

## COVER STORY

# After SPM: Deciding the future

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**T**OMORROW, the wait will be over for 434,535 candidates who sat the 2016 Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination.

With the announcement of the exam results tomorrow, SPM school-leavers now have to face the daunting task of taking the next step in terms of furthering their education.

After a structured school system where students generally pursued either the science or arts stream, how best can they decide on the field of study and programme? The decision is not a light one as it is the first step towards determining the path their future will take.

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Professional career coach Nik Faiz Iskandar Nik Zahari said students in the country tend to view higher education as a mere paper chase.

"Most students here regard institutions of higher learning as a means to gain a diploma or degree qualification that they can boast about. This mindset has to change. School-leavers and aspiring undergraduates have to plan their future careers before deciding on the course that they want to pursue," he said.

Professional trainer and motivator Jackson Ng said SPM school-leavers should not be pressured by their peers to apply for a particular course or succumb to their parents' demands. Instead, they should look to themselves for indicators of their interest, talents and inclination.

"Identify your passion. Look at your innate abilities — the talent you are born with. Pay attention to the compliments others give you with regards to what you are good at.

"And listen to the voice inside of you, what you are keen on. These are indicators of the field of study you should pursue. Of course, these have to be mapped against the current and future job market," he said.

Ng cautioned that oftentimes when students base their decision on friends or are pushed by their parents, they end up switching courses halfway, resulting in loss of money and time. Or if the student does graduate and earn a diploma or degree, he finds himself unable to find employment as he has no passion for the field.

Deciding on studies after Form Five can be stressful if one does not have knowledge of the career decision-making process, said HELP University lecturer and counsellor Justin Yap.

"Ideally, one should have knowledge about both oneself and the world of work. Self-knowledge in the areas of interests, aptitudes and skills, personality, as well as values is essential.

"Secondly, it is vital to have some knowledge about the workplace such as a basic job description, office environment and requirements such as skills and education.

"When we have both these sets of information, we are then able to match who we are and what the job requires, providing a person-environment fit which results in a high performing and satisfied worker. Even though a student may only be concerned about a field of study or a major, it's always best to take a long-term view as one only spends three to eight years at university but close to 30 years in the workplace," he said.

Career Cube head and consultant Mastura Mansor recommends SPM school-leavers take a personality test to find out their interest.

"A common test for students is the Holland Code (RIASEC). RIASEC is the Holland Occupational Themes which refer to a theory of personality that focuses on career and vocational choice. It groups people on the basis of their suitability for six categories of occupations. In RIASEC, students differentiate themselves with six different categories and interests," she said.

The characters are summarised as either realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising or conventional.

The RIASEC Code guides students on the environment and career that will suit their personality. "Once they know their personality and their favourite subject, they can find out more about careers that suit them and choose an institution for pursuing their studies."

## SCIENCE VERSUS ARTS

Both science and arts secondary school-leavers have a variety of fields to choose from at higher learning institutions.

It is a misconception that arts students have second class options as they can have their pick of programmes such as social science, humanities, education (special, sports, language, music, early child, etc), business, communications, art (graphic media, animation, etc), hospitality and human resources.

"Students just need to choose the course that matches their personality and interests,"

said Mastura.

Both arts and science stream students need to free themselves from the "box" they were put in at school, Ng added.

"Conventional wisdom has it that those in the science stream are destined to be professionals while those in the arts stream go into business. This is not true — science students can do well in fields such as psychology, for example.

"Although an arts background may seem like a lesser choice and an unfair starting point, the reality is that many professionals with science background work for businesses or corporations, or for entrepreneurs from the arts stream," said Ng, adding that every industry is a business and there is equal opportunity to succeed.

"Anyway, what we study is not a worry as there is a tendency for a person to do something else every five years. Life is all about progress. Lifelong learning is key."

Yap commented that at the Form Five level, the arts student is only held back by effort.

"Even though the arts student may be at a slight disadvantage in terms of scientific knowledge, he or she can overcome it by spending extra time reading to make up for it. To rule out



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**JACKSON NG**  
Professional trainer and motivator



Nik Faiz Iskandar Nik Zahari at a career seminar for Form Five students.

## MALAYSIA'S TOP UNIVERSITIES BY QS SUBJECT RANKINGS

SUBJECT	INSTITUTION	RANK
Accounting & Finance	University of Malaya	101-150
Agriculture & Forestry	Universiti Putra Malaysia	51-100
Anthropology	University of Malaya	51-100
Architecture /Built Environment	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia	51-100
Art & Design	Universiti Sains Malaysia	101-150
Biological Sciences	University of Malaya	151-200
Business & Management Studies	University of Malaya	51-100
Chemistry	University of Malaya	101-150
Communication & Media Studies	University of Malaya	51-100
Computer Science & Information	University of Malaya	51-100
Development Studies	University of Malaya	26
Economics & Econometrics	University of Malaya	151-200
Education	University of Malaya	41
Engineering - Chemical	University of Malaya	38
Engineering - Civil & Structural	University of Malaya	51-100
Engineering - Electrical & Electronic	University of Malaya	23
Engineering - Mechanical, Aeronautical & Manufacturing	University of Malaya	33
Engineering - Mineral & Mining	University of Malaya	35
English Language & Literature	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia	51-100
Environmental Sciences	Universiti Sains Malaysia	49
Geography	University of Malaya	151-200
Hospitality & Leisure Management	Taylor's University	29
Law	University of Malaya	151-200
Linguistics	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia	51-100
Materials Science	University of Malaya	101-150
Mathematics	University of Malaya	151-200
Medicine	University of Malaya	101-150
Modern Languages	University of Malaya	51-100
Pharmacy & Pharmacology	University of Malaya	51-100
Physics & Astronomy	University of Malaya	201-250
Psychology	University of Malaya	251-300
Social Policy & Administration	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia	51-100
Sociology	University of Malaya	151-200
Sports-related Subjects	University of Malaya	51-100
Statistics & Operational Research	University of Malaya	101-150
Theology, Divinity & Religious Studies	International Islamic University Malaysia	46
Arts & Humanities	University of Malaya	85
Engineering & Technology	University of Malaya	35
Life Sciences & Medicine	University of Malaya	164
Natural Sciences	University of Malaya	188
Social Sciences & Management	University of Malaya	71

Source: QS World University Rankings by Subject 2017

the scientific field because one didn't spend two years (Forms Four and Five) studying it would be premature as one's interest and skills are still developing.

"Instead, let your curiosity drive your exploration and use the energy generated from that motivation to overcome any shortcomings you may have," he said.

## MATRICULATION, FOUNDATION OR DIPLOMA COURSE?

Nik Faiz said the Education Ministry provides a lot of opportunities for students to further their studies, be it overseas or locally. Those who excel in their SPM exam, of course, have a wider range of choices to further their studies.

"Students who have an interest to study at a university abroad may consider Foundation courses, International Baccalaureate or A Level programmes offered by external examination

boards. Those who intend to enrol in local universities may consider the Matriculation programme managed by the ministry," he added.

Students who are eligible to enter the Matriculation programme can opt for either science or accounting electives. Students are given an allowance throughout their year-long studies which are conducted in an atmosphere similar to university. Upon completing the programme, they can then apply for a place in programmes at public universities.

Meanwhile, there are home-grown foundation programmes with qualifications awarded by various universities that SPM school-leavers may want to consider. The advantage of a foundation programme is that students study subjects specific to the course they plan to take at degree level. The assessment style is usually a combination of coursework, continual evaluation and a final exam, but the weighting of each assessment

## The TVET option

SIJIL Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) school-leavers have another avenue when furthering their education — Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programmes.

The Ministry of Higher Education, as outlined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025, envisions that polytechnics and community colleges will be the premier higher education TVET providers that develop skilled talent to meet the growing and changing demands of industry.

The higher education landscape is now in the midst of changing from a primary focus on university education as the sole pathway to success to one where academic and TVET pathways are equally valued and cultivated.

Datuk Amir Md Noor, director-general of the Department of Community College Education and acting director-general of Department of Polytechnic Education at the ministry, envisages that enrolment in TVET programmes will increase significantly, through extensive partnerships with industry, to ensure supply matches demand.

Polytechnics education, which began in Malaysia with the establishment of the Ungku Omar Polytechnic, Ipoh in 1969, was entrusted to provide technical manpower to cater for the demand for semi-professionals in the engineering, commerce and services sectors.

Community college education, on the other hand, was established in 2001 and aimed at providing vocational-based training programmes to secondary school-leavers and the local community through a lifelong learning approach.

Almost all of the programmes of study in polytechnics are designed to meet the regional and national demand for semi-pro-



Amir Md Noor

professionals in the said sectors while the majority of the programmes offered in community colleges are tailored to suit the socio-economy needs of the community.

The distinct difference between programmes run by polytechnics and community colleges is the level of qualification — polytechnics mostly offer diploma courses while community colleges provide certificate programmes.

As of June this year, Malaysian polytechnics will be offering two pre-diploma programmes, five special skills certificate programmes, 63 diploma programmes and eight degree programmes.

"In other words, the target groups for community colleges are quite diverse ranging from school-leavers/drop-outs, displaced workers, communities or any members of the public who need training for work. SPM holders can apply for full-time programmes at the certificate level in community colleges and local community members can enrol in short courses of their interests either during the weekends or weekdays at a nominal fee."

Amir said as a rule of thumb, school-leavers should be mindful of the following when applying for a programme in either polytechnics or community colleges — interests, unique talents, work attitudes, nature of education and training, career advancement, expected salary and availability of jobs.

"Depending on their SPM results, there are many programmes at both polytechnics and community colleges that they can consider. They should also consider consulting career guidance counsellors at their respective schools on a particular programme in these institutions."

depends on the college.

The disadvantage of university-specific foundation programmes is that it may be difficult to switch courses.

Nik Faiz said SPM school-leavers can also enter Form Six and sit the Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia exam as it gives them ample time to study — close to two years — and think about their future career.

"Students who may have personal obligations such as family finance prefer pursuing diploma courses where they have the chance to secure a job first and will consider a degree programme later when they want to move up the career ladder," he added.

A diploma programme generally takes three years and there are courses in a myriad of fields. Diploma holders are generally skilled and readily employed. If a diploma holder decides to continue studies at the degree level, they will generally get credit exemption for the programme.

## RANKINGS

Does the rankings of a university matter when looking at courses to pursue or should future undergraduates just pursue the field of study of their choice at any university?

Mastura said the university rankings are just an insight into its capacity to serve students in their studies.

"The most reliable ranking survey is QS ranking and in Malaysia we have APEX (Accelerated Programme for Excellence) and Research University (RU) status. Only a few public universities have this recognition of more capacity, better fa-



Mastura Mansor



Justin Yap

cilities and bigger research grants — that is all.

"From the employer's perspective, it doesn't really matter from which public or local university the students graduate from. Good results at university are just a ticket to a job interview. It is the student's responsibility to enhance himself with positive personality, skill competency and leadership experience to build up their charisma in the eyes of the future employer."

Yap commented the dilemma here is very similar to the passion versus pragmatism conundrum — "Should I pursue my passion or should I take a safe job that guarantees a stable salary?"

"There are merits on both sides of the coin. On one hand, graduating for a higher ranking university looks better on your resume and the student may probably receive a higher quality education, not to mention connections and networks.

"On the other hand, history is full of individuals who have succeeded in life despite coming from less glamorous institutions of higher learning," he said.

"In fact, both the late Steve Jobs and his rival Bill Gates didn't even complete their university education. It doesn't matter whether one ends up at a top ranked university or chooses to pursue a suitable course at a lower ranked one because success seems to be determined more by the will of the individual rather than the quality of education. Once the student realises that he is in charge of his destiny instead of the university he attends, then this decision becomes an easy one."