

COMMENT

Raising standards in basic education

LESS-THAN-COMPLIMENTARY COMPARISONS:

Our students are behind in maths, science and reading

MALAYSIA'S commitment to education has been recognised as enabling the country to progress socially, politically and economically at a far greater pace than her neighbours.

The phenomenal success of the national education system is rooted in Article 12 of the Federal Constitution that recognises the right of every Malaysian to have equal access to education regardless of socio-economic status and location of the child.

The National Key Result Areas (NKRA) for education now includes preschool, thus bringing 77 per cent of 5-year-olds into schools, bumping up further the total children in the school population.

Investment in education has been consistently high at 3.8 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), which is higher than the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average of 3.4 per cent, and twice as high compared with other Asean countries, including South Korea, Singapore, Japan and Hong Kong.

The Preliminary Education

Blueprint 2013-2025 also reckons that Malaysia spends US\$1,800 (RM5,431) per student annually, slightly higher than other countries with a similar GDP per capita. Heavy investments in education, for now, have yielded high returns in terms of human capital development.

Malaysians are known for being educated everywhere in the world, in every field, and well respected in their field of knowledge.

As countries move up the economic scale, the need for a knowledge-based economy to stay ahead of the pack is more imperative.

In view of the crucial role that education plays in the economic development of the country, poor showing in Science

and Mathematics of 15-year-old students in international tests, such as Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), is unacceptable.

This finding is reinforced in OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa), where 60 per cent of Malaysian students failed to meet the minimum proficiency level for Mathematics, Reading (44 per cent) and



A Fun Maths Carnival at SK Raja Muda (Integrasi) in Shah Alam last September. Students have to improve their knowledge and understanding of Mathematics and Science.

Science (43 per cent).

When calibrated against 74 other participating countries, it shows that other countries are three years ahead of Malaysian students in their knowledge and understanding of Mathematics, Science and Reading.

While education is more complex than simply meeting world standards, the worry for Malaysia's education system is in tackling the issue highlighted by the less-than-complimentary comparison made in the Education Ministry's preliminary report on the definition and the setting of standards of the national examination taken by all students at the end of Form Five.

The variance of locally defined standards and how we measure against international standards needs to be realigned to ensure that scores obtained in high-stakes examinations, such as the Sijil Pelajaran

Malaysia, are as close as possible to international standards.

Descriptions of competencies used in international assessment should provide an insightful source in determining the conceptual framework for teaching and learning, and in assessment indicators for an improved quality of basic education.

International standards, such as TIMSS and Pisa, are examples where globalisation in education is now part of the education landscape, even as criticisms have been levelled at the complications in, for example, sampling and curriculum design of the subjects in participating countries.

For Malaysia to be a strong player in the world, the approach to education needs to be developed with world education standards in mind. International assessments and standards are yardsticks by

which all Malaysian students will be judged for entry into higher education, whether in local institutions or overseas.

The globalising of education, although never clearly defined, has seen the decline in the importance of regional and cultural borders.

The implication of this is that education in one country is now inextricably linked to other countries.

Greater interconnectedness of education through extensive global networks of universities and institutions of learning is forcing countries to adopt internationally recognised standards in education to remain competitive.

Malaysia has had a good run in providing basic education to nearly all citizens as promised in the constitution. But that is in the past.

It now needs to ramp up the standards of basic education to a level where school leavers with Malaysian certificates of learning will once again be assured of entry into prestigious institutions of higher learning without having to rely on costly international examinations and certifications, and without succumbing to international education imperialism.

To push ahead, national basic education standards must be on a par or exceed international standards.

With excellent educated human capital, Malaysia will be in a stronger position as a competitive player on the world economic stage. That is the crux of the matter in the transformation of the national education system.



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