

2016 IN REVIEW

EDUCATION

Cultivating academic excellence

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AMIDST a challenging economic environment, the focus on education remained steadfast in 2016.

While the government recalibrated and restructured the 2016 Budget earlier this year, the education sector was seen as a key focus area recognised for its contribution to talent and socioeconomic development as well as being a key factor in safeguarding the future of the country. With that view, creating opportunities and raising the quality of education were top priorities.

In January, the government announced that four Public Service Department sponsorship programmes would continue to provide opportunities for those pursuing higher education.

Other measures announced were a RM5 billion allocation for the National Higher Education Fund (PTPTN) for undergraduates, the continuation of MyBrain15 — a scholarship programme aimed at increasing the number of professionals with a postgraduate certification in Malaysia — the Academic Training Scheme for Bumiputera (SLAB) and Academic Training Scheme of Public Higher Education Institutions (SLAI) programmes. A total of 15,000 students were to be added in the MyMaster programme, 5,000 for MyPhD, and 300 for SLAI.

In terms of reputation and ranking, several universities made the

country proud. In June, five Malaysian public universities were ranked in the top 100 in the QS Asia 2016 University Rankings: Universiti Malaya (UM) in 27th place, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) in 49th place, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM).

Recently, three Malaysian universities made it to the top 100 list of 300 universities in 50 countries in the Times Higher Education (THE) BRICS and Emerging Economies University Rankings 2017. UPM was in 89th place, a climb of 14 places from its previous ranking, while UTP was 91st and UTM ranked 100th. Making it to the top 300 were USM at 114 and UKM at 136, while UUM made it to within the 201-250 range and Universiti Teknologi Mara made it to the 251-300 band.

In terms of internationalisation, 2016 saw the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) citing Malaysia as among a favourite education destination for international students, being home to 10 international university branch campuses — the highest in Asia.

More Malaysians are being encouraged to partake in life-long learning through a more flexible means of education. This comes af-



Doctors of Philosophy degree graduates with their scrolls at **Universiti Sains Malaysia's 54th convocation** this year. Pic by Ramdzan Masiam

ter the launch of two guidelines developed by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) — the Guideline for the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning Credit Award or APEL (C) and the Credit Transfer for Massive Open Online Courses Guideline — which allow individuals with working experience and various short courses to be entitled for credit transfers in academic programmes offered at higher education institutions.

At the school level, 2016 saw the completion of the review for both Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR) and Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah (KSSM), as planned in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025).

Education director-general Tan Sri Dr Khair Mohamad Yusof told the *New Straits Times* students could expect changes of between 15 and 20 per cent in subjects' syllabi, which had been tweaked. The pedagogy of instruction and assessment would no longer focus only on central examinations, like SPM and Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR), but also on school assess-

ment, co-curriculum, physical health, sports and talent. To address English language proficiency, a Roadmap for English Language Education in Malaysia spanning from 2015 to 2025 was approved, marking the beginning of a journey to align the standard of English taught in Malaysian schools and institutions of higher learning with international standards.

In a bid to further democratise education and level the playing field for schools, the Education Ministry has set its sights on enhancing broadband connectivity for some 2,000 schools in rural areas and the interior to 4G, under the second phase of the 1BestariNet initiative.

At present, Education Minister Datuk Seri Mahdzir Khalid said schools were using the Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL) and Very Small Aperture Terminal (VSAT), which have slow connectivity.

"I have already given the company responsible and the Educational Technology Division until early next year, at the very least, to achieve faster Internet speed," he had said.

Concerns about the increase of bullying cases has led to the Education Ministry announcing a plan to enforce a one-year suspension on all primary and secondary school

students involved in bullying. It is expected to be enforced next year.

Amidst the uproar of this year's unexpected UPSR results in November, the Education Ministry is mulling a proposal to replace UPSR with the School-Based Assessment (PBS) next year. Under the plan, examinations will comprise 50 per cent of overall scores for students, with the balance coming from students' emotional, spiritual and physical aspects based on their participation in school.

The school year ended on an upbeat note with the announcement of an improved performance in Mathematics and Science by students, as measured by the Trends International Mathematics and Science (TIMSS) study 2015. TIMSS is an international benchmarking study conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA).

Khair said Malaysia was among 16 countries that recorded the highest score in Science, at 471 points in TIMSS 2015, an increase of 45 points from the score of 426 in TIMSS 2011. For Mathematics, Malaysia was among 18 countries that recorded improvements when it scored 465 points, an increase of 25 points from the figure in TIMSS 2011.

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RM5b

Allocation for the National Higher Education Fund (PTPTN) in 2016



Broadband connectivity for rural schools is being upgraded to 4G under the second phase of the 1BestariNet initiative. Pic by Luqman Hakim Zubir



Central examinations may be given less emphasis with the completion of KSSR and KSSM review. Pic by Farizul Hafiz Awang