

TECHNOLOGY will play a key role in making the agriculture and plantation sector more attractive for locals.

Prof Mahendhiran Sanggaran Nair from Monash University Malaysia's Econometrics & Business Statistics department believes that local school-leavers and graduates would be willing to take up the jobs in agriculture and plantation, a key sector for the Malaysian economy, if they can be transformed into high-tech, innovation-driven and high income sectors.

"In many developed countries, smart agriculture and precision farming methods are used to enhance efficiency, productivity and yield of the agriculture sector," says Mahendhiran, who is also Monash Malaysia R&D Sdn Bhd CEO.

Science, technology and innovation (STI) will transform the agriculture sector to be less labour intensive and more knowledge intensive. Mahendhiran predicts that it is going to be a key driver for enabling the agriculture sector to leap-frog to a higher stage of development, which entails being a high revenue earner for the country, creating high income jobs and ensuring food security for the nation.

In order to encourage the young to enter this field, Mahendhiran

Technology and innovation will attract local workers



Prof Mahendhiran: 'We need a holistic approach to look at the full value chain in talent development for this sector.'

believes that we need to start early by teaching agricultural science in primary and secondary schools.

Technical colleges, polytechnics, community colleges and universities should also develop agricultural courses, full programmes, and microcredentials to train the next-generation agriculture talent, he adds.

Presently, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) is best known in the country for its agriculture-related courses and accreditations.

"We need a holistic approach to look at the full value chain in talent development for this sector. The young need to know their career prospects in this sector,"



Shareen: 'The agriculture and food sector has growth potential... We need to focus on food security and improve our yield.'

Mahendhiran says, pointing out that a strategic talent development approach, underpinned by sound STI is critical to transform this sector into a high value and high income sector.

Human capital and talent strategy specialist Shareen Shariza Abdul Ghani is also of the view that Malaysia should focus investment and resources on modernising the agriculture and plantation sector.

Moving forward, mechanisation and automation will drive higher yields and growth, she says. With this in mind, Malaysia needs to grow jobs within the sector that will attract a more skilled work-



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force for Malaysian youths.

Youth are underrepresented in the plantation and agriculture sector as by and large these sectors employ mainly low to lower-end workers of the mid-skilled brackets, says Shareen, who is the CEO of Sorga Innovation and former CEO of Talent Corporation Malaysia Bhd (Talentcorp).

"We need to create more jobs in the mid- and high-skilled levels, for example machine operators, maintenance, production and more high-tech plantation jobs," she explains.

One way to make work in this sector more attractive is by emulating the way New Zealand

"brands" its agriculture sector. Its Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern heavily engages with the agriculture sector focusing on the Kiwi fruit industry where they are reskilling youths, says Shareen.

"The agriculture and plantation sectors in Malaysia have growth potential especially in the agriculture and food sector. We need to focus on food security and improve our yield."

Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) economist Dr Rafiq Idris says that locals may be inclined to join these sectors if they are provided with the right reward structures – such as attractive salaries and benefits.

To that end, Rafiq adds that incentives like wage subsidies must also be given to land owners and plantation companies to employ local youths. He suggests that access to financing for agriculture-related business can also be considered to add impetus for greater involvement in agriculture.

To ensure the right initiatives are introduced, Rafiq says that it is crucial for us to conduct a comprehensive study to look into the business model of more successful countries and see what elements can be brought back and used in a Malaysian context.