

PERSPECTIVE

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Education in Post GE-14 Malaysia: Promises, Overtures and Reforms

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Pakatan Harapan’s promises to reform the education system have raised expectations for broad meaningful changes in post GE-14 Malaysia.
- *Buku Harapan*, PH’s manifesto, sets out some laudable goals, notably to raise the quality and esteem of national schools. The early pronouncements on enhancing schooling experience, broadening education access, de-politicizing top appointments and safeguarding academic freedom seemed headed in the right direction.
- Early policy actions have largely focussed on gaining political mileage with some constituencies, such as easing student loan burdens and promising 1,000 matriculation places to the Chinese community.
- The government will need to go beyond such political gestures, to formulate policies for systemic reforms which can balance the twin goals of enhancing the quality of education and pursuing national integration. Some fundamental tensions inherent between these two national objectives will present an extremely daunting challenge for the PH government in the days ahead.

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INTRODUCTION

Reforming Malaysia's education system poses one of the most important and daunting challenges for the new Pakatan Harapan (PH) government. While economic relief and financial recovery efforts – chiefly, abolishing GST, investigating corruption scandals, reviewing megaprojects, and the other “first 100 days” promises – headlined PH's manifesto, *Buku Harapan*, education discreetly pervaded the GE-14 campaign rhetoric and swiftly took centrestage in post-GE-14 Malaysia. PH's policy pledges, and Malaysian public expectations, span a complex range of issues, from quality of national schools to equitable education access, national integration, de-politicization of institutions, and academic freedom. The current prominence of immediate, tangible, and mostly operational measures are welcome and understandable, but PH must soon begin to lay the groundwork for fundamental reform.

This Perspective proceeds with an overview of PH's education agenda. It then evaluates two broad aspects of post-GE-14 developments. First, *Buku Harapan's* education agenda largely targeted pledges at specific groups and popular concerns, but also expressed lofty principles and goals. This historical juncture, political milieu and leadership change hold out the potential for substantive reform, but PH will need to formulate a cohesive and comprehensive policy that clarifies continuities and changes ahead. Second, initial actions and commitments have focused on education access, electoral overtures, de-politicization of leadership appointments, institutional autonomy and academic freedom. These are welcome steps, but in doing so, PH must avoid institutionalizing practices that may detract from systematic reform, and strive to inculcate new norms, mindsets and practices in education that help bring Malaysia's education to the aspired next level.

HARAPAN'S EDUCATION PROMISES

Alongside the unprecedented change of power and collapse of the BN's 61-year reign, GE-14 also saw the new governing coalition take power on the back of an extensive and ambitious manifesto. Education featured centrally in two of *Buku Harapan's* 60 promises, with each promise in turn comprised of various pledges and commitments. The first set of pledges fall under the overarching objective of making national schools “the school of choice”. The manifesto was not specific about how new policies would enhance quality, appeal and accessibility, but included within this agenda commitments to enable teachers, including by hiring assistants for administrative work and providing financial support and professional training (for national, religious and missionary schools), return residential schools to original focus on low-income students (B40 and M40), elevate TVET, and support trust schools. Interspersed through the manifesto were special commitments to provide schooling and improve facilities for FELDA settlers, the Indian community and Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia and the states of Sabah and Sarawak.

The second set of pledges revolved around autonomy, de-politicization and accessibility of education institutions, particularly higher education. PH promised to repeal the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) and promote academic freedom, institute independent and politically impartial boards of governors and vice-chancellors such that appointments are based on merit and not political considerations. The manifesto also committed to recognizing the UEC for public university entry, alleviating the debt burden of the higher education loan

(PTPTN) recipients, and allocating more scholarships and subsidies for B40 and M40 households. PH set a minimum income threshold; only PTPTN debtors earning above RM 4,000 per month will be required to service their loans. This, together with the removal of defaulters off a blacklist, was magnified as one of the ten “first 100 days” promises.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Dr. Maszlee Malik was appointed Education Minister on 21 May, as part of the Cabinet’s second major instalment. The selection of a neophyte politician and former academic brings educational experience and lesser political baggage to the leadership position. Maszlee swiftly expressed an interest to take Malaysia’s schools, colleges and universities in new directions, stating an intention to make learning enjoyable¹ and to possibly reorient schooling to be less examination-based, looking to models such as Finland². At the same time, the previous administration’s Education Blueprint (2013-2025), in which uplifting national schools and bolstering English proficiency are top priorities, will broadly continue, subject to periodic review³.

A dynamic of continuity and change plays out. The Education Ministry initiated broad consultation and set up online channels for the Malaysian public to convey opinions and recommendations. In August, Maszlee announced a new seven member line-up in the National Education Advisory Council, and promised additional members to enhance regional and ethnic representation⁴. The direction, influence and independence of this council will become more apparent in due course.

Nonetheless, these measures signal a commitment to change. One of the problematic elements of the Education Blueprint is that it vests more incentives and autonomy in principals and education administrators, but provides little for teachers to be empowered. Maszlee’s promise to cut down teachers’ administrative work aligns with a discernible new education ethos that prioritizes teachers’ core tasks and expands teacher autonomy, but structures of top-down, centralized control – as well as schemes to score and track student progress – will need to be reconfigured, and professional competencies of teachers, principals and administrators redeveloped.

The vision of making national schools the school of choice confronts two deep-seated challenges: quality of education and national integration. Reforms must galvanize the participation of the government’s largest entity. The Ministry of Education consistently receives about 20% of the annual federal budget and comprises roughly 42% of public sector employees. Societal predispositions also pose hurdles. Primary schooling is perennially fragmented; the vast majority of Chinese attend Chinese vernacular schools and a large majority of Indians attend Tamil schools, while Malay students mostly opt for the national schools, with increasing numbers in religious schools. The composition of national school enrolment, with 94% Bumiputera, 1% Chinese and 3% Indian, staggeringly departs from the national population, where the corresponding proportions are 67%, 25% and 7%⁵.

The exodus from the national schools stems from a decades-long decline of confidence in quality of education, as well as linguistic and religious factors – particularly, concerns over Islamization⁶. Notably, Bumiputeras make up 9% and Indians 2% of Chinese primary school

enrolment; Chinese constitute the majority, at 88%. The new government maintains the highly ambitious goal of drawing a diversity of students back to the national schools. This is, of course, the reasonable and established course of action, but it will take a herculean effort and a large dosage of public faith to make breakthroughs in inducing the desired reverse migration. The focus on enhancing the learning experience, pursuing academic excellence beyond examination-based success, and emphasizing English proficiency, may contribute to the aspired restitution of national schools – but the approach must be systematic and sustained, addressing dysfunctions at multiple levels and undo embedded rote teaching and learning habits. The reform programme must be convincing, involving realignment of societal expectations with a substantially different education ethos.

The PH government's intention to invigorate TVET continually endorses this national priority. Whether the new regime can do the job more effectively than its predecessor, however, again depends on the coherence and boldness of its plans, and its capacity to integrate a sprawling, disparate sector. The Ministry of Education will continually play a key role, but whether it gains authority or jointly oversees TVET with the Ministry of Human Resources, or whether both relinquish this jurisdiction to a newly created central entity, remains to be determined.

ELECTORAL OVERTURES, SYSTEMIC REFORMS?

In practical terms, prominent early initiatives derive from specific electoral pledges or newly conceived electorate engagement. Among the measures garnering public attention, and seen to be well-received, are the issuance of guidelines for lightening school bags and even an apparel switch from white to black shoes⁷. There are certainly more substantive matters than the ones featuring in headlines and circulating in social media. The media and public, on their part, are also responsible for fixating on the more simplistic and sensational.⁸ On the whole, the government's early actions show a responsive and decisive administration attuned to pragmatic issues, delivery of promises, and touchstone issues of interest groups. Nonetheless, the measures taken are only first steps needing sustained and systemic expansion and follow-through – and some decisions risk setting adverse precedents.

A major 100-days promise centred on student loan burdens. This was arguably the simplest pledge, deliverable by decree. PH has brought relief to lower earning graduates, and taken about 430,000 defaulters off the blacklist⁹. However, problems and deficiencies with education financing persist, and these demand systemic solutions. Malaysia has an established practice of awarding scholarships, but there is wide scope to explore need-based bursaries providing more targeted assistance to low-income households. Bolder initiatives such as student part-time employment also merit consideration – although this entails changes to academic programmes with heavy credit hour requirements that preclude employment and independent learning opportunities.

Other specific promises pertain to support and accreditation of Chinese schools, a touchstone of the Chinese community, which among all ethnic groups most overwhelmingly voted for PH. In November 2017, BN approved the relocation of six Chinese vernacular schools and construction of ten new schools. Maszlee affirmed continual support for the relocations and construction of two new schools that have broken ground, but deferred endorsement of the remaining eight – stating instead that the proposal would be reviewed¹⁰. The eventual decision

might stay the course, or strike a compromise in view of other concessions on Chinese education concerns. PH promised to recognize the independent Chinese secondary schools' United Examination Certificate (UEC) for public university admissions. The UEC's status is a longstanding issue that never came to fruition under BN's federal government, although BN-governed Sarawak recognized the UEC at the state level in 2016.

Some segments of the electorate greet the move with approbation, others with unease, evidenced by some vehement objections. The finality of this decision is now postponed, pending a review, with the government stating that UEC recognition involves a five-year process. The circumspection is understandable. Moreover, Maszlee indicated that post-secondary education might move in the direction of a single pre-university system – presumably entailing a merger of the various national examinations¹¹. Such a step concurs with the aspiration of more unified national schools, but entails comprehensive and sustained effort.

The Education Minister shoulders unenviable roles and responsibilities, handling reforms of huge magnitude, some of which trigger polarized reactions. Popular overtures are expected, especially in the wake of an historic election. But some electorally-minded decisions risk setting problematic precedents, and dispensing operational fixes may also detract from systemic solutions.

Tellingly, Maszlee announced a “gift” to the Chinese community, in the form of 1,000 additional spaces in matriculation colleges, where a 90% Bumiputera quota currently applies¹². He attached a further condition that only students from the B40 – the bottom 40% of households based on income – would qualify. The incorporation of socioeconomic disadvantage is welcome, but this intervention potentially sets a regressive precedent, by extending the practice of overt racial allocations and ignoring problems with the matriculation colleges. Demands for other ethnic slots will surely surface.

More importantly, expanding access to matriculation lowers the bar for larger sections of the population, since the programme is essentially a fast track and watered down pre-university syllabus, proven to under-equip students for degree-level study. The issue of single university entry channel arises again. Disparities in content and rigour of matriculation, STPM (Malaysia's A-level equivalent), and the UEC if approved, will need to be addressed.

The PH government's manifesto has, perhaps more consistently, signalled how it will rectify the politicization of education under BN. Malaysia's education institutions have become entrenched as overtly partisan bodies, governed by political appointees promoting BN's interests while obstructing opposition presence, and restricting academic freedom in general. Reforms to de-politicize high-ranking appointments, especially the vice chancellor and university board members, requires institutionalizing new processes but also imparting new norms and cultures. Maszlee's guarantee that students can organize political events distinguishes the new regime. Whether students make use of the opened spaces and new freedoms, of course, remains to be seen, but the days of opposition politicians being barred from campuses are clearly over.

In the meantime, the government is saddled with the need to usher out BN appointees and apologists, some of whom are also tainted by corruption, plagiarism and abuse of power allegations¹³. This process must be carefully managed, to avoid over-extending the executive

arm while taking robust action to facilitate a change of guard – while instituting procedures that empower universities to make their own decisions and appointments. In other words, some centralized decision-making is necessary in the interim, and ministerial appointments may be required to pave the way for eventual removal of such prerogatives. However, the process has become complicated by Maszlee’s appointment as president of the International Islamic University (IIUM). The Minister’s insistence on retaining the position, in the face of public pressure and some students’ objections, compromises the integrity of administrative reforms and de-politicization of education, regardless of the potential positive impact of his presidential post at IIUM¹⁴.

The infamous Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) provides wide latitude for university administrations to control student activism and arbitrarily punish dissent. PH’s promise to repeal and replace the UUCA responds to public opinion that asserts the importance of a clear, symbolic and substantive break from a tainted past. Parliament should undertake a methodical abolition of the UUCA, but it is difficult to grasp why the process needs five years, as the government has recently suggested. Indeed, given the complexity of a comprehensive reset of university governance, careful study and transition planning should begin in earnest, involving the gamut of change, and possibly plans to reassign university staff in preparation of greater autonomy, for example, by expanding of university admissions departments and downsizing of redundant student affairs departments, in line with the commitment to reduce monitoring of student activities.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Post-GE-14 Malaysia eagerly looks forward to the Pakatan Harapan government’s delivery of various education promises, which encompasses fundamental renovations and pragmatic modifications. The government has reiterated its commitment to reform, but largely made various electoral overtures and addressed practical and more deliverable promises, while also tempering expectations and responding to popular sentiments and some backlash. Whether Malaysia realizes the higher aspirations of enhanced education quality, access and integration will depend on the coherence, efficacy, integrity and resolve of its reforms.

¹ “Dr Maszlee to make learning a joy again”, *The Star*, 19 May 2018.

² “Focus on tech and English as education minister looks to Finland too”, *The Malay Mail*, 22 May 2018.

³ “Education blueprints to stay”, *The Star*, 23 May 2018.

⁴ “Seven chosen to be part of National Education Advisory Council”, *The Star*, 17 August 2018; “Maszlee: National Education Advisory Council will give objective views on education system”, *The Star*, 2 September 2018.

⁵ Ministry of Education (2013) *National Education Blueprint, 2013-2025*. Putrajaya: Ministry of Education.

⁶ For a scholarly, wide-ranging and critical appraisal of Malaysia’s education system, see Moses Samuel, Meng Yew Yee and Lorraine Pe Symaco (editors) (2017) *Education in Malaysia: Developments and Challenges*. Singapore: Springer.

⁷ “Ministry guidelines to ease load on heavy schoolbags”, *The Star*, 29 June 2018; “Students to wear black trainers next year, says Dr Maszlee”, *The Star*, 20 July 2018.

⁸ “Black and white shoes aside, here are Maszlee's other points”, *Malaysiakini*, 20 July 2018.

⁹ “More than 400,000 PTPTN borrowers taken out of blacklist, says new chairman”, *Bernama*, 26 June 2018.

¹⁰ “Relocation, construction of SJKC were objectively studied”, *Bernama*, 30 June 2018.

¹¹ “Bicara khas Dr. Maszlee”, RTM interview, 30 July 2018.

¹² “1,000 matriculation spots available for Chinese students: Maszlee”, *New Straits Times*, 28 June 2018.

¹³ “Pro-BN chancellors can go, says Maszlee”, *The Malaysian Insight*, 21 June 2018.

¹⁴ “IIUM welcomes Maszlee's appointment as its President”, *Bernama*, 5 September 2018; “Maszlee wants to bring back IIUM's glory”, *Bernama*, 12 September 2018; “Affirm commitment to academic reforms by rejecting IIUM post, Maszlee told”, *The Malay Mail*, 7 September 2018.

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