward to going to work every day.

"Long hours and huge crowds are welcomed and there's an adrenaline rush and a sense of 'flow' behind the bar," he says.

Looking back, Leong says it is too much to ask 17- or 18-year-olds what they wanted to do with the rest of their life.

"I think a degree is not only about securing a career. Its journey also lays a founda-

resources, and when I went into banking, I came equipped with enhanced marketing skills from my experience in dealing with people," says Gijay, who now guides students into making study choices.

He says there is a need for students to go through career and personality tests to help them learn more about themselves.

"Such efforts should begin in school during a student's formative years. Schools should help them make decisions based on their passion and strengths.

"In this sense, school counsellors should play a more prominent role. Not only should they help with personal problems, they should also go beyond these issues and guide them to choose a suitable career," Gijay adds.

But even if graduates find themselves on the wrong path, "it is not the end of the world", says Utar research, development and commercialisation vice-president Prof Dr Lee Sze Wei.

"Some students end up in ill-suited courses after being influenced by friends and family. It happens.

"But even if they have completed their degree and realise they are on the wrong track, there are other options," he says, adding that those with the time and means could consider pursuing a second degree.

Dr Lee says he knows students in science and technology courses who switched streams and excelled.

"One student from a science-based course took up political science and did really well," he says.

Dr Lee advises students to be guided by their interests and strengths and to seek help from counsellors if they are unsure.

"The more feedback you get, the better. Utar has support services to help students and potential students.

"Parents should also always ask what their children want and avoid putting too much pressure on them," he says.