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## CASE STUDY:

### Foreign Workers in Malaysia

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#### Abstract

*Malaysia has become a popular destination for many foreign workers since getting independence in 1957, owing to its rapidly growing economy and industrialisation. Most of the migrant workers in Malaysia are low-skilled or uneducated, and public debate is going on their outcome, whether it is substantial or not. The purpose of this study is to manifest the role and contribution of imported labour to the Malaysian economy. Evidence is collected from secondary sources- journal article, relevant books, and online databases. The review finds that the impact of migrant labour on Malaysian growth has not been studied holistically and sufficiently. Existing evidence shows that although it is somewhat positive, the public attitude is most adverse to illegal and irregular migrants. Therefore, more empirical research is required to determine the role of imported temporary workers on the economy of Malaysia, for its ongoing vision- to become a high-income nation.*

**Keywords:** low-skilled foreign workers; economic growth; employment; productivity; development.

#### Introduction

Human migration, an age-old phenomenon, relates to economic, social, political and technological transformations that affect both the source and receiving countries, as well as transit countries. Almost 3.5% of the world's population were international migrants globally in 2019, which equates to around 272 million people out of a global population of 7.7 billion, or 1 in every 30 people (IOM, 2019). Among them, 164 million were migrant workers—nearly 60% of total international immigrants. Recently, international labour migration has been considered one of the key global issues that affect almost every nation's socio-economic development (ILO, 2010). The *World Migration Report 2020* mentions that Malaysia ranked 18<sup>th</sup> (3.4 million people) among the top 20 destination countries of international migrants in 2019 (IOM, 2019), at 10.7% of the total population on 1 July 2019 (UNDESA, 2019).

In the last three decades, Malaysia has witnessed a hasty upsurge of immigration, mainly due to its speedily expanding economy, increasing urbanisation (ILO, 2016), burgeoning industrial plans (Othman & Rohani, 2017), the relatively cheap cost of foreign labour (Ramlee, 2017), and acute labour shortages in the countryside owing to low levels of participation from local citizens

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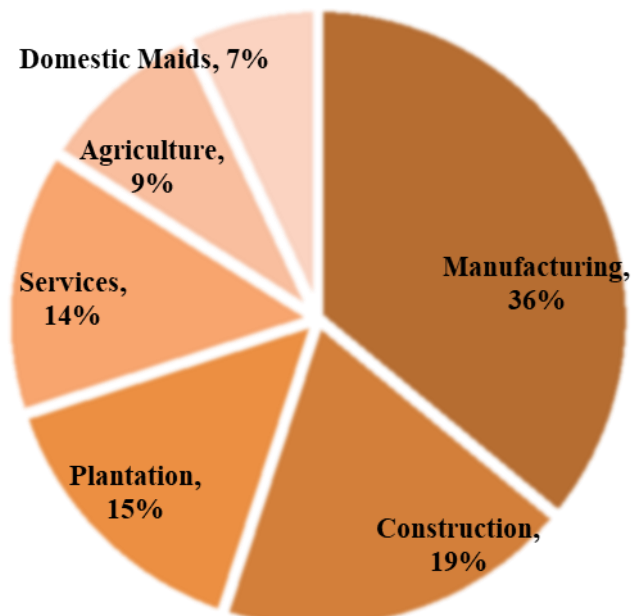
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(Kassim, 2017). Immigration involves mainly low-skilled foreign workers, who are now responsible for roughly 20% to 30% of the total Malaysian workforce (ILO, 2016). Almost one-third of the workforce of the agricultural, manufacturing, and construction sectors in Malaysia are migrants (ILO, 2016). Based on job distribution, the manufacturing industry carries the highest percentage of migrant workers (36%), while the construction and plantation sectors have 19% and 15%, respectively (figure 1). Many of the rest are in the services (14%) agriculture (9%), and domestic maid (7%) sectors (Loh, Simler, Wei, & Yi, 2019). Malaysia is among the countries in East Asia and the Pacific with the highest ratio (figure 2) of migrants to the total population (UNDESA, 2019).

**Figure 1.** Sectoral distribution of foreign workers in Malaysia.



Source: Loh, W. S., Simler, K., Wei, K. T., & Yi, S. (2019), p.20

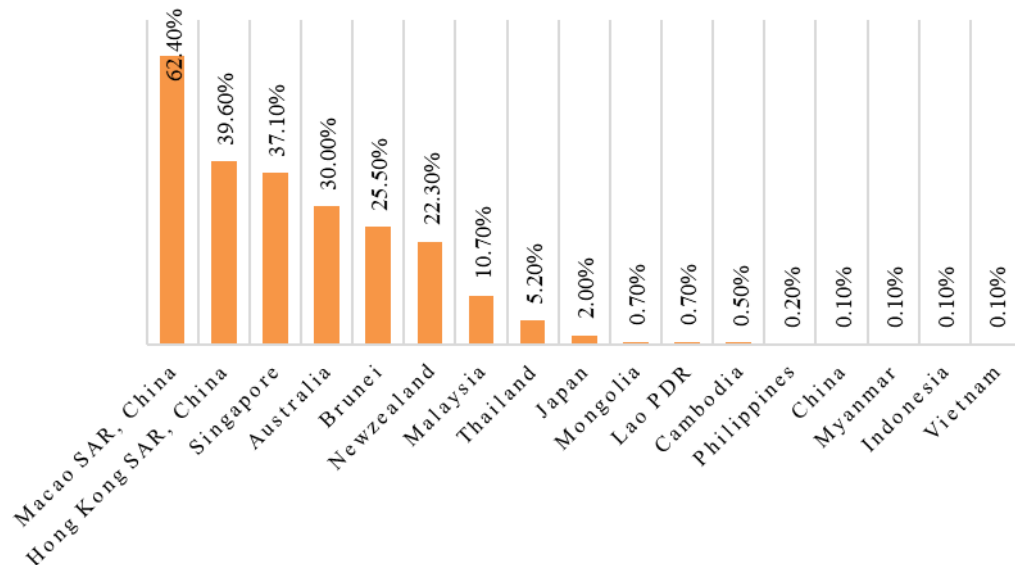
According to the Ministry of Home Affairs' records (2000–2015), the major source countries of labour are Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Philippines, Pakistan, and India (Ramlee, 2017). The first four countries mentioned above are active source countries based on their supply pattern. Although the management of migrant workers in Malaysia is focused at the apex level of policymakers, the real number of temporary imported labour workers is extremely difficult to determine because different sources denote this in various ways. Following to government report, the number of total migrant labourers was 6.7 million in 2014, and this dropped to 3.8 million in 2016 (Hwok-Aun & Leng, 2018). According to the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF), the total number of estimated foreign workers (both legal and illegal) is 6 million, whereas The Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia (ACCCIM) suggests that 1:2 would be the ratio of legal and illegal foreign workers (Ramlee, 2017). The number of low-skilled migrant workers has now escalated to over 93% of foreigners in Malaysia, and most of them work in Peninsular Malaysia, where manufacturing takes the top position for its rapid industrialisation, while Sabah and Sarawak depend more on agriculture and plantations (Kassim, 2017).

Malaysia has a vision to become a high-income nation (WorldBank, 2015), and it needs both high- and low-skilled workers to achieve the target. However, excessive numbers of low-skilled



labourers and irregular migrants create immense pressure on the economy of Malaysia, an issue which has been discussed frequently. 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. Malaysia's has become increasingly concerned about the vast number of immigrants, both legal and illegal (Kassim, 2017). Recent policy has mainly emphasised dealing with foreign labour to ensure Malaysia becomes a high-income nation by 2020 by facilitating growth and reducing the negative aftermath of the economy and society (Kanapathy, 2006). Malaysia would become a high-income country if its economy were to be globally competitive and resource-sustainable for future generations (Rafael, 2016).

**Figure 2.** Share of total migrants to population- regional peers of Malaysia.



Source: UNDESA (2019), p.1

The core aim of this study is to explore, integrate, and evaluate the recent economic development and achievements of Malaysia in connection with international labour migration. Malaysia has tremendous experiences with foreign worker issues, as its economy has long benefited from a supportive immigration stance. This study has accumulated information on almost all recent development features, as well as challenges, and examines to what extent foreign workers in Malaysia are a boon or bane for its economy and development.

## Method

In this study, secondary sources are the main method of data collection. These sources are relevant books and articles (on migrant labour in Malaysia) or official statistics and reports produced by the Malaysian government and international organisations such as ILO, IOM, UN DESA, and the World Bank. Some prominent Malaysian migration researchers are also covered. Pertinent information from newspaper/journal reports and articles are utilised. The content analysis method is used to obtain consistent findings and outcomes. This study did not follow any specific theoretical framework.

## **Results and Discussion**

The International Labour Organisation clearly mentions that the impact of foreign workers on destination countries is not as well documented as that on origin countries (ILO, 2010). Though many researchers and academicians have attempted to address the issue of migrant labour in Peninsular Malaysia, the contribution of migrant labour to Malaysian development has not been assessed seriously (Ismail & Yuliyusman, 2014). The government of Malaysia always gives priority to national security and people's safety, when it creates policy around immigrant labourers, rather than concentrating on their immense involvement in the country's development (ILO, 2016). Empirical research on the contributions of low-skilled imported workers in Malaysia is scarce, and existing studies have tended to concentrate mostly on the manufacturing sector (Devadas, 2017).

### **Impact on the Economy**

Migrants workers have played a crucial role in the Malaysian economy since their arrival in this region. The World Bank's senior economist, Rafael Munoz Moreno (2016), states that two remarkable achievements, one being the eradication of extreme poverty and the other the promotion of inclusive growth, have occurred in Malaysia over the previous few decades (Rafael, 2016). One of the major sources of the impact of foreign workers on the economic development of Malaysia has been the World Bank's report titled *Malaysia Economic Monitor: Immigrant Labour*, in which it was noted that both skilled and unskilled labour had had a dynamic role in Malaysia's growth, and both are needed to achieve the country's vision of becoming a high-income nation by 2020 (Cecilia, 2018). As education levels have risen drastically in Malaysia, the majority of Malaysians are now seeking higher-skilled jobs, and contracted foreign workers have been needed to fill the gaps in at the bottom of the labour market, mostly in low- to mid-skilled jobs (WorldBank, 2015). The findings of the report are presented in Table 1

Another World Bank assessment strongly supported migrant labour as an enabler for development and stated that migrant workers, "... generate jobs for Malaysians by reducing costs of production making Malaysian firms cheaper and more competitive in the global market, allowing them to expand and consequently increasing their demand for Malaysian workers." (WorldBank, 2013, p-11 cited in Kassim 2017). The report also highlights that, whilst expatriates (highly skilled) remains on the top and do not displace local workers, hence having a negligible influence on the wages and employment of Malay citizens whereas a mammoth number of low-skilled workforces stay at the bottom of the Malaysian job hierarchy (Kassim, 2017).

Some sectors are treated as pivotal to growth, for example, manufacturing, construction and palm oil; while remaining profitable and competitive, these sectors profoundly rely on unskilled foreign workers (Kanapathy, 2006). These so-called problematic low-skilled workers are also consumers who can play a positive role in the creation of demand for daily commodities such as food, clothing, housing, medical services, banking, and transportation services (Kassim, 2001).

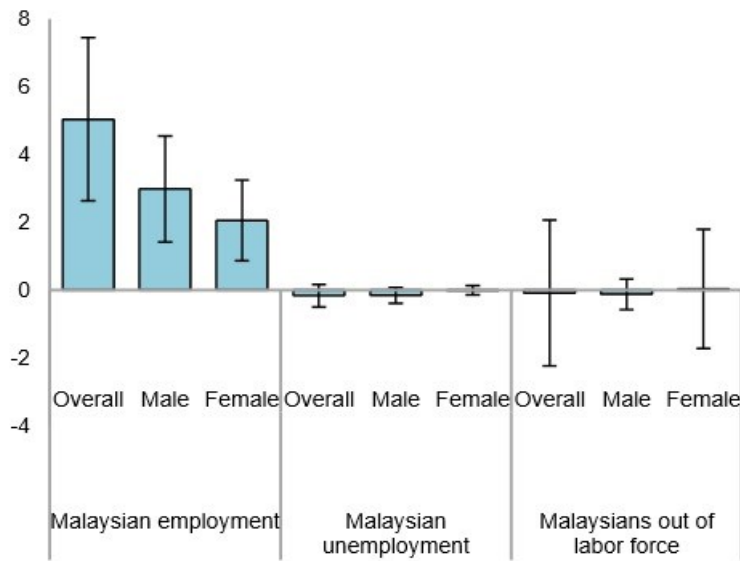
Some studies specify the correlation between migrant workers and economic growth is positive, owing to the creation of jobs and capital accumulation, whereas many others believe that unskilled immigrants plummet economic growth (Ramlee, 2017). For instance, the Bank Negara Malaysia differs in its opinion on foreign labour productivity. It perceives that the productivity of industries negatively correlates (figure 7) with the share of foreigners (Wei, Murugasu, & Wei, 2018a).



**Table 1.** Findings of the World Bank's report.

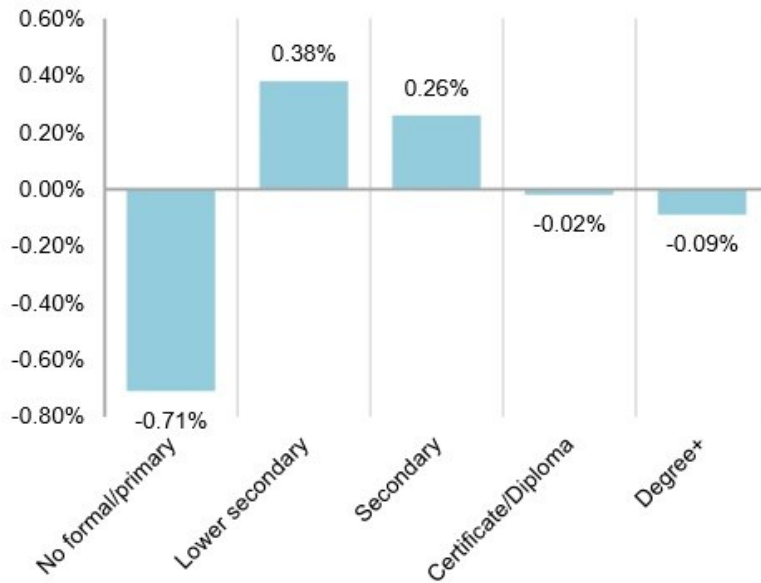
Serial	Issues	Results
01	An influx of 10 new foreign workers in a given state or sector	Creates 5.2 new jobs for Malaysians (figure 3), 2 of them are female (WorldBank, 2015)
02	A 10% net increase of low-skilled foreign labour	May upsurge real gross domestic product (GDP) of Malaysia by 1.1% (Rafael, 2016)
		Slightly increases the wages of local people (Malaysian) by 0.14% (Melissa, 2015)
02	A 10% net increase of low-skilled foreign labour	Decreases wages of the least-educated Malaysians by 0.74% (figure 4), who represent 14% of the total labour force (Cecilia, 2018)
		Reduces significantly salaries of existing migrant workers (figure 5), who are already in Malaysia, by 3.9% (WorldBank, 2015)
03	Low-skilled immigrants in Malaysia	Fill workforce gaps, reduce production costs, increase investment and expand output and exports (Melissa, 2015)
04	Untrained migrant labourers	Create demand for skilled Malaysian employees and contribute to the country's economic growth (Melissa, 2015)
05	The fiscal impact of legal immigration	Is likely to be small (WorldBank, 2015)
06	Documented unskilled immigrant workers pay levies for work permits	Created 1.2% of the total national revenues of Malaysia in 2014 (WorldBank, 2015)
07	Legal low-skilled foreign labourers raise wages and employment	Which in turn contribute to public revenue (WorldBank, 2015)
08	Documented migrant workers (both high and low-skilled) have health insurance	This reduces the burden on the government of Malaysia (WorldBank, 2015)
09	Undocumented and illegal foreign workers in Malaysia	Create a fiscal burden for the government (Melissa, 2015)
10	The influx of foreign labor	Has a negative impact on the wages of some groups of Malaysians (Cecilia, 2018)
11	Firms with migrant workers	Value added (figure 6) per worker (Moreno et al., 2015)

**Figure 3.** An additional 10 new immigrants increase the employment of local citizens



Source: WorldBank (2015), p.42.

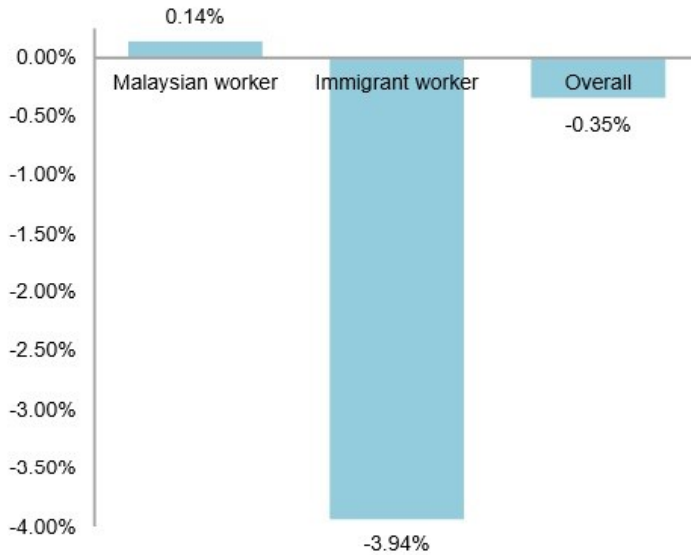
**Figure 4.** The impact of immigration on the wages of Malaysians differs based on their educational background



Source: Özden & Wagner (2014), p.43.

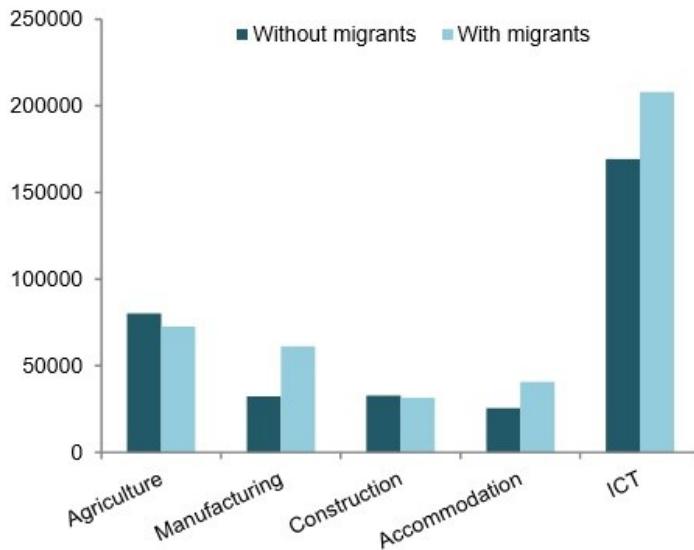


**Figure 5.** A 10% increase of foreign labourers causes a small upsurge in the wages of Malaysians, but reductions in immigrant workers' wages

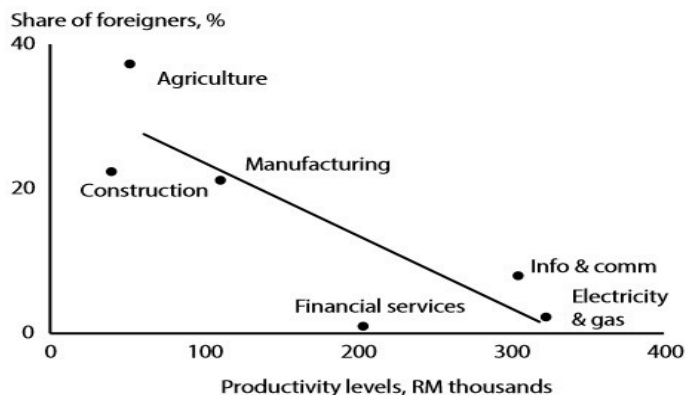


Source: Özden & Wagner (2014), p.43.

**Figure 6.** Firms with immigrant workers have higher value-added per worker



Source: Moreno et al. (2015), p.44.

**Figure 7:** Productivity and share of foreigners by industry

Source: Wei, Murugasu, & Wei (2018b), p.5.

Foreign workers have played a vital role in Malaysia's plantation sector from the very beginning when they entered this land. Malaysia has 1.4 million hectares of palm oil plantations, which largely rely on foreign workers (78%), with locals representing the remainder of the workforce (22%) (Ramlee, 2017, p-11). Indonesians primarily work in the plantation sector as harvesters. Palm fruits need to be processed within 24 hours after harvesting. The country has long suffered from a loss in the form of unharvested fruits because of the time at the mills being too long, due to insufficient labour (Ahmad, 2019). Without the migrant labour force, the plantation sector would be unable to function. Palm oil investors worry about this because as Indonesia expands its plantations, Malaysia will lose more harvesters (Ahmad, 2019). Low-skilled foreign workers commonly engage in so-called 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning), which locals shun. Nevertheless, these jobs form a critical element of the Malaysian economic jigsaw (Ahmad, 2019). He also mentions that the ongoing highway projects cannot proceed without workers from Bangladesh.

Nizam et al. (2017) studied the effect of the influx of low-skilled immigrants on Malaysian economic growth based on MRW model or Mankiw-Romer-Weil model (Nizam, Ahmad, & Aziz, 2017). Following this model, they found that the rate of human capital, stock of knowledge and skills, decreased for domestic labour from 0.6855 to 0.6661 (2010 to 2013) because of the participation rate of them is lessened, while the rate of human capital for foreign labour increased from 0.0745 to 0.1040 for the same period due to sharply swelling their involvement ratio. Whereas, it was also found from their study that physical capital accumulation per effective labour with the presence and the absence of foreign labour differs significantly. With the absence of foreign labour physical capital accumulation per effective labour was 3.5158 in 2013. On the other hand, it was 3.0756 in 2013 with the presence of foreign labour. So, employment of migrants reduces the rate of physical capital.

A study of the case of the impact of immigration on employment of Malaysia's native workers found that scale effects outweigh substitution effects (Özden & Wagner, 2014). Approximately one-third of the agricultural, manufacturing, and construction workforce is migrants; these are industries which collectively contributed MYR 297 billion (US\$ 68 billion), or 35.7% of Malaysia's gross domestic product, in 2014 (ILO, 2016).





**Table 2.** Some studies related to the impact of foreign workers on the manufacturing sector.

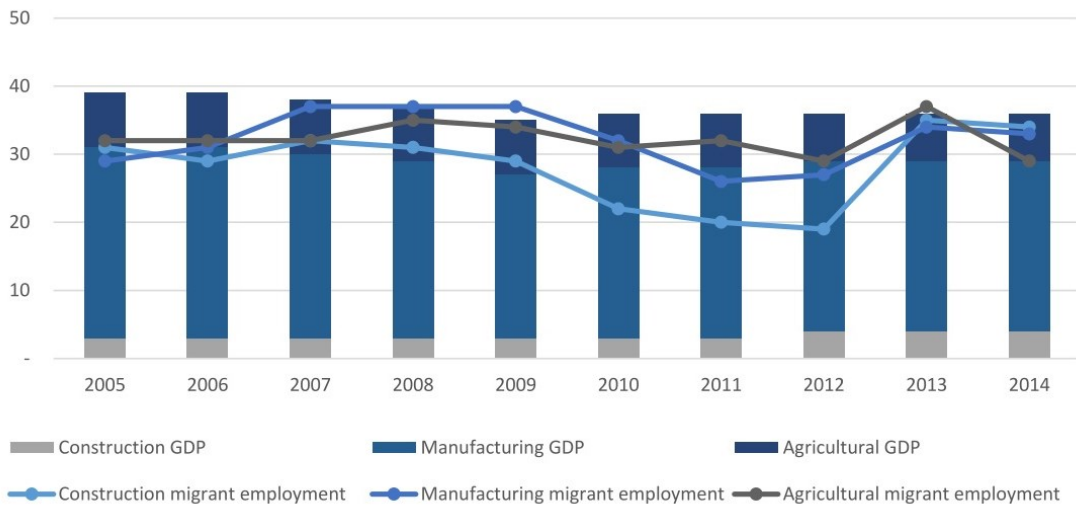
Serial	Name	Topic	Findings
01	Zaleha Mohd Noor Noraini Isa Rusmawati Said and Suhaila Abd Jalil (Noor, Isa, Said, & Jalil, 2017)	The Impact of Foreign Workers on Labor Productivity in the Malaysian Manufacturing Sector	If there is a 1% increase in foreign labour, productivity will increase by 0.172%. Foreign labour neither complements nor substitutes for local labour.
02	Nasri Bachtiar, Rahmi Fahmy and Rahmah Ismail (Bachtiar, Fahmy, & Ismail, 2017)	The Demand for Foreign Workers in the Manufacturing Sector in Malaysia	Professionals and technical personnel have positive relationships with wages and production, but the relationship with the capital price and the local wage rate is negative.
03	Rahmah et.al. (2003) Cited in (Bachtiar et al., 2017)	The role of foreign labour on output growth, job opportunity and wage in the Malaysian manufacturing sector	Output growth is significantly influenced by professional immigrants. Moreover, local workers and professional migrants are complementary, whereas unskilled imported workers and local workers are substitutes.
04	Jajri Idris Ismail Rahmah (J. Idris & Rahmah, 2006)	The elasticity of substitution between foreign and local workers in the Malaysian manufacturing sector	At the production level, foreign labour is not a competitor for Malaysian workers. They are more of a substitute than complement.
05	Rahmah Ismail and Ferayuliani Yuliyusman (Ismail & Yuliyusman, 2014)	Foreign labour on Malaysian growth	Both foreign and local unskilled workers are negatively related to economic growth. There is a meaningful impact on skilled and semi- skilled workers in both the short and long term.
06	Jacob A. Jordaan (Jordaan, 2018)	Foreign workers and productivity in an emerging economy: The case of Malaysia	1.Foreign workers generate positive productivity effects, especially when the endogeneity of the industry share of foreign workers is controlled. 2. Positive productivity effects are linked to the presence of both highly-skilled and low-skilled foreign workers. 3. Industry heterogeneity is important.

Sharmila Devadas (2017) tried to find out the effect of immigration on labour productivity, which is quite varied across individual countries. For example, the proportion of positive total immigrant effects are notably lower for Malaysia (Figure 9a,b), but are higher for the United Kingdom and the United States (Devadas, 2017).

Bank Negara Malaysia clearly mentions that cheap migrant labour creates distortions in the economy (Wei, Murugasu, & Wei, 2018). This is because most Malaysian firms depend on low-skilled migrant workers, and have no interest in moving towards sophisticated technological advancement requiring a huge amount of investment. Bank Negara (National Bank) Malaysia strongly believes a high reliance on low-skilled foreign workers, which is the predominant feature

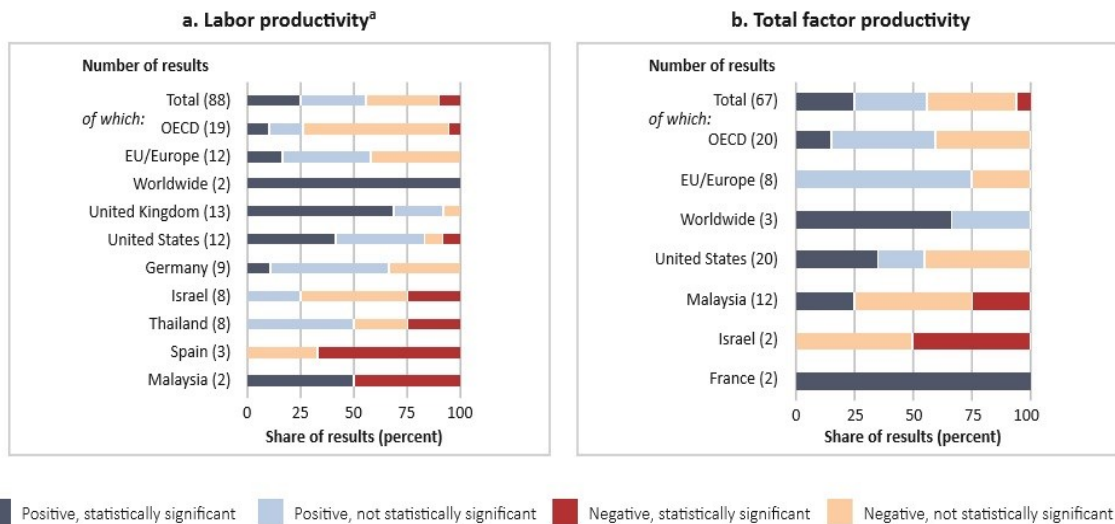
of Malaysia’s economy, is a key issue causing declining local wages, as well as delaying the country’s expected progress towards becoming a high-productivity nation. In addition, it says high dependence on low-skilled foreign workers will also have an adverse effect by shaping Malaysia’s reputation as a low-skilled, labour-intensive destination. The country remains in a low wage and low productivity trap that may benefit individual firms in the short term, but could lead to macroeconomic costs to the economy over the longer term (Cecilia, 2018).

**Figure 8:** Share of GDP and employment of migrants for key economic sectors 2005–2014 (%)



Source: ILO (2016), p.2.

**Figure 9.** Effects of total immigrants on labour productivity and its components.



Source: Devadas (2017), p.3.



Economically, there are concerns that the dependence on migrant labour may cause a delay in upgrading technical skills, factory automation, and productivity improvement. There are many claims around how outward remittances (migrants usually repatriate a large share of their income) limit the spillover or multiplier effect on the domestic economy, despite the high cost of monitoring, control, detention, and deportation of illegal immigrants (Pillai, 1999; Tham & Liew, 2004). From 2011 to 2017, the share of low-skilled jobs in Malaysia increased significantly to 16%, compared with an increase of only 8% in the period of 2002 to 2010 (Cecilia, 2018). The trend in employment of low wage foreign workers that allows employers to keep salaries low (ILMIA, 2016).

### **Addressing the Challenges**

Finding the appropriate formula for reducing the negative effects of foreign labour, as well as maximizing their benefits, is one of the prime challenges for Malaysia. Bank Negara (National Bank) Malaysia proposes a five-pronged approach to managing foreign workers in Malaysia (Cecilia, 2018). Firstly, the role of low-skilled migrant labour in the Malaysian economy should be clear and focused. Secondly, clear communication to the relevant industries should be developed regarding policy implementation and any changes. Thirdly, following the Malaysian economic objectives, existing labour management tools—for example, quotas, levies and dependency ceilings—might be reformed to be more market-driven. Fourthly, Malaysia should ensure a place for foreign workers in the Malaysian economy, and treat them better in terms of their rights and ensure agreed payments. Finally, robust and effective monitoring should be confirmed and enforcement for the proposed reform should take place while paying special attention to undocumented foreign workers.

The World Bank proposed six possible directions to strengthen the Malaysian immigration system (WorldBank, 2015):

- To identify labour market demand for immigrants
- To revise employment immigration policies focusing on new HRD
- To adopt a live-levy system for labour market needs
- To categorise immigrants by a broader set of criteria
- To promote productivity-enhancing technology
- To strengthen monitoring and enforcement efforts

### **Conclusions**

In summary, the inadequate existing evidence does not provide distinct information on the impact of low-skilled migrant workers on the Malaysian economy and entire development. It has both positive and negative effects. Some evidence indicate that Malaysia has clearly benefitted from the presence of migrant labourers, so it is necessary to define an optimum number of foreign workers, in order to minimize the adverse effects on the economy. Malaysian labour migration policies have remained an “interim solution” or “ad hoc approach” to fill immediate labour shortages since it was introduced. The current policy has inbuilt weaknesses, owing to not successfully controlling illegal and irregular foreign workers.

Moreover, the present systems were formulated based on focusing public safety and security, rather than on labour administration and the long-term sustainable development of Malaysia (ILO, 2016, p-3). ILO found that these measures were taken when popular media raised their voices frequently against the foreign workers which shaped public attitudes and political decision, and

subsequently, migrant workers are treated as a potential threat for social problems ranging from electoral fraud to street crimes. So, ongoing policy neither confirms economic transformation to a high-income nation nor reduces its heavy reliance on low-skilled imported workers. Though low-skilled migrant workers have both positive and negative effects on the Malaysian economy, the persistent influx of irregular migrants creates various adverse effects in the long term. To address the labour migration affairs more effectively, this study suggests the following recommendations:

- It is urgently required to define a place for migrant workers in the Malaysian economy. 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 benefit to both parties.
- Management of foreign workers must evolve over time so that no loopholes are left unattended. A necessary structural adjustment may help the current situation.
- To become a high-income and high-productivity nation, Malaysia needs highly educated and skilled workers from abroad. Notwithstanding, to reduce the dependence on foreign labour, Malaysia must create a capable workforce that will fill positions successfully.

Overall, the contribution of low-skilled imported workers is not well researched yet. There are undoubted positive effects from these workers—a boon for the Malaysian economy; however, it is an undeniable truth that public attitudes are gradually souring towards migrant labour in Malaysia, and several factors have become widely considered a “bane” in the long run. Consequently, more independent research is urgently needed to find the evident-based impact of foreign workers on the Malaysian growth.

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