

Foreign Workers' Recruitment and Reconsideration of Crucial Factors: A Sequential Exploratory Mixed-Methods Study of Migrant Labourers in Malaysia

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Abstract

Malaysia has witnessed an influx of foreign workers, mainly due to its rapidly expanding economy. However, low-skilled or uneducated migrants prevail in the labour market, which places immense pressure on the Malaysian economy. This study aimed to identify some crucial factors related to foreign workers requiring reconsideration at the recruitment phase. It was a sequential exploratory mixed-method study. Data were collected using qualitative (in-depth interviews) and quantitative (face-to-face surveys) methods. The study found that some recruitment factors should be reassessed, such as fixing the minimum educational qualification at the recruitment level, mandatory skill tests and compulsory pre-departure training for selected workers. The findings of this study will help in redesigning foreign worker recruitment policies. Moreover, the results will also assist in guiding the sustainable enhancement of workforce contributions to society and the Malaysian economy.

Keywords: *Low-skilled foreign workers; recruitment phase; educational qualification; skill test; pre-departure training*

Introduction

In a global context, Malaysia is one of the prominent nations popularised for international migration, chiefly owing to economic opportunities (IOM, 2022). However, most foreigners in Malaysia are migrant workers, who are largely low-skilled and uneducated (ILO, 2016). Even the number of undocumented workers is higher than the documented ones (IOM, 2022; Ramlee, 2017). Many scholars believe that Malaysia will remain a low-wage and low-skill destination due to a heavy reliance on low-skilled migrant workers, and economic transformation through automation will be less likely to be achieved (Wei et al., 2018). Malaysian labour migration policies have been focused on fulfilling immediate labour shortages since they were introduced (Fernandez, 2008; Neeko, 2008). However, the current policy has weaknesses due to it not successfully controlling foreign workers (Kassim, 2017).

The International Labour Organisation has emphasised the necessity of a skilled workforce for strong, sustainable and balanced growth (ILO, 2011). An educated and skilled person possesses certain characteristics that an uneducated one normally does not have. Malaysia has a vision of reaching a high-income nation status (WorldBank, 2015) and to achieve this, it needs a high ratio of skilled workers. Migration is playing an increasingly important role in the composition of the skilled-based labour force all around the globe (Vakhitova et al., 2013).

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Therefore, the recruitment process, the first phase of foreign workers' management, is undoubtedly vital as its importance lies in finding a qualified candidate for a job role. Nevertheless, Malaysian labour migration policies have been formulated by focusing on public safety and security, rather than on labour administration (ILO, 2016, p-3). Consequently, finding suitable policies for maximising the benefits of foreign workers are a prime challenge in the sector of migrant labourers' management.

In September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for transforming the world (UN, 2015). In the SDGs, migration is considered an essential contributor to sustainable development for the first time in the mainstream global development landscape (IOM, 2017). Therefore, a redesign of recruitment factors for migrant workers is urgently required, as this is the first step of foreign workers (FWs) management. Unscrupulous individuals should not be able to exploit foreign labourers for their own financial gain. There needs to be a win-win policy that provides benefits to both parties. The recruitment of foreign workers must evolve over time, so that no loopholes are left unattended. A necessary structural adjustment may help the current situation. The research question to be that needs to be addressed is: in the recruitment phase for foreign workers in Malaysia, what are the crucial factors that would enhance sustainability in migrant labourers' related sectors?

As per the researchers' knowledge, migrant workers' recruitment issues, considering sustainability, have not yet been studied adequately in Malaysia. The traditional recruitment process produces uneducated and low-skilled foreign workers. We have focused on some crucial issues around foreign workers' recruitment, including educational qualifications, skill tests and pre-departure training for selected workers. We believe that there is an opportunity to improve these factors. The findings of this study could help in redrawing the policies relating to foreign workers' recruitment. They will also allow for increasing the workforce contribution to the society and the economy of Malaysia in a sustainable way.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical perspective of mixed methodology would be either explicit (based firmly on a theory) or implicit (based indirectly on a theory) (Terrell, 2012). Both migration and development theories were implicitly adopted in the present research. According to Lee's theory of push and pull factors, migration is influenced by factors from the country of origin and country of destination (Lee, 1966). This study identified that most respondent FWs (foreign workers) chose their country of destination according to pull factors, which included: job processes being completed more quickly than in other countries (32%), lower cost than South Korea and the Middle East (17%), the weather being good and the same as in their country (16%), tried many countries, but got a job here (13%), social security (12%), and same religion and culture (10%). Conversely, push factors included a lack of employment (69%) and insufficient income and poverty (31%). In total, 63% of respondents of this study stated that their recruitment in Malaysia greatly depended on factors associated with the country of origin and/or that of destination.

The new economics of labour migration (NELM) theory views migration as a household strategy to minimise family income risks or to overcome capital constraints on family production activities (Stark, 1991). In total, 22% of respondents of this study reported that their migration to Malaysia was a household strategy. According to the Human Capital Theory



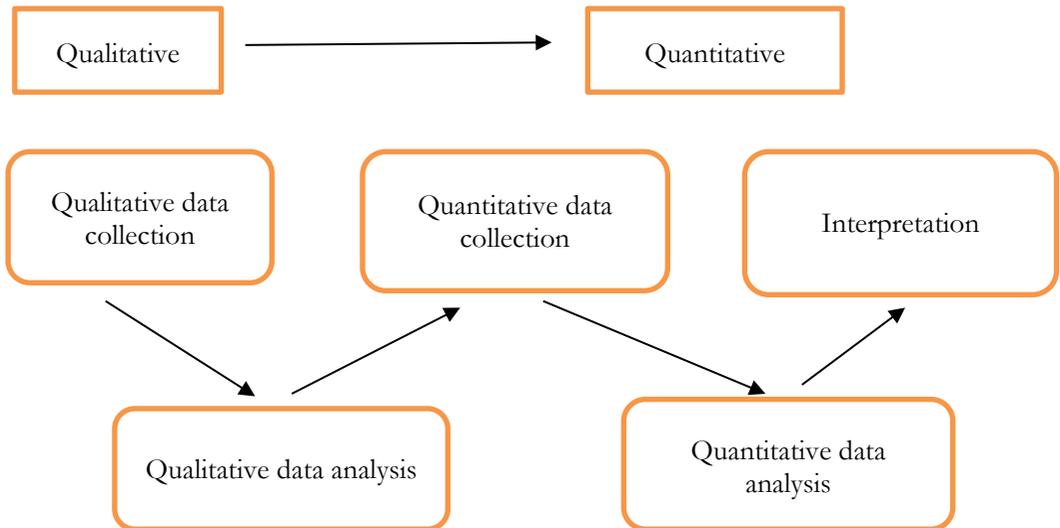
of Migration (Sjaastad, 1962), the likelihood of migration increases with education level. Therefore, migrants tend to be relatively skilled, because this increases the chances of their success. In total, 15% of the respondents of this study reported that their education level played a vital role in their migration to Malaysia.

The Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 04 (quality education) have been considered in relation to the theory of development. This study was focused on SDG 04 given the recognised association between FWs’ recruitment factors and educational capabilities. At the core of sustainable development is the need to consider “three pillars” together: society, the economy, and the environment (Kates et al., 2005).

Methodology

This study featured a sequential exploratory mixed-method design (Clark & Creswell, 2012). It was premised on the idea that combining qualitative and quantitative approaches provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone. Exploratory research is usually conducted to address a problem that has not been studied and defined more clearly yet (Clark & Creswell, 2012) . A “QUAL (————>) quan” dominant sequential design was adopted, where the qualitative data took priority over quantitative data, following Morse’s (Morse, 2016) mixed methods design typology. The key reason to choose a mixed methodology for this study was to obtain rich information from both experts (first phase: in-depth interview) and general workers (second phase: face-to-face survey). The following figure shows the sequential exploratory strategy:

Figure 1. The sequential exploratory strategy (Terrell, 2012)



Qualitative study

For the first phase, we collected data by means of in-depth interviews. Purposive sampling, which pertains to choosing the sample based on the study’s purpose (Crossman, 2020), was

used to identify experts in different sectors in labour migration management in Malaysia. The following table list the experts involved in this study:

Table 1. Experts involved as respondents

In-Depth Interview	Remarks
Representative of Malaysian Employers Federation in Kuantan	Informant I
One Manager (Plantation Sector) in Kuantan	Informant II
One Agent of Migrant Workers in Kuantan	Informant III
One Factory Manager (Manufacturing) in Kuala Lumpur (KL)	Informant IV
One Factory Manager (Construction) in KL	Informant V
Labour Councillor of Source Country A in KL	Informant VI
Labour Councillor of Source Country B in KL	Informant VII
One Journalist of Labour Migrant issues in KL	Informant VIII
One Senior Leader of Working Migrant Labours in KL	Informant IX

After collecting the primary data, transcripts were made and coded separately based on themes for qualitative analysis. That is, the analysis was undertaken through the thematic analysis method, with assistance from the qualitative data analysis software NVivo (Version 1.6).

Expert interviews (the first phase) took place between February and April 2021. The researcher conducted the interviews. We used a semi-structured interview format. In addition, we used a detailed interview protocol to increase comparability across interviews and the interviewer. Before undertaking the interview, we provided a consent form and collected it from every respondent.

Qualitative Results

Educational Qualification

A. Fixing minimum educational level: Most of the foreign workers in Malaysia are illiterate and unskilled (Lee, 2017). Some respondents (N = 5) suggested fixing an educational barrier at the recruitment level to reduce this problem. The labour councillor of source country B (Respondent VII) illustrated the issue, “*An educated worker could save himself from being exploited by unscrupulous owners/employers/agents. However, he also might contribute more than an illiterate one. SDG 04 also emphasises quality education*”. Informants IV (Factory Manager—Manufacturing), VI (labour councillor of source country A), VIII (journalist of labour migrants issues), and IX (senior leader of working migrant labourers) were also in favour of imposing an educational barrier at the recruitment level. As one put it: “*A minimum educational background should be at the secondary level and it might be compulsory for all exported workers in Malaysia. For the manufacturing sector,*



educated and experienced people are required. It would help improve production capacity”—a factory manager in manufacturing (Respondent IV). By contrast, other respondents (N = 4) did not emphasise the educational background of foreign workers at the recruitment phase. Respondent I (representative of Malaysian Employers Federation) said frankly, *“Migrant labourers’ physical strength is more important for most employers than the educational qualification. Employers seek mainly profits, rather than anything else. If their demand can be fulfilled by unskilled workers, they obviously do it”*. Informants II (factory manager—plantation), III (migrant workers’ agent), and V (factory manager—construction) opined in the same manner.

B. Stop primary level selection: Some respondents (N = 5) also highlighted that primary level selection must be stopped gradually. Conversely, another group of informants (N = 4) were against the idea; they wanted to continue the present procedures without any change.

Skill Test

A. Mandatory test: Interviewees I, II, III, and V (N = 4) supported the idea. At the same time, they mentioned that often it is not followed strictly. Most employers/agents check potential candidates’ age, health, and financial situation (MEF, 2016). Ultimately, they agreed with the idea, but were not in favour of making it obligatory. Informants IV, VI, VII, VIII, and IX (N = 5) reinforced the idea clearly, and wanted to make it unavoidable. For instance, a journalist of migrant labour issues (respondent VIII) said, *“A compulsory skill test on basic numeracy and literacy would help to pick prospective workers”*.

B. Divisional or departmental test: All respondents from I to IX (N = 9) agreed on this proposition. They assented that some specific sectors (e.g. manufacturing and information technology) should add other relevant divisional or departmental tests, such as regarding appropriate soft and hard skills.

Pre-Departure Training

A. To train workers before departure: Training would be beneficial for newly selected workers (MEF, 2014). Most respondents, including informants I, III, IV, VI, VII, VIII, and IX (N = 7), suggested compulsory pre-departure training for successful workers. A factory manager—manufacturing (respondent IV) explained this in the following way: *“Pre-departure training for newly selected workers must be compulsory and detailed. Otherwise, we have to face numerous hazards which will impact the expected development”*. Informants II and V said that training would not be too crucial for the plantation and construction sectors. Most of the FWs could work in these sectors without any formal training.

B. Duration of training: Informants I, II, and V did not fix any duration for pre-departure training. They believed it might depend on the source country’s needs. Informants III, IV, and VIII fixed the duration for pre-departure training as at least one week of rigorous training. The labour councillor of source country A (respondent VI) took this issue seriously and said, *“Pre-departure training would be at least two weeks of laborious training. The source country’s government should create such an environment (dummy environment) for simulation training for selected workers. A simulation would help our workers learn practically. It would also help our labourers to live and to work abroad with confidence”*. Informants VII and IX also spoke in favour of two weeks of practical training for newly appointed workers.

Quantitative study

Participants: In the second phase, a survey interview was used to accumulate quantitative data with random sampling. Random sampling allows for everyone within a defined region to have an equal chance of being selected (Thomas, 2020). The survey data were collected from FWs living and working in Kuantan and Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. The researcher chose to collect data from Kuantan due to its familiarity and status as an important industrial hub. Kuala Lumpur was chosen for collecting data as the centre (capital) and the most important place in Malaysia, where research information for this study was available and thorough. In total, 300 migrant workers were interviewed, though some items were unanswered. The table 2 and 3 demonstrate the survey interviewees and demographic characteristics of the interviewees of the study, respectively:

Table 2. The survey interviewees of the study

Category	Number of Respondents	Area
Legal Foreign Workers in Malaysia	100	Kuantan (Bukit Sagu, Semambu, Gambang Felda, IM 14, Swiss Garden, Bander, Jaya Gading)
	200	Kuala Lumpur (Gombak, Cameron Highland, Pudu, Batu Cave, Ampang, Nilai, TBS, Kotaraya, Sri Petaling, Bukit Jalil, KLCC, Genting Highland)

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of the interviewees

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Male	274	91.3
Female	26	8.7
Age (in years)		
18–29	78	26.0
30–44	178	59.3
45–60	39	13.0
Above 60 years	5	1.7
Education Level		
Did not attend school	77	25.7
Primary	127	42.3
Secondary	69	23.0
Higher Secondary and above	27	9.0

Most of the respondents were male foreign workers, who legally lived and worked in Malaysia. Moreover, the majority of them were low-skilled and had low levels of education. Specifically, almost 70% of participants had just primary level schooling or no school background (low education level respondents). Whereas the proportion of high education level respondents (secondary and higher secondary or above) was 30%.



Instruments

The closed-ended survey questionnaire comprised 10 items tapping into various dimensions of FWs' recruitment in Malaysia. The survey interview was carried out between May and August 2021, and was performed by the researchers. Items of recruitment issues were adapted from many previous studies (Devadason & Meng, 2014; Hamzah et al., 2020; MEF, 2014, 2016; Othman & Rohani, 2017). Responses were presented on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Every instrument underwent validity and reliability assessment. Moreover, data normality was tested for the survey data, with all data being found to be approximately normal, and thus eligible for parametric testing.

Data Analysis

The survey data analysis was undertaken with the help of SPSS 25. Moreover, a Chi-Square Goodness of Fit Test was performed to determine whether the proportion of respondents who worked as foreign labours was equal between the four different types (Weisstein, 2021): did not attend school, primary level, secondary level and higher secondary or above. The results showed that the proportions differed by type of education level of the respondents, $\chi^2(3, N = 300) = 67.307, p = .000$.

Results of the Quantitative Study

Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics for the various constructs of foreign workers' recruitment are provided in Table 4. With a minimum rating of 1 (strongly disagree) and a maximum rating of 5 (strongly agree), the mean ratings for the various dimensions were between 2.32 and 3.46. The highest mean score was pre-departure training ($M = 3.46, SD = 1.35$), whilst the lowest was educational qualification ($M = 2.32, SD = 1.63$). Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics of various dimensions of FWs' recruitment:

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of various dimensions of foreign workers' recruitment

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Educational qualification	1	5	2.32	1.63
Skill test	1	5	2.72	1.42
Pre-departure training	1	5	3.46	1.35

Mean differences

Table 5 displays the mean differences among the interviewees' groups:

Table 5. Mean differences among the respondents' groups

		N	Mean
Educational qualification	Did not attend school	77	1.3377
	Primary	127	1.2940
	Secondary	69	4.5072
	Higher Secondary and Above	27	4.4321
	Total	300	2.3267
Skill Test	Did not attend school	77	1.8701
	Primary	127	1.8031
	Secondary	69	4.6087
	Higher Secondary and Above	27	4.7160
	Total	300	2.7278
Pre-departure training	Did not attend school	77	2.2987
	Primary	127	2.5728
	Secondary	69	4.2319
	Higher Secondary and Above	27	4.7315
	Total	300	3.4587

For all variables, mean differences were found to be markedly high between the groups based on their education level. As abovementioned, we had four educational groups: did not attend school, primary level, secondary level and higher secondary or above. The findings of the mean differences show that in most cases, did not attend school and primary level respondents opined the same. These respondents were identified as “low-level educational background respondents”. Likewise, secondary and higher secondary respondents had similar opinions mostly. They were recognised as “high-level educational background respondents” in this study for further analysis of the outcomes. High-level educational background respondents were also treated as a reference group.

A one-way ANOVA test

A One-Way ANOVA test was conducted as a parametric test to identify any significant differences between the groups, based on respondents' educational level (Zach, 2018). The following table shows the summary of the ANOVA test results.

Table 6. Summary of ANOVA test results

IV (Independent Variable)	DV (Dependent Variables)	F	p-Value	Effect Size (Eta Squared)
Education level of the respondents	Educational qualification	(3,296) = 464.456	.000	0.82
	Skill test	(3,296) = 545.332	.000	0.84
	Pre-departure training	(3,296) = 53.391	.000	0.35

The one-way ANOVA test results show that there was a significant difference between all DVs (educational qualification, skill test, and pre-departure training) during the recruitment phase, based on the education level of the participants: ($F(3,296) = 464.456, p = 0.000$);



($F(3,296) = 545.332, p = 0.000$) and ($F(3,296) = 53.391, p = 0.000$), respectively. Thus, we rejected the null hypotheses.

Furthermore, the Tukey HSD post hoc test also indicates a significant difference between the groups for the above three DVs. This was 0.000 (the mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level) between low-level educational background respondents (did not attend school and primary) and high-level educational background respondents (secondary and higher secondary or above). The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was 0.82, 0.84, and 0.35 (educational qualification, skill test, and pre-departure training, respectively), which means the actual differences in mean scores between the groups (respondents with low-level and high-level educational backgrounds) was markedly high.

Discussion

From the qualitative findings, it is evident that interviewees were mainly divided into two groups in their opinions regarding the proposals. The 'N = 5' group supported the themes in most cases. These interviewees included one factory manager—manufacturing (respondent IV), labour councillors of source countries A and B (respondents VI and VII, respectively), one journalist in the labour migration sector (respondent VIII), and one senior leader of working migrant labourers (respondent IX). Their opinions were based on real scenarios and the betterment of the FWs' futures. By contrast, the other respondents ('N = 4' group) were opposed to almost every proposal. They represented the Malaysian Employers Federation (respondent I), one manager—plantation sector (respondent II), one agent of migrant workers (respondent III), and one factory manager—construction (respondent V). They had no issues with foreign workers' rights and sustainability. Gaining profits or company benefits influenced their opinions. In exception, pre-departure training was endorsed by informants I and III.

In respect of the quantitative findings, the One-Way ANOVA test results showed that there were significant differences in DVs among groups on the issues of fixing educational qualities, skill tests, and pre-departure training. The p-values indicated that respondents' opinions on these proposals were markedly different. The effect size also revealed large differences in mean scores between the groups. Furthermore, the Tukey HSD post hoc tests revealed considerable differences between low-level educational background respondents and high-level educational background ones. Last but not the least, SPSS recoding analysis shows that 93.6%, 95.85% and 52.45% low-level educational background informants opposed the proposals of educational qualification, skill tests and pre-departure training, respectively. Conversely, 90.1%, 96.4% and 99.3% high-level educational background respondents agreed on the issues on educational qualification, skill tests and pre-departure training, respectively.

From both the qualitative and quantitative investigations, the findings reveal that the 'N = 5' group ('N = 7' group for pre-departure training), as well as the high-level educational background respondents' strongly supported the proposals. The 'N = 4' group and some respondents (mostly low-level educational background) commonly did not want any changes, because of focusing on their own interests rather than quality education and lack of consciousness for low-level education, respectively. Thus, we conclude that to increase workforce contributions (ILO, 2011) and sustainability (in line with the SDG 04), it is important and necessary at the recruitment phase to:

1. Fix the minimum educational qualification, which should be at least at secondary level or equivalent vocational qualification.
2. Set compulsory skill tests (divisional and departmental tests, if necessary) for potential foreign workers.
3. Require mandatory pre-departure training for selected foreign workers.

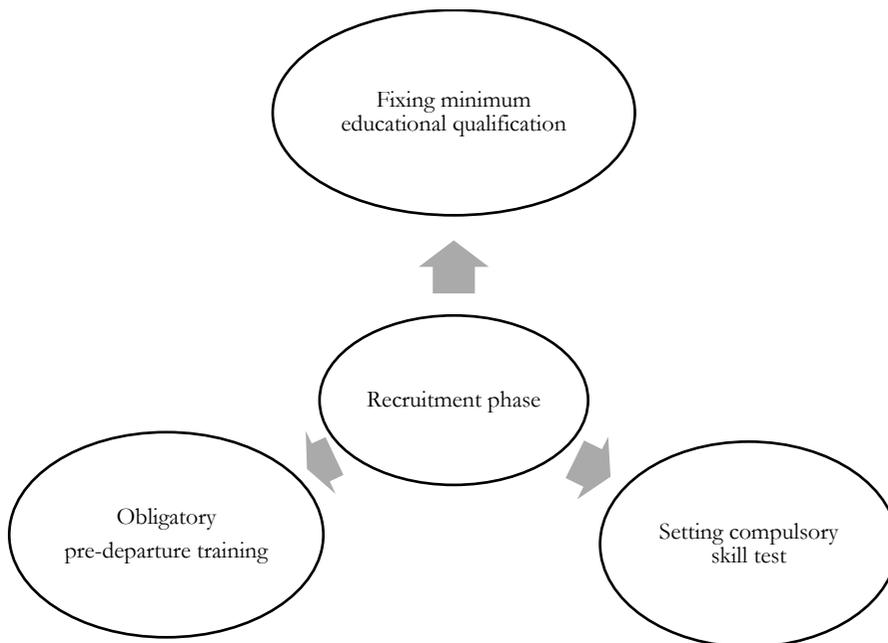
Summary of outcomes

At a glance, table 7 summarises the findings from both qualitative and quantitative results. Besides, figure 2 finally depicts the crucial factors of foreign workers in Malaysia that should be reconsidered in the recruitment phase.

Table 7. Summary of qualitative and quantitative findings

Issue	Findings	Short Form
Recruitment Phase	Minimum educational qualification for FWs should be at the secondary level	Fixing minimum educational qualification
	Skill tests should be compulsory for FWs in the recruitment phase	Setting obligatory skill tests
	Pre-departure training should be mandatory for selected foreign workers	Compulsory pre-departure training

Figure 2. Factors that should be reconsidered at the recruitment phase.



Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to identify some important factors at the recruitment level for foreign workers in Malaysia that could promote the goal of educational capabilities (SDG 04) for all prospective labourers and enhance sustainability in the entire migrant workers' related sectors. Our findings have highlighted the need to change some important policies in the recruitment phase of FWs.

Education is the process of gaining knowledge, skills, values, and beliefs (OALD, 2019). Amending educational qualifications to have a minimum requirement at the recruitment phase of foreign workers will be one of the key factors in the FWs' management system in Malaysia. Our study findings suggest fixing this at the secondary level, or an equivalent vocational qualification. Recruitment of low-level educated workers (primary level or illiterate) should be reduced gradually. Moreover, the study outcomes have revealed the need for FWs' skill tests (ILO, 2017). Skill tests on basic numeracy and literacy must be compulsory at the recruitment level, which is pertinent for selecting competent workers. In addition, some specific sectors (e.g. manufacturing and information technology, etc.) could add other relevant divisional or departmental tests, such as appropriate soft and hard skills. Finally, pre-departure training was considered. This is one of the most important sustainable tools to increase FWs' production capacity, as well as that of the company as whole, name recognition, brand value, and survival efficiency (ILO, 2011). The study endorsed pre-departure training issues, and we advise making such training compulsory for every company, whether small, medium, or large.

Our findings could help to change the policies related to foreign workers' recruitment in Malaysia. The findings will also guide the sustainable boosting of the workforce's contribution to society and the economy of Malaysia. SDG 04 will also be met, if the proposals are implemented.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Questionnaire

Educational Qualification

What should be the minimum educational background of foreign workers?
 Do you think primary level or illiterate workers should not be selected for employment in Malaysia?
 How can we reduce the number of unskilled workers?

Skill Test

Should skill tests be compulsory at the recruitment phase?
 What about divisional or departmental tests?

Pre-Departure Training

What is your opinion on pre-departure training for selected workers?
 What would the training agenda be?
 What is your opinion on the duration of pre-departure training?

Appendix B: Survey Questionnaire

Please respond on the following scale:

For recruitment of foreign workers...	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
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Educational Qualification

Minimum educational background should be secondary level or equivalent vocational qualification

No primary level or illiterate person will be selected for employment in Malaysia

The number of unskilled workers should reduce gradually

Skill Test

Potential candidates must pass compulsory skill tests, such as basic numeracy and literacy tests

Some specific sectors may add other relevant divisional or departmental tests, like appropriate soft and hard skills

Foreign workers' skill tests should be held under the supervision of any representative of the destination country's government

Pre-Departure Training

Training workers before departure to the destination country must be compulsory

Training should include destination country's language, culture, and adaptation to the local people, and the job's regulations and conditions

Pre-departure training must be long (at least one week), and should train the selected workers practically

After completion of the session, their improvement should be checked by arranging an examination

