

## Is becoming an education hub still worth it?

### Introduction

The notion of Malaysia as an education hub was first introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in 2007. In the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (also known as Pelan Strategik Pengajian Tinggi Negara or PSPTN), the seventh thrust outlined the country's ambition to be an international education hub, playing host to 200,000 international students by 2020.

Three years later, education was selected as one of the 12 National Key Result Areas (NKEA) through the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP). The spotlight was on the projected revenue of RM40,000 per international student, alongside spillover effects in various service sectors in the country.

In 2011, MOHE introduced the Internationalisation Policy for Malaysian Higher Education and Malaysia's Global Reach agenda in PSPTN. These documents brought the education hub narrative one step further, through specific contribution by higher education institutions and national-level projects in international mobility programmes, academic and research collaborations, as well as networking and sharing of best practices between Malaysia and its foreign counterparts, particularly countries from the Global South.

When the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) was launched in 2015 to replace the PSPTN, the narrative was solidified with an even more ambitious goal of hosting 250,000 international students by 2025. The "identity" of the hub was also described in detail, where Malaysia aspires to be a destination of choice for students from ASEAN, the African continent, as well as East and West Asia.

### Where are we now?

Much has happened within the Malaysian higher education system since 2015. We hosted Going Global (2018) and APAIE (2019), two renowned conferences for international educators, consequently putting us on the map as a keen player in internationalisation. MOHE also issued a number of documents which promoted specific agenda for the system, such as "Way Forward for Private Higher Education Institution: Education As An Industry (2020-2025)" in February 2020, Action Plan on Entrepreneurship for Higher Educational Institutions in February 2021, and Action Plan on Graduate Employability in October 2021, among others.

On the political front, the 14<sup>th</sup> General Election in 2018 saw higher education being consolidated under the Ministry of Education, before the sector became a ministry of its own again in February 2020. There has been only one Minister of Higher Education since then; that said, a brief lull was observed between August and September 2021 as the spot was vacated due to changing political alliances. The MOHE Minister highlighted six sector-wide agenda: digitalisation of HE, graduate employability, community well-being, institutional resilience, strategic collaboration and networks, as well as student development and well-being.

A great reset upended priority and resource allocation of the Malaysian higher education system for at least 18 months. On 18 March 2020, the government enforced the first ever Movement Control Order (MCO), as a measure to curb the spread of COVID-19 in the country. The Malaysian border was closed for international travelers throughout 2020, before it was gradually opened starting January 2021. The many iterations of MCO also culminated in the proclamation of emergency

on 11 January 2021, which ended on 1 August 2021. At the current point of writing, the country is in the National Recovery Plan (NRP), with the end goal of a gradual shift into a strategy on living with COVID-19, as compared to the previous focus on reducing the spread of COVID-19 within the community.

At this rate, we can infer that the education hub narrative is still around, but has been pushed to the peripheral. In this paper, we briefly offer three areas for deliberation.

## Space

At the policy level, the education hub agenda is Malaysia's international branding exercise for its higher education system. It builds on the country's ambition to recruit more international students, hence, a stepping stone towards greater economic gains through education service exports. It is also branded as an access solution; the early adopters (Monash Malaysia, Nottingham Malaysia, Swinburne Malaysia, and Curtin Malaysia, among others) of international branch campuses were given approval to establish their base here in order to provide higher education opportunities to students who may otherwise not gain admission to local public universities.

At the operational level however, the education hub agenda is manifested in the form of physical spaces to congregate students, institutions, capital, and even ideas into a visible node or focal point for higher education. The idea mirrors various industrial zones located across the country, where concentrations of multinational companies were located to attract foreign direct investment into strategic localities.

EduCity is a well-spotlighted example of a physical education hub space. It is a cluster of various institutions with different disciplines, grouped together into a shared physical space with the intention of increasing service and economic value of Iskandar Malaysia, a strategic economic region located in Johor Bahru.

The other less reviewed example is KL Education City (KLEC), a project that was approved for implementation in 2006. This project might be the spark that drove a formal conception of "education hub" within the Malaysian higher education policy lexicon in the early 2000s. KLEC was envisioned as a University Park, with tenants comprising local and international educational institutions from primary up to tertiary and continuing education. It was also envisioned as a site to host branch

campuses of renowned institutions. A unique point associated with KLEC was the edutourism angle, which was intended to attract visitors for short-term educational and executive development visits.

24 years on, is a physical education hub space worth the investment? Even without a physical location, the import/export of academic programmes is still happening, with increasing intensity after the COVID-19 global pandemic. Faculty members can also deliver their lessons online, barring restrictions in terms of time zones and broadband connectivity. A virtual hub is already happening through Coursera, edX, Future Learn, Udemy, and an assortment of other platforms. Physical hubs are expensive, and may not be feasible at the current point of time.

## Developmental Focus

Early literature described the education hub as a continuous development, starting from student hub, to talent hub, knowledge hub, and finally innovation hub. A country has to invest and develop appropriate strategies in order to progress from one stage of the hub to another.

In reality, the development of an education hub is far from linear. Qatar's Education City is the closest manifestation of Malaysia's education hub aspirations, in terms of the institutions hosted, and its attraction as a node to pursue higher education for the Gulf region. Both Qatar and Malaysia are exclusively student hubs, where the focus is on international student recruitment, and the main activity is the provision of education services to the international student cohort. The research agenda is secondary, since the main outcome is measured in terms of international student numbers and revenue generated from international student enrolment.

Singapore, on the other hand, is strategic in its positioning, using migration as a leveler for national development. With a focus on research and development, investments to attract talent and international collaboration in research are prioritised and sustained in the long term through policy and resource allocation. Instead of building a cosmetic brand through physical presence, the Red Dot emphasises on long-term economic and human capital gains via its research institutes, research publications, and innovative products. As such, Singapore's stand as an education hub cut across talent/knowledge/innovation dimensions, and distinct characterisation is futile and unnecessary.



Moving forward, how would Malaysia fundamentally differentiate itself as more than just a student hub? The Science Outlook 2020 report issued by the Academy of Sciences Malaysia offers much direction for the country to pursue. At a time where Indonesia and Vietnam are fast surpassing us as economic powerhouses of ASEAN, Malaysia's education hub identity has to be grounded in research, development, commercialisation and innovation (RDCI).

## System

The public/private distinction on who governs and operates an education hub is fuzzy in the Malaysian context. The ideation comes from the government, and is legitimised through various policy documents described earlier. The establishment of an education hub is a public-private endeavour; in EduCity's case, it is Iskandar Investment Berhad, an investment wing under Khazanah Nasional, which is a sovereign wealth fund for the Malaysian government.

Pagoh Higher Education Hub, located in Pagoh, Johor, is the latest addition to the public-private partnership in education hub development. This hub commenced development in 2011, and came into operation five years later. Sime Darby is the private entity involved through a BLMT (build-lease-maintain-transfer) arrangement. Three public universities and one polytechnic set up base in the hub, with the goal of accelerating development of the Pagoh district, a parliamentary constituency led by the former Prime Malaysia, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

To what extent do the hubs contribute to development and well-being of the local community? It is good to note that EduCity attracts more students from Johor rather than Singapore. Khazanah Nasional Berhad observed that the land value surrounding EduCity has increased five-fold since the project began. That said, properties around EduCity are inaccessible by individuals living within Iskandar Malaysia. The Pagoh Higher Education Hub is still a work in progress, and its impact, if there is one, can only be felt at least 10 years from now. This hub also demonstrates the utility of "education hub" as a political tool, consequently its highly rhetorical nature within the context of the Malaysian higher education system.

## Conclusion

As with the rest of the world, Malaysia is deep in recovery mode. Sector-wide recovery for higher education, particularly in terms of maintaining continuity over core functions in teaching, research, and service are still ongoing. International activities, such as conferences and meetings, are still conducted online. Many higher education institutions have also resorted to conducting virtual mobility of students and staff, while waiting for the gradual opening of national borders for international travelling.

It remains to be seen whether the education hub agenda will be further pursued by the government of the day. The time is right for us to go back to the drawing board and revisit this agenda. Perhaps the first question that must be answered is "Who is the education hub for?" - the economy, the students, or the Malaysian higher education system? More empirical research is needed to look beyond the rhetoric, and to do what is right for the stakeholders that matter.

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