



## **Turning Malaysia's failure in education into great success**

Education has always been a very controversial issue in Malaysia. This is because the education system has an enormous impact on the nation's cultural evolution, sustenance of the nation's labour pool and the peoples' critical thinking skills. It is also a major influence on national unity.

Malaysia's higher educational institutions should be on a par with Hong Kong and Singapore, given the similar colonial heritage.

However, according to Times Higher Education 2021 Asia University Rankings, Singapore's National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technical University are ranked 3rd and 5th respectively, while the University of Hong Kong is ranked 4th, Chinese University of Hong Kong 7th, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology 8th, and City University of Hong Kong 19th. Malaysia's top university in the rankings is Universiti Malaya at 49th.

There are a number of factors that will pose challenges to higher education.

Malaysia's birthrate of 1.98 is below the population replacement rate of 2.1. This is well below the world average of 2.4. This means that Malaysia's stock of university places will lead to surplus capacity over the next generation. The sudden loss of international students at private universities at the beginning of the Covid-19 restrictions showed how devastating this can be to the industry. Some private universities have been forced to close down over the last two years.

This coming surplus in capacity, unless met with an influx of foreign students, will require a rationalisation within the public university system. This will mean fewer and/or smaller public universities in Malaysia within the next decade.

Similarly, Malaysia's high graduate unemployment – 202,400 in 2020, representing 4.4% of 5.36 million graduates in 2020 – points to some mismatch in what courses are offered in universities and what is required within the marketplace. This requires an agile reappraisal of what courses are run by universities over the next decade.

These basic structural issues are supplemented with a number of systemic issues.

Industries have long complained about the poor command of English and soft skills by local graduates. Others complain about poor critical thinking and problem-solving skills. From the student side, public

universities are experiencing high dropout rates, while pass standards are kept low as a perceived university management solution. Graduate students are having difficulty with PTPTN student loans, indicating issues with the funding system.

Malaysian public university staff mixes are far from representative of the national ethnic structure, where a number of public universities prefer to employ foreign academics over non-Malay academics. UiTM accepts Malay and foreign students but shuts out local non-Malay students. This is very much counter to the philosophy that students need to learn from other cultures to understand each other. In fact, the opposite is occurring.

There is also wide criticism of the lack of university autonomy and a high-handed ministry of higher education. Public universities have the prime mission of enhancing labour utility for industry needs, where students become industrial fodder, rather than nurturing people to become the best they can be.

Restrictions on student political activities is preventing these institutions nurturing Malaysia's leaders of tomorrow.

Public universities have also been criticised for wasteful spending, faculty and chancellery politics, often leading to political appointees, and nepotism. University research has led to intellectual property registrations with little or no commercial utility.

This is not to say there aren't successes within Malaysian public universities. There are some pockets within the system that have world-class recognition and operate with excellence. However, there is more mediocrity than excellence within the Malaysian higher education system today.

Thus, in a post Covid-19 pandemic environment, where the world will once again reopen, and the economy requires new drivers, higher education should have an important role to play. It's now time for us to reimagine what the Malaysian higher education system should be.

The first issue involves preparing young people to enter university. This is a primary and secondary education responsibility. Malaysia must head towards multilingual education, where all students should be able to speak at least two languages fluently upon completion of secondary school. There are very good models of multilingual education systems, such as that of Switzerland, that can be learnt from.

The development of soft skills and critical thinking must also be focused upon. There must be a return to classical education to primary and secondary schools. This needs to be followed up in higher education. The set of compulsory subjects which include courses like Islam and Asian civilisation need to be dropped to provide more class and study time in the disciplinary work involved in the respective courses. Universities should not be indoctrination mills.

Leadership must be nurtured. Now that the voting age is 18, students have a constitutional right to participate in politics, and should be encouraged to while at university. Bans on political activity within university campuses should be immediately lifted. Both political and apolitical club activity on campuses will assist in developing argument articulation and become a good incubator for future leaders.

Malaysian higher education institutions must be decoupled from the ministry of higher education, which formally directs institutions in policy and who they employ. These decisions must go to the institutions themselves. University boards must have student and local citizen representatives. The employment of academic and administrative staff should be based on meritocracy and represent the demographics of general society.

Funding should be provided to institutions on programme-based budget criteria in order to make these organisations run much leaner and more efficiently. Universities should make use of short and other postgraduate courses to raise faculty funds. Research with industry should be encouraged where university-industry consortiums bid for research funds.

The future of Malaysian higher education will heavily involve vocational and community colleges. These should become the education and skill support of Malaysia's SME sector. According to the **Malaysian Department of Statistics**, SMEs contribute 38.2% to national GDP, 13.6% of export revenue, and employ 48% of Malaysia's workforce. This is the sector set to play a major role in national recovery and needs educational support.

Not only will community colleges play a major role in educating the youth by equipping them with knowledge skills, accrediting them to trades, and developing new trades, they also act as a place where those in mid-career can gain new sets of skills with which they can re-enter the workforce or set up their own SMEs.

Vocational education will be critical for national recovery and nurturing innovation at the SME level. As the scope of SME-based activities are wide, the private sector must jump in to assist in developing this revamped vocational sector. Qualification regulations must be changed where those with trade-based experience can teach part-time under supervision as practical instructors.

Changing the emphasis from university to vocational education could be a real game changer in national economic revival. The concept can be introduced into community centres all around the country, where lifelong skill development is encouraged. In this way rural and urban kampongs can be redeveloped into value-based business communities that develop vibrant local economies. This is very much the sustainable-circular economy highlighted within the 12th Malaysian Plan.

Such changes will require massive political will. It will require a completely different corporate culture within the ministry of higher education. These changes will assist Malaysian education realign to the needs of tomorrow's society. This is also an imperative strategy if Malaysia wants to lessen the need for foreign workers in the country.

The post-Covid-19 economic boom will require skills rather than classroom-based qualifications. This may require a generation to achieve, but the reimagining must occur now. This could turn Malaysia's failure in education into a great success.

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