AI, Future Jobs and RMK13: REHDA Institute Bridges the University-Industry Gap

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A gap between students' expectations and employers' assessments of workplace readiness has emerged from a REHDA Institute Youth Initiative (RIYI) 2026 survey, reinforcing the need for closer university-industry collaboration as artificial intelligence (AI) changes the skills required of fresh graduates.

The survey found that 41.6% of student respondents considered one to three months a realistic timeframe for fresh graduates to begin adding commercial value at work, compared with 2.9% of employer respondents. While 62.0% of students felt well prepared by their universities, only 32.3% of employers agreed that local universities adequately prepare graduates for workplace realities.

The findings form part of RIYI 2026's closing summary report, which draws on responses from students and recent graduates across 21 Malaysian universities and employers. The targeted surveys provide insights into graduate expectations and employer perspectives but are not nationally representative.

The responses offer a window into workforce issues addressed by the Thirteenth Malaysia Plan, 2026–2030 (RMK13). The Plan calls for higher education programmes to align more closely with industry needs and for active industry involvement in talent development. It targets average labour productivity growth of 3.6% a year over 2026–2030.

The report was presented to Economy Minister YB Akmal Nasrullah Mohd Nasir at RIYI 2026's closing event at Monash University Malaysia. The event included a town hall titled 'Advancing Malaysia's ESG-Ready Built Environment: Connecting Government, Youth, Universities and Industry under RMK13.'

The programme brought together 50 students from 15 collaborating universities, alongside students from six other universities, with senior industry leaders for practical exposure to workplace expectations, career development, leadership and the skills required in a technology-driven economy.



RMK13 also proposes a mandatory paid internship scheme and more demand-driven learning through collaboration between public universities and the private sector. RIYI's mentorship offers students another form of early industry exposure: they can hear from senior professionals, receive feedback on their career plans and better understand workplace expectations.

RIYI's focus comes as young Malaysians face challenges in transitioning into employment. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), the unemployment rate among Malaysians aged 15 to 24 stood at 10.2% in June 2026, compared with the national rate of 3.0%.

REHDA Institute Chairman Dato' Jeffrey Ng Tiong Lip said closer university-industry collaboration is needed to give students earlier exposure to workplace realities.

"A university qualification provides an important foundation, but young people also need to understand how workplaces operate, how decisions are made and what employers expect from them.

"This is where RIYI plays an important role in bringing students closer to industry through direct engagement and mentorship, while helping them develop the judgement, resilience, communication and adaptability needed to build sustainable careers," he said.

Ng added that engagement with industry leaders gives students access to workplace lessons that cannot be gained purely from textbooks, helping them understand what it takes to progress from fresh graduates to future leaders.

The RIYI report also highlighted AI's impact on entry-level employment. Although 76.4% of student respondents reported using AI tools regularly, 50.0% of employers surveyed expected AI to reduce the number of entry-level roles they hire for over the next three years.

The findings point to a need for graduates to develop practical judgement, problem-solving and adaptability alongside digital skills. RMK13 places AI and digitalisation at the centre of Malaysia's economic transition and calls for collaboration among the public sector, industry and academia to equip talent with advanced technology skills.

The surveys also identified common ground on career development. Some 79.4% of employers were willing to provide structured, quality training and a clear career path in exchange for a retention commitment, while 67.6% of students would accept such an arrangement outright.

Pay transparency and talent retention emerged as further areas of concern. Among respondents, 82.4% of students and 58.3% of employers supported compulsory salary-range disclosure in job advertisements, while 57.1% of students said they were likely or very likely to work outside Malaysia within five years.

The wage and retention findings also speak to RMK13's labour market agenda. The Plan aims to raise the share of compensation of employees in GDP to 40% by 2030 and outlines measures to determine graduate starting salaries and implement the Progressive Wage Policy. The RIYI survey adds student and employer views on salary disclosure and career progression to that wider discussion.

For Malaysia's property and built environment workforce, RMK13 envisages wider use of the Industrialised Building System (IBS) and Building Information Modelling (BIM), particularly in affordable housing, and encourages developers to seek Green Building Index certification. These priorities point to demand for professionals who can apply technology and sustainability principles to projects. RIYI brings young people into direct contact with the industry that will put those priorities into practice.

The final RIYI session, themed "Climbing the Career Ladder in the AI Era," explored AI's impact on junior roles, productivity, decision-making and the capabilities expected of future leaders.

Participants attended AI-Augmented Judgment and Strategic Value and Leadership Influence and Stakeholder Management clinics before presenting their Three-Year Career Mastery Blueprints for feedback from industry mentors.

The programme concluded with a negotiation and influence masterclass covering workplace communication, deadlines, career progression, salary discussions and managing professional expectations.

RIYI 2026 brought together students from more than 21 universities across Malaysia, representing a diverse cross-section of the country's higher education institutions. Students represented a diverse range of universities across Malaysia, including Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia (UPTM), Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology (TAR UMT), INTI International College, HELP University, UCSI University, University of Wollongong Malaysia (UOW Malaysia), Taylor's University, Monash University Malaysia, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), Sunway University, Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM), Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM).

REHDA Institute aims to develop RIYI into a longer-term platform connecting universities, employers and young talent while contributing industry perspectives to Malaysia's graduate employability and future workforce development.