

Money and madness in numbers

So many high scorers but our higher education is not really something to shout about.

THE SPM exams have just ended. And the SPM exams are here again. Testing times just don't seem to go away for our students.

After the first round of the exams ended, a second session has just begun on April 5 for those who were unable to sit for their papers the first time around either due to the Covid-19 pandemic or the unexpected floods.

And already, there are questions about whether they will have to go for yet another re-sit. There are claims of questions being recycled from the first session.

Many students had already discussed answers to those questions and could well be scoring big. I guess they will be hoping for some good results this time.

Some 85,000 of the 407,000 registered candidates sat for the papers in the second session.

Recycled questions or not, some 10,000 may score straight As. Last year saw the best result in half a decade, with 9,411 getting straight As. That was about 2% of the total number of candidates.

It makes sense that only such a small number – the top 2% or so – can come out as excellent students.

Which then leaves me with a

**DORAIRAJ
NADASON**
newsdesk
@thestar.com.my



Why not?

mind-boggling question: How did 80,000 undergraduates get first class degrees in our local universities in just one year, all of whom have since been spared the need to repay their PTPTN loans?

Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Dr Nṛraini Ahmad announced recently that 79,873 students had all got first class bachelor's degrees, and a total of RM2.06bil of PTPTN loans will be wiped off the slate.

I wasn't really the best at Mathematics at school, but the simple calculation has me amazed.

Assuming that an annual school cohort is about 400,000, and about half the number get into local universities, that would mean a full 40% of undergraduates managed

to get first class degrees.

Of course, it may be a bit simplistic. But remember that just 10 years earlier, in 2011, only 11,621 were eligible for loan write-offs.

For the number to have leap-frogged to 80,000, there must have really been a huge improvement among the students. Or something could be very wrong.

Are our already low standards being lowered further? Are lecturers practically giving away first-class degrees? Will these "first-class" graduates be strong additions to the workforce?

Lower standards are something we really do not need, especially after the outcry over the incredible number of PhD holders we seem to be producing over the last few years.

If we do want to give more students free education, the government should just do that – offer free education to the B40.

Let's get this straight. I have no problems with so many of our students doing very well in their exams. It's actually something to be proud of.

But the pride takes a huge dent when we realise that these paper qualifications are just that – pieces

of paper.

What have these doctoral degree holders brought to the country? How have their theses helped the country, or even their own academic fields?

Our education standards, like it or not, are not really something to shout about.

The QS world university rankings were out on Wednesday, listing top universities in 51 disciplines.

Malaysia did not merit a single mention in the top 50. That tiny neighbour down south did – many times.

The National University of Singapore (NUS) was Asia's best performing university, better even than those from China, coming out as the world's best in petroleum engineering.

Petroleum engineering! How much oil does Singapore produce? Shouldn't we be the ones who do well in all things petroleum?

Oh, incidentally, NUS was also in the top 10 in 16 different disciplines. The university was ranked 11th overall with Nanyang Technological University at 12th.

Malaysia's best – Universiti Malaya – was ranked 65th with

Universiti Putra Malaysia at 143, Universiti Kebangsaan at 144 and Universiti Teknologi at 147.

However, not all is lost. We did do better than the larger Asian countries like India and even some Chinese and Korean universities.

And the best news of all in recent days was that six Malaysians have made it to Harvard College in one intake for the first time ever.

This is indeed something to be proud of. The best we have managed before this was just two.

The six – Chooi Je Qi, Herman Leong Xin Yang, Ishant Shah, Carisma Michaela Wong, Lee Ee Jenn, and Alyssa Yap Xin Yi – have to be congratulated.

After all, they had received offers of admission amid stiff competition from a global applicant pool of 61,220 students.

The fact that Herman and Ishant are from my hometown of Penang is yet another thing to preen about.

And guess what, most of them are not likely to have to pay anything in tuition fees unless their parents are in the very high-income bracket, taking home more than RM640,000 a year.

Now, that's an exemption for top students that I can live with.