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Making Malaysian graduates more employable a reality

by [danial rahman](#)



A file pic of Universiti Putra Malaysia's (UPM) Faculty of Agriculture building. UPM will be introducing the 2u2i programme for Bachelors of Plantation Studies students.

DO we really go to university for the knowledge?

A friend recently remarked: "Parents wouldn't send their children to university unless it came with the belief that their children could one day get a job, earn a living, and take care of themselves. One which guarantees employment will be the most sought after".

I think it's a fair comment.

I'm sure "love for knowledge" is somewhere on the why-I-want-to-enter-university list, but equally prominent on the opposite list is "student debt" and "examinations".

In order for universities to remain relevant and attractive, the ability of their students to get employment upon graduation is certainly an important consideration.

So, how's Malaysia doing?

In 2015, of 227,421 graduates leaving university (both public and private), polytechnics and community colleges, 75.1% were able to find employment within six months of completing their studies. The graduate employability (GE) numbers increased to 76.1% as of May 2016. In our community colleges, the GE rate was a whopping 94% (signalling a big demand for skilled workers).

In comparison, according to the Britains's Higher Education Career Service Unit, in 2015, of 267,735 British domiciled-students surveyed, 71.2% were employed and 6.3% were unemployed. Though the numbers and methodologies vary, the worldwide average is about 75%.

In short, Malaysia isn't doing too bad.

Nationally, Malaysia's unemployment rate is at about 3.5% of the total workforce and this is deemed as "functionally full employment".

Though I'm a glass half full type of person, the fact remains that about 50,000 graduates are unemployed yearly or take more than six months from graduation to find jobs. According to the Department of Statistics, about 160,000 Malaysians who have a tertiary education are unemployed (though reasons vary and the age range covers the entire labour force).

At the same time, even those who are able to find employment want better quality employment opportunities. It also goes without saying that a better quality of graduates means better job opportunities, financial security, social mobility and overall societal peace and prosperity.

Basically, a lot is expected of our higher education system to improve GE.

So, what is our Higher Education Ministry doing? The short answer: Many things.

Having launched the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) aka the HE Blueprint in April 2015, the Ministry has stepped up existing efforts and embarked on various initiatives to enhance students' employability prospects.

A VALUE-ADD TO ASSESSING STUDENTS

One of the initiatives is the introduction of the Integrated Cumulative Grade Point Average (iCGPA) programme. The iCGPA is a value-add to the traditional CGPA, whereby students are not just assessed based on their knowledge, but also across seven other indicators such as communication and entrepreneurial traits, problem solving abilities and ethics.

iCGPA aims to provide students and universities additional information about their strengths and weaknesses so that they may improve themselves. This means university curriculum must be more robust and comprehensive.

Currently, five public universities have piloted the iCGPA with positive feedback from the students. In September 2016, more public universities are expected to begin implementing it

“2u2i”

Secondly, beginning September 2016, the Ministry will introduce the 2u2i programme. This refers to students spending two years in university and two years in the industry and is a work-based learning programme.

The traditional practice in universities is for students to go for “industrial training” but these only last for short periods of time. 2u2i enables a more immersive experience for selected programmes.

For example, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) will be introducing 2u2i in its Bachelors of Plantation Studies programme. Here, students will spend the first two years in UPM, learning the theory and basics of plantation. Then, in their third and fourth years, they will be based in the industry.

Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) on the other hand will introduce 2u2i for its entrepreneurship programme. The first two years will be in the university, the third year in industry, while in the fourth year, students will incorporate their own business start-ups and will run it with the guidance of their university professors.

INDUSTRY-GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION

Industries play a key role in shaping our higher education sector. Industries provide key insights into the current and future demands of the market force and helps ensure curriculum-relevance.

Taking this a step further, in 2015 the Ministry introduced the CEO @ Faculty Programme. The programme brings top industry CEOs into public universities, where they give lectures and provide advice to our universities.

To date, top CEOs such as Tan Sri Tony Fernandes of AirAsia, Tan Sri Azman Mokhtar of Khazanah, Lee Sang Hyung of Samsung and Anna Braun from BBraun and many more have delivered lectures and shared their experiences with our university students.

Beginning 2016, in view of the resounding feedback for the CEO @ Faculty Programme, up to 60 CEOs will be involved, this time including top government officials, such as the Chief Secretary to the Government, Inspector-General of Police and the Chief Secretary of the Treasury.

IMPROVING ENGLISH

In 2015, the Malaysia University English Test (MUET) recorded a 27.8% rise in results. More students were obtaining higher bands. For instance, 11,128 students obtained a Band 4 (out of 6) in 2015, compared to only 5,200 in 2014.

The MUET results are indicative of improving English proficiency among our students.

So, what spurred this? One of the reasons could be that English was made a compulsory pass in SPM. Another is that the Band entry requirement for university was raised. The Malaysian Government clearly sent the signal that English needed to be taken seriously.

English improvement efforts continue. At the school level, the Education Ministry has introduced LINUS 2.0 (a literacy and numeracy tracking programme), the Dual Language Programme, and various English enhancement initiatives. As for higher education, aside from the higher MUET entry-requirement, most universities currently teach and conduct research in English and have compulsory English classes.

ONLINE LEARNING

In September 2014, the Ministry launched the Malaysia MOOCs initiative. MOOCs, which stands for Massive Open Online Courses, is about bringing the teaching and learning experience online, similar to Coursera, EdEx and Khan Academy.

Want to learn highway engineering? How about data structures and algorithms? Or maybe just English in the media? Now, you can do this all online and for free thanks to Malaysia MOOCs.

Malaysia is the first country in the world to have a national level MOOCs initiative.

The Ministry recognises that online learning will play an important part in the future of higher education. It not only allows students access to information anytime, any place, anywhere, but will also help save costs associated with on-campus activities.

Currently, the MOOCs Malaysia platform is hosted at OpenLearning.com and has 63 courses on offer with more than 148,917 students currently taking or having taken courses there.

In conclusion, as we work towards enhancing our students' graduate employability and the higher education experience, there are many success stories to highlight as well. My article last week explained some of these success stories.

Suffice to say, we have our challenges, we have our efforts to improve GE, and we have our success stories.

Malaysia's higher education comes in a complete package with its positives and negatives. What's important is to be aware of everything that's happening and work towards nurturing the best future leaders for the nation and the world.

> The views expressed are entirely the writer's own.

