

# Spelling out the nation's future educational needs

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**The 'National Education Blueprint 2006-2010' will ensure the Education Ministry's goals are reflected and planned in a transparent and deliverable manner. Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein shares his visions with KOH LAY CHIN.**

**KUALA LUMPUR:** An A-to-Z guide on the country's education system, including its weaknesses, future strategies and how funds are disbursed, will be launched soon.

In a first effort of its kind, the Education Ministry will lay bare its plans in the "National Education Blueprint 2006-2010".

The document will spell out the ministry's approaches for the next five years, including timelines on its delivery of goals.

It will also show how the mammoth RM23 billion allocation for education will be distributed under the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

Mindful that "everyone has an opinion on education", the ministry will also explain its direction for key areas such as the strengthening of national schools, its "clusters of excellent schools", access to education, and empowering teachers.

Admitting that the Malaysian education system was at the crossroads, Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein said the blueprint would ensure the ministry's goals were reflected and planned in a transparent

and deliverable manner.

Themed, "Pioneering Change — A National Mission", the blueprint would allow all those involved and interested in education to be clear on where the ministry is heading and how it wants to get there, he said.

"Education policies have far-reaching implications and we need to understand where we are before we can figure out how to get to where we need and want to be as a nation," he said in an interview with the *New Sunday Times*.

"For example, not many realise that children, who entered their first year of education at primary level in 2005, will only graduate to the marketplace in year 2020."

It is, therefore, crucial to have a blueprint and implementation plan, and to instil a sense of urgency in Malaysians, he added.

"We need to face up to the fact that Malaysians have to compete with billions of our fellow Asians who are hungry for the kind of prosperity and stability we have achieved over the past 20 years.

"They will work harder and smarter because they are

hungrier.

"All Malaysians, especially the Malay community, have to come to terms with this fact.

"If we don't rise to the ever-increasing critical challenges, we will return to being losers in the global race.

"I also feel the blueprint has approached most of the issues from a purely market perspective, whereby we have looked at satisfying the needs and demands of the market."

The blueprint would be targeted at education officers at the federal, state and district levels, Members of Parliament, state assemblymen, teachers, parents (through parent-teacher associations) and non-governmental organisations.

It will be for all to see when it is posted on the ministry's website after its launch on Jan 12.

Hishammuddin had announced various new policies and changes this year and in 2005, such as the re-assessing of academic and non-academic achievement and the teaching profession, but he feels the public needs a better understanding of

why he is taking such steps and not a "total reform" as often demanded by educationists.

"People out there usually take only bits and pieces of education, and read what interests them... they don't look at it in a holistic manner.

"Being transparent is important because the amount allotted for education is so big and I do not want allegations that it did not reach target groups or our objectives because this blueprint will show exactly where the money is all going to."

Hishammuddin made it clear that the various streams of schools were here to stay.

"For too long, people have perceived the various streams and types of schools as something destructive or to quote economists, a zero-sum game."

Hishammuddin said he had to get the message across that the different streams were beneficial and were not going anywhere so that people would get past the "phobia or fear of the unknown" and move on to producing the very best students out of these schools.

# 'We have to build on strong fundamentals'

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**Q:** There have been times during your tenure as Education Minister when educationalists and academicians say there needs to be total reform and that what the ministry is currently doing is merely putting "patches on an old shirt".

**A:** When I first began as Education Minister, I shared the same view. Everybody has an opinion on education. You always feel that the grass is greener on the other side and because we are now much more exposed and more educated, the expectations and demands are also higher.

I was no exception. When I came to the ministry, I was just a member of the public who was also a parent, having the same views and expectations. However, my recent trip to South Africa for the Commonwealth Ministers of Education meeting opened my eyes to the strong foundations and progress we have achieved in education.

When viewed in the context of our achievements vis-a-vis the other Commonwealth countries, it is heartening to note that our education system ranks very high in key indicators among our peers who share the same legacy, colonial past and system. In the recent report by the Commonwealth Secretariat, Malaysia ranked very high in terms of our literacy rate and also participation rate at all levels of education.

It is, therefore, crucial that everybody appreciates the fact that we need not start from scratch. We have to build on these strong fundamentals, adjust where necessary, reform where needed and re-engineer what is not working.

Educationists, academicians or NGOs who are involved in areas like sports, for example, want us to emphasise on sports but they don't look at the time available in schools.

If we have two-session schools, how are we going to do that? And out of frustration about certain areas, they call for "total reform". Where would we start? It's better for us to realise we have a strong foundation and let's improve on that.

We have consistently, since Independence, put much investment in education and that has not been emphasised enough. We have got a very strong basis, we don't need to change the shirt as it were, and we don't need to put patches on it because I think what we need is to maybe fine-tune and tailor it to make it more trendy.

We are not complacent, we have a strong shirt to wear at the moment. So we are just making sure the shirt doesn't stay the same until 2020.

And with regard to the pace of reform, our education system is like a supertanker out at sea. Any sudden shift or change in its course will only cause major disruptions. It is, therefore, important to ensure that we are fully prepared for a major shift in direction before the ship can successfully change course.

**Q:** Some people say there are very necessary reforms in areas like the teaching profession. That there is a lack of dedication from teachers, unlike before, and that this stems from so many different issues such as teacher training, heavy workload, etc.

**A:** Teachers are the backbone of the nation's education system. They are the ones who ensure the successful delivery or change in schools. We need to bring them on board before any reform is carried out.

For far too long, teachers have been neglected. For example, the teacher-classroom ratio was revised after 24 years.

The struggle to upgrade the teacher training colleges is something teachers have been fighting for 30 years. A dedicated study to understand the workload faced by teachers was commissioned and completed in

would be a teacher. How many of our children would say that? Our teachers need enough respect from the parents themselves. They expect teachers to deal with all their children's problems, from discipline to truancy to sports. But how many times have they come to meet the people who teach their children? How many parents of those students who got 5As in UPSR recently made the effort to thank their teachers?

There are many passionate, good teachers out there, and they have to be recognised and rewarded.

**Q:** It is a perennial issue — the deteriorating degree of racial integration among students. So many things have been said about this and how to solve it, but the reality is that it is happening and it is hard to manage.

**A:** The prime minister was brave in accepting and publicly stating the reality that national integration is still a problem, and the fact remains that a lot still has to be done to achieve the vision and hopes of our forefathers.

We need to make our national schools as "the school of choice" for all Malaysians. Several streams of schools co-exist in the system, with SK as the primary stream and there are also national-type schools, state religious schools and religious schools.

National schools have to be empowered and used as the anchor for national integration.

Statistically, we have 7,819 national schools with 4.58 million students. However, this remains a major challenge. Racial polarisation in our schools is still very apparent. Of late, we see that our national schools have lost their appeal to not only the non-Malays but the Malays as well. This will have to change.

National integration is something close to my heart. As someone who has been brought up in an environment to respect the diversity of Malaysia, I feel that integration should be the responsibility of all Malaysians. I only saw how big the problem

was, really, when I went into the Education Ministry.

When I was in sports (Youth and Sports Ministry), when Malaysia is winning everybody is happy, it doesn't matter where you come from, what colour, or what religion. When you are losing, they are even united in bashing the minister.

But in education, because it's so polemic, so critical to everybody, the tendency to look at it on racial and religious grounds is much more pronounced. It has to be addressed but we have to look at it in perspective.

Here, I would like to put the record straight. While I agree that polarisation and national integration is a perennial problem, it is important

that we view this in its proper context.

For example, the mix of students in our secondary schools is not a problem as most of our students attend the same schools.

This is reflective in the statistics whereby the level of non-Bumiputera students in secondary schools is at a healthy 32 per cent. The concern is really with our primary schools, especially those situated in areas where there are alternative streams on offer.

**Q:** Will integration programmes like the Students' Integration Plan for Unity and National Service, and soon pre-National Service, really work in the long term?

**A:** I believe these programmes are essentially very good. However, their success very much depends on the commitment by all stake holders involved — be it parents, government agencies and departments, political parties or others.

I am heartened to see that support from various ministries and agencies have been extremely forthcoming in this area.

We are also in continuous dialogue with various parties, especially the minister in charge, Datuk Maximus Ongkili, to devise ways and means by which more creative elements can be introduced in our schools to foster greater integration.

Also, co-curriculum and sports is not just for the sake of having co-curriculum and sports. It's the fun way of getting children to interact and if they cannot do it voluntarily, then we might have to force them under the pre-National Service programme.

**Q:** How about the curriculum that we have had since the 1980s — the KBSR and KBSM. Times have

changed, so will there be a change in what our students learn?

**A:** What our students study in schools and the curriculum used is something that is dynamic and periodically reviewed. For example, the last major review was conducted in 2000.

However, as I mentioned earlier, our education system is at the crossroads.

On one hand, we have managed to provide the basic tenets of quality, access and equity to education for all Malaysians, but the demands of today's globalised and borderless world have forced us to re-look the type of students we produce.

The PM mentioned this in his recent speech at the Umno general assembly, where he used the term "ceklik minda" to describe students who are not only good academically, but have the ability to compete globally in a variety of fields and disciplines, confident and are inquisitive and Malaysian in all senses.

This will involve some change in curriculum, but more importantly it brings into question the orientation and emphasis we want to see in our schools.

As a first step, I have instituted measures to enhance the non-academic focus of our schools through the revival of co-curricular activities.

This is clearly reflected in our policy, where the Cabinet has decided that entry into public universities will have to take into account co-curricular involvement in schools.

I have also initiated steps to begin the shift from mere rote learning to more creative-based thinking. This will be reflected in the blueprint.

However, this initiative will depend very much on the support and change in mindset of the public, especially parents.

## WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE BLUEPRINT (2006-2010)

- Reforms in curriculum for more all-round thinkers
- Changes in assessments/examinations
- Tougher screenings for aspiring teachers
- Better promotional opportunities for teachers
- Key Performance Index for the Education Ministry
- Reduction in educational gap between rural and urban schools
- More emphasis on fostering greater integration
- The history, facts and figures on education

an effort to reduce their workload.

Allowing our teachers to be promoted to JUSA C (Highly senior or "Super Principals" scale for those in education) without leaving schools was also introduced.

There is strong political will in the present administration to see through these reforms and ensure that teachers come out on top.

Having said that, we have to change our approach and tighten the entry into teacher training colleges. The days when we took on just anybody when there was a shortage are over.

In Finland, if you ask any child what they would want to be when they grow up, the usual answer