

The Involvement of Graduates Youth in Commercial Agriculture: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT: *Recently, involvement and sound achievements of today's generation of youth in the commercial agricultural sector are increasingly strong and on the increase, even though the percentage is still very small. Thus, this article is aimed to examine the key factors that drive the youth to venture into commercial agriculture; graduates' perceptions towards commercial agriculture; the contributing factors and why many young people refuse to venture into commercial agriculture; and trainings and skills needed as well as personal attributes of successful commercial agricultural entrepreneurs. This is a qualitative study with in-depth-interviews of five respondents among youth graduates. Results of this study have answered all of the research questions as well as identified a new finding which is the roles of informal mentor in helping the respondents to successfully venture into agriculture commercially. Respondents participated in virtual mentoring for direct access of information from the informal mentors who supervised and assisted them in starting up their first ground of commercial agriculture and throughout their success. Finally, based on the interviews, conclusion can be made that changes in time, respect, comprehensive supports, and incentives offered by the government agencies are vital in motivating young farmers to be successful agricultural entrepreneurs.*

KEY WORDS: *Youth generation in Malaysia, mentor, mentoring, agriculture, graduate students, entrepreneur, and business.*

Introduction

Commercial agricultural sector in Malaysia until these days is still lack of young people, especially educated youth and university graduates. This young workforce is needed by the Malaysian government in the process of improving the agricultural industry, modernizing agro-based industries, and developing skilled workers of the commercial agricultural sectors. Hence, graduates youth who decided to venture into commercial agriculture can be considered as special and commendable.

There are many factors that drive the youth conscious decision to venture into agriculture and what is certain, today's generation of youth with diplomas and degrees in other fields began to realize that the mentality of professional careers

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as the main wage earner must be left behind. In line with the government serious commitment to attract the graduates to become agricultural entrepreneurs; and, so, this study has approached successful graduates agricultural entrepreneurs to share their insights and experiences in the field of commercial agriculture and to get valuable inputs to be used as examples by the next generation of agricultural youth, as well as for those who are still thinking to venture into commercial agriculture and also for the stakeholders.

This article summarises the results of a research project which tried to answer the following questions: (1) What are the driving forces that influenced the respondents' decision in venturing into commercial agriculture?; (2) What are respondents' perceptions towards commercial agriculture?; (3) What are the contributing and rejecting factors of youth involvement in the commercial agriculture?; (4) What types of training and skills needed?; and (5) What are personal attributes of successful commercial agricultural entrepreneurs?

Youth and Agriculture in Malaysia

A survey conducted by the Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia showed that of 22,016 working graduates under reviewed, only 2.8% is self-employed. Similarly, only 1.4% of 11,313 of diploma holders are self-employed (FAMA-LP3, 2007a). In an effort to promote entrepreneurship in higher education, entrepreneurship courses are offered by universities, polytechnics, and community colleges across the country. The courses are aimed to cultivate business theories and good entrepreneurship values in students, as well as to develop knowledgeable and capable graduates in terms of technology.

Based on the definition of youth by the Ministry of Youth and Sports that "youth" refers to those aged between 15 and 40 years old, based on a number of reasons made by the Malaysian Youth Council (KBS, 1995). They are deemed to have matured and able to think positively. Entrepreneurs are defined as those who take risks, opportunities, and, above all, are innovative. Agriculture is a very broad field which includes efforts of farming, planting, fisheries, and downstream agro-based or agro-processing industries. Commercial agriculture refers to farming activities which are undertaken in the form of plantation productivity on a large scale, the total cultivated land area is large, viable and developed with potential crops for sale which ensure profitable income and value added to the land used for commercial returns.

The government hopes to attract many young people into the sector, and to produce full-time young farmers and successful agricultural entrepreneurs. At present, there are successful young agricultural entrepreneurs to prove that agriculture is a profitable business, but the number or percentage involved in this area is still too small (Aidit & Husnizam, 2005). Thus, there are young farmers who gave up half way due to certain constraints and some agro-based agencies provide only short term formal assistance. The key points to be successful agriculture

entrepreneurs are initiatives and mental strength in facing the challenges of the business as well as personal strength.

Personal Traits Needed to Become Successful Entrepreneurs

According to J.L. Glick-Smith (2008), there are 12 main characteristics or traits required for those who want to succeed in their own business, they are as follow: (1) Good health; (2) Comfortable with the environment where they have the maximum authority and responsibility, as they do not work well in traditional structured organisation; (3) Highly self-confidence; (4) High energy level and never ending of sense of urgency or impatient to do or to complete something; (5) Comprehensive awareness; (6) Realistic outlook; (7) Having superior conceptual abilities; (8) Low need for status; (9) Objective approach; (10) Emotional stability; (11) Attraction to challenges; and (12) Describe situations by numbers.

A. Chuck and S. DeFiore (2008) laid out certain traits that make a person succeed in their business. The traits need to be first evaluated before one decides to launch into one's own business. According to A. Chuck and S. DeFiore (2008), a successful entrepreneur: (1) is a goal setter who continuously develops new goals and works to achieve them; (2) knows his own strengths and weaknesses; (3) knows how to maximise opportunities; (4) knows the business inside out and understands the competitions/competitors ; (5) knows how to effectively manage the budgets and finances; (6) strives for excellence; (7) enjoys the business; (8) has high determination and work hard; and (9) gets help when necessary and he knows where and when to get help.

A research conducted by D. Gray (2008), on successful businessmen, had indentified the common traits of successful entrepreneurs, they are: individualistic, optimistic, and possess high capabilities in problem solving. D. Gray (2008) added that successful entrepreneurs should have special traits as follow:

First, Tenacity and orientation drive. This means that entrepreneurs need to set clear goals and continuously evaluate the goals and change the goals based on personal interest, talents, and business needs. A successful entrepreneur will always work on new goals to challenge himself and his business.

Second, the Ability to sustain the business. Successful entrepreneurs are not afraid of failure and learn from the failure to rebuild.

Third, Risks taker. They are able to indentify risks and able to make good judgement of the risks. Successful entrepreneurs enjoy the risks in order to achieve their goals realistically. But the degree of risk taking is varies and based on the areas of businesses.

Fourth, Independent and posses the overpowering need to achieve. Many businessmen have the ability to lead and always want to be in control. As leaders, they are highly disciplined as well as proactive in managing their own activities towards the successful path. They maintain good contacts and extending certain relationships in the hope to get lots of information in problem solving.

Fifth, Posses the ability to get things done. Successful entrepreneurs possess the ability of self-control especially in handling problems, failures, and uncertainties. They also have the common sense of accepting failures and problems as parts and parcels of the business.

Sixth, Possess the ability to implement ideas creatively. As they are persistent and hardworking, they eventually become innovative. They have creative thinking ability as well as unique insight and always able get things done in a different way or find different approach for certain things.

Seventh, Goal setting. Successful entrepreneurs set their own goals and mission which motivate them into the business. They know that their actions lead to certain outcome. Their missions need to be profitable, and their products or services are unique.

According to D. Tucker (2008), successful entrepreneurs need to have the following traits or characteristics: (1) They are careful and concern about money since they were children; (2) They are competitive by nature in terms of school participation, active in sports, and competitions; (3) They trust their own capabilities and have high energy; (4) They are risk takers; and (5) They have abundance of new ideas and new approaches to upscale their business profits as well as never afraid to put forward new ideas.

And such, those traits are seen as the fundamental factors for those who are involved in businesses including commercial agriculture. In the context of this study, individuals who possess those traits will have the driving force to venture into commercial agriculture even though they have sound academic achievement. Without those traits, it is impossible for the young entrepreneurs to face the challenges and to take certain risks of the agricultural business. Respondents' personal justifications will be discussed further in the findings of the study.

Formal and Informal Mentors

According to S.G. Weinrach (1979), the relationship of a mentor and his/her mentee normally initiated spontaneously and without realizing it, a mentor already contributes towards career success of his/her mentee. In formal mentoring, a mentor is formally introduced or assigned to his/her mentee by the coordinator of a structured program with time expectation; this sometimes may cause awkwardness. However, the relationship of informal mentoring tends to be longer as it is structure free and without any formal or written obligation. It is more to help and non-profit. Meeting is not programmed and it is scheduled when necessary; and the interaction can be done through various sources of communication tools such as via the internet and telephone.

The relationship of a formal mentoring is structured for certain period of time based on maybe between 6 months to a year contract. The meeting between the mentor and his/her mentee is scheduled and pre-determined in the agreement contract, which is signed by the both parties. On the other hand, the relationship

pattern of informal mentoring is more casual but motivational in guiding the mentee. There is a sense of kinship in a conducive communication, even without proper recognition as the present of the mentor is merely to help.

The primary function of informal mentoring is to provide a significant contribution in terms of career advancement and psychosocial. The roles of the mentor in career success are: (1) to guide; and (2) to expose. In guiding his mentee, a mentor advises, assists, recommends, or counsels his/her mentee to learn something new as well as for career advancement. A mentor also exposes his/her mentee on long term benefits by sharing his professional knowledge and indirectly provides information on types of future occupations for the mentee. A mentor also encourages his/her mentee to move forward in his career.

In terms of psychosocial functions, the mentor's primary role is to strengthen the friendship and be a role model. The closeness of the relationship is based on mutual helps for mutual benefits. As a role model, a mentor is seen as an idol that inspires the mentee to strive harder to be as successful as his/her idol. Hence, career advancement is the main concern of informal mentoring compared to formal mentoring.

Similarly, Pitts observed that people running their own businesses can't see the wood for the trees (cited by Osipow, 1983). The problem being that they find it difficult to stand back and reflect on the problems they are experiencing, getting too tied up with the urgent, and immediate actions and not leaving time to take the bigger picture, strategic view into consideration. Engaging with a mentoring relationship can allow the entrepreneur to step into "pools of reflection" and to see situations more clearly and from different perspectives. It is particularly difficult for small businesses to find time to reflect (Super, 1957; Brown & Brooks, 1984; and Mohd Noah, 2001). Generally, this article is aimed to identify the roles of informal mentors on the young graduates who are the novices in managing commercial agriculture projects.

Research Methodology

Respondents of the research are five young successful farmers of the commercial agriculture, who started off the business gradually from small scales. The entrepreneurs were selected based on the following criteria: (1) Respondents are youth at the age range of 15 to 40 years old, as defined by the Malaysian Ministry of Youth and Sports; (2) Successful in the field of agriculture and in setting up downstream agro-based industries as well as those who gained net income more than RM 3,000 per month; (3) Posses business assets, for example have more than 10 acres of land; (4) University graduates; and (5) Previously worked in the public or private sectors.

All selected respondents are graduates youth with different farming activities. The respondents are HO (landscaping and ornamental plants); KA (vegetables fertilization); FZ (mango planting); SY (planting lemon grass, bananas, coconuts, and goat livestock); and HK (mushroom cultivation).

This study uses qualitative methods to obtain data through in-depth interviews of five young entrepreneurs to gain information and to answer the research questions. The questions are semi-structured. The purpose of in-depth interview is to elicit depth of information as opposed to surveys and questionnaire. In-depth interview also allows the interviewer to deeply explore respondent's feelings and perspectives on a subject.

Research Findings

First, Contributing factors in making decision to venture into commercial agriculture. Respondents decided to become agricultural entrepreneurs because of: (1) Interest; (2) Influence and previous work experience before venturing into agriculture; and (3) Family influences with the background of commercial agriculture. Those three aspects are indentified as the prominent factors to reshape the attitudes, characteristics, perceptions, and positive outlook of the respondents towards agricultural sectors. It also began with an awareness of the shortage of *Bumiputra* or native of country's youth who seriously consider farming as a solid career (FAMA-LP3, 2007b).

It is true and proven by the respondents that interest motivates individual to move forward. Interest and the need to be self-employed had influenced and motivated the respondents to change the paradigm in becoming successful entrepreneurs in the field of commercial agriculture. Their experience as wage earners had also influenced the respondents to venture into this sector commercially. The respondents also overcame skeptical and narrow insights on the agricultural sector. Apart from that, their self-confidence and determination to succeed in the industry had made them strong, competent, creative, and innovative in finding new technologies and making changes. However, family involvement and agricultural background are somehow playing some roles in influencing the respondents to venture into commercial farming sector themselves.

Second, Perceptions of commercial agriculture. The aspect of respondents' perceptions on commercial agriculture can be divided into four main themes, as follow: (1) Marketing facilities and potential; (2) Media publicities and cropping period; (3) Systematic plans of projects; and (4) the Perceptions of the community.

Most people and the youth are still sceptical with the concept of young farmers and they are still concern with the prospect. And, thus, comprehensive efforts are needed to attract the youth venturing into the sector. Among others of the negative perceptions towards agricultural sector are limited marketing and potential of commercial agriculture, uncompetitive and perishable for commercialisation, and lack of media publicity to promote agriculture as a solid career and as a profitable platform. In addition, certain agro-based activities need a long production period or planting time which can double up the operational costs, which do not promise a better profit.

Respondents agreed that perceptions towards commercial agriculture can be changed through systematic planning. With proper and detail planning, agricultural business will be successfully launched into a profitable business project. This in the long run will gradually change negative mentality and narrow perceptions of the community to be more and wide-open at the potential for those indulging in agriculture. They have to shift the old paradigm and stigma which regarded agricultural sector as sustenance of life and to realize that agriculture is a profitable business and they can become successful entrepreneurs in the field of agriculture. All of these will be achieved through careful planning, strategies, determination, and perseverance.

At present, there is a promising development in Malaysia when university students are introduced with the basic knowledge of business and entrepreneurship during their studies. The purpose is to widen and change the mentality of the graduates that they can no longer rely on the work as wage earners. The unemployment rate will be reduced if more university graduates decided to become entrepreneurs. The study of "Agriculture and Men" is now compulsory for all university students in Malaysia. Due to several awareness campaigns and promotions, the perception of university leavers has changed little by little and the educated youth of today are more open on the potential of agriculture as a profitable and solid career (FAMA-LP3, 2007c).

Third, Key factors of youth involvement in commercial agriculture. There are always two contradicting factors in every effort, the attracting and rejecting factors. Careful consideration is needed in answering the third research question on those two contradicting key factors in influencing youth involvement in the commercial agriculture. This is important for the success and sustainability of the youth agricultural development programs. Another vital element is their mental strength. They are two contradicting key factors identified from the responses of the respondents that influenced them in venturing into commercial agriculture, as follow: (1) Family factor; (2) Financial factor; and (3) Facilities factor.

Supports from family and friends would help an individual to succeed. All of the respondents agreed that their success is due to undying support from the family members. In terms of financial, they need to have the capital and be able to develop appropriate financial stability in starting up agricultural ventures. Financial stability will empower them to have control over the resulting financial returns from their activities.

While a significant number of young people are involved in independent agricultural activities and providing agricultural support to their families, it was also noted that the young entrepreneurs benefit from communal agricultural sources, either through the traditional financial and banking systems, government agencies, and investors. Those are their immediate support groups; however, the bureaucracy and unnecessary long process of getting the financial supports will dampen the spirit. Another obstacle is the operational costs which are getting higher despite the static selling prices.

Government, through existing agencies led by the Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry and Ministry of Youth and Sports, really shows the commitment to open up opportunities for university graduates to venture into commercial farming. Meanwhile, there are many facilities and support provided by various government agencies, including technical assistance and advisory services on a regular basis, to enable the young farmers get the work done as well as to attract more youth to venture into this field (FAMA-LP3, 2007d). They also learn and benefit from this communal agriculture support systems, such communal endeavours help the youth to build up self-esteem and a sense of community. This emphasizes the importance of immediate support groups for the young farmers and also highlights the need to improve the institutional “enabling environment” provided by these groups if young people are to be developed as agricultural entrepreneurs.

Fourth, Training and skills. Basic knowledge is essential in starting up a new business, and the knowledge is gained through the following: (1) Formal training and skills; (2) Previous working experience; (3) Extra knowledge and mentoring; and (4) Communal agricultural groups either through the local traditional systems, advisory services, or as members of agricultural groups.

Becoming young farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs is not an easy job; it needs time, energy, and financial stability. Managing a farm is challenging, which involves crops or livestock management as well as farm labours. And, thus, the young people not only need determination and strong-willed, but valuable information. This means, comprehensive trainings and skills programs for young farmers are vital, in addition to their experience in farming activities.

The common scenario and main efforts of the government are in attracting the young inexperienced people to venture into commercial farming. However, in the process, the government and support system are neglecting the present and successful farmers. And such, the concept or system of mentor-mentee is a very good method to be applied to young entrepreneurs who want to venture into commercial farming. Successful farmers should provide guidance and assistance to the new entrepreneurs, formally and informally. However, incentives should be given to those experienced entrepreneurs who are willing to guide the young ones in starting up the business in various management and technical aspects. Successful and experienced farmers should be the mentors in the youth agricultural development programs.

Fifth, Personal traits of successful agricultural entrepreneurs. There are six main themes of traits identified as essential in successful agricultural entrepreneurs, as follows: (1) Knowledgeable; (2) High determination; (3) Self-discipline in time management; (4) Proactive; (5) Smart and creative; and (6) Risk takers.

Entrepreneurs need to possess those traits to help them uphold the business, especially when they are facing hard times and in the verge of failure. It is proven by all of the five respondents that agricultural entrepreneurs will only succeed in their commercial agricultural ventures, if they are risk takers who have business knowledge, determination and resilience, self-discipline, and also good time management.

A part from those, young farmers need to have their own mission and vision. They need to be creative and innovative, especially in marketing and promoting, rebranding, and labelling their products. They also need to be smart in finding new business ventures for their agricultural products.

Conclusion

Producing agricultural entrepreneurs is a comprehensive and long term process. Coordinated implementation programs are needed by implementing a package of development strategies, along with skills and entrepreneurship trainings; providing infrastructure and business premises; financing; product development; fiscal incentive, credits supports, application of new technologies; and comprehensive infrastructures. The main problem now is the shortage of agricultural talents among young people. Therefore, hopefully the implementation of certain programs would be able to attract young people, especially the graduates into the sector. The Ministry confidants that through careful planning, structured programs, and mobilization efforts of all parties are able to make the agricultural sector favored by the young people.

The five agricultural entrepreneurs, selected as respondents of this study, are university graduates with diplomas and masters degrees. Based on their educational background and qualification, they can no longer be considered as traditional farmers. They are young educated farmers who no longer rely on the work of wage earners, they have decided to shift from the old paradigm to become successful entrepreneurs in the field of agriculture.

They are the role models for the educated youth to be more open on the potential and to grab the opportunities provided by the government for those interested in venturing into agriculture. However, venturing into commercial agriculture is a pure challenge which needs smart handling. Those interested in indulging into commercial agriculture need to be ready in facing common difficulties, especially physical challenges, financial constraints, and crops problems. On the other hand, determination, strength, and preverance will overcome those challenges. This is proven by all of the respondents, who are now successful entrepreneurs.

Today's globalization and modernization era and working culture witnessed the information is easily accessible just at the fingertips on the new development and networking. These facilities and modernization aspects allow the respondents to update on the progress of agriculture. Their knowledge, educational profiles, and spirit would give them strength to venture into the business with new brilliant and creative ideas of agro-business.

Sharing of information, skills, and knowledge with others in the same business is a good way to be successful agricultural entrepreneurs. Family and community are the two dominant entities in decision making to those who decided to venture into agrobusiness. However, they are no longer key constraints, as the main catalyst is the person himself, who should posses self-determination and confidence, as well

as competitive, innovative, and creative in their strives to succeed in their ventures. Based on the interviews, conclusion can be made that changes in time, respect, comprehensive supports, and incentives offered by the government agencies are vital in motivating young farmers to be successful agricultural entrepreneurs.

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