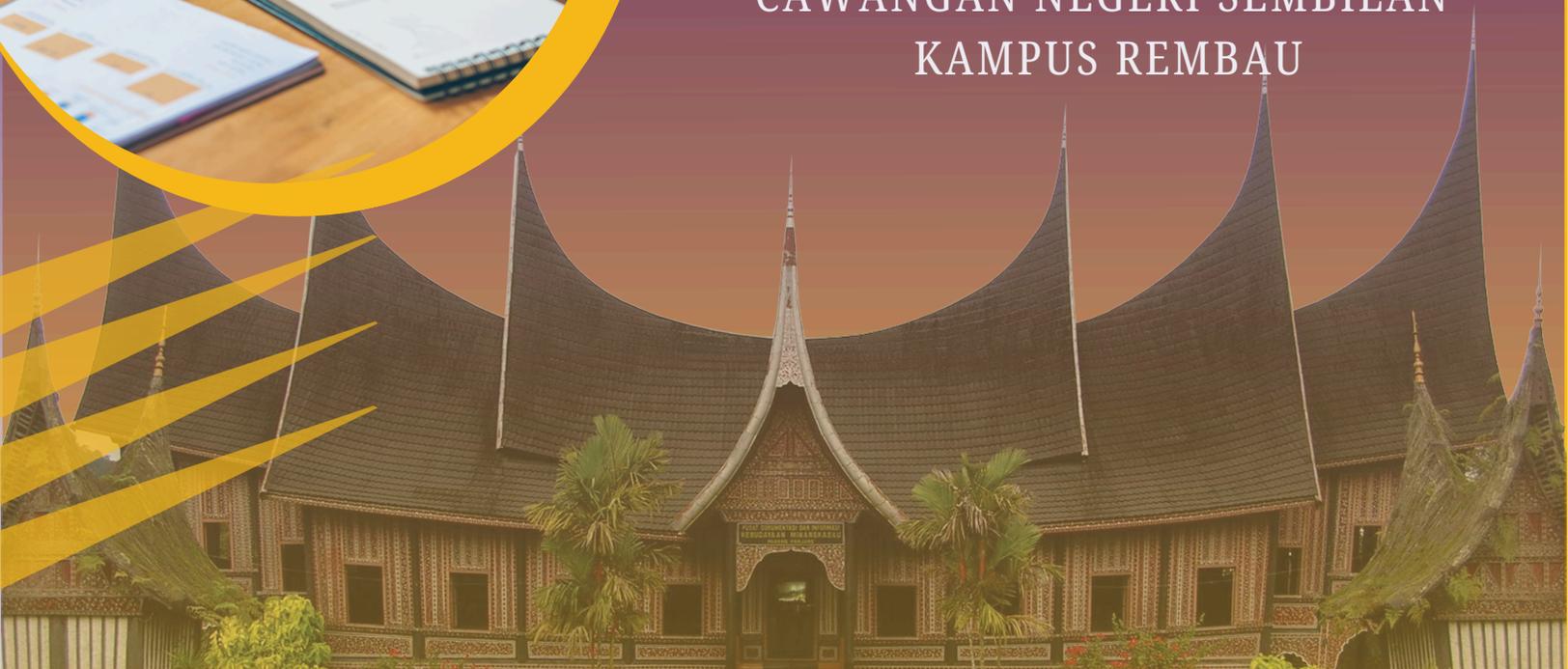


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THE STRAWBERRY GENERATION: A SWEET BUT FRAGILE CHALLENGE FOR MALAYSIA'S FUTURE WORKFORCE

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If you've scrolled through social media lately, you've probably seen the term "strawberry generation" thrown around, often with a sigh or a smirk. It's used to describe young people, particularly those from Generation Z, who are said to be easily bruised like strawberries: soft, sensitive, and unable to handle pressure. But is this label fair? And more importantly, what does it mean for Malaysia's human capital development — the talent that will drive our economy in the next decade?

Let's unpack the reality behind this generational buzzword.

Who Are the Strawberry Generation?

The phrase "strawberry generation" originally came from Taiwan and quickly spread across Asia. In Malaysia, it's often used to describe young people born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, our Gen Z who grew up in a time of comfort, technology, and instant gratification. They've lived through smartphones, high-speed internet, GrabFood, TikTok trends, and the post-pandemic hybrid lifestyle. They are digitally fluent, socially aware, and highly expressive, but critics say they lack resilience and struggle with real-world hardships.

You've probably heard comments like:

“Budak sekarang tak boleh ditegur.”

“Baru kena marah sikit, terus berhenti kerja.”

“Tak tahan tekanan, asyik nak ‘mental health day’.”

While these statements may sound harsh, they highlight a growing concern —the perceived emotional fragility among today's youth and its impact on their ability to adapt to the working world.

Why This Generation is Different

To understand Gen Z, we must first understand their environment. They grew up in an era of abundance and exposure, but also of high uncertainty, that is the economic instability, the COVID-19 pandemic, social media comparison, and rising living costs. They witnessed global crises through a phone screen and were told to “follow their passion” while also being reminded that “jobs are scarce.” Many Gen Z Malaysians experienced education disruptions during the pandemic. Online classes blurred the line between learning and leisure, and now, some are struggling to readjust to workplace discipline and hierarchy. In short, they are not weak —they are shaped by a different world.

The Workplace Friction

Malaysian employers and educators have noticed some common challenges among fresh graduates and young employees:

- **Low tolerance for criticism** – Feedback is often taken personally, making supervisors cautious about correcting mistakes.
- **Job-hopping behaviour** – Many switch jobs within months, chasing better pay, flexibility, or emotional comfort.
- **Lack of perseverance** – When faced with pressure, some prefer to quit rather than push through difficulties.
- **Communication gaps** – Overreliance on digital communication has made face-to-face interaction and teamwork harder.

On the flip side, many Gen Z workers say that the older generation doesn't understand them. They value mental health, work-life balance, and meaningful work and not just salary. They want leaders who listen, not bosses who command. It's a clash between traditional expectations and modern aspirations.

Implications for Malaysia’s Human Capital Development

Malaysia has long aimed to build a knowledge-based, high-income economy driven by skilled and innovative talent. However, if the incoming workforce lacks resilience, discipline, and adaptability, this vision could be at risk.

1. Lower workforce productivity

Employers are reporting higher rates of absenteeism, burnout, and emotional exhaustion among young staff. If not managed, this could affect productivity and organisational performance —especially in sectors like healthcare, education, and manufacturing that demand persistence and teamwork.

2. Decline in employability

According to TalentCorp and several university studies, a key issue in graduate employability is not academic qualification but soft skills —communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence. A “strawberry mindset” that avoids discomfort or challenge could make it harder for graduates to meet workplace expectations.

3. Weak leadership pipeline

If today’s youth avoid difficult situations or criticism, they may not develop the leadership maturity needed to handle future responsibilities. The country risks having technically skilled but emotionally unprepared leaders.

4. Economic cost of turnover

High job-hopping among young workers increases recruitment and training costs for employers. This instability can reduce the overall efficiency of Malaysia’s labour market, slowing progress toward Vision 2030 and Madani Economy goals.

Finding the Balance: From Fragile to Flourishing

While it’s easy to criticise, the truth is —the strawberry generation also has strengths that Malaysia desperately needs. They are tech-savvy, creative, globally connected, and socially conscious. They care about sustainability, inclusivity, and fairness —values that align with modern ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) priorities. The real challenge isn’t to harden them, but to help them grow resilience without losing their compassion.

Here’s how we can do that:

1. Education reform beyond academics

Schools and universities need to focus not only on grades but also on character building. Programs that nurture emotional intelligence, adaptability, and teamwork such as leadership camps, social innovation projects, and entrepreneurship programs that can help students build real-world grit.

2. Workplace mentoring and coaching

Instead of the old-fashioned “command and control” management, organisations can adopt mentorship culture. Young employees thrive when guided, not scolded. Structured feedback sessions, mental-health awareness, and recognition for effort (not just outcomes) can nurture loyalty and resilience.

3. Encourage constructive failure

Malaysian culture often stigmatizes failure. But learning to fail—and recover—builds resilience. Employers and educators should create safe spaces where mistakes are treated as learning experiences, not punishable offences.

4. National youth development initiatives

Programs under KBS (Kementerian Belia dan Sukan), Rakan Muda, and MyFuture Youth Plus should continue evolving to address real emotional and workplace challenges faced by young Malaysians. Integration of life skills, financial literacy, and mental resilience training can help shape well-rounded citizens.

A Shared Responsibility

Let’s be honest: calling young people “strawberries” might make us feel superior, but it doesn’t solve the problem. Every generation reflects the society that raises it. If Gen Z struggles with pressure, perhaps we should look at the systems, such as education, parenting, and work culture that shaped them. Instead of blaming, we can bridge the gap through understanding and adaptation. After all, strawberries may bruise easily, but under the right conditions, they also grow sweet and strong and thus capable of thriving in the right environment.

Final Thoughts: From Labels to Legacy

The so-called “strawberry generation” of Malaysia’s Gen Z should not be dismissed as fragile, but recognised as different and with full of potential. They may not respond well to harsh criticism, but they care deeply about authenticity, balance, and purpose. They may seem impatient, but that impatience can drive innovation. They may avoid toxic work cultures, but that’s because they value empathy and humanity, something our workplaces have long needed. For Malaysia’s human capital to flourish, we need to blend resilience with empathy, discipline with creativity, and tradition with innovation. Because the future of our nation won’t be built by crushing strawberries but by cultivating them to bloom, thrive, and lead.