

Regional Research Paper

**Education Reform in Malaysia: An
Overview and Sustainability towards a
Developed Nation**

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February, 2017

Parliamentary Institute of Cambodia



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Introduction

An education system is an important tool to create a greater nation. Many plans and policies have been established since independence to drive Malaysia to greater heights in the education sector. Malaysia's current arrangements do, to some extent, reflect unbalanced development in some sectors in education in respect of national development and a need for reforms to ensure equal and balanced access for all citizens, overcoming all barriers and obstacles to provide a quality education for the sake of the country's progress. Many plans and Blueprints have been drawn up especially in the education sector to steer the nation towards global competitiveness and the access it provides to quality knowledge development. The latest Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, which is a follow-up of an end of decade review and sub-set Blueprint from 2000 - 2015, was designed to transform the national agenda of the education system from pre-school to upper secondary level, drawing a clear and in-depth path for the comprehensive development of the nation in respect of education. These Blueprints have transformed the national agenda of the education system towards building Malaysia's social and economic capital to sustain the country's economic growth. As a result, the quality of Malaysia's education is catching up with international standards of education and has contributed to regional and international development.

The Government has been committed to promoting the Prime Minister's vision to improve Malaysia's global competitiveness. He has opened up many economic sub-sectors to competition. Under his New Economic Model (NEM), he is striving to promote innovation and creativity, to enhance public-private sector cooperation, to develop talent and human capital and to mould new mindsets, among other transformational measures.¹

The focus of this research is on identifying some of the loopholes in plans for education, especially regarding the holistic approach to the curriculum, as well as infrastructure development and government commitments which could hamper the performance of the education sector and consequently the country's competitiveness and its aspirations towards achieving the status of a developed nation by 2020. Identifying the exact loopholes or weaknesses within the comprehensive coverage of the national agenda on education will identify a clear path towards a quality and educated nation in the near future. This paper addresses two research questions:

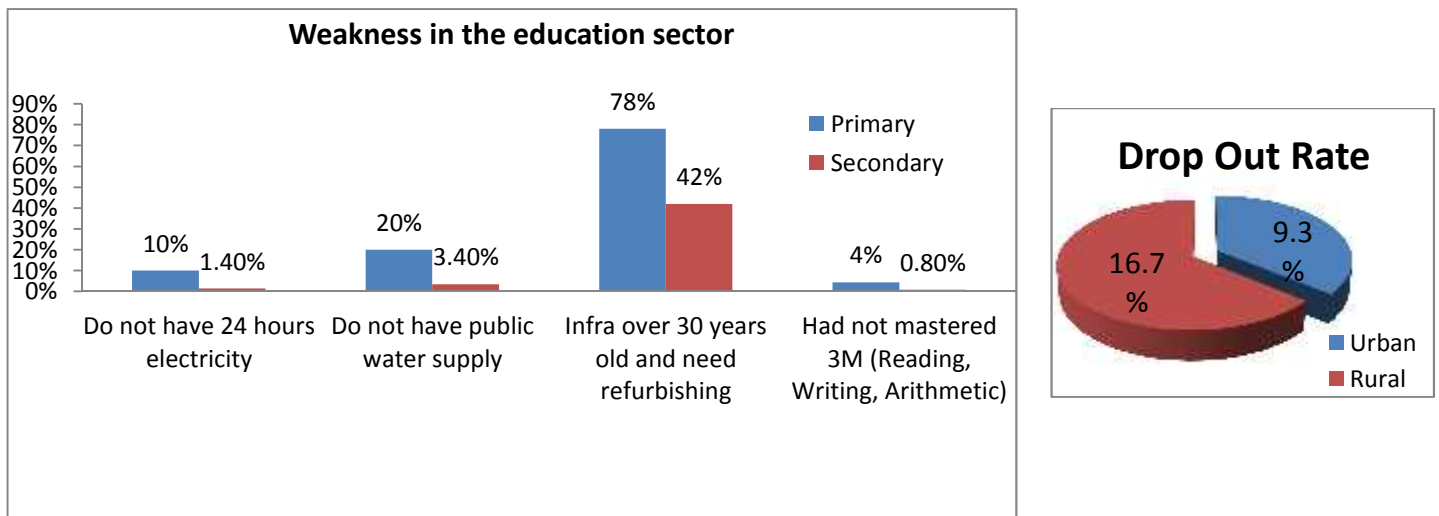
- To what extent does the current policy of education and reforms ensure equal opportunity and access and improve the quality of education catering for the needs of a developing nation?
- What further actions in policy implementation are needed to support the Blueprint of the National Agenda on Education to meet the needs for sustaining national development?

Methodologies comprise a compilation and analysis of secondary data and indicators that reveal the current standing and future benchmarks to meet in the development of education in Malaysia.

National Agenda on Education

The National Agenda on Education started as early as 1956 with what was called the Razak Report, and this was followed by the End Decade Review dated 2000-2015. The first Blueprint was launched for the period covering 2006-2010 during which many set-backs and obstacles were recorded which needed to be addressed. In 2012 a new master Blueprint, dated 2013-2025, was released that covers all development issues for education, comprehensively and holistically, with enhancements that reflect the outcomes and results of policies from the former road map guiding Malaysia’s education journey. These Blueprints have focused on a set of goals that have concentrated on a few important issues such as the establishment of a National Pre-School Curriculum, and the setting up of 100 new classes for students with special needs, increasing the percentage of single-session schools to 90 percent for primary schools and 70 percent for secondary schools, and decreasing class sizes from 31 to 30 students in primary schools and from 32 to 30 in secondary schools by the year 2010².

The Blueprint also provided statistics concerning weaknesses in education. For example, it states that 4.4 percent of primary students and 0.8 percent of secondary students had not mastered the **3Ms (reading, writing and arithmetic)**. The drop-out rate for secondary schools was given as 9.3 percent in urban areas and 16.7 percent in rural areas.³ It also reveals that 10 percent of primary schools and 1.4 percent of secondary schools did not have a 24-hour electricity supply, 20 percent and 3.4 percent, respectively, did not have a public water supply, and 78 percent and 42 percent were over 30 years old and required refurbishing.



Source: MOE 2012. Preliminary Report: Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025. Malaysia

Blueprint with “National Ownership”

In recent years, the Malaysian education system has come under increased public scrutiny and debate as parents’ expectations have risen and employers have voiced their concerns regarding the system’s ability to adequately prepare young Malaysians for the challenges of the 21st century. Given the nature of the education system, it will take several years for fundamental changes to be felt. This makes the need for ambitious actions now both important and urgent.

Due to the inconsistency of structured development towards a developed nation status in education via former policies and Blueprints, a new set of follow-up or sub-set Blueprints has been introduced to further the continuous enhancement of the national agenda in terms of the education system in Malaysia: a follow-up plan that is synchronized with the former Blueprint - the National Education Blueprint 2013 to 2025 - was released.

This development process of Blueprint for 2013-2025 was comprehensive and holistic, and was designed to lead to a sense of “*National Ownership.*” Why is that so? Below is the table of consultations that took place prior to the development and presentation of the National Blueprint with records of the substantial participation of stakeholders from all walks of life, which created this sense of ownership.



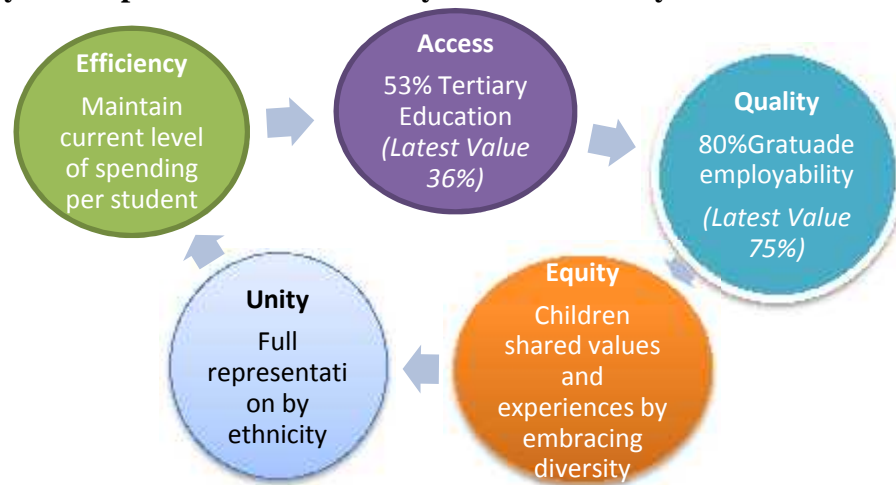
12 Malaysian Review Panels	3000 articles and Blogs post
4 International Review Panels	200 Memorandums
6 Public Universities	20+ Independently organized seminars and discussions
9 Education Labs	9 Open days
Focus Groups, Workshops, Research	National Dialogue Town halls, Open Days, Roundtables, Surveys
750 Principals	8000 Teachers
15,000 Teachers	2000 Parents Teachers’ Associations
22,000 Students	7000 members of the public
300 State and District Education Officers	

The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 was launched in 2013 with the aim of transforming the national agenda of the education system from pre-school to upper secondary level, drawing a clear and in-depth path for the comprehensive development of the nation in terms of education. This ensures that the education agenda continues to provide strategic direction for nation building, for developing human capital, for strengthening the national schools, bridging the education gap, elevating the teaching profession, and accelerating excellence of educational institutions: these elements had already been highlighted in the Education Development Master Plan 2006 to 2010. Current efforts to strengthen the Malaysian education system - so that it can further address the needs of all the population - and to prepare the nation to perform at an internationally recognized level are elaborated in the new Blueprint 2013-2025⁴ and are highlighted in Box 1.

Since 2013, Malaysia has experienced part of 11 shifts in education reform such as: providing equal access to quality education of an international standard; ensuring every child is proficient in dual languages; developing Malaysians who are values-driven; transforming teaching into the profession of choice; leveraging ICT; and empowering state and district education department to customize solutions based on needs. These aspirations were charted in three current and future waves. The First Wave was implemented between 2013-2015 to increase teacher's quality and improve student literacy. The mandate of the Second Wave of 2016-2020 is to focus on accelerating the improvement of the education delivery system.

The Third Wave, 2021-2025, will be geared towards increasing operational flexibility to cultivate a peer-led culture of professional excellence. At the same time, the government has reviewed higher education development plans with an enhanced version of higher education policy, while dealing with the setbacks recorded, to cater for the needs of a developed nation, and included these recommendations in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 which was released in April 2015. This Blueprint provides a comprehensive policy direction for education reforms at all levels to provide for the needs of the nation as well as to increase the role and quality of the country's education provision to achieve international recognition. The achievement of national goals to increase access to quality education for all Malaysians will ensure learning outcomes at the higher education level.

Box 1: Five system aspirations for the Malaysian education system



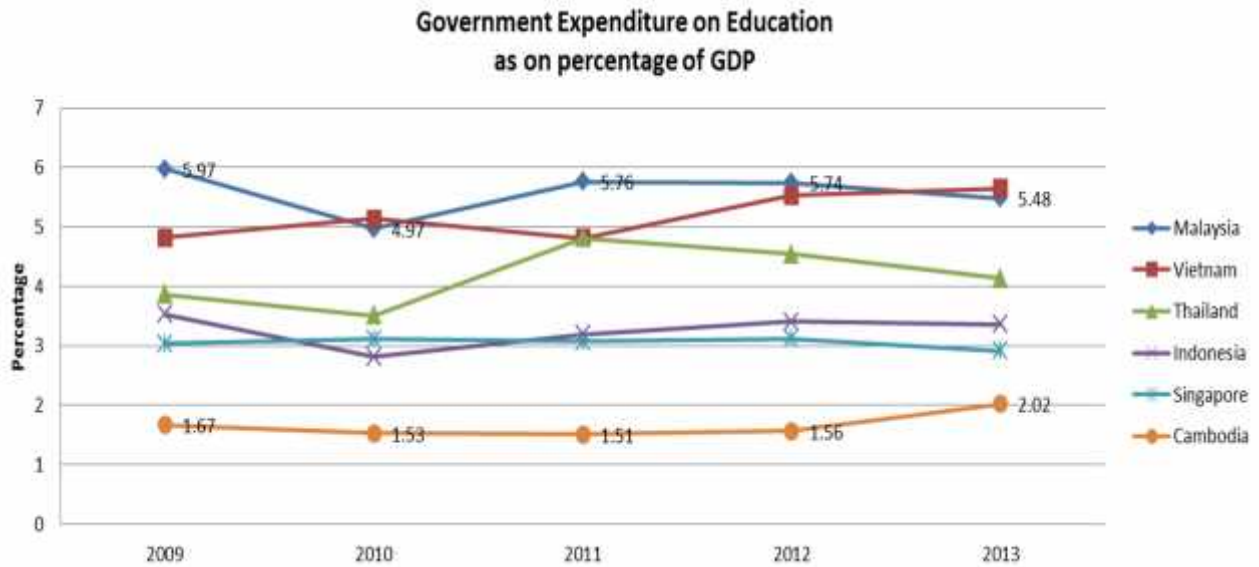
Government Commitment to Sustainable Development in the Education Sector

The government has shown a strong commitment to support the implementation of this education agenda through its financial commitment to the education sector. These National Level Policies would have little meaning if policies and strategies were not properly implemented and monitored through regular evaluations.

A crucial step forward in a mechanism of checks-and-balances was taken via the establishment of the Performance and Delivery Unit (PADU) in 2012, operating directly under the Department of the Prime Minister. This department is responsible for delivering and monitoring all initiatives drawn up in the National Education Blueprint 2013-2025.

Since the year of independence in 1957, over a period of 59 years, the Malaysian Government has always been committed to developing the education sector. Since 1980, Federal Government spending on primary and secondary education, as per GDP, was the highest in East Asia. By the Year 2011, the amount spent - at 3.8 percent of GDP or 16 percent of total government spending - was on a par with top performing systems in countries such as Singapore, Japan and Korea: in 2012 a sum of RM 36 billion, which was 16 percent of the total budget, was allocated to the Ministry of Education (MoE) by the Malaysian government. This reflects the very real commitment of the government to prioritize national education for the future of the nation.⁵

The result has been seen as sustained development and an improvement in access to a fair and equal education system, with close to universal enrolment at the primary and secondary level. Shifting the curriculum away from rigid learning and closing the gap between rural and urban schools are key aims of ongoing education reforms, which also envisage more private sector involvement. The graph below compares the allocation of government spending on educational sectors in Malaysia and five other Asian countries.

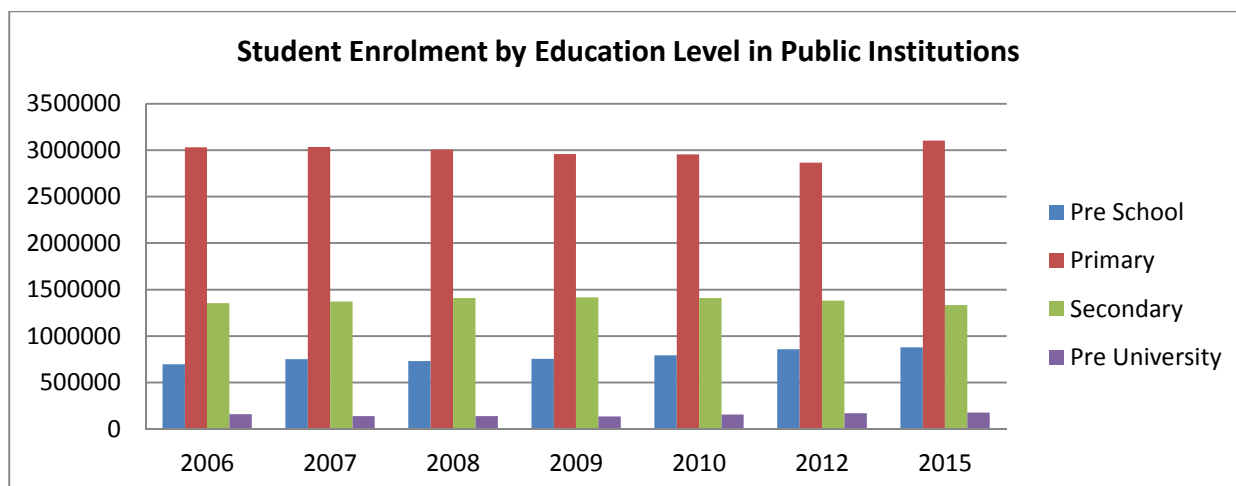


*All rates conversion to USD was done in November 2016 (WORLD BANK DATA)

Education Achievement

The education journey in Malaysia starts at the pre-education level, which spans the ages 4 to 6 years and is not compulsory in the Malaysian system. Primary education is available for children aged from 7 to 12, and goes from standard 1 to standard 6.

Public secondary education follows from the primary level and starts from the age of 13 up to 17 (Form 1 to Form 5). After successfully completing secondary education students can choose to continue to pre-university education, which is either Form 6 or Matriculation or Diploma Level. Higher education is available for students who qualify to continue their education to either college (which concentrates on vocational and foundation programs) or university (either a public or private entity). . The chart below presents enrolment figures for basic pre-school to pre-university.



Source : World Bank data

The higher percentages in primary enrolment compared with those recorded for pre-school respond to the fact that the Education Act 1996 (Act 550) was amended under the Education (Compulsory Education) Regulations 2002, which came into effect in 2003, to make primary education compulsory. Since 2012 the Government has adopted the policy of free education and the above graph underlines its success.

Enforcing Compulsory Primary Education

Malaysia has a legal framework for compulsory education as outlined in the Education Act 550. All parents must register their children at the nearest school in their community before the child reaches the age of 6 and that child must remain in primary school for 6 years. Non adherence to this Act entails the punishment of a fine not exceeding FIVE THOUSAND RINGGIT or IMPRISONMENT for a term not longer than 6 months, or both. As a result of this policy the primary school completion rate has been close to 100 percent over the whole period.⁶

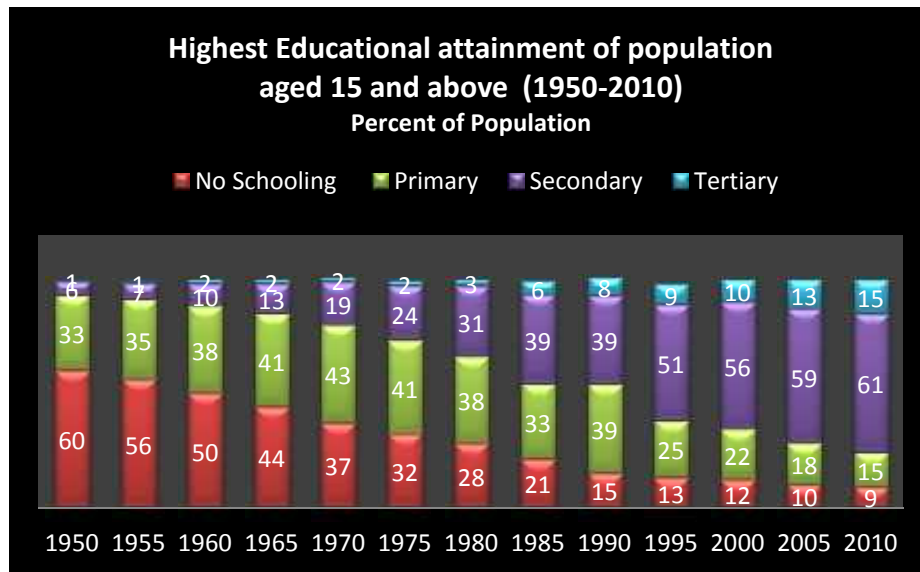
Apart from some amendments and policy reforms, together with the initiatives of the ruling government, many significant achievements have been recorded. Adherence to the Blueprint has enabled the nation to achieve competitive results among peer countries.

Remarkable progress has been recorded since independence in 1957, when more than half of the population had no formal education, and only 6 percent were able to reach secondary level education. Just five and half decades later the education sector has been transformed beyond recognition.

By the year 2011, the country had achieved near universal enrolment at 94 percent at primary level, while the percentage of children dropping out of primary school had been significantly reduced from 3 percent in 1989 to 0.2 percent in 2011. Enrolment level at lower secondary had

also risen to 87 percent and, by the same year, upper secondary had recorded the greatest improvement over the same period - from 45 percent to 78 percent.

Within the same timeframe, youth literacy has risen from 88 percent to near universal literacy of 99 percent, while adult literacy has increased even more dramatically from less than 70 percent to more than 92 percent.⁷



Source : World Bank data

The best outcomes in terms of student achievements come from a high quality of teaching. While many teachers are excellent, a research study found that only 50 percent of lessons were being delivered in an effective manner. Insufficient engagement with students and a passive mode of content delivery was resulting in only a surface-level understanding of lesson content instead of developing higher-order thinking skills.⁸

The quality of an education system encompasses multiple dimensions. National examinations indicate that students' performance has been gradually improving, but it is also imperative that Malaysia matches its benchmarks to international standards. The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2007 assessment indicated that that relatively few Malaysian students were excelling: only about 3 percent were performing at the highest benchmark levels, such as complex problem solving. In comparison, more than 30 percent of students in Singapore achieved scores at the advanced level in mathematics and science. These results have driven the government to look further into the curriculum to address the need for reforms in the education sector.

Curriculum Improvement

The curriculum focuses on the development of a child holistically, with intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical dimensions. The author of Integrating Transversal Competency in Education policy and practice - Dr. Sheela Nair Gopal Nair- has summarized the findings that some teachers and school heads perceive values and skills as distinct elements, and that a serious commitment should be made to teach these separately, in addition to the lessons that are taught in the class room.⁹

Some recommendations have been put forward in terms of developing reading, writing and arithmetic ability in the restructuring of a new curriculum to address the lack of basic literacy among students from low income families who are, for many reasons, deprived of a pre-school education. Research has supported the claim that the return on investment made in pre-school and primary education is greater than the return of investment in higher education.¹⁰ The school curriculum should also focus on a holistic learning approach that is relevant to the current world, and includes the skills of problem solving and higher-order thinking capacity among students and teachers.

Malaysia has made a significant effort to enhance quality education as part of its objective to transform into a developed nation by 2020. Consequently, Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and communication skills, as well as the ability to be a good team player, are the ultimate goals for human resource development as the country moves through the 21st century.

The implementation of the National Pre-school Curriculum, which was developed in 2010, focused on nurturing students to reach their full potential in all aspects of development such as mastering basic skills and adopting a positive attitude.

The new curriculum at the primary level was replaced with a platform for creating HOTS that emphasizes innovation in areas of curriculum content, organization and classroom approaches. It is also focused on the modular approach and is tailored to meet present and future challenges in Malaysia's journey towards becoming a developed nation.

A graduate with a balance of knowledge and morals will be well prepared for employment in today's global economy. Students will also have better choices through new models of learning such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), greater competition across higher learning institutions (HLIs), and better guidance on educational pathways and career options.

These changes have been described as 'student-centered', and assessments are based on the attainment of competencies rather than on academic achievement. Other major initiatives have resulted in comprehensive development in areas of education infrastructure, learning environments and better qualified teachers to achieve holistic coverage in educational development in Malaysia.

Such a comprehensive and holistic master plan guarantees a well-balance education and equal opportunities for all children so that they enjoy the right to a quality education that will equip them to face the next millennium.

Development of Infrastructure

The MoE ensures that all schools provide an environment for students that are conducive to learning. It has adopted a common standard for school infrastructure, while providing sufficient flexibility so that facilities can be tailored to local needs. Measures have been introduced to:¹¹

Ensure that all schools have a minimum level of acceptable infrastructure, adapted to individual school needs in a cost-effective manner;

Undertake immediate maintenance in respect of all schools in critical need of repairs; and

Upgrade facilities and equipment across all schools to support evolving learning requirements of students over time.

SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

Basic 2013 - 2015	Baseline 2016 - 2020	Future 2021 - 2025
For all schools to at least achieve the bare essentials required for a safe, hygienic environment conducive to teaching and learning	To provide the minimum level of facilities to enable curriculum and pedagogical delivery	To create an exciting environment for 21 st century learning
<i>Requirements for further tailoring based on school type (eg. Urban, Rural, SKM (Malaysian skill certificate), Schools with hostels)</i>		

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Physical structure (roof, walls, wiring, painting) Classrooms that meets ratio of 15-20 sq. ft. per student *Toilet that meets ratio of 1 toilet bowl per 50 students *12 hours electricity, except for schools with hostel facilities which require 24 hours supply *Treated water that is safe to drink *1 table and chair per student *1 workspace for teacher *1 whiteboard or blackboard per classroom *At least 1 ICT device for every 20 students in all schools *Internet connectivity at a minimum speed of 2Mbps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *1 sports facility *24-hour Internet access at speeds of at least 4-10 Mbps *At least one IT device for every 10 students in all schools *1 library/resource center *Accessibility features for the disabled, such as ramps and toilets *Designated places for Islamic education activities *Living skills workshop *Hostel for rural school students who travel more than 1 hour to school daily 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Internet connectivity: at least 10 Mbps for all school *1 IT device per student at secondary school level *At least IT video conferencing facility to support distance learning *At least IT advanced sports facility per state *Further changes to school design may be required based on requirements of new curriculum (e.g. specialist teaching room based on student grade and performance)
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Source: Guidelines and Rules on Development Planning by the Committee of Standards; Economic Planning Unit Prime Minister's Office

Gender Parity

In their study, Goolamally and Ahmad (2010) found that almost half of 275 university students surveyed attributed the under-performance of boys to a lack of male teachers in school to act as role models. Existing gender stereotypes in classrooms, which seem to be more female- than male-orientated, also mean that the boys can be mistreated and develop negative relationships in schools.¹²

Since Malaysia is already on track to achieve gender parity in both secondary and primary education, many reforms and initiatives have been directed towards changing typical stereotypes within the education system. Encouraging more women to choose traditionally male-orientated

fields of study such as engineering and technical studies, as well as raising awareness about gender parity in classroom teaching, have been addressed. Efforts to encourage boys to stay longer in school are also part of the efforts to close the gender gap. Strategies have also been development to:

- Offer female students technical- and engineering-based courses in upper secondary education electives as opposed to more traditionally female-oriented courses in home-economics, commerce, and entrepreneurship. At the lower secondary school level, female students are now being offered carpentry, wiring and electronics besides the traditional sewing and cooking classes.¹³
- Encourage female participation in sports and physical education.

Most importantly, a need has been recognized to encourage male students to opt for a teaching career to avoid the feminization of the teaching profession: this has been presented as one reason why boys are not performing as well as girls in schools. Among the reasons that are being identified for this is that children might relate better to teachers of the same gender. There are also initiatives to make the teaching profession more attractive in general.¹⁴

In view of this, the MoE is increasing its efforts to draw more men into the teaching profession. Special criteria for male teaching applicants have been drawn up to entice more to apply; however, female applicants still greatly outnumber males.

Challenges

Many factors have been identified that could hamper the development of the nation, especially in the sector of education, which, through a combination of curriculum and technology development, contributes so much towards the transformation of the new generation of students in developing nations. The challenges are mainly divided into three sectors namely, student outcomes, governance, and innovation.

Enrolment at the primary and lower secondary levels is nearly universal and recent gains in pre-primary education have been noteworthy.¹⁵ However, relatively few students continue on to complete post-secondary education, with just 37.2 percent of the relevant age group completing upper secondary (Form 6 or equivalent), and 15.3 percent of 25-29 year olds in 2012 holding a bachelor's degree or higher.

Spending on education is considered adequate by the World Bank and does not appear to be hindering improvements to the system. Expenditure on basic education is more than double that of other ASEAN countries; however, according to the results of the 2012 PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) testing, regionally, Malaysian students out-perform only their

Indonesian peers and lag behind lower income countries like Vietnam quite substantially. This is despite enrolment levels, infrastructure development, and curriculum enhancement which are equal to those of developed economies in the region.



Research conducted in 2011 by the Higher Education Leadership Academy found that among the 41 schools surveyed, 50 percent of the lessons delivered did not sufficiently engage students and relied on a passive lecture format employed primarily for assessment purposes instead of cultivating higher-order thinking skills.¹⁶

Reacting to the latest PISA results, the MoE has already embarked on a program to reform the education system into one that provides comprehensive and holistic education with the aim of delivering results where it matters.

The National Education Blueprint has already sparked a multitude of initiatives such as the Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS) program which is aimed at ensuring that all Malaysian children acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills after three years of mainstream primary education to pave the way to an education system that reflects the country's aspirations.

The MoE has specified an employability target rate of 75 percent. In 2013, feedback from industry about graduate employability found that 13 out of 20 public universities did not achieve this target. Many reasons have been put forward for this 'unemployability'. For instance, it has been argued that graduates do not have the right attitude, motivation, or the ability to think out-

of-the-box, and that they lack problem-solving skills and the ability to work either as a team or independently. Command of English was also cited as one of the weaknesses among graduates.¹⁷

The World Bank surmises that the key constraints to improving the quality of basic education relate to institutions, specifically pointing to a lack of autonomy, and shortcomings in teacher training and recruitment. By way of example, the World Bank describes Malaysia as having one of the most centralized education systems in the world, with over 65 percent of schools reporting that the selection of teachers for hiring takes place at the national level, compared to just over 5 percent in South Korea.¹⁸The story is much the same for budget allocations within schools, student assessment and choice of textbooks. This means that schools struggle to respond to local needs as policy is being dictated from the center.

Conclusion

The latest development plan in Malaysia has placed human capital at its core, setting ambitious objectives to improve professional training and education as the country works towards a broader vision to join the ranks of developed economies by 2020.

The government's strategic plan for enhancing quality education beyond 2020 has outlined measures and strategies that will continue to make Malaysia a Center of Excellence as explained above. Under the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, the education system will focus on: introducing the best practices of high performing education systems in order to cater to the demands of the future; and making structural adjustments across each phase of education to ensure students' output matches the desired quality and standard at all levels of the education sector.

Malaysia's ongoing commitment to education is evident in government investment in the education sector, which, according to the World Bank, usually amounts to at least 20 percent of the annual budget for all levels of learning. The result has been sustained development and improvement in access to a fair and equal education, with close to universal enrolment at the primary and secondary levels. Shifting the curriculum away from rote learning and closing the gap between rural and urban schools are key aims of ongoing education reforms, which also envisage more private sector involvement. Significant efforts have been harnessed to address the lack of sufficient Infrastructure. Measures have been applied in stages whereby basic needs were the focus from 2013-2015, while baseline needs to improve facilities to provide for curriculum delivery took center stage for 2016-2020. Future developments - from 2021-2025 - will concentrate on creating exciting learning environments for the 21st century.

Malaysia is already on track to achieve gender parity in both secondary and primary education, and many reforms and initiatives have been directed towards changing typical stereotypes within the education system. Encouraging more women to choose traditionally male-orientated fields of

study such as engineering and technical studies, as well raising awareness about gender parity in classroom teaching, have been addressed. Efforts to encourage boys to stay longer in school are also part of the efforts to close the gender gaps.

The kind of impact that this transformation will have on Malaysia's development is expected to be positive, and the following results are forecasted:

As outlined above, the Malaysian Education Blueprint from pre-school to post-secondary school, and the transformation of higher education, will lead to benefits, rights, and corresponding responsibilities for every relevant stakeholder. A well-guided journey through the elements of the Blueprint will provide positive results.

Students will benefit from technology, experimental and higher quality programs and modules that offer more personalized and engaging learning experiences. A graduate with a balance of knowledge and morals will be well prepared for employment in today's global economy. Students will also have better choices through new models of learning such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), greater competition across higher learning institutions (HLIs), and better guidance on educational pathways and career options. They will also be supported by financial assistance that is commensurate with their needs so that lack of financial resources is no longer a barrier for any eligible students wishing to continue their studies. This Blueprint also allows them to re-enter the world of learning at any time in their life through formal, non-formal, and informal pathways, in order to satisfy their intellectual curiosity, and pursue ongoing professional development with leadership development programs. In return, students will be asked to respond to the investment being made in their future by fully embracing the opportunities to enable them to develop as well-rounded, entrepreneurial, and balanced individuals, upholding financial commitments such as loan repayments, and by showing gratitude for the opportunities they have been given by finding ways, big and small, to serve the community, nation, and world.

At the same time, the academic community will be seen to be reaching greater heights. Academicians will enjoy more attractive, differentiated career pathways and performance-based rewards that support specializations in teaching, research and institutional leadership, and allow practitioners and professionals more flexibility in participating in higher education and in the sharing of expertise. Enjoying greater decision-making rights in areas such as curriculum development, financial management and talent management, will enable them to support their institutions to move with greater agility and speed in responding to global and local trends. They will also benefit from closer integration with industry, as well as with local and international communities, through innovative partnership models on funding, teaching and learning, as well as research, development and commercialization.

The outcomes and developments discussed above indicate that many reforms have taken place to meet the needs for equal opportunity and access, to improve the quality of education and to

provide for the ever-growing requirements of a nation that aspires to be considered ‘developed’ by 2025. Malaysia is committed to compete with other nations and to be placed among the top three countries in the world in PISA rankings, in which it is currently placed in the fifties.

Many policies and guidelines have been holistically modified to correspond to the implementation of the Blueprint that also reflects the government’s commitments in nurturing the sustainable development of the education sector towards achieving national advancement.

These efforts have carved out a path to a brighter and a bolder future for all Malaysian children. This mandate might sound ambitious, but it is inspiring, and it is the responsibility of each and every Malaysian to work towards making this aspiration a reality for the future of the nation.

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