

## COVER STORY

# An education redesign in progress

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**W**E hear of many cases where fresh graduates are unable to gain employment upon graduation; nor do they have the relevant skills and opportunity to strike out on their own.

This generally occurs when their education and training are either sub-standard, not forward-looking and rendered obsolete upon graduation or cannot be translated into practice at the workplace.

This scenario in the country takes on more urgency in the face of a fast-changing globalised world prompted by rapid technological advances and the impending impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) took action to circumvent the issues in 2015 via the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025 which sought to transform the higher education system to be among the best in the world that will enable the country to compete globally.

Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh declared in his mandate in January that 2017 is the year of Redesigning Higher Education — a follow-through and continuing of existing efforts designed to produce holistic graduates who are highly employable — resilient, innovative and are present and future-ready for the unpredictable job market.

Education, he said, should be made current, relevant and can translate academics into practical output.

And to have the education that is able to deliver all these, he added that tertiary institutions have to better understand the needs of students in relation to the current state of the world where technology is prevalent. Therefore, there is a need to change the concept of teaching and learning at the higher education level.

This year, the ministry has looked towards embracing technology as a means to jumpstart a paradigm shift in higher education.

Idris also declared 2017 as the year of "translational research" — translating academic research into practical solutions to benefit the industry, academia, government and society.

To inculcate the spirit of volunteerism in undergraduates, the ministry implemented a Gap Year programme at eight public universities to give them the chance to volunteer at government agencies.

The ministry continued to be committed to the mainstreaming of Technical and Vocational Education (TVET), and worked on to improve the quality of TVET to make it a popular choice among students.

All in all, Mandate 2017 focused to improve the overall quality of the higher education system as well as the calibre of graduates from both public and private tertiary institutions.

## GAP YEAR

In general, a gap year is a one-year break from studies or work for an individual to pursue

other interests, generally different from his regular life or line of work. The term is usually applied to students who take a year (or less, rarely more) away from their studies to better prepare for the workplace.

Malaysia's Gap Year 2017 programme announced by MOHE early in the year involves eight universities — Universiti Utara Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia and Universiti Malaysia Sabah. UKM and UiTM were identified to kick-start the programme which began in September.

Under the programme, students take time off from studies to pursue their interests and are particularly encouraged to volunteer with agencies such as the army, police, Civil Defence Department and especially those under the National Blue Ocean Strategy.

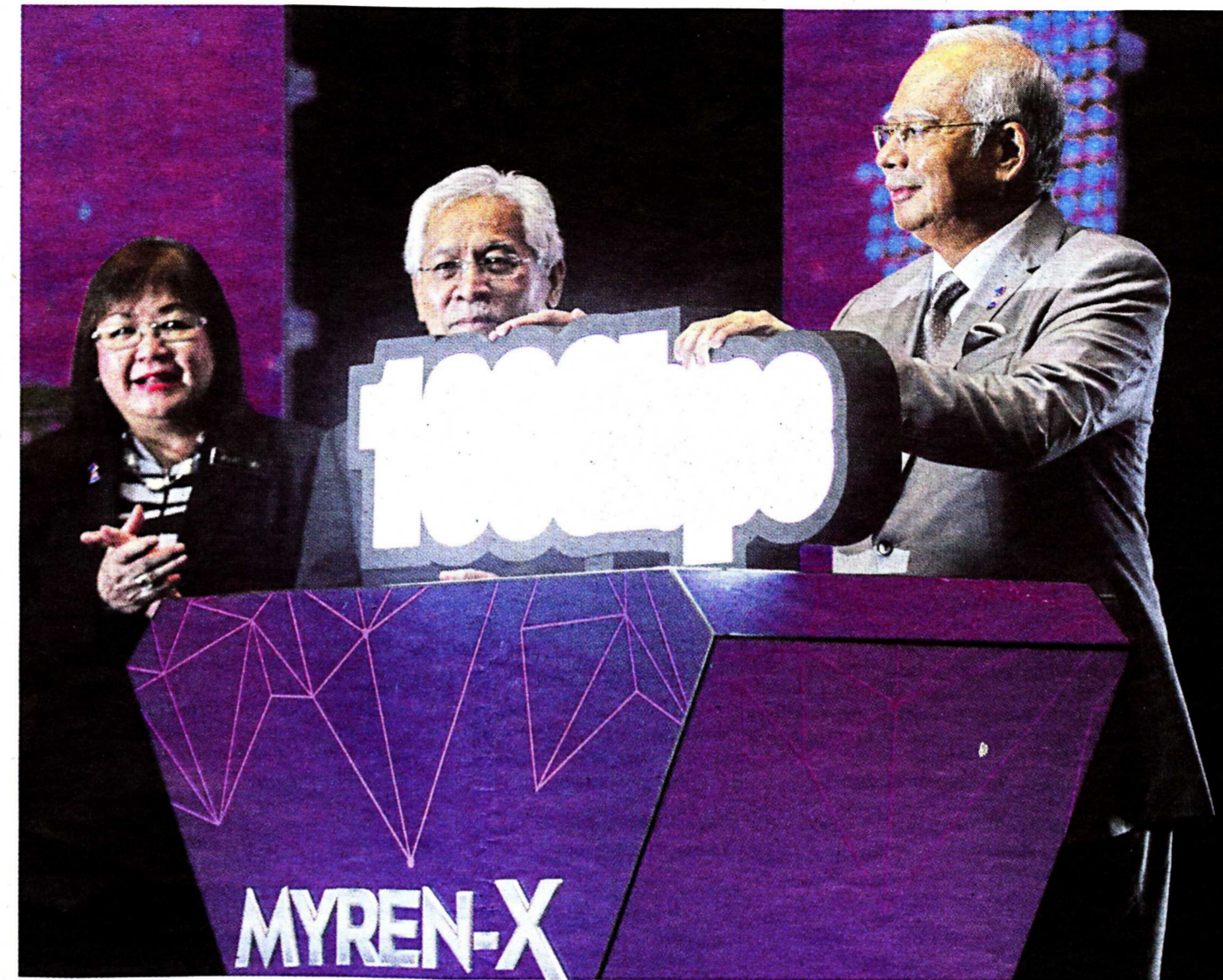
It is part of the ministry's efforts to produce holistic graduates, with good academic results, vast experience in the industry and love for the nation.

Other than gaining experience, the programme is expected help to inculcate patriotism in students. A student allowance for the duration of the programme has been proposed.

## GAME-CHANGING TECHNOLOGY

The enhancement of the existing Malaysian Research and Education Network's (Myren) online ecosystem to Myren-X — a 100-gigabit high speed broadband infrastructure — in October is set to be a game-changer for the local higher education sector.

Designed to be a dedicated network for



Datuk Seri Najib Razak (right) and Idris Jusoh at the launch of Myren-X in University of Malaya. Looking on is Deputy Higher Education Minister Datuk Mary Yap Kain Ching. PIC BY ASYRAF HAMZAH

research and learning activities with its own separate and independent gateway to the Internet, Myren-X increases bandwidth capacity at public universities to a maximum of 100 gigabits per second (Gbps) and for other institutions under the MOHE, up to 10 Gbps.

It also offers a bandwidth of more than one megabit per second per student.

MOHE deputy secretary general (management) Datuk Kamel Mohamad, who is also its chief information officer, said the higher overall bandwidth speed and bigger capacity under Myren-X allow huge amounts of data to move at higher speed, which is a

requirement of teaching and learning activities.

Myren-X also enables big data research and experiments which consume huge network bandwidth and capacity like those in the fields of genome, telemedicine and particle physics.



MOHE's aim is to produce graduates who are resilient, innovative and are present and future-ready.



Students are encouraged to volunteer with agencies like the police for their gap year.

"Myren-X is expected to further spur the implementation of programmes under the Redesigning Higher Education initiative stipulated in Malaysia's Education Development Plan (Higher Education). It will facilitate new ways and methods in 21st century teaching and learning such as collaborative online learning, virtual classrooms and Massive Open Online Courses.

"In addition, it will not only allow Malaysians to access overseas education online, but also enable foreigners to access education in Malaysia and bring Malaysian education overseas.

"Researchers in the country can collaborate with research communities as well as have access to international research labs in real-time," he added.

## STEPPING UP ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Realising that Malaysian graduates need the right combination of knowledge and communication skills, and more than academic qualifications alone to compete effectively in the job market, MOHE introduced the Malaysia English Assessment (MEA) which is embedded in the Ecosystem for English Language Learning and Assessment in Higher Education to nurture holistic, entrepreneurial and balanced graduates.

Tertiary institutions play an important role in raising the standard of English of the country's graduates and future generations, and MEA is the platform to do this.

The MEA has three development phases. The first phase, which started in September, involves the construction of the Higher Education English Language Test Repository system — a "question bank" — developed by Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris.

This question bank will be used to construct standard Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) exam questions for the English empowerment programmes in public universities at the end of Semester 1, Session 2017-2018.

CEFR was originally developed to improve language teaching in Europe and it is recognised in practice as the international standard worldwide.

The second phase is the construction of test specifications for formal and informal assessments while the third phase outlines the MEA Guidebook and Test Repository Manual for users.

These developments are expected to be completed in stages by end of next year.

At the launch of MEA in October, Idris said assessment is not only critical to learning as it provides a bridge between teaching and learning, but it can also enhance the latter and drive a student's educational experience.

## STRENGTHENING POSITION AS REGIONAL EDUCATION HUB

To achieve the nation's goal of becoming an education hub in the region, MOHE believes it is important to harmonise public and private higher learning institutions rather than have them seen as separate entities. Therefore, it is important that private higher education institutions adhere to a strict set of regulations that will ensure their quality.

Institutions in the private higher education sector consist of diverse types, sizes, capabilities and capacities. There are 487 Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in the country and this makes regulation challenging. Hence, ACT 555 was enacted in 1996 to regulate the operations of PHEIs.

In order to address the current transformation and challenges in the private higher education sector and facilitate the operations of these private institutions, Idris said it is imperative to amend ACT 555.

The amendment of ACT 555 came into force on Nov 28 and it is expected to lead to better regulatory practice that will allow the improvement of the quality of PHEIs through a performance-based regulation. The Malaysian Quality Evaluation System for Private Colleges (MyQUEST) is an example of a performance-based rating system to evaluate their quality.

MyQUEST informs the private institutions of their performance compared to others which facilitates competition and drives value; enables individual institutions to engage in self-reflection and identify areas of improvement; enables potential students and their parents to make informed choices when it comes to the pursuit of knowledge; and enables stakeholders, such as sponsors, to determine education sponsorships.

MyQUEST also enables the ministry to ensure that private institutions operate within the regulatory framework and meet the goals of providing the best education that Malaysians deserve.

An improved performance in MyQUEST will boost the reputation of the colleges, as well as raise the public's confidence in the nation's ability to provide quality higher education.