Trends in Southeast Asia

QUALITY, EQUITY, AUTONOMY:
MALAYSIA'S EDUCATION REFORMS
EXAMINED

LEE HWOK AUN

ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK
INSTITUTE

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2019 no.13

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The author is wholly responsible for the views expressed in this book which do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher.

FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Quality, Equity, Autonomy: Malaysia's Education Reforms Examined

By Lee Hwok Aun

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Pakatan Harapan (PH) government promised education reforms before getting elected in 2018, and presently grapples with the complexities of making good on those pledges while seeking to negotiate continuity and change with regard to the previous administration's Malaysian Education Blueprint launched in 2013.

- This article situates the education reforms in the context of Malaysia's highly centralized administration, embedded practices and policy initiatives of recent years. Discussion focuses on three areas—quality, equity, autonomy—where PH has more distinctly differentiated itself from its predecessor.

  - On the quality of national schools, efforts to alleviate teachers' bureaucratic work load and enhance the schooling experience mark a positive start. However, transforming mindsets and practices will require more systemic changes, critical self-reflection, and sustained efforts on difficult matters, particularly in basic schooling and technical and vocational programmes.

  - On equity, the government's consistent attention to Bottom 40 (B40) households progressively allocates opportunity, and continual need to address ethnic concerns poses steep challenges. However, policy responses tend to unfold in an ad hoc manner, and the balancing of ethnic interests lacks clarity and coherence.

  - On autonomy, at the institutional level, legislative overhaul in higher education is in the works, while at the personal level,

academic freedom clearly thrives more under PH administration. Meaningful and effective reform will hinge on devolution of power away from central government, institutionalization of autonomy, and depoliticization of the system.

Quality, Equity, Autonomy: Malaysia's Education Reforms Examined

By Lee Hwok Aun[1]

INTRODUCTION

Reforming the education system is arguably Malaysia's most paramount development challenge, and also one of the most daunting and difficult for the still fledgling Pakatan Harapan (PH) government. The menu of areas earmarked for reform is comprehensive, encompassing early (pre-primary), primary, secondary and higher levels of education, and covers policy questions from lofty philosophical heights down to ground-level operational concerns. A non-exhaustive list includes the enjoyment of education, quality of public schools, multiple secondary school certification and university entry systems, teachers' bureaucratic workload and other morale- and efficacy-inhibiting issues, diffused and underperforming technical and vocational institutions, financing of the system and financial aid for students, serious allegations of misconduct and fraudulent practices in higher education institutions, and quotidian matters such as the weight of school bags and the colour of school shoes. Adding a further layer of complexity, PH inherited from its predecessors an ambitious education agenda, and has yet to clarify which plans will be continued, altered, or jettisoned. PH has repeatedly committed to

modify, not overhaul, ongoing reforms, and to focus on more effective implementation. Hence, it is pertinent for us to review the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) to set the context for this article.

The pre-election promises and post-election commitments are too broad-ranging for this article, requiring a selection of key issues. Merely cataloguing the programmes would also fail to do justice to the dynamic process that has unfolded. In the first year of PH's administration, some issues less salient or even absent in PH's manifesto have risen to the fore, while some seeming priorities in the manifesto have taken a relative back seat (Lee 2018). This article evaluates the reform agenda—based on emergent priorities, initiatives and pressures—arranged under three themes: quality, equity, autonomy.

The emphasis on quality, the first overarching theme, follows on policy priorities in recent years, and applies foremost to primary and secondary schooling, as well as technical and vocational education which spans secondary and post-secondary levels. The new government arrived with expectations that deep-seated problems of the previous regime might finally be fixed. Questions of access, largely resolved for primary and secondary schooling, amplify in post-secondary and higher education. The second theme thus revolves around equitable opportunity, particularly among ethnic groups' advancement to university. PH encounters expectations of broad reform to bumiputra preferential treatment, most acutely in the pre-university matriculation programmes, and of recognition of the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) for university admissions. The third reform theme of autonomy applies largely to higher education, and even more specifically to universities, in an institutional sense. Universities are large entities requiring much internal processes, specializations and decision-making. Nonetheless, autonomy has some applicability at the primary and secondary levels, with regard to the scope of teachers and school administrators to exercise decision-making discretion. Autonomy is also intertwined with academic freedom.

This article evaluates the reforms in these three areas, providing an overview of Malaysia's education system, outlining the continuities and changes pre- and post-May 2018, and paying special attention to distinctions and challenges of PH's reform agenda and achievements

thus far. I also unpack some ways that the PH government has faced reality checks and had to modify plans, seek advice, or postpone and even backtrack on ambitious goals. While the reforms are in progress or are pending prerequisites or policy formulations before proceeding, there is sufficient material to assess the recurrent pronouncements and efforts.

CHALLENGES AND COMPLEXITIES

Structures and Antecedents

Reforming education presents a gargantuan task in any country, but it is important to take into account specific features of the Malaysian system. The PH government made bold promises, but also gave assurances that the process would unfold with consultation and deliberation, continuity of ongoing policies, and gradual pace. The government's decisions, signals and missteps, and public responses to them, further illustrate the dilemmas ahead, with expectations both of decisive action and consultative approach, tensions between the interests of different groups, and the difficulties of steering an exceptionally heavy ship.

The unfolding of the ministerial appointment and its public reception bear testament to both the magnitude of centralized power in the sector and the sometimes conflicting expectations placed on the government, for institutional reform and executive action. On 17 May 2018, in the second round of Cabinet appointments after the settlement of the crucial finance, home affairs and defence ministerships on 11 May, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad tapped himself to be Education Minister. Some greeted the move with alarm, given its direct violation of PH's manifesto promise that the prime minister would not hold any Cabinet portfolio. Some welcomed the decision, believing that Mahathir could leverage his clout unlike any other to resolve complex and intractable problems in the system and confront the entrenched practices and interests of a massive bureaucracy.[2] Within a day, Mahathir conceded to

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[2] "NUTP, MSPC Welcome Dr M's Appointment as Education Minister", *New Straits Times*, 18 May 2018.

public protests and pressures from within the new ruling coalition. On 18 May 2018, he appointed Dr Maszlee Malik as Education Minister.

The Malaysian education system is highly centralized, with the federal government designated broad jurisdiction, and conventionally wielding immense executive power over primary, secondary and tertiary levels. All levels of the education system fall directly under federal jurisdiction. The Ministry of Education (MOE) oversees basic education, at the primary and secondary levels—and an approximately 430,000-strong teaching corps. Post-secondary and higher education, comprised of colleges, training institutions, university colleges and universities, also come under MOE's authority. Technical and vocational institutions are dispersed across various ministries, but numerous pre-labour market technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, as well as the accreditation system, reside within MOE. Notably, the National Occupational Skills Standards (NOSS) is under the Ministry of Human Resources' purview. Culturally, the massive education workforce, comprising teachers, administrators, policymakers and support staff, has for decades been assimilated into a hierarchical and deferential system. Structure and culture add complexities to change management. Aside from the obvious numerical size of the ministry, particularities of teaching professionals and their distinct salary and employment scheme within the public services system, reforms face resistance—not exclusively to this ministry, but certainly acutely—from sharp hierarchies and culture of deference, and the importance of personal ties and seniority to promotion prospects.[3]

Likewise, funding of public institutions, which predominate at primary and secondary levels and constitute about half of tertiary education enrolment, draw solely on federal government sources, except for a handful of institutions owned by state governments. Tertiary institutions have conformed to public service employment terms and operational norms, even when constitutionally provided broader latitude to exercise autonomy (Faruqi 2018). Reform challenges thus stem not just from the

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[3] Author's interview with an anonymous government official.

magnitude of the enterprise, but also from ingrained mindsets, norms and habits. The federal government has for decades controlled not only allocation of funding but also the appointment of top administrators and governing bodies, while also setting salary and pension schemes, and exerting wide regulatory and disciplinary powers. Within universities, substantial authority is centralized in the office of the vice chancellor.

The structure of higher education administration has vacillated from being combined with basic education under one roof, to being separated under two ministries, then remerged while maintaining two ministers and the same dual portfolio structure. Prime Minister Mahathir opted for one minister of education with expansive responsibilities.

Some antecedents of education policy are worth highlighting. The change of government in 2018 took place in the middle stages of the Malaysian Education Blueprint, launched in 2013 with an ambitious twelve-year plan to transform the system by 2025. Malaysia's achievements in increasing educational access and attainment, in a more quantitative sense, are veritable successes, but quality and administrative efficacy tell a different story. In 2017, the country registered enrolment rates of 97.9 per cent at primary level (years 1–6), 96.6 per cent for lower secondary (years 7–9), and 84.1 per cent for upper secondary (years 10–11) (Educational Planning and Research Division 2018). However, policy inconsistency or implementation shortcomings, including flip-flops in some areas deriving from hasty introduction of new programmes, have diminished teachers' morale and public trust, and potentially offset their buy-in of new initiatives in view of the possibility that policies might eventually be rolled back.[4]

The MEB brought some refreshing change. It empirically assessed the international standing of Malaysia's education, noting the country's slide down international test scores. Widespread concerns over declining quality of schooling were confirmed by international standardized tests, particularly the Trends in Mathematics and Science

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[4] Author's interview with Dr Tee Meng Yew, Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, 6 November 2018.

Study (TIMSS), in which Malaysia recorded the largest drop among all participating countries, from 1999 to 2011. An additional impetus of this policy is the exodus of some groups from national schools and ethnic disproportionalities in primary schools, which while a matter of choice and reflection of Malaysia's unique educational heritage, continuously raises concerns over social integration. The composition of primary schools is staggeringly monoethnic (Table 1). National secondary schools, however, more closely resemble Malaysia's multiethnic society.

Each community's choices are markedly different. In 2000, 98 per cent of bumiputra primary school students attended national schools, and 2 per cent were in Chinese vernacular schools; in 2011, the proportions were slightly altered to 97 per cent and 3 per cent, respectively. Among the Chinese, 92 per cent chose Chinese vernacular schools and 8 per cent national schools in 2000; 96 per cent and 4 per cent in 2011. For Indians, 47 per cent were in Tamil vernacular schools and 49 per cent in national schools (5 per cent in Chinese vernacular schools) in 2000; the shares were correspondingly, 56 per cent, 38 per cent and 6 per cent in 2011 (Ministry of Education 2013). Non-Chinese have increasingly enrolled in Chinese schools; their proportion of the total Chinese primary school population being 18 per cent (93,600 out of 520,000) in 2018, up from 11 per cent in 2011.[5] The government has refrained from compelling enrolment in national schools instead of vernacular schools, a stance that upholds political settlements—which also include support for Islamic religious schools.

The MEB laid out aspirations for the education system, in terms of access, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency. It also articulated a set of aspirations for students, who are to have knowledge, thinking skills, leadership skills, bilingual proficiency, ethics and spirituality, and national identity. The transformation was slated to roll out on an accelerated, sequenced three-wave schedule, conforming to a template of the consultancy firm that wrote the report. The plan centred on

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[5] Yasmin Ramlan, "Why Malays Send Their Children to Chinese Schools", *Malaysiakini*, 24 July 2019.

Table 1 Enrolment and Ethnic Composition of Primary and Secondary Education Enrolment[a]

	Enrolment (2018)	Share of Total (2018)	Ethnic Composition[b] (2011)
Primary education			
National schools	2,071,890	75.1	B 94%; C 1%; I 3%
National-type Chinese schools	518,543	18.8	B 9%; C 88%; I 2%
National-type Tamil schools	81,488	3.0	I 100%
Total public schools	2,693,318	96.8	B 72%; C 18%; I 6%
Total (public and private)	2,759,918	100.0	
Secondary education			
Ministry of Education schools[c]	2,041,798	91.7	B 72%; C 22%; I 7%
Other government schools[d]	96,516	4.3	n.a.
Independent Chinese schools	66,723	3.0	n.a.
Total (public and private)	2,225,640	100.0	n.a.

Notes: a. Excludes private schools that enrol both primary and secondary students, of which disaggregated data are not available.
b. Share of bumiputra, Chinese, Indian students.
c. Includes residential schools, religious schools, vocational colleges and other secondary-level institutions under the Ministry of Education.
d. Religious secondary schools, MARA Junior Science colleges, and the Royal Military College.
Sources: Educational Planning and Research Division (2018), Ministry of Education (2013).

national schools, not only because they constitute the vast majority of enrolment, but also because of intense concerns over quality deficiencies and exceedingly high ethnic disproportionality. Ultimately, from 2013 to 2025, Malaysia would move up from bottom third to the top third of international standardized tests, specifically the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program for International Science Assessment (PISA). Malaysian universities would also pursue positional improvements in international rankings schemes.

Transformation would progress in three waves. The first wave, spanning 2013–15, would focus on literacy and numeracy, teaching quality, and leadership, while empowering state and district education officers, expanding the development of higher order thinking skills, promoting principals' leadership and upskilling English teachers. The general idea was to engender a rapid turnaround in the first three years. The second wave (2015–20) was designated to follow up, over the period 2015–20, by accelerating system improvement, including revised career packages for teachers and principals, and revised curricula. The third wave (2020–25) strives for "excellence with increased operational flexibility", moving most schools to self-managed and peer-led modes, while also scaling up "instructional innovation".

The MEB was generally well received. Its fulsome articulation of amenable ideals, projection of a radiant future, and offer of a road map redressing key problems and cumulatively refashioning the system, apparently pre-empted critical scrutiny. Its crafting process is credited for meaningfully consulting stakeholders, including teachers and educationists.[6]

Our focus here on ongoing reforms precludes in-depth interaction with the MEB, and as the definitive document to which PH has committed to continue in principal, elements of the MEB will be interwoven through

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[6] Author's interviews with Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim, Chair, Parental Action Group for Education (PAGE) and member, National Education Advisory Council, 5 November 2018; and Harry Tan, Secretary-General, National Union of Teaching Professionals (NUTP), 9 November 2018.

the discussion to follow. Nonetheless, a few points can be raised at this juncture, with emphasis on PH's declared priorities aligned with the MEB, elements of the MEB that PH may uphold in principle but pursue through different means, and omissions in the MEB that the new government has given some attention to. The MEB itself included large elements of continuity, but added clout to implementation of various plans already underway, notably to incorporate more school-based assessment and reduce the stress and rote learning associated with national exams.

However, while candidly assessing Malaysia's shortcomings in international test scores and setting lofty goals such as higher order thinking skills, it was difficult to discern a bold vision of change in the culture of learning and inquisition. Some matters that eluded attention—including academic freedom, pedagogy, teacher empowerment, affirmative action, and institutional autonomy—raise questions over the actual breadth and depth of the efficacy of transformation plans. Indeed, the word "freedom" appears just twice in the MEB, in reference to expanded discretionary powers for administrators and inspectors, and the report evades the self-inhibitive practice of pursuing critical thinking skills while proscribing criticism of public policy and restricting freedom of expression, seemingly oblivious to the need for an open and free milieu for "higher order" thinking skills to flourish.

The MEB also expressed a rather insouciant disposition towards stultifying instructional practices. It referred to internal teaching assessments which found that 70 per cent of lessons test the ability to "recall facts" while only 15 per cent require synthesizing information, but failed to respond to this staggering revelation with conviction and resolve.

The general approach of the MEB conformed to government orthodoxy of the time, with emphasis on fast delivery of quantifiable targets and progress monitoring. Undoubtedly, some accelerated change would be required; the MEB highlighted training and development programmes, particularly for principals and local officials, to enhance leadership capabilities. Nonetheless, a rather formulaic response to the question of the capability of the teaching corps was tendered. To address this question of "quality", only the "top 30 per cent" would be selected (Ministry of Education 2013). This imposition of a simplistic filter, and

omission of safeguards that selecting graduates based on a rote learning system would truly forge a pioneering generation of a vastly different holistic system, reflected a tendency to prioritize speedy results over steady reforms.

Another aspect of the educational transformation was the formation of a delivery unit, in line with the mode of Malaysia's economic transformation agenda. The Education Performance and Delivery Unit (PADU) was created, and operated with a blend of independence and interconnection vis-à-vis the Ministry of Education.[7] There are advantages to this approach, in terms of driving change, injecting dynamism, coordinating multiple programmes, providing independent inputs, and monitoring progress. However, the effectiveness of this audit-centric method, with biases in self-reporting success, remains to be cogently shown. A laudatory World Bank report concluded that Malaysia has instituted effective mechanisms for monitoring compliance and teacher accountability under PADU's oversight, but only evaluated the structures and systems, not performance and outcomes (Kunicova, Govindasamy, and Sondergaard 2018). Some omissions in the content and flaws in the evaluation method raise concern. In-class assessment of pedagogic practices are not under PADU's purview.[8] External evaluations can be gamed, for instance by enacting a model class session when visited; attainment of numerical targets can similarly be engineered, and indeed the pressure to meet annual deadlines can induce corner cutting and cosmetic action, such as by reporting books in stock regardless of whether they have been read.[9]

The Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint (Higher Education), or MEB(HE), followed up on the MEB two years later, with a 2015–25

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[7] The acronym is very intentional; PADU means solid, and echoes the word's conjugated form, *bersepadu* and *perpaduan*, which mean integrated and cohesion.

[8] Author's interview with a PADU senior officer, 8 November 2018.

[9] Author's interviews with Dr Tee Meng Yew, 6 November 2018, and Harry Tan, 9 November 2018.

timeline. The MEB(HE) also adopted the three-wave template, but was launched with less prominence than the MEB, and this disparity was perhaps not surprising considering the former's lesser transformative scope and force. The marked structure of higher education, with clear vested powers in university administration, and various priorities and programmes that had preceded the Blueprint, also accounted for the lesser impact of the MEB(HE). Tellingly, in contrast to PADU for primary and secondary education, no parallel oversight was empowered for higher education. The transformation element comprised of a set of playbooks, borrowing the template of the GLC Transformation Programme, to which participation of universities was voluntary. The performance management unit for higher education, parked within the ministry, was closed in July 2018, having produced four playbooks, with a fifth pending.

14th General Elections: Education Policy Change and Continuity

Education reforms were covered substantially, but did not feature as flag-bearing matters, in *Buku Harapan*, Pakatan Harapan's election manifesto released in March 2018. PH's marquee promises addressed more immediate material needs and rousing concerns—abolishing GST, ameliorating economic hardships, fixing scandals—in full expectation that personality and identity would prevail over ideology and policy in securing votes. Measures to ease study debt burdens were also included among the ten, but pertained more to financial relief than educational reform. As admitted later, PH wrote its manifesto without expectancy of winning. It thus erred on the side of exuberance and extravagance to gain any slight advantage and cover all grounds. As policy documents, election manifestos do not pass through the rigours of background research and public consultation; the sweeping scale of *Buku Harapan* amplifies these deficiencies. Nonetheless, elections have consequences. Upon winning, PH has been saddled with the obligation to deliver.

Out of sixty promises, two were devoted to education. Promise #49, themed "Making government schools the best choice for its people", focused on raising the quality of national schools, with emphasis as well

on extending benefits to B40 households—specifically in residential schools at secondary level. *Buku Harapan* also raised the prospect of expanding trust schools, and affirmed religious, missionary and vernacular schools. Teachers were promised support for continuous training and reduced administrative burden, and the National Education Advisory Council would be reinvigorated. A number of niche concerns were also prominently included, notably endorsement of trust schools and promise of their expansion, and recognition of the Unified Examinations Certificate.

Promise #50, to "Restore the authority and independence of public universities and institutes of higher learning", professed to uphold academic freedom, especially for students, epitomized in the repeal and replacement of the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) and other higher education legislation. The manifesto further promised to depoliticize universities and guarantee institutional autonomy and to empower the board of directors, and implicitly to curb the discretionary powers of the Minister of Education. TVET would be prioritized and reinvigorated, as would financial aid for the B40. In a major call—included in the ten promises PH would deliver within the first 100 days—the coalition proposed reforms to the PTPTN (Perbadanan Tabung Pendidikan Tinggi Nasional, or National Higher Education Fund Corporation) student loan scheme, specifically to exempt graduates earning less than RM4,000 per month from servicing their debt. Indeed, funding obstacles to higher education and debt burdens beyond graduation, along with the financial dire straits of the PTPTN, posed some of the most consequential challenges for PH.

Upon taking over the administration, the core issues and reform areas are quite widely agreed upon; change of government did not introduce drastic shifts. Various key features of the manifesto were consistent with the MEB. Unsurprisingly, Maszlee Malik, the Minister of Education, signalled that his administration would consult and study the options, while avoiding radical departure from the MEB. The new leadership also started out in a consultative spirit, by opening up channels for the public to contribute inputs. The response was voluminous, as expected given the gravity of the issue, and collective concern and special interests of individuals and groups. The minister's office was overwhelmed, with

11,000 responses received in the first two days.[10] The influx of public opinions and proposals exceeded the capacity to compile and sort the information.[11]

A more measured and coordinated process was subsequently set in place, with the appointment of agencies to helm the policy review and advisory process. Maszlee revamped the National Education Advisory Council, appointing seven new members, with former Director General of the Ministry of Education Tan Sri Wan Mohd Zahid Mohd Noordin as head. As an advisory body, the Council's chief mandate was to review the MEB. Subsequently, four others were added, enhancing its representativeness.[12]

Under the council, a few committees have been formed with specific purviews. The thirteen-member National Education Policy Review Committee, helmed by Professor Ibrahim Bajunid, was appointed in October 2018 and tasked to evaluate policies at all education levels. The committee conducted its own rounds of consultation and set up channels for public inputs. The chair, however, had already indicated that the focus would be more on implementation.[13] The committee held meetings with 3,141 stakeholders and obtained submissions from 3,728 parties, and submitted its report to the Education Minister on 3 May 2019.[14]

Various developments have unfolded in a fluid and responsive manner, with some policy pronouncements or public pressures emerging and gaining momentum, and others losing prominence. Maszlee pronounced, and reiterated, an overarching ideal to make schooling enjoyable.[15]

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[10] "More than 182,000 Get into Public Unis", *The Star*, 3 June 2018.

[11] Author's interview with a former senior official in the Ministry of Education.

[12] "Maszlee: National Education Advisory Council Will Give Objective Views on Education System", *Bernama*, 2 September 2018.

[13] "Committee Set Up to Study and Review Nation's Education Policies", *New Straits Times*, 18 October 2018.

[14] "Submission of JKD Report", Press statement, Ministry of Education, 3 May 2019.

[15] "Dr Maszlee to Make Learning a Joy Again", *The Star*, 19 May 2018.

This stance seems to be greeted warmly, albeit perhaps with a tinge of scepticism.

The ideal is consistent with the shift away from an exam-centric system and a focus on practical burdens, and provides an anchor for further reforms focused on the learning process and student wellness, as well as making teaching a less onerous job, a voluble teachers' complaint for many years. Maszlee also remarked in November 2018 that a new curriculum might be rolled out by end 2020 or early 2021. Such foundational change would surely have to wait for the imprimatur of the advisory bodies that had not yet conducted their research and consultation and disseminated their recommendations, and would need more time to organize and implement.

Some premature pronouncements and actions suggested zeal to effect change, but also reflected inexperience in filling the role of a public figure and in dealing with an embedded bureaucracy treated as an appendage of the BN for decades and helmed by appointees of the previous regime. Indeed, a raft of issues were picked up by the media—and also magnified and sensationalized above their intended importance—which overshadowed more major concerns, leading to public dissatisfaction at perceived passivity in executing reforms. The suggestions for school children to wear black instead of white shoes, and to lighten the weight of schoolbags, recurred in the public limelight for weeks. This was not an indication of neglect of other issues, but still detracted from sustained focus on the bigger picture of the reform agenda. It must be said though, that the ministry's tact and discipline in media engagement have improved over time.[16]

In the wake of an unprecedented change of government, popular issues took centre stage. Pre-university programmes, where questions of access and preferential versus fair treatment are salient, have stood out

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[16] In conjunction with the first anniversary of PH taking power, the minister penned an op-ed outlining his administration's achievements—albeit an article that was not widely published. See Maszlee Malik, "Thank you, everyone", *New Straits Times*, 13 May 2019.

as vigorously contested and heated issues. In late June 2018, Maszlee announced the allocation of 1,000 places in matriculation colleges for low-income Chinese households as a reward for the community's overwhelming support for PH in GE-14.[17] Although the minister clarified and reiterated[18] that this was an ad hoc, one-off allocation, the gesture perhaps stirred expectations of further concessions to non-bumiputras, and disappointment with the non-fulfilment of the UEC promise, probably fuelled public pressure for more non-bumiputra in post-secondary education, which in turn shone the spotlight on the matriculation programme's 10 per cent non-bumiputra quota. In July 2018, Deputy Education Minister Teo Nie Cheng had announced that the UEC would be recognized by year end. This triggered backlash from the Malay right, compelling the administration to put this initiative on hold, pending a review.

On some other issues, the administration showed more consistency, prominently on teachers' workload and academic freedom. Maszlee has maintained commitment to reducing irrelevant or redundant administrative tasks, and engaged with the National Union of Teaching Professionals (NUTP) to realize this goal. Academic freedom is an issue of primary concern in universities, with particular resonance among students and their freedom of expression and association. One of PH's early legislative measures was an amendment to the UUCA to broaden the scope for students' political participation; other follow-throughs include political non-interference with student council elections. These were preliminary steps leading up to the bigger promise of abolishing and replacing the UUCA. The government has committed to more comprehensive legal reforms, involving the consolidation of the UUCA, which oversees public institutions, and currently separate legislation governing private institutions.

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[17] "1,000 Matriculation Spots Available for Chinese Students: Maszlee", *New Straits Times*, 28 June 2018.

[18] "3,200 Places for Indian, Chinese Students for Matriculation a 'One-Off' Last Year", *FreeMalaysiaToday*, 19 April 2019.

RAISING QUALITY AND MAKING NATIONAL SCHOOLS THE "SCHOOL OF CHOICE"

This section considers some emerging themes in the administration's approach to reversing the decline in national school quality. Major elements of the reform agenda are carried forward from the previous administration's MEB, chiefly the objective of making national schools the "school of choice" and enhancing the stature and reputation of technical and vocational education (Ministry of Education 2013). The discourses and decisions on this front remain in flux. Nonetheless, three challenges warrant further discussion: resetting the ethos of education; enhancing reinvigorating the teaching profession and schooling administration; and consolidating TVET.

New Education Ethos?

The Minister of Education's exhortation for schooling to be enjoyable again appears to evoke a sense of loss that is widely shared, at the philosophical level regarding the purpose and fulfilment of education, and with regard to practical matters and burdensome daily routines. This marks a distinctive departure from the previous administration. The objective of improving the schooling experience may be implied in the MEB and in initiatives in recent years to alleviate the weight and stress of national examinations, but the bias for "quantifiable" goals probably precluded articulation of such pursuits with intangible elements. Correspondingly, various calls were made to draw on the experience of countries standing out for "alternative" modes to the mainstream of centralized, performance audited, "managerial" modes—which characterize the practices embedded in Malaysia's system and reinforced by the MEB.

A fuller picture of Malaysia's future directions, and the extent if at all it will emulate countries such as Finland, remains to be seen. Such concerns are presumably covered in the Education Policy Review Committee's report recently submitted to the minister, although as noted above, the focus appears to be on improving implementation rather than seeking

new directions. There is some headway in adding conveniences and alleviating physical burdens, with black shoes replacing the longstanding white uniform footwear, and measures introduced to lighten school bags. The requirement to buy new shoes faced some pushback on the grounds of household costs, but objections will likely peter out, unlike quality improvements that are of enduring concern to parents.

One aspect of reform that has progressed tangibly is the shift away from an exam-centric system. In 2011, the PMR middle secondary examination (grade 9) was abolished. A ministerial directive has eliminated exams in the first three years of primary schooling. The UPSR Standard 6 exam remains, albeit characterized by the Malaysian Examination Board, representing the ministry, as a "checkpoint" rather than certification examination. Concomitantly, the education authorities have expressed support for efforts to manage the pressure and stress on this year six evaluation.[19] The future of the UPSR year six exam, however, will need to be more decisively settled; notably, the NUTP weighed in on the matter, seeking clarity and reminding the government of previous commitments to phase out the UPSR.[20]

The greater challenge of ensuring standards also continues. The Malaysian School Certificate (SPM) examination for secondary school completion has been retained, as well as various post-secondary, pre-university certificates. Indeed, the multiplicity of university pathways persists as a policy quandary—we return to this in discussing equitable access below. The wider academic standards challenge—both in terms of rigour and core content—pertains to school-based assessments which have been rolled out. The desire to transition towards more responsive, dynamic and engaging learning experiences concurs

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[19] "UPSR Not an Examination but a Checkpoint, Says Malaysian Examinations Board", *The Star*, 24 September 2018.

[20] "NUTP Urges Education Ministry to Explain on UPSR Abolition Issue", *Bernama*, 4 August 2019; "NUTP Renews Calls to Abolish UPSR", *The Star*, 4 August 2019.

with emergent economic imperatives and social expectations of more holistic and relevant education, and national schools hold out various advantages to regain public confidence among segments of the populace, including embeddedness in residential areas, facilities, multicultural and multiethnic composition.

Two further issues require clarity. One area of uncertainty at this juncture concerns the role of international test scores for policy benchmarking. The MEB gave prominence to international standardized tests—with breaching the top third a principal long-term target—but the commitment had observably been fading prior to GE-14. TIMSS and PISA scores supplied empirical grounds to launch the MEB. These show the decline in Malaysia's scores from 1999 to 2011, both in absolute terms and relative to Asian counterparts, referenced in the MEB (Figures 1 and 2). Subsequent to the Blueprint, Malaysia's performance in these tests came to light—but with some controversy. Malaysia recorded marked improvement in PISA 2015, but apparent sampling biases discredited the result. Initially selected schools were replaced with a substantially new sample, one that included disproportionately more residential, and higher performing schools. Due to reliability concerns, Malaysia was excluded from the PISA comparative cross-country analysis.

The Ministry's self-reporting, conducted by PADU, is also indicative. The 2017 Education Blueprint Annual Report referenced TIMSS 2015 and PISA 2015 results. There was no acknowledgement of the controversies surrounding PISA, which might be understandable, but somewhat surprisingly the report also omitted attention to Malaysia's striking rebound in the TIMSS results, in which the eighth grade scores recovered from a trough in 2011, back to 2007 levels (Ministry of Education 2017). Noticeably, the following year's report made only a passing mention of TIMSS and PISA.

Another challenge concerns the orientation and scope of Islamic education in the national schools. Concerns that the subject load exceeds an optimal balance, and takes time away from other subjects, are occasionally articulated in the public domains. Notably, Prime Minister Mahathir has been among the more vocal critics of current practices in the schools. In December 2018, the prime minister indicated a willingness to cut back on Islamic instruction, and in April 2019 he

Figure 1 TIMMS Mathematics 8th Grade National Average Score, Selected Countries
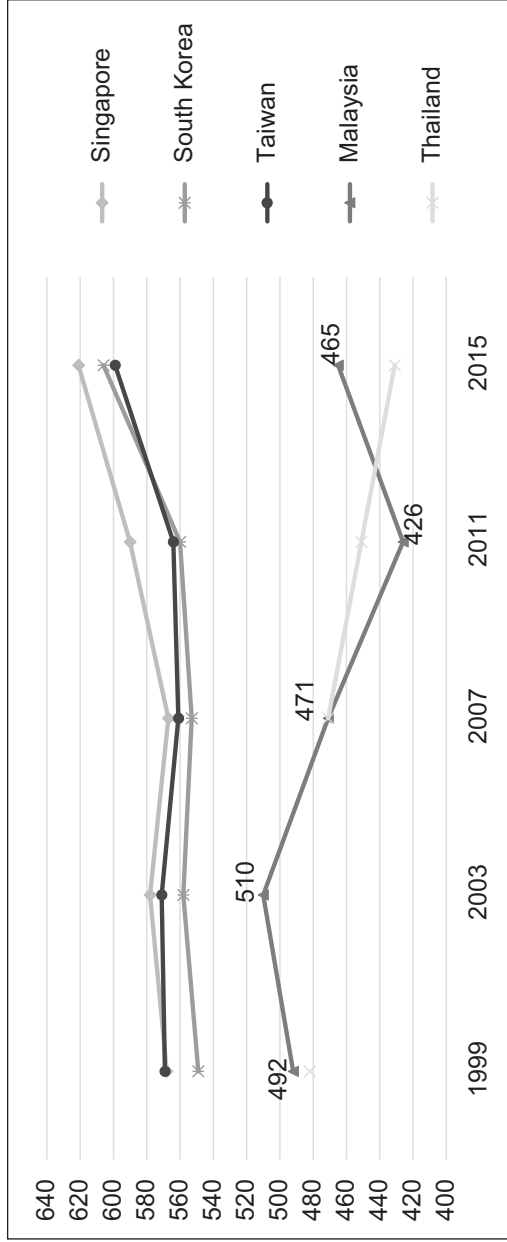
Source: Mullis et al. (2016a).

Figure 2 TIMMS Science 8th Grade National Average Score, Selected Countries

Source: Mullis et al. (2016b).

pressed for the content to be focused on values rather than rituals.[21] This lends weight to the issue, but also raises questions over the extent of the Ministry of Education's ownership and resolve. Undoubtedly, the matter must be handled delicately. MOE, through the Advisory council, set up a task force in April 2019 to research the issue of Islamic education in primary schools and propose improvements for the benefit of students, teachers, parents and society as large. It will be imperative for resolute, tactful and magnanimous decisions on these matters, on which distrust and parochialism often trigger contentious reactions, as exemplified in public reactions to the Ministry's August 2019 announcement of past policy decisions to introduce Islamic calligraphy in vernacular schools.

Most fundamentally, Malaysia is still awaiting a comprehensive system and structure, and a clear and resolute commitment to see it through to completion.[22] The ambient rhetoric at present would seem to resist the managerialism arguably enmeshed in the MEB, but there are few clear safeguards against such practices creeping into the system (Sahlberg 2012). Malaysian schools have not lacked new mechanisms and a willingness to transform testing methods, but processes and teaching methods have not broken from ingrained rote learning modes. In addition to the introduction of school-based assessment from 2011 and replacement of the PMR (national middle secondary examination) with the PT3, higher order thinking skills (HOTS) questions have been incorporated into exams, and i-THINK mind maps rolled out. However, these new testing modes have not been comprehensively accompanied by changes in classroom methods (Hwa 2016). Academic research, based on in-depth classroom observation, show that rote learning and ineffective teaching practices remain entrenched (Tan, Tee and Samuel 2017; Tee et al. 2018). Arguably, the relative inattention to pedagogy and teaching methods in the MEB's results-driven approach may ultimately curtail the efficacy of reform plans.

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[21] "For Education Overhaul, PM Moots Cutting Back on Religious Studies", *Malay Mail*, 21 December 2018; "Dr M: Students Learning Only Rituals, Not Values in Islamic Studies", *Malay Mail*, 8 April 2019.

[22] Author's interview with Dr Tee Meng Yew, 6 November 2018.

Undoubtedly, there are no success formulas and obvious technical fixes. Perera and Asadullah's (2019) statistical analysis of PISA 2012 for Singapore, South Korea and Malaysia finds Malaysia's underperformance only partly explained by individual, family background, and school characteristic. The dataset provides a considerable array of socio-economic variables, showing Malaysia to be quantitatively not lagging far behind, yet performing substantially poorer in the test. They also find that increased spending, improved teacher qualifications, and school autonomy, *inter alia*, are statistically associated with increased test scores in Singapore and Korea, but much less so in Malaysia. Further insights can be drawn from qualitative research closely examining each country's education system. Singapore and Korea stand in striking contrast to Malaysia, in terms of teacher qualifications and training which is outstandingly strong in Singapore, and school autonomy and empowered school principals, which are prominent factors in Korea.

Teaching Profession and Education Administration

The MEB engaged in broad consultation, but retained a top-down structure based on performance targets and monitoring, with augmented roles, autonomy and reward accorded to district officers and school principals and emphasis on teacher capability and training, but limited devolution of decision-making powers. Teacher empowerment, especially in the Malaysian context of institutionalized hierarchy and compulsion to follow top-down directives, is necessarily a gradual process, involving training, recruitment, career development as well as exit policies. Accountability remains exerted through external monitoring, compared to other systems characterized by "trust-based responsibility" (Sahlberg 2012). Devolution of responsibilities in this audit-based system has resulted in bureaucratic overload on teachers.

School-based assessment, introduced in 2011 and reinforced under the MEB, has been a major source of discontent among teachers. Post GE-14, the NUTP raised its concerns, and in Maszlee the teachers union has found a more sympathetic ear than the previous administration had

been.[23] Sustained engagements and clear commitments to reducing teachers' bureaucratic burdens, especially irrelevant or redundant tasks, have clearly fostered amenable relations. The NUTP positively reviewed the minister's first year on the job.[24] The zealous efforts of the NUTP to advocate for change also underscores the essential and irreplaceable role of contact hours between teachers and students, which excessive bureaucracy disrupts, and the importance of letting teachers focus on their core responsibility and competency.

A number of other issues weigh in on the notion of resetting the ethos of education. A consensus readily forms around the need to usher in and train dedicated, capable and effective teachers; but should the system usher out teachers who do not bear those characteristics, and how? This is highly contentious and complicated. Cases of negligence and misconduct require one set of policy responses, with disciplinary action, even exit from the profession, constituting the main thrust. These matters must be handled with diligence and care, and within legal bounds and meeting standards of proof.[25] Teachers who fail to deliver on their job, or may be unsuited to the profession, present a different set of challenges, including exit plans. The span of teachers' tenure, which like the civil service are typically career-long leading to pension, adds urgency but also complicates such efforts which will be heavily resisted and politically unpopular. Exit policies are in place, but are rarely enforced.[26] While the focus continues to fall positively on improvement to teaching personnel and methods, Malaysia's education reform will also need to mitigate the negative consequences of teachers ill-suited or indifferent towards undertaking education reform.

Of course, teachers are an easy—and sometimes unfair—target for blame. Education reform, and enhancing children's learning and

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[23] Author's interview with Harry Tan, 9 November 2018.

[24] "Maszlee Resolved 18 Education-Related Issues, Says Teachers' Union", *Bernama*, 14 May 2019.

[25] Author's interview with Harry Tan, 9 November 2018.

[26] Author's interview with Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim, 5 November 2018.

development, also involves society more broadly.[27] While teachers clearly bear responsibilities, family environments, safe neighbourhoods, and community support are also important. Parents play instrumental roles in providing encouragement to children and inculcating reading and learning habits. Indeed, the overarching goal of a new education ethos, including the shift to a less exam-oriented and reduced homework burdens, emphatically require a mindset change throughout society.[28] The MEB lays out plans for more frequent interactions between teachers and parents, and other measures to foster a collaborative spirit and enhance accountability. Trust schools have occupied less prominence than the attention given to them in *Buku Harapan*, but are continually advocated, and hold out possibilities for expansion. The potential for trust schools to widen education quality gaps weighs in as a policy concern. Whether the PH government makes concerted and consistent efforts or not will reflect its resolve to reorient the system.

Change within schools remains the government's direct sphere of responsibility. District education officers and school principals continue to be the main agents of change on the ground. This aspect of reform, with a programme of action in place, will likely continue as planned. More attention and resolve will need to be channelled towards a rebalance of oversight and autonomy, in the broader context of Malaysia's highly centralized system and its contradictions with school-based assessment. With only six years left on the MEB's timeline, the government is clearly inclined to not disrupt the proceedings—but policy succession plans warrant consideration. Another aspect of these leadership positions pertains to the terms of principal appointments. Conventions that bias seniority, and tendencies for principal appointments to be brief pre-retirement postings, overlook younger talent and leave little scope for effecting change. A bolder adherence to the policy of capability-based selection of principals, supplemented with job-specific training—distinct

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[27] Author's interview with Harry Tan, 9 November 2018.

[28] Author's interview with Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim, 5 November 2018.

from teachers' training—and the longer term appointments, stand to uplift the efficacy of school leadership.[29]

As for federal government oversight, by all indications, centralized performance management remains firmly in place. PADU's purpose, set-up and continuing operations are understandably difficult to dismantle, as long as the government remains committed to the MEB. The continual absence of teaching methods evaluation in PADU's scope, however, deprives the schooling system of feedback and independent oversight in arguably its areas of greatest need. PADU's annual progress reporting tracks performance indicators, and supplements this preponderantly quantifiable evaluation with featured stories—which serves to provide constructive exposure of successes. There does not seem to be a place still for constructive criticism and candour towards the state of teaching practices, with anonymized findings to protect confidentiality and integrity. Reports of the extent of parental participation in schools arguably should also be evaluated, and can play a counterbalancing role that averts blaming teachers solely for schooling deficiencies.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)

TVET has suffered perennial drift, sprawl and neglect, but also has been ascribed high policy priority in recent years—and renewed emphasis post–GE-14. Its prominence in PH's education reform agenda warrants inclusion as a topic under this theme of education quality, although the very preliminary state of policy action confines the volume of discussion here. The challenges are well documented. Over the years, various studies have highlighted the problems surrounding quality and industrial relevance of programmes, inadequate engagement with industry on skills standards, and duplication and lack of coordination across providers (World Bank 2013). Education policy has striven to raise TVET interest, and managed to gradually expand the share in overall enrolment. Nonetheless, the current share (2017) of a mere 7.2 per cent of upper

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[29] Author's interview with Dzameer Dzulkifli, Co-Founder and Managing Director, Teach for Malaysia, 9 November 2018.

secondary enrolment, falls short of targets and expectations (Ministry of Education 2018).

In recognition of these systemic deficiencies, PH set up a TVET Empowerment Committee in June 2018, appointing Member of Parliament Nurul Izzah Anwar as its chair. A key goal of the committee was the establishment of a TVET Commission—although it made little headway since Nurul's tenure was short-lived.[30] Administratively, the need for coordination and dynamic standards settings, with integrated instruction and industrial training, poses challenges. In terms of programme content, TVET also faces steep hurdles. The responsibility of equipping graduates with industry-relevant skills, some in highly specific tasks and rapidly changing technologies, poses distinct operational challenges of coordinating with industry standards—mostly domestic but also international in scope.[31] TVET institutions have been dispersed around the country, sometimes located in political constituencies rather than based on sound economic rationale and proximity to industrial zones. On the other hand, proximity to home can increase affordability as some students can live with family, but education reforms will need to critically consider the feasibility of institutions that do not meet industrial placement standards.

Coordinating the TVET sector, and balancing equity and quality, surely reside at the top of the relevant policy-making body's agenda. In May 2019, two previous committees were merged to form the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Empowerment Committee, chaired by Maszlee.[32] Malaysia awaits the outcome of this committee's deliberations. Given the voluminous priorities under the minister's watch and his divided attention, slow progress may be expected—but excessive

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[30] Author's interview with Nurul Izzah, Member of Parliament for Permatang Pauh and former TVET Empowerment Committee chair, 9 November 2018.

[31] Author's interview with Prof. Dr Kamal Harun, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Universiti Teknology MARA (UiTM).

[32] "Maszlee to Head TVET Empowerment Committee", *Bernama*, 14 May 2019.

delays will be deleterious to a sector urgently needing clear and effective change.

EQUITY AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Education institutions fulfil various functions in Malaysia, including the promotion of national integration and fostering ethnic relations (Samuel, Tee and Symaco 2017). These overarching goals, in turn, hinge on two principal elements: (1) equal access to mandatory schooling levels and equitable opportunity to advance further; (2) inclusion of all groups and freedom to express and preserve language, culture and religion, and diversity in educational settings. Having attained universal primary and high secondary school enrolment (where equalizing quality is increasing the concern), the question of equitable access mainly applies to tertiary education, and to some extent, selective programmes in secondary education.

Education policies have continually emphasized equitable access, encompassing support for rural communities, low income and disadvantaged, and for vernacular primary schools, and higher education opportunity for all groups. Challenges remain in facilitating access and funding, with policy emphasis on class (promoting B40 enrolment in residential secondary schools and tertiary institutions) and race, ethnicity or language (opportunities for non-bumiputras to enter pre-university programmes, recognition of the independent Chinese schools' certificate).

In terms of increasing B40 access, the PH government recommitted to this public policy priority that has been mainstreamed in recent years. We cannot conclusively ascertain whether the momentum would have continued under another government, but we can refer to official reports that suggest an accelerated pace to the increase of B40 beneficiaries. University admissions in 2018 undertook a larger intake than the preceding year, and just above half of offers were to prospective entrants from the B40 category, with sizeable numbers of special needs, Orang Asli and athletes.[33] The University of Malaya's enrolment consists of

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[33] "More Than 182,000 Get into Public Unis", *The Star*, 3 June 2018.

60 per cent from B40 households.[34] Matriculation colleges and MARA junior science colleges likewise reported increased proportions of B40 students, from 44 per cent in the 2018 intake to 68 per cent in the 2019 intake (4,492 out of 6,606).[35] As noted earlier, 1,000 spaces in matriculation colleges were offered to B40 Chinese students, as a one-off post-election overture.

Following through on the B40 emphasis entails resolving PTPTN's woes, which are deep and complex, and are being researched and deliberated, despite being the subject of study over the years. While demonstrating a consultative approach and canvassing for more ideas, there is urgency for PTPTN to deliver on innovative and decisive actions.

Importantly, the government must also be honest and candid that its policy stances continue to prioritize the B40 low-income category *within* an ethnic group. The education sphere presents the greatest scope for shifting away from ethnicity to disadvantage in selection criteria, but this entails a more systematic approach that explicitly replaces ethnic quotas with preferential treatment for disadvantaged households regardless of ethnicity. In other words, Malaysia must go beyond the current practice of adding B40 preference in the distribution of ethnic quotas. A clear reversion to preference for the disadvantaged regardless of ethnicity could set a salutary precedent, in line with policy commitments to "need-based affirmative action", and in combination with selection processes that take into account the realization of student diversity, based on ethnicity, region, language, and other aspects.

Ethnic contentions in education persist, and in some ways have escalated in post–GE-14 Malaysia. PH leaders reiterated the election

[34] "Funding Cuts Fuel UM's Endowment Fund Initiative", *The Edge Malaysia*, 15–21 July 2019.

[35] "MARA Umum Keputusan Kemasukan MRSM 2019" [MARA Announcement of MRSM Intake 2019], Press release by Minister of Rural Development Rina Harun, 3 January 2019.

promise to recognize the independent Chinese schools' UEC for public university admissions, even promising to deliver this by end 2018. The UEC was recognized by the Sarawak state government in 2014. Segments of society reacted strongly, with Malay nationalist sentiments inflamed for political gain, and the government conceded by putting this decision on hold pending further review. A task force was formed in March 2019 to study the feasibility of recognizing the UEC nationally.

The matriculation college system was another pre-university programme that became embroiled in controversy. The government's backtracking on the UEC, together with the one-off allotment of 1,000 spots for B40 Chinese in matriculation colleges, perhaps combined to stir attention to the broader issue of the 90 per cent bumiputra quota in the matriculation colleges. Discontent, predominantly among Malaysia's Chinese community, stems from the 10 per cent non-bumiputra for matriculation colleges they are limited to. The matriculation is known to be easier for scoring high grades; by design it is a simpler and shorter pathway—a one-year programme with fewer and lighter subjects, compared to Form Six or Higher Education Certificate (STPM), Malaysia's A-level equivalent. The public university admissions system does not factor in differences in difficulty; and under the banner of meritocracy places matriculation grades on par with STPM, thus disadvantaging non-bumiputras who predominantly seek to enter university with STPM qualifications. The PH Cabinet decided on another apparent one-off measure or a deferral of difficult policy decisions into the future, by increasing the total intake to matriculation colleges, from 25,000 to 40,000.

A layered admissions system warrants consideration, and can operate fairly simply. For instance, there could be one round of students selected based purely on academics, followed by a round with socio-economic disadvantage factored in (without considering ethnicity), and concluded with a last round of admissions to promote diversity. Maszlee has expressed an openness to a single university entrance exam. This is a worthwhile long-term objective, but emphasis must return to the syllabus and quality of matriculation and other "fast-track" routes, and efforts to narrow achievement gaps, as vital preparatory measures towards a single university entry point.

AUTONOMY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The question of autonomy pertains mainly to the governance of institutions—their independence from federal executive control and self-governing structures—and has a storied and chequered history (Wan 2017). Academic freedom of students and staff is a basic right, but also bears elements of autonomy at the personal level. These two are intertwined, and have been the focus of PH's reform agenda. Less explicitly than the call for schooling to be made enjoyable, Maszlee has also indicated that universities should reset culturally, including being less obsessive about international rankings. On these fronts, however, the government has not provided further visionary clarity for universities, and has been quite occupied handling misconduct cases.

Autonomy applies most saliently to universities, which are large organizations generally esteemed and influential in society, and whose *raison d'étre* is to push the frontiers of knowledge. Current legislation, particularly the UUCA, concentrates power in the hands of the Minister of Education, and within institutions, the vice chancellor. Over time, more functions and decision-making authority have also been transferred to university boards. Constitutionally, universities hold much broader autonomy than they have exercised (Faruqi 2018). As statutory bodies, they are granted *de jure* autonomy, even while being predominantly publicly funded, but have *de facto* operated in passive compliance with central government directives.

That said, past efforts by the central government to institute more autonomy and practise non-interference have not been taken up vigorously by the university administration.[36] Universities can also be resistant to change, due to their scale and clout—the same reasons that they have the capacity to be autonomous. This weak track record, however, goes back to the continual executive control—in appointing top management and board members—and in the politicized milieu that

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[36] Author's interview with Abdul Razak Ahmad, former Ministry of Education senior officer, 7 November 2018.

compels loyalty and conformity. This demonstrates the importance of fuller delinking university administration from central government.

BN's legacy on academic freedom is a sketchy and tarnished one. The UUCA has empowered public universities to take action against dissent, and against students critical of government.

Public university staff, falling under the jurisdiction of the Statutory Bodies (Discipline and Surcharge) Act, have been cowed into deference. PH's reform message and follow-through has been consistent on academic freedom. Student elections have proceeded without political interference, with much less overtly partisan campaigning and no more direct party patronage.[37]

The path to reform, however, is onerous and complicated. In an indication of the zeitgeist, society's expectations are also heightened. Maszlee's acceptance of an appointment as President of the International Islamic University (IIUM) raised concerns over conflict of interest and detraction from institutional autonomy. The intense criticism of this move, and his subsequent withdrawal from the position, has perhaps provided a wake-up call.

Efforts are under way to overhaul the legislative framework, including the colossal task of unifying the currently separate laws for public and private higher education—the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Private Higher Education Act 1996. To these ends, the Ministry has formed ancillary groups, including a committee to deliberate UUCA abolition, and a study group to propose the framework for a new, integrated legislation encompassing public and private higher education. A comprehensive and consultative process and sustained political will be key to the success of this ambitious endeavour, which has been attempted before, unsuccessfully. Full buy-in and application will also need to be established; some universities have initiated more student participation

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[37] Author's interview with Asheeq Ali Sehi Alvivi, former UKM student and president, GPA-IPT (Higher Education Institute Academic Freedom Coalition), 6 November 2018.

by appointing them to the university Senate. However, this top-down approach still falls short of the bottom-up student-led empowerment more aligned with aspirations and principles of post–GE-14 Malaysia.

Quality and integrity of public universities' top management affect institutional capacity to embrace reforms and undertake autonomy. Steep challenges have arisen, with the government needing to engage with an old guard of university administrators—some marred by allegations of misconduct, fraud, or disloyalty to the new government. The process was also set back by the minister's initially antagonistic stance towards them, and his acceptance of appointment as President of the International Islamic University which directly conflicts with the principle of autonomy. The practice of political appointments, notably in board membership, remains quite entrenched (Lai 2019).

Nonetheless, the minister's about-face on these matters, and a more assertive and autonomous vice-chancellor selection committee, mark positive and constructive steps forward. UUCA amendments of 2009 provided for the optional establishment of this advisory committee. The current members have, since January 2019, operated with greater resolve, independence and rigour, in evaluating and interviewing candidates who have applied or who are drawn from the Higher Education Leadership Academy's (AKEPT) pool of qualified candidates, and nominating their choice to the minister—and setting precedents for appointment based on merit. Refinements to the procedures have been proposed.[38] This process is centralized in the federal ministry at present—and foreseeably in the near future as university board membership also will require a coordinated and large-scale changing of guard—but should eventually be devolved to university-level search committees. Of course, this ultimately rides on effective university autonomy.

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[38] Author's correspondence with Dr Andrew Aeria, member of the Ministry of Education's Selection Committee; Gerak (Malaysian Academic Movement), "On the Appointment of the New UMS Vice-Chancellor", *Malaysiakini*, 11 August 2019.

On the ethos of education in universities, Maszlee has urged less obsession with rankings and articulated broader ideals on the role of universities.[39] How this translates into practice, though, remains quite uncertain. A major task ahead will be to strive for balance in preserving the universities' status and role in generating public knowledge and probing new frontiers, while also being attuned to industry needs and practical skills. There are concerns that universities have become industry-led, rather than academy-led.[40] Academic honesty and integrity are also vital, and commitments to these principles and to taking action against dishonesty, plagiarism and other misconduct, will help move universities forward—although more preventive measures will also be needed.[41]

CONCLUSION

Malaysia's long education reform journey keeps unfolding. As PH proceeds beyond the fifteen months of its neophyte administration and the undeniable steep learning curve it has had to climb, it must increasingly address expectations of clear, decisive and effective next steps. This article closes with a few concluding thoughts, mindful of the continuing state of flux. Recent reports indicate the possibility that Prime Minister Mahathir may revert back to two education ministerial portfolios in his Cabinet. The complexity of reforms clearly demands more attention than one person can handle. This move, should it happen, stands to enhance administrative focus and capacity, provided the parties involved work out smooth transitions.

The largest looming reform of improving education quality, most acutely in basic schooling and TVET, will require clarification on

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[39] "'Don't Be Too Obsessed with World Rankings'", *The Star*, 16 November 2018.

[40] Author's interview with Prof. Dzulkifli Abdul Razak, Rector, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), 7 November 2018.

[41] "Public Varsities to Get Tough on Plagiarism", *The Star*, 14 July 2019.

the continuities with the MEB and departures from it, and objectives and strategies beyond the Blueprint's conclusion in 2025. This can provide the needed bedrock to lay comprehensive plans for the school system, and involvement and ownership of teachers, principals and education administration in the process. It is crucial for society to regain confidence in the education system and for teachers, parents and society at large to get on board with reforms. Resolving the teaching profession's bureaucratic workload, raising the calibre of principals, and broadly enhancing teaching practices, will also be pivotal to effective and enduring change.

Malaysia's facilitation of equitable social opportunity and national integration through its education system continues to articulate laudable goals but encounter hurdles—some of which have been insurmountable in the past. In primary schools, the multiple public school types, in which the high stakes and heightened communal interests constrain the scope for compromise, it is opportune to continue the overarching approach of increasing diversity through inducing more non-bumiputras to opt for national schools. However, the national integration project can perhaps be pursued more concertedly at the secondary school level, where student bodies are more reflective of neighbourhoods and the national population. Efforts to expand access to the disadvantaged in residential schools and pre-university programmes also warrant continued commitment and expansion, but with a clear and coherent framework for allocating opportunity based on need or disadvantage, and continual outreach to distinctly under-represented groups, such as the Indian and Orang Asli communities. Concurrently, it would also be in the national interest to retain middle-class Malays and bumiputras in urban schools instead of enrolling in residential schools, and to avert further opt-out from the public system into private schools.

Relative to the daunting prospects and massive scale of the reforms addressing quality and equity discussed above, the promises of autonomy and academic freedom in higher education appear more attainable. Nevertheless, PH must sustain political will and institutional commitment to see the reforms through, and not to settle for partial solutions. Indeed, the need for decisive and comprehensive action cannot be overstated.

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