

## Decentralising Malaysia's education system

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The next stage in Malaysia's catching-up process requires that economic growth be knowledge-led and not just capital-led. The post-1970 New Economic Policy (NEP) produced a large middle-class through economic centralisation. But the decentralisation of decision-making is badly needed to enable knowledge-led growth to wrench Malaysia out of the middle-income trap and to spread the fruits of economic growth more equally. Reform of the education system, and not just economic policy and the financial system, is urgently needed.



The education system fails in imparting competence in basic skills such as reading, mathematics and science to the average student and promoting academic excellence in talented students. Malaysia's education system is unnaturally low in quality according to OECD cross-country surveys on the scores of primary and secondary school students in basic skills. In the 2012 OECD sample of 65 countries, Malaysia's rank for mathematics, reading and science were 52, 59 and 53, respectively. Malaysia's scores were comparable to those of Thailand (50, 48 and 49), Chile (51, 48 and 47) and Mexico (53, 51 and 55).

Government expenditure on education per capita in 2011 (measured in PPP-adjusted 2011 international dollars) was PPP\$1307 for Malaysia, PPP\$701 for Thailand, PPP\$860 for Chile and PPP\$832 for Mexico. This huge gap between what Malaysia spends and what Thailand, Chile and Mexico spend indicates some severe problems in Malaysia's education system.

There is a problem of accountability and competence of teachers in the Malaysian education system due to the absence of performance-based pay and the guarantee of lifelong employment. Then there is the problem of the school curriculum — imposed by the central government on all government-aided schools — being set at a low academic level, resulting in an

upward trend in the number of students receiving perfect scores in the annual national examinations.

Another issue is the state-set curriculum requiring many courses that cater to [political demands](#) <sup>[1]</sup>, meaning there is simply not enough time and resources to teach mathematics, reading and science well. For example, students in some schools are required to learn three languages, receive religious instruction and study many courses on Malaysian history and society. These are designed to promote acceptance of the Barisan Nasional-sanctioned narrative about the optimal type of social–economic–political arrangements such as Ketuanan Melayu (Malay supremacy) for Malaysia.

These politically-motivated courses promote recitation by students of state-set viewpoints rather than critical examination by students of these viewpoints. This politicisation of the school curriculum means that the overall tone in Malaysian schools is conformity to orthodoxy rather than creative thinking that produces knowledge-led growth.

The education system underwent numerous systemic reforms in the 60-plus years of Barisan Nasional rule. Every reform was a contentious affair and every reform failed to improve the performance of the average student. What usually went up after each systemic reform was the quantity of students in the education system but not the quality of the education.

Successful school reform requires acknowledgement that different parents have different objectives for their children's education. To respect the wishes of parents, Malaysia must diversify the curriculums of publicly-funded schools. This needed curriculum diversity can be achieved only with decentralisation in three areas.

First, all schools must share an academic core that is allocated enough time and resources to be taught well, and each school should be allowed choice on other subjects it offers in the remaining space. For example, the Ministry of Education will require a common core curriculum of the Malay language, mathematics, reading and science in all schools and each school, in consultation with the local community, will decide on the relative proportion of courses on subjects like Malaysian history, world history, religion and geography.

Second, the oversight of schools should be transferred to state governments. State governments can introduce incentive pay for teachers, allow a diversified range of public schools and conduct experiments on different pedagogical approaches.

Third, the funding of public education should also be decentralised. Every school age child should receive an education voucher from the government annually and the parents of the child should be able to redeem the voucher at the school with the curriculum that they think is best for their child.

Success in reforming the education system requires a reform package and not just a single reform measure. Decentralisation in these three areas is only one of the fundamental reforms that must be implemented together to raise the quality of education at public schools.

Other fundamental reforms include a pay and promotion structure that rewards good teaching and innovative management of schools, effective training of teachers, and expansion of well-run boarding schools for children from remote areas and nutritious meal programs for poor students. There also needs to an easing of the restrictions on the establishment and operations of privately-funded schools to enable them to be an easy benchmark to judge the performance of public schools and to widen the selection choice of students. This is especially true at the tertiary-level .

Crucial to reform of the education system (and [reform more broadly](#) <sup>[2]</sup>) will be reconsideration of the NEP. The NEP is incompatible with entrenching excellence into the socio-economic institutions of Malaysia. It cannot create critical masses of world-class talent for the key industries and sectors of the 21st century, mobilise the entire brain-power of Malaysia for knowledge creation, or establish Malaysia as a regional knowledge and innovation centre that attracts world-class talent to Malaysia. The centralisation-oriented NEP public policy framework of the 20th Century must be abandoned in order for Malaysia to escape the middle-income trap and reduce income inequality.

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[1] political demands:

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[2] reform more broadly:

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