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EDUCATION: MALAYSIA'S BIGGEST CHALLENGE

COVER STORY

CHARTING
MALAYSIA'S
RECENT
EDUCATION
JOURNEY

PEAKS & PARKS

BUKIT LANGKAP:
A MODEST
HILL WITH A
SPLENDID VIEW

PHOTO ESSAY

FAMILIES HARD
AT WORK AT
PULAU TIKUS
MARKET





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CHARTING MALAYSIA'S RECENT EDUCATION JOURNEY

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HEALTH



The **Malaysian Breast Cancer Summit 2024** aims to empower breast cancer patients, survivors and caregivers with the tools to manage this life-altering disease. Expect forums and practical workshops, Q&A interactive sessions, stories shared by breast cancer survivors and more.

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CONTACT +6017-449 4097

WEBSITE mbc24.talkhealthasia.com

ART



Negaraku showcases works from the RuMa Collection and highlights the collectors'—Bingley Sim and Ima Norbinsha—belief in the transformative power of art for political and cultural reflection. The exhibition probes into Malaysia's socio-political landscape, emphasising the role of political art in documenting societal issues, critiquing injustices and fostering dialogue.

WEBSITE hinbusdepot.com/

CHARITY



Registration is now open for **Charity Fun Walk Day**, a 5km stroll to honour the International Day of Sign Language for the Deaf community organised by YMCA Penang and Pusat Majudiri 'Y'. Registration closing date is on August 30, so hurry up and register!

TICKET From RM50

WEBSITE howei.com/event_details/charityfunwalkday2024



The Malaysian Red Crescent Society Penang Chapter is organising its annual fundraising dinner. Guests can expect an evening of delicious food, live entertainment and more. Your attendance and support will help the society to continue their life-saving work in the community.

WEBSITE fb.com/MRCPenangChapter



Indulge in a variety of Eurasian delights while supporting a great cause at the **Penang Eurasian Fiesta Fundraising Food Fair** organised by the Penang Eurasian Association. Visitors can also expect a fantastic bazaar and amazing live band performances!

DATE 17 August

VENUE St. Xavier's Institution, Jalan Farquhar

TIME 10am-6pm

CONTACT +6012-205 1459

WEBSITE rb.gy/3fekos

Calling all pet enthusiasts and families to **Charity-PAW-a-Thon**, a mini pet carnival. Visitors can expect an online most-patriotic-pet-dress competition, a variety of DIY workshops and games, a charity food fair, lucky draws and more.

DATE 1 September

VENUE Island 88

TIME 8am-9pm

CONTACT +6017-477 5331

WEBSITE rb.gy/mr0akn

CULTURE

Penang Hidden Gems' **Penang Heritage Food Trail** is back! Curated by Peter Yeoh, a Penang-based food writer who contributes frequently to local and international publications, this unique experience combines history and food as you embark on a journey to discover the origins of Penang's iconic dishes. Registration is required.

DATE 10 August

MEETING POINT Cendol stall at Lebu Keng Kwee

TIME 9:30am-11:30am

CONTACT +6017-340 9019

WEBSITE penanghiddengems.com/products/penang-heritage-food-trail-with-peter-yeoh-1

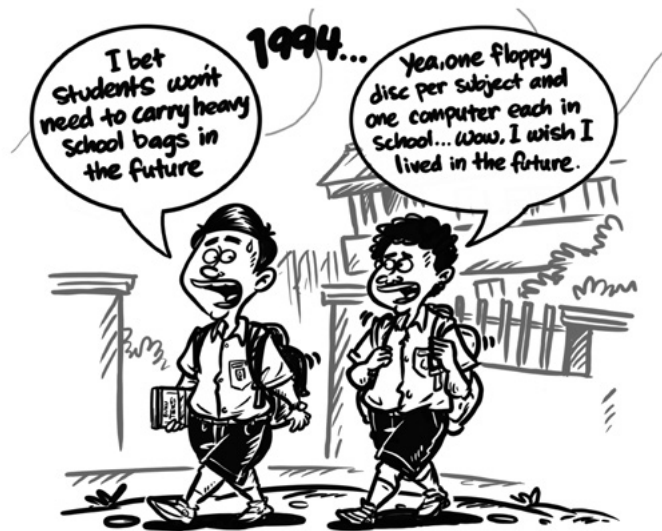
penang MONTHLY

THE PENANG MONTHLY ENDEAVORS TO BE THE VOICE OF PENANG AND AN INSPIRING READ FOR THE CURIOUS MALAYSIAN. A PUBLICATION OF PENANG INSTITUTE, IT AIMS TO:

- 1 Supply Penangites with information about significant issues in order to promote public participation;
- 2 Encourage discussion about various aspects of Penang's fate and fortune;
- 3 Profile Penang personalities who have contributed, sometimes in very unassuming but critical ways, to the reputation and wellbeing of the state;
- 4 Put the spotlight on ordinary Penangites who otherwise go unnoticed, but who nevertheless define the culture of the state in essential ways;
- 5 Highlight the importance of Penang as a generator of culture, education, industry and cosmopolitan values;
- 6 Emphasise present trends in the arts, industry, politics and economics which affect the immediate future of the state and country; and
- 7 Offer reliable socioeconomic data for the benefit of decision makers in government and the private sector.

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SAME DEAL
By Azmi Hussin

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DIAGNOSING COUNTRIES: EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA SHOWS SIGNS OF ARRHYTHMIA

BY OOI KEE BENG



WE LIVE IN the Era of Nation-States. At the moment, there are 193 members in the United Nations (UN). Inevitably, we have to compare them to see what we can learn from each of them and to understand their level of comparability. But how?

It's like going to the medical clinic to see a doctor. You get your blood pressure taken, your temperature and weight measured, the contents of the blood flowing through you and keeping you alive analysed. A diagnosis is then made by this white-coated medical man. If needed, some medication is prescribed and some advice on how to live your life provided. You thank him, you pay and you leave to come back another day.

You may feel somewhat comforted, or somewhat disquieted by this new knowledge. You may or may not take the medication, you may or may not follow the advice. And you may even get a second opinion if you dislike this new knowledge about your health and lifestyle. In some cases, we may consider alternative medicines for better effect or for more acceptable knowledge about ourselves. After all, you probably know yourself better than the doctor does.

The body is a complicated thing, and no diagnosis, no series of routine tests, can prove satisfactory. There is always room for doubt. Has your ability to self-heal been overlooked? After all, you have always been proud of how well your immune system is. Did you visit the doctor at an inopportune time? After all, you did party somewhat heavily the last two days. And you admittedly ate too much durian the night before. Is that young doctor really qualified? How does he know so much? How much is guesswork? Isn't he just a medicine salesman after all?

You may decide never to go back to that clinic again. Grandma's concoctions worked well enough for you when you were young, why not now?

Like our bodies, nations are very complicated things. Nations' diagnosticians are everywhere, telling

*NOTE

1. GDP is the total monetary or market value of all the finished goods and services produced within a country's borders in a specific time period.
2. GNI is the sum of all the money that a country's citizens and enterprises have made during a certain timeframe.
3. HCI estimates the anticipated productivity of a child born today as a future employee.
4. HDI is an indicator of average performance in three important areas of human development: enjoying a long healthy life, having access to education and having a respectable level of living.

them what's right and what's wrong. There is always room for doubt about a diagnosis, and there is always room for choice in applying a medication.

But what does a right or wrong diagnosis mean for a country, for a society? What does refusal to take a medication mean for a government?

Unlike the pudding, the proof for the pill does not lie in the eating, unless we are talking about a quick-fix painkiller or some urgent intervention. The proof, otherwise, lies somewhere else, and shows itself only over time. Time series are therefore key in how doctors of nations diagnose their patients.

Data about yourself over time are compared. More tentatively, data about yourself over time are also cogently compared to those of other nations. That way, you know yourself, and you know others, and then you decide what you want to be, or are capable of becoming. You accept some prescriptions and advice, and you accept others. You also make up some of your own, for comfort.

THE MODERN SCIENCE OF COUNTRY DIAGNOSIS

What do different schools of thought have to say within the Modern Science of Country Diagnosis? Well, the UN leans towards a dualistic diagnosis—either X or Not-X. Developed or Developing Country. This facilitates the prescription as well. If a country is “developing”, then it may be given the medication we call “foreign aid”. Presently, 137 of the 217 countries and regions in the world which it recognises, are categorised as “developing countries/economies”—Malaysia being one of them.

A “developed country” is healthy. Its immune system works, its blood counts are good. More often than not, it subsists in a good neighbourhood.

The World Bank is seemingly more discriminate. The world as pictured in its diagnostic charts is made up of upper-income, middle-income, lower-middle and low-income countries.

Instead of blood tests and temperature measures, nations undergo a study of their economic wealth in

the form of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or their Gross National Income (GNI). These may satisfy certain parties, but those who highlight other human values prefer other quantifications such as Human Capital Index (HCI) or Human Development Index (HDI).*

As alternative medicine to mainstream economics, it is the HDI that is of greatest interest. The Human Development Index, developed by the UN, consists of three dimensions, four indicators and three indexes. These are (1) a long and healthy life, as measured by life expectancy at birth in the Life Expectancy Index; (2) education or knowledge, as measured by mean years of schooling, and expected years of schooling as measured in the Education Index; and (3) a decent standard of living, as measured by GNI per capita in USD, as measured in the GNI Index.

EDUCATION: AN ANOMALY TO WATCH

Where does Malaysia stand? How healthy are we, how educated are we and how comfortably rich are we?

We place 63rd in the category of “Very High Human Development” for 2022. Third in Southeast Asia at 0.807 (on a scale of 0–1), after Singapore (9th, at 0.949) and Brunei (55th, at 0.823), and above Thailand (66th, at 0.803) and Indonesia (at 112nd, at 0.713).

That's what the diagnostician says after looking at and ranking 193 countries. According to measurements from 2022, Malaysians can expect to live to 76.3 years old (Singapore 84.1; Brunei 74.6; Thailand 79.7; Indonesia 68.3). Our children are expected to go to school for 12.9 years, and for 10.9 mean years of schooling (Singapore 16.9 and 11.9; Brunei 13.7 and 9.2; Thailand 15.6 and 8.8; Indonesia 14.0 and 8.6). Malaysia's GNI is at 27,295 (Singapore 88,761; Brunei 59,246; Thailand 16,887; Indonesia 12,046).

All seem to be what we expect in regional comparisons, except for the nagging fact that the children in all neighbouring countries are expected to go to school for longer periods than Malaysian kids. That is a surprise, and an anomalous symptom that any good diagnostician would advise us to monitor.

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ADDRESSING PISA DISPARITIES TO PROPEL PENANG'S SEMICONDUCTOR INDUSTRY

BY RAHIDA AINI



DR. RAHIDA AINI
works as a Publication
Officer at Penang Institute.
She enjoys writing and
strolling along Straits
Quay, appreciating the
beauty of mother earth.

WITH THE SWIFT evolution in communication technology, it becomes increasingly crucial for a country like Malaysia to establish a robust footing in science and technology, navigate towards a knowledge-based economy and attain the status of a developed nation. An education in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) nurtures analytical and critical thinking, and provides skills and qualities essential for 21st-century success.

Particularly in Penang, high-tech and mid-tech manufacturing industries play a pivotal role in raising the state's gross domestic product (GDP), underscoring a critical need for STEM talent. But there exists a disparity between supply and demand. A contributing factor in this challenge is the waning interest among students in STEM subjects.

Malaysia needs to ensure that its workforce possesses expertise in disruptive technologies and innovation, and this is where critical, creative and innovative or higher order thinking skills (HOTS), play a crucial role.

PROGRAMME FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ASSESSMENT (PISA)

Initiated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), PISA is the world's main yardstick for evaluating school systems in terms of quality, equity and efficiency, offering governments and educators ways to create effective education policies for their respective local contexts.^[1] At the school level, a PISA-based test assesses the ability of 15-year-old students to solve complex problems, think critically and communicate effectively, all of which are HOTS tools crucial for tackling 21st-century challenges.

According to Deputy Education Minister Wong Kah Wong, “the 2022 PISA findings [show that] Malaysia had fallen behind Singapore, Vietnam and Brunei in all three assessed literacy domains—mathematics, science and reading”.^[2] In light of the situation described, this comparative analysis highlights the imperative for Malaysia to align with global educational benchmarks.

A 2022 study by Mohamad Hisyam, Hidayah and Rohaida found that students regard STEM lessons as rigid, monotonous and confined.^[3] Nur Izzati, a high-school participant of this study, states that, “My science teacher prioritises explaining the concepts and observations we're expected to encounter, rather than allowing us the freedom to explore and observe on our own.”

If more student-driven activities are used in classroom lessons, students are more likely to become critical thinkers—hands-on experimentation opportunities provide students with scenarios where they tackle complex problems. As students come to recognise the interdisciplinary nature of academic fields, they can foster a deeper appreciation for STEM subjects.

A 2019 study on Science teachers in Malaysian secondary schools from various disciplines—Chemistry, Biology, Physics and General Science—in Johor, Selangor, Kedah and Penang reveals that secondary school teachers faced obstacles such as a lack of exposure and training in STEM methodologies, inadequate facilities, budget and time constraints, heavy administrative workloads as well as insufficient support from school leaders.^[4]

Realising that teachers like himself are expected to design engaging learning experiences, and deliver quality teaching and HOTS learning objectives, Khalil* resonates with the first obstacle: “We are well-informed about the implementation of STEM and student empowerment, and we actively participate in STEM programmes and encourage students to join activities. However, we need specific training to better integrate HOTS into our STEM teaching practices to make our topic content more relevant to everyday life.”

Coupling the challenges faced in developing HOTS with the anticipated impact of low results in the 2022 PISA rankings, how can we effectively support Penang's state vision of cultivating a highly skilled workforce and elevating the semiconductor industry up the value chain?

WHAT PENANG CAN DO

The semiconductor industry's advancement, particularly in advanced packaging, relies heavily on STEM talent. Penang needs STEM graduates for IC design, and for these to leave their comfort zones within existing MNCs and embrace a spirit of entrepreneurship and innovation. To propel Penang's semiconductor industry up the value chain effectively, several recommendations can be considered:

1) MORE EXPOSURE AND ENGAGEMENT

The Ministry of Education (MOE) has executed HOTS initiatives to boost PISA rankings; the Penang state government supports this by empowering teachers to instil critical thinking skills in students, focusing on analysing, synthesising and evaluating—all key elements of Bloom's Taxonomy, a cognitive framework that helps students move beyond remembering and recalling information. Additionally, Penang promotes STEM education through Penang STEM, a collaboration among six centres—namely PSDC, Penang Digital Library, Tech Dome Penang, @CAT, Penang Science Cluster and Penang Math Platform—and the North-East Education Department.

These centres have been conducting many STEM programmes, activities and workshops within their centres to cultivate, nurture and excite students in the field. A total of 180,000 students and more than 2,000 teachers have been trained under the “Coding for All” programme; 2,550 STEM-related workshops were also given to 435,000 students.^[5] The centres can continuously expand their efforts through co-curricular activities such as science fairs, robotics clubs and field trips, nurturing interest in semiconductor manufacturing, and especially in advanced packaging and IC design.

2) CURRICULUM ENHANCEMENT

The STEM curriculum needs to be re-evaluated and aligned with HOTS and industry demands to ensure that students are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in the semiconductor sectors.

3) TEACHER TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Continual professional growth for STEM teachers is essential for refining their HOTS abilities in implementing engaging teaching methodologies that leverage course materials provided by the ministry.

4) PROMOTION OF STEM CAREERS

Despite numerous efforts and campaigns aimed at creating awareness about career path choices within STEM fields, there remains a notable scarcity of young talent, particularly within the semiconductor industry. What schools can do is to showcase success stories of individuals who have excelled in STEM-related careers to inspire and motivate students.

5) INVESTMENT IN INFRASTRUCTURE AND RESOURCES

Not all secondary school classrooms in Penang have sufficient infrastructure to accelerate STEM education; outdated facilities such as ill-equipped science labs and incomplete resources, including poor internet coverage, pose challenges for teachers. To address this, resources must be allocated to upgrade STEM facilities so that hands-on learning and experimentation can take place.

6) COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND OUTREACH

Schools should engage community leaders, relevant stakeholders and parents in promoting STEM education and career pathways. Organising outreach programmes, career fairs and mentorship opportunities can involve the broader community in supporting students' respective STEM journeys.

7) INCENTIVES AND SCHOLARSHIPS

Providing financial aid for underprivileged students aids inclusivity and equal opportunities, while incentives like scholarships and grants recognising merit in STEM can encourage excellence. Teachers can leverage their connections and expertise to aid students' access to relevant resources and internships.

*Note: Not his real name.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Rahida Aini, M.I. (2019) The relationship between teacher efficacy and teacher's delivery effectiveness in the presence of HOTS training programme. Ph.D Doctoral Thesis. https://etd.uum.edu.my/view/creators/Rahida_Aini=3AMohd_Ismail=3A=3A.html

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[5] Penang leads in STEM education. (2024). Buletin Mutiara, January 1-15, p.4.

HOW SXI KEEPS ENROLMENT HIGH



JUSTIN TEOH recently graduated from UNC Chapel Hill with majors in Comparative Literature and Public Policy. You can find him sharing music finds and food pictures on Instagram at @justinteoht_.

BY JUSTIN TEOH

THE ENROLMENT RATE among Penang's public high schools is declining,^[1] but not in St. Xavier's Institution (SXI)—the second-oldest school in Malaysia as well as the first Lasallian institution based in Asia. Walking down its bustling corridors one Friday morning, I was greeted by students in brightly coloured co-curricular attires, who smiled as they headed towards the canteen. I was there to talk to brother-director, Jason Blaikie, and board of governors' chairman, Victor Tan, about what it was that kept SXI afloat. From these interactions, I gained the sense that the answer involved something intrinsic to the culture of this 172-year-old institution.

THE FIVE GUIDING PILLARS

In their leadership roles, Jason and Victor are tasked with administering maintenance and building projects in SXI, and a large part of the tasks include outreach and fundraising.

However, they do not consider their efforts as marketing strategies as much as they are acts of sharing—presenting noteworthy events and developments to the broader public.

Foregrounding this work, they explained, is what they call the Five Pillars—a set of educational principles that form the ethos of all Xavierians, past and present: quality education, concern for the poor and social justice, inclusivity, respect for all, and faith in the presence of God.

SXI looks beyond examination grades and recognises that intellectual needs differ among students. Towards this end, it maintains the La Salle Learning Centre, where keen students can take advantage of the training provided, such as in woodworking, baking and languages; at the time of writing, the Board is pursuing the implementation of music and technical literacy programmes. “We try to give them options in life,” Jason says, “because we know that not everybody is academically gifted.”

As administrators, Victor and Jason also host fundraising drives with students, paying forward the valuable social services provided by charitable organisations around Penang, such as Cheshire Home and Little Sisters of the Poor. Evoking the enduring legacies of renowned alumni—many of whom the Lasallian institutions gave second chances to when other schools did not—SXI aims to nurture the altruistic spirit that runs in what they call the “Lasallian DNA”.

SXI enrolls students from various primary schools in Penang—national and

vernacular—though primarily from George Town. The consequent diversity gives way to an organic sense of camaraderie—one that is blind to racial, ethnic and religious differences. Through cross-cultural interactions in academic activities and break-time chatter, students imbibe knowledge about what it takes to sustain a tolerant, harmonious community.

FUNDRAISING FOR THE XAVIERIAN COMMUNITY

While the Five Pillars are not organisational prescriptions per se, the mutual courtesy that they instill among Xavierians is compelling. This is why Victor and Jason share monthly videos about campus happenings to the broader community through YouTube and Facebook, providing publicity about prominent visitations, developments and events that put said courtesy into practice.

“People like what they see,” Jason supposes, “and maybe that has gone around, and that is why parents want to send their kids here [at SXI],” as opposed to private and international schools.

Indeed, parents who can afford the extra premium often select these schools in favour of higher education standards, but for the Board, this is more a need-less perception than a necessary reality. Victor reports that SXI is regarded as a



1

CAPTIONS

1. A corridor in St. Xavier's Institution.

2 & 3. The façade of the school.

FOOTNOTE

[1] See Penang's Evolving School Preferences (page 16).



2



3

high-achieving school based on its strong SPM grades from past years, which substantiates his position that the Five Pillars do develop an “all-rounded education” for its students.

Public school or not, a big threat that consistently looms over student enrolment is the suburbanisation of society, whereby families leave urban areas in search of affordable living options elsewhere. Among other things, not only would longstanding city schools like SXI have to worry about decreases in class size, but also about long-term funding sources. For Victor and Jason, overcoming these hurdles are important because restoring dilapidated parts of SXI's historic campus is key in sustaining a healthy learning environment. Jason says, “To provide a *better* all-rounded education, we need to upgrade the hall, the field and the infrastructure.”

He goes on to profess a characteristically Lasallian dilemma: “No money, no mission.” Every cent that they receive goes back to the maintenance of the school, rather than into anyone's pockets; and every cent is not easy to come by.

Still, the school has to keep going for its students. Besides publicising about SXI's activities—to work around tight budgets, the monthly videos are outsourced to a video company rather than produced through an in-house editor—the Board

regularly brainstorms win-win ways of fundraising. In each meeting, Victor and Jason gather stakeholders, including SXI's subcommittees, alumni, administration and principal to discuss their observations, plans and action items—all with the shared goal of boosting the institution's standards. Consequent initiatives typically include alumni dinners, sponsorships, venue hostings and monetary donations.

As they know very well, donations can only come so often and go so far. “After a while, people get tired,” Jason chuckles.

Nevertheless, that did not stop him and Victor from going the extra mile in carrying out the Lasallian mission: providing education to all youths, especially the poor or marginalised.

“All of this is always for the school that we love and for the children entrusted to our care.”

As they continue to work behind the scenes, it matters to them that students receive the learning they need, form fruitful friendships with each other and emerge from SXI prepared for whatever life brings.

POLICY SUCCESSES AND ASPIRATIONS

By integrating a principle-based approach with their administrative work as board members, Victor and Jason were able to fundraise priority projects quickly and increase SXI's student population steadily.

Based on their experiences overall, they suggest that schools adopt two key indicators alongside examination grades and enrolment rates: happiness and attrition rates. To Jason, seeing students greet each other with smiling faces is indicative of well-being and community-building.

Moving forward, they hope that the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Home Affairs can consider a visa policy that would help sustain SXI's mission as a La Salle school: a short-term education pass where Brothers from other countries can continue providing Lasallian education in Malaysia (read: not converting students into Catholics). Taking cues from the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation's (MDEC) digital nomad pass and Singapore's employment pass, Victor highlights that Jason is the *only* local Malaysian Brother as well as the youngest. Looking into the future, another Brother must take his place.

Jason adds: “We want the younger Brothers to see what it is like to study in a different country, not spend their life here. Two to three years should be enough, just for them to get the experience.” He mentions Brothers in neighboring countries such as Myanmar, Thailand and the Philippines who are already administering worldwide. “If this goes through, you might be part of history now,” he jokes to me.

CHARTING MALAYSIA'S RECENT EDUCATION JOURNEY

Photo courtesy of Teach For Malaysia.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Malaysia's education system faces crisis - Expert - Sinar Daily

[2] The problems with our local education system | FMT (freemalaysiatoday.com)

[3] World Bank (2024). World Development Indicator.

[4] Ibid.

[5] World Bank (2024). Malaysia Economic Monitor April 2024. Bending Bamboo Shoots: Strengthening Foundational Skills.

BY DORIS LIEW

MALAYSIA'S NATIONAL EDUCATION PHILOSOPHY (NEP), the guiding system since 1988, emphasises fostering well-rounded individuals for a united and progressive society. However, Malaysia's education system has been criticised for being too rigid and not adequately preparing students for the demands of the modern world.^[1,2]

instead, the excessive focus on national unity and conformity may have stifled creative and critical thinking skills needed for 21st-century challenges.

The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 was launched to align with Malaysia's NEP. This comprehensive blueprint emphasises five key aspirations: access, quality, equity, unity and efficiency.

Malaysia's education system has its successes—most notably the near-full net primary enrolment rate. The government's commitment to education is also evident in the increased public education budget, which rose from 18.4% of total government expenditure in 2010 to 20.5% in 2021.^[3] At 4.3% of Malaysia's GDP in 2021, this surpasses the average spending of other middle-income countries.^[4]

Nevertheless, a recent World Bank report on Malaysia's Economic Monitor suggests that Malaysia's education system is experiencing a significant disparity between quantity and quality of education—that is, between the amount of time students spend in school and their actual academic achievements.^[5]

Despite dedicating 12.5 years to education by the age of 18, Malaysian students' learning outcomes only reflect 8.9 years of progress. The data suggest that the Malaysian education system is not efficiently utilising student time, resulting in a shortage of fundamental skills such as reading, writing and mathematics. This lack of foundational knowledge can have far-reaching consequences, including difficulties for students in higher education and future career advancement.

To gain a deeper understanding of the story behind our education system, we have had the privilege of speaking with Chan Soon Seng, CEO of Teach For Malaysia, and Auzellea Kristin Mozilhim, coordinator of Hive Educator, a Sabah-based education think-and-action tank. Both have accumulated over a decade of experience in the education sector, with valuable insights into the intricacies of our education system. The World Bank's report is used to set the foundation of the discussion.

STRUGGLES IN READING, MATHS AND SCIENCE

According to the World Bank report, many children with disadvantaged backgrounds face challenges in their academic performance. 24% of children entering school lack school-readiness foundation. As learning is a cumulative process, weak foundations translate into difficulties with reading, writing and math. By the end of Grade 5, nearly half of students struggle to read and understand a paragraph; and by age 15, Malaysian students are behind their international peers in reading, math and science.

According to Auzellea, one significant issue is the need for more comprehensive teacher training. Teachers in the current system are burdened with high responsibilities, including numerous administrative tasks mandated by the Ministry of Education (MOE). This administrative load leaves them with limited time and energy to focus on personalised training for students. As a result, differen-



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tiation strategies, which involve creating tailored teaching materials to meet the diverse needs of different subsets of students, are often neglected. The time constraints make it difficult for teachers to develop and implement such strategies, leading to a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to address the unique learning needs of each student. This gap in training and support for teachers not only affects the quality of education but also hampers the overall development of students.

Auzellea also highlights the importance of MOE initiatives targeting underprivileged children. She emphasises that inputting parents' salaries into the system would make aid more accurately directed to those who need it the most. This method allows for more precise identification of families and children requiring financial assistance, providing them access to necessary educational materials, support programmes and other resources.

Soon Seng points out that the gap between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds is a common issue worldwide. He notes that many children who do not attend preschool and lack early learning support face significant challenges when they start primary school. Soon Seng's view aligns with the World Bank report that underprivileged children often enter the education system with a disadvantage, lacking the foundational skills and knowledge that their more privileged peers have acquired. This early gap can have long-term consequences.

Soon Seng echoes the World Bank report on the importance of early intervention and support programmes. By providing access to preschool education and early learning resources, underprivileged children can develop the necessary skills and confidence to succeed. Addressing these disparities requires a concerted effort from government and community to create an inclusive and equitable education system.

NEW EDUCATION SYSTEM SEEKS TO ENGAGE LEARNERS

In a significant shift toward a more holistic approach to education, Malaysia's national examination landscape underwent a transformation in recent years. The high-stakes Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR) was abolished in 2021 to be replaced by a system of school-based assessments. This was followed by the discontinuation of the lower secondary Form Three Assessment (PT3) in 2022.

These changes aim to reduce pressure on students and teachers, allowing for a more well-rounded learning experience. These are viewed by most educators as a largely positive development. With the pressure of standardised exams lessened, Auzellea hopes that teachers will now have the flexibility to create engaging projects that extend beyond the confines of a rigid syllabus. This allows for a more student-centred learning experience, fostering creativity, critical thinking and a deeper understanding of subject matters.

Additionally, the absence of national rankings has shifted the focus away from a purely exam-oriented approach to education. This will enable teachers to cater to individual student needs and learning styles, fostering a more inclusive and well-rounded learning environment.

However, she acknowledges the downside—the lack of measures to assess teachers' and schools' performances. The PBD (Pentafsiran Bilik Darjah) system, which includes exams, classroom assessments and projects, may aim for a more holistic evaluation, but it has its shortcomings.

Soon Seng echoes the sentiment that removing high-stakes tests allows for more diverse teaching methods. However, he adds that the exam-centric mindset is still prevalent. Instead, a cultural shift towards mastery-based learning, where student outcomes are measured by diverse criteria and communicated effectively to stakeholders, is advocated. School-based assessment systems can offer a more granular way of assessing student performance, provided teachers are supported in their use.

“BY PROVIDING ACCESS TO PRESCHOOL EDUCATION AND EARLY LEARNING RESOURCES, UNDERPRIVILEGED CHILDREN CAN DEVELOP THE NECESSARY SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE TO SUCCEED.”





Photo courtesy of Teach For Malaysia.

LARGE CLASS SIZES A BARRIER TO WELL-ROUNDED LEARNING

Prioritising well-rounded student development requires addressing various challenges within the classroom. One significant hurdle is the student-teacher ratio. Auzellea, for instance, shares her experience teaching in a school with a staggering 2,500 students, and up to 40 students per class. In such large settings, providing personalised attention to individual students becomes nearly impossible.

While MOE has taken steps to address this by ensuring at least one remedial teacher in every primary school, Soon Seng highlights the limitations of this approach. These dedicated educators are often overwhelmed by the sheer volume of students requiring additional support, creating a situation where students who might benefit most from targeted interventions fall through the cracks.

Compounding these challenges is the inflexibility of the current curriculum. Soon Seng added that the rigid structure restricts teachers' ability to tailor lessons to suit the diverse learning pace and needs within their large classrooms. The one-size-fits-all approach reduces the effectiveness of project-based learning and other innovative pedagogies that require adaptation to the rate of progress of various students.

Soon Seng highlights that an implicit streaming system continues to exist within schools. Students placed in lower proficiency classes often face negative stereotypes and receive less support and engagement from educators. This perpetuates a cycle of discouragement and hinders their academic progress. Moving forward, a shift in mindset is crucial. Teachers need to be equipped with the tools to support students across all proficiency levels.

SHIFTING LANGUAGES IN SCIENCE AND MATHS

One issue impacting learning outcomes is the frequent oscillation in the language of instruction for core subjects like science and mathematics. This back-and-forth between English and Bahasa Malaysia has created instability and confusion for both students and educators.

Teachers initially trained in one language may need to adapt their methods to a newly designated language, potentially impacting the quality of instruction. Students who begin learning a subject in one language may face difficulties transitioning to another. Furthermore, this inconsistency creates uncertainties for parents and educators alike.

To this end, both the interviewed educators offer novel solutions. Soon Seng advocates for a dual language programme as a potential middle ground. He acknowledges the disruption caused by previous shifts from English to Bahasa Malaysia, emphasising the importance of learning continuity for students. The Dual Language Programme could potentially ensure that students develop proficiency in both languages while acquiring a strong foundation in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects. This approach balances the need for robust language skills with the mastering of scientific and mathematical concepts.

On the other hand, Auzellea proposes allowing students to choose their preferred language of instruction for science and mathematics. This approach recognises the diverse learning styles and backgrounds within Malaysian classrooms, empowering students to take ownership of their learning journey.

THE NEED FOR CONTINUOUS TEACHER IMPROVEMENT

Research across the globe consistently identifies teachers as the single most influential factor driving student learning gains. Their expertise, dedication and instructional practices have a profound impact on how much knowledge and skills students acquire. Effective teachers create dynamic learning environments, fostering a love for learning and igniting intellectual curiosity among students.





Photo courtesy of Teach For Malaysia.

The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 aligns with international best practices on teacher quality. It emphasises a multi-pronged approach focused on enhancing teacher effectiveness and professionalism.

While the blueprint does make sound recommendations, the World Bank report suggests that many teachers still lack knowledge and skills such as planning and preparation, establishing a conducive classroom environment, and providing clear and effective communication.

Soon Seng highlights the importance of continuous professional development, noting that many teachers still rely on outdated practices. He calls for better coaching, mentoring and merit-based evaluations, along with exit strategies for underperforming teachers.

Auzellea suggests instead that teachers proactively seek personal development opportunities rather than wait for MOE workshops. She emphasises that there are many online courses available, both locally and internationally, which teachers can utilise.

SHOULD MALAYSIA DECENTRALISE TEACHER RECRUITMENT?

The proposal to decentralise teacher recruitment, shifting the responsibility from national level to individual states in Malaysia, has been widely debated. Proponents hail this as a chance to tailor teacher selection to specific regional needs. However, critics raise concerns about potential inconsistencies, a decline in national standards and increased inequality in teacher quality across different states.

Auzellea was concerned that individual states may lack the resources needed to effectively train and support teachers. A centralised system, she argues, ensures a standardised level of quality across the country. However, she acknowledges the value of state-specific initiatives, such as the successful language programme implemented in Sarawak.

Soon Seng, on the other hand, advocates for a more flexible approach. He envisions a system that allows schools more autonomy in hiring while maintaining central oversight of qualifications. This “middle ground” approach could address shortages in specific regions or subjects by allowing schools to explore alternative pathways for qualified professionals to transition into teaching roles.

Ultimately, the optimal solution lies in striking a balance between national consistency and regional responsiveness. Both Auzellea’s and Soon Seng’s perspectives highlight the need for a nuanced approach that addresses the unique challenges and opportunities that come with decentralisation.

Auzellea calls for stopping the public announcement of SPM results to reduce exam-centric perceptions, and instead support project-based learning and adopt a critical approach to international assessments like PISA. Soon Seng, meanwhile, emphasises faster implementation of the education blueprint’s aspirations and a greater focus on the quality of learning experiences.

Ultimately, bridging the learning gap is essential for Malaysia to cultivate a well-educated, skilled workforce capable of thriving in a competitive global economy. By investing in comprehensive educational reforms, Malaysia can unlock the full potential of its students and pave the way for a more prosperous future.

***Note:** Soon Seng invites young professionals and graduates to join Teach For Malaysia, which offers a two-year, fully-paid programme to teach in rural and niche schools. Applications for the 2025 cohort are now open at www.teachformalaysia.org.

PENANG'S EVOLVING SCHOOLING PREFERENCES

BY PHILIP KHOR

PENANG'S EDUCATION SCENE is changing rapidly. While Malaysia's private school enrolment remains modest regionally, it is seeing a concerning shift. Public secondary schools in Penang are experiencing a drop in enrolment, while private institutions, particularly international schools, are booming. Is this a simple case of parents seeking better options, or is it something more? This trend raises concerns about a widening education divide and potential cracks in Penang's social cohesion.



PHILIP KHOR is a Visiting Data Scientist at Penang Institute with a background in financial sector regulatory modeling, technical writing and enterprise data science training. His interests include labour and health economics, the ethics of artificial intelligence and climate policy.

THE ALLURE OF PRIVATE SCHOOLS

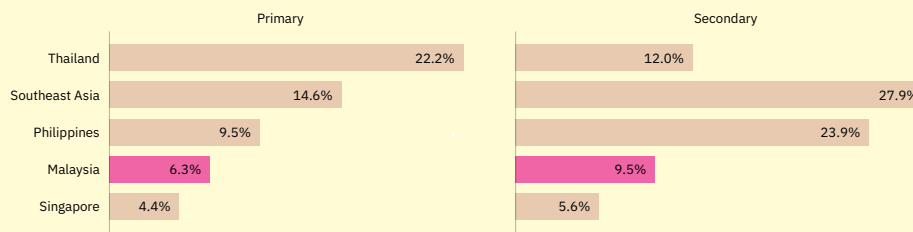
Malaysia boasts a relatively low private school enrolment rate compared to its Southeast Asian neighbours. However, a concerning trend threatens the long-held role of public education in fostering social cohesion.

Since the ban on citizens attending international schools was relaxed in 2008 [1], the share of secondary school-age children enrolling in private institutions has almost tripled from 3.4% (2002) to 9.4% (2021), while at the primary level, the rate has risen dramatically from just under 1% in 2002 to 6.3% (2021), even outpacing enrolment rates at the secondary level until recently.

The share of enrolment in private schools in Malaysia is **low** by Southeast Asian standards.

PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOL-AGE ENROLMENT IN PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS (%), LATEST AVAILABLE

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)

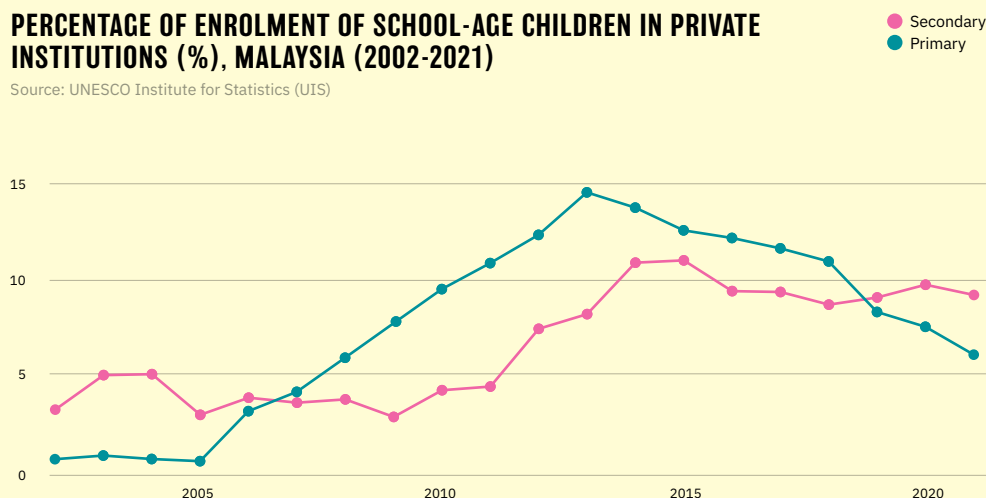


Note: The UIS defines "private" to refer to "all educational institutions not operated by a public authority, regardless of whether they receive financial support from such authorities".

The rate of secondary-level enrolment in private institutions has stabilised at around 10%.

PERCENTAGE OF ENROLMENT OF SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN IN PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS (%), MALAYSIA (2002-2021)

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)



Penang parents' pivot towards private schools coincides with a surge in the popularity of private education nationally, spurring the recent proliferation of international schools in Penang. Public secondary school enrolment has declined by 19.2% over the past decade (2013-2023), and primary school enrolment has decreased by 5.3%, comparable with a 6.2% decrease in Penang's age-5-to-14 population in the same period.^[2] Concurrently, according to Ministry of Education (MOE) reports, the number of international schools in Penang has risen from 8 to 12.

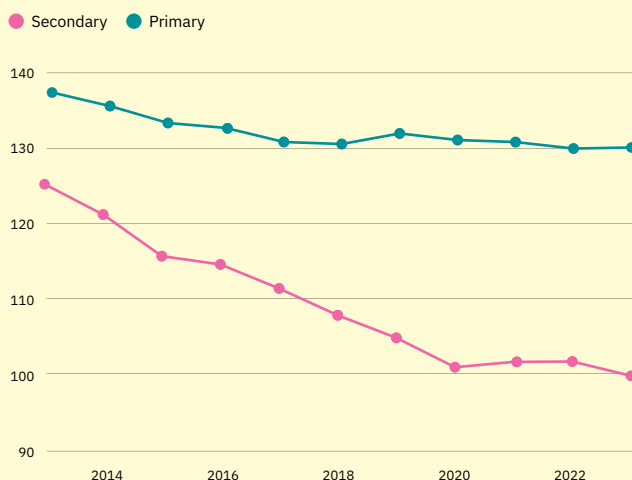
The reduction in public school enrolment is unlikely to indicate a significant pattern of dropouts from formal education in Penang. However, this may be a concern at the national level. The UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) indicate that one in 20 (4.7%, 2022) primary school-age children in Malaysia do not attend any school. In Penang, public school enrolment in Year One alone (20,843, 2023) equals 96% of children born in 2016 (21,781). In contrast, Malaysia's 2023 Year One public school enrolment (447,876) was only 88% of children born in 2016 (508,203).

The faster pace of decline in public secondary school enrolment, relative to Penang's demographic changes, suggests that the shift in preference for private education dominates at the secondary level, as opposed to the primary level. Penang's national primary school graduates are over twice as likely not to attend public secondary school than the average Malaysian Year Six student. Almost one in five (17.8%) eligible primary school graduates in Penang did not enrol in a secondary public school in the subsequent year, versus 8.3% for Malaysia (2023).

Enrolment in Penang's public schools has fallen by **20%** in a decade.

MID-YEAR ENROLMENT IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS, PENANG (AS OF 30TH JUNE) (THOUSANDS), 2013-2023

Source: Author's compilation from *Buku Perangkaan Pendidikan Malaysia*, Ministry of Education

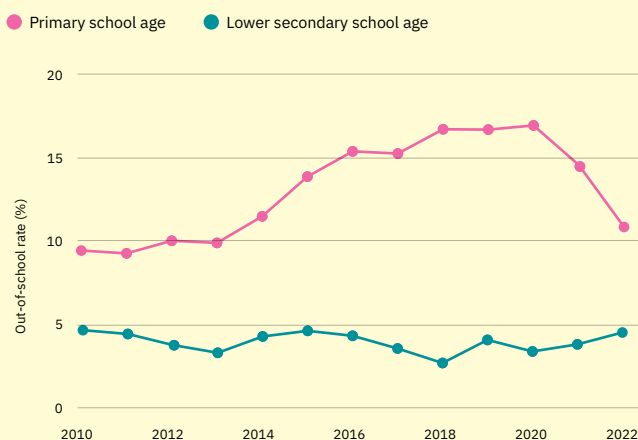


One in twenty children of primary school age do not attend school.

OUT-OF-SCHOOL RATES BY AGE GROUP, MALAYSIA (SDG INDICATOR 4.1.4)

Source: SDG 4 indicators, February 2024 data release, UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Out-of-school rate: Percentage of children and young people in the official age range for the given level of education who are not enrolled in pre-primary, primary, secondary or higher levels of education.



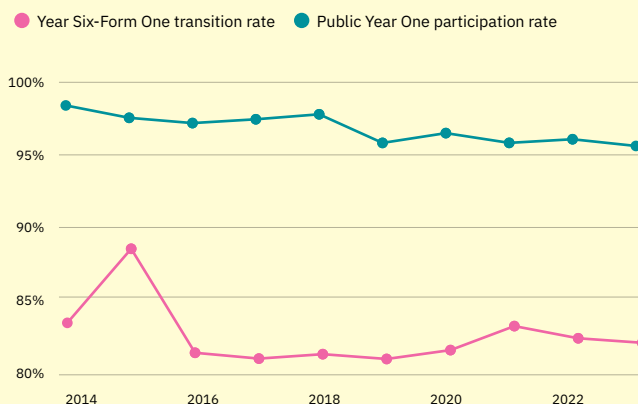
While the share of live births enrolling in Year One in public schools is on a **slight decline**, just under **one in five** Year Six pupils does not enrol in a public secondary school in the subsequent year.

PUBLIC YEAR ONE PARTICIPATION RATE AND YEAR 6-FORM 1 TRANSITION RATE, 2014-2023, PENANG

Source: Author's analysis and compilation from *Buku Perangkaan Pendidikan Malaysia*, Jabatan Pendaftaran Negara (JPN) (via OpenDOSM)

Public primary enrolment to births ratio: current-year Year One enrolment in public schools as a percentage of live births seven years prior.^[3]

Secondary public school transition ratio: current-year Form One enrolment in public schools as a percentage of the previous year's Year Six and remove enrolment in public schools (less current-year remove enrolment). Consistent with the definition in *Buku Perangkaan Pendidikan Malaysia*.

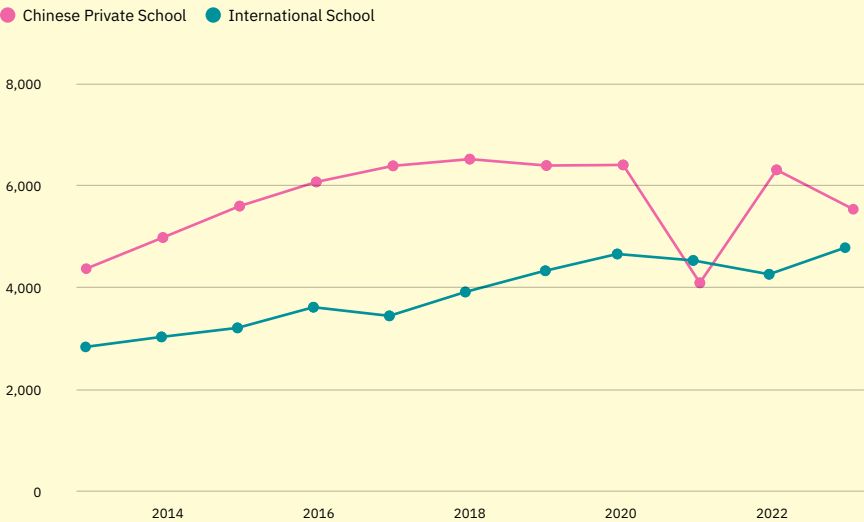


The outsized presence of Chinese-medium private schools is especially noteworthy. Although enrolment (5,702, June 2023) is on par with international schools (5,010, June 2023), it is crucial to consider that independent Chinese schools cater solely to the secondary level. Enrolment in these schools is almost double secondary-level enrolment in international schools in Penang (2,695, June 2023). For comparison, international and independent Chinese schools' enrolment at the secondary level is equivalent to 8.7% of secondary-level students enrolled in public schools in Penang (96,896, 2023).

Chinese private schools continue to **out-enrol** international schools in Penang.

STUDENT ENROLMENT, CHINESE PRIVATE SCHOOLS AND INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS, PENANG (2013-2023)

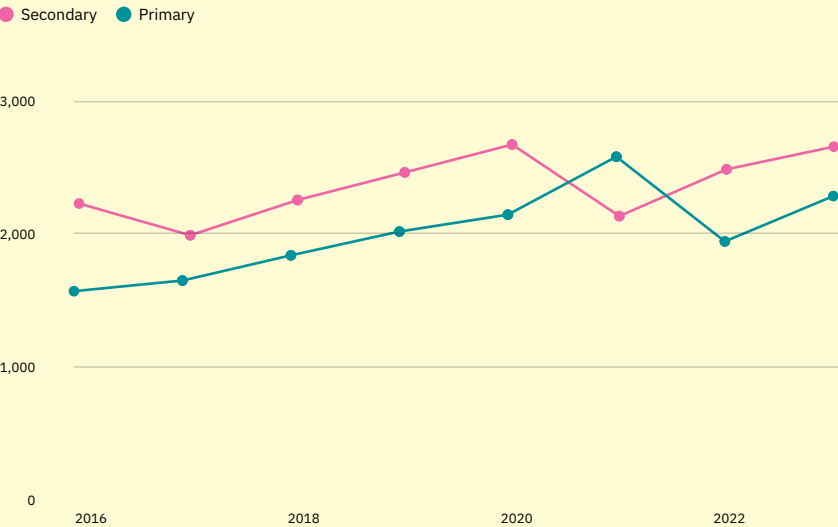
Source: Author's compilation from *Buku Perangkaan Pendidikan Malaysia*, Ministry of Education



International schools are **more popular** at the secondary level.

STUDENT ENROLMENT BY LEVEL, INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS, PENANG (2016-2023)

Source: Author's compilation from *Buku Perangkaan Pendidikan Malaysia*, Ministry of Education



The demand for international education is booming in Penang. Enrolment in international schools has grown at 5.2% annually (cumulative annual growth rate, CAGR) between 2013 and 2023, outpacing plateauing enrolment growth in Chinese private schools (2.3% CAGR). According to a Tenby Schools Penang representative, this surge is driven by parents' desire for their children to develop strong English language skills and benefit from a broader curriculum that fosters independent learning. Interestingly, primary-level enrolment in international schools is catching up with secondary-level enrolment, even surpassing secondary enrolment for a brief period in 2021. Tenby Schools Penang confirms this observation of a rising influx of younger students.

It is essential to note the substantial role of the religious private education sector.^[4] Between various privately-run religious education entities, including people's religious schools, private religious schools (*sekolah agama swasta*), Tahfiz schools and *sekolah pondok*, Penang registered 8,836 students across 92 institutions in 2023, well exceeding international schools.

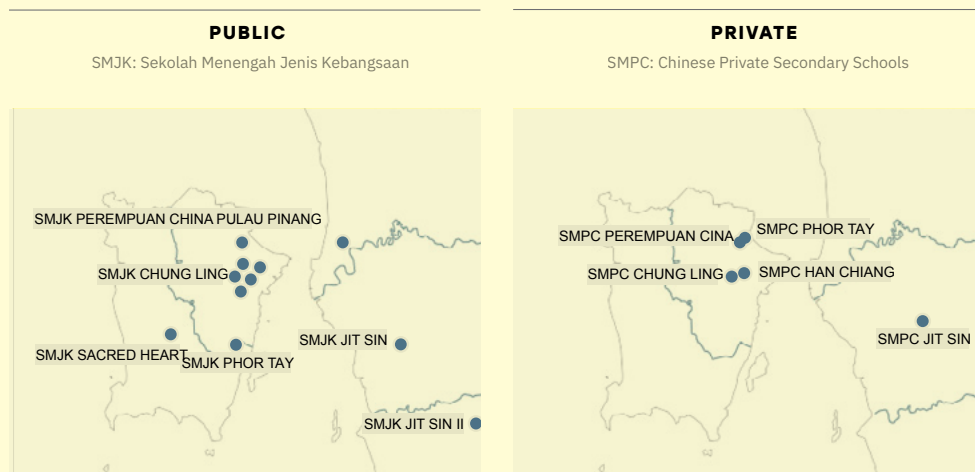
CHINESE PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Chinese private schools, also known as independent Chinese schools, enrol some 76,634 students in 60 schools across Malaysia (June 2023), five of which are in Penang.^[5] These schools are also huge: each school enrolls 1,140 students on average, more than double international schools who enrol an average of 418 students per school in Penang. Almost all who enrol are Malaysian citizens, with reportedly only 0.87% of foreign enrolment in 2022 across Malaysia. The more prominent Chinese national-type public secondary schools—Penang Chinese Girls' High School, Chung Ling High School and Jit Sin High School—co-locate with their private counterparts, blurring the lines between public and private education.

Chinese secondary schools are located in **Chinese-dominated areas** in Penang.

LOCATION OF CHINESE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN PENANG

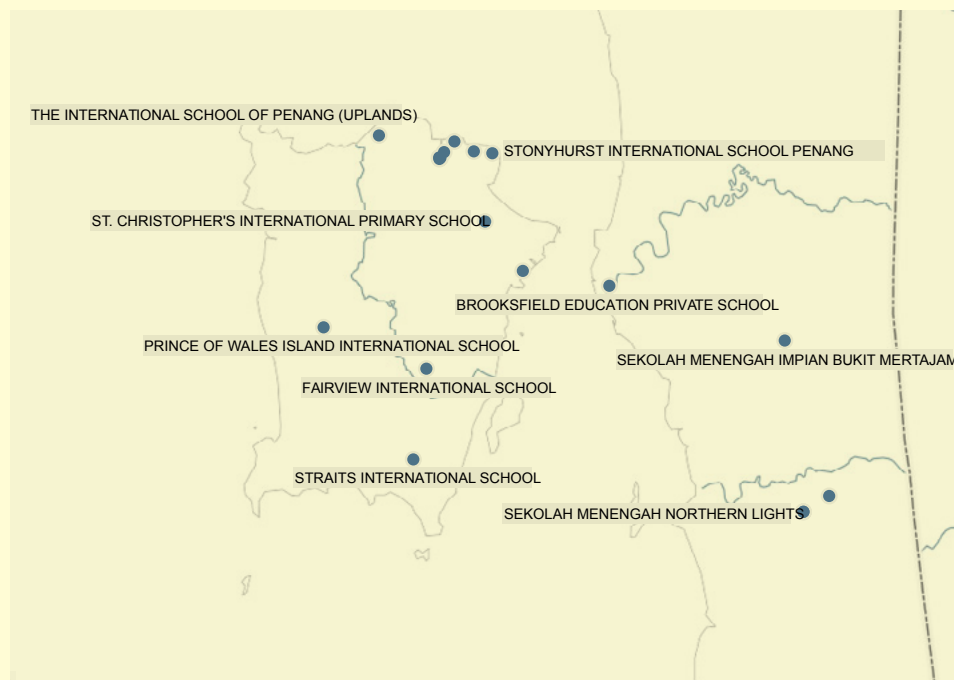
Source: Lokasi Sekolah di Pulau Pinang, Pejabat Setiausaha Kerajaan Negeri Pulau Pinang (Bahagian Teknologi Maklumat dan Komunikasi Negeri), via archive.data.gov.my



INTERNATIONAL AND OTHER PRIVATE SCHOOLS

LOCATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL AND OTHER PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN PENANG

Source: Lokasi Sekolah di Pulau Pinang, Pejabat Setiausaha Kerajaan Negeri Pulau Pinang (Bahagian Teknologi Maklumat dan Komunikasi Negeri), via archive.data.gov.my

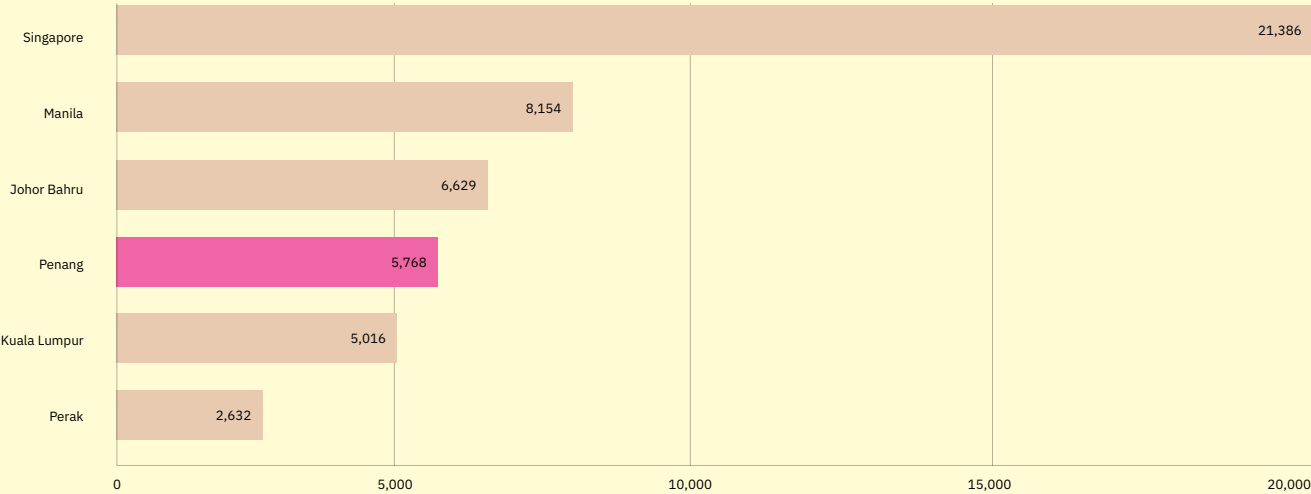


The international school sector presents a distinct picture. These schools primarily cater to expatriate children and affluent Malaysians seeking a globalised education.^[6] Today, nationally, 55,999 Malaysian citizens comprise 70% (2023) of total student enrolment in international schools, and 50% more citizens enrol in international schools compared to 2017 (Beh, 2023). Unlike Chinese independent schools, which are more affordable, international school fees often put them out of reach for the average Penangite. International Schools Database estimates median fees for international schools in Penang to be USD 5,768 in 2022, amounting to 33%^[7] of the median Penang household's annual income.

International schools in Penang are **more expensive** than in Kuala Lumpur but more affordable than in Johor Bahru, Manila and Singapore.

MEDIAN ANNUAL FEES FOR A 6-YEAR-OLD IN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS BY CITY (USD), 2022

Source: Adapted from International Schools Database
<https://www.international-schools-database.com/articles/the-cost-of-international-education-around-the-world-in-2022>



FOOTNOTES

[1] <https://asia.nikkei.com/NAR/Articles/Failing-state-schools-prompt-parents-to-go-private>

[2] According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) population estimates, Penang's 5-14 citizen population decreased by 11% in the same period. Assuming the non-citizen population makes up a negligible portion of public school enrolment, the muted decrease in primary public school enrolment suggests that the citizen population may now be slightly more likely to attend public primary school. It is also important to note that Penang vernacular (primary) schools have seen double-digit declines in enrolment in the past decade (Chinese: -13%; Tamil: -11%; 2013-2023), while national primary schools have maintained their headcount.

[3] Adapted from "Are ALL Children in Malaysia Getting an Education?" - The Star

[4] An overview of the religious private education sector is beyond the scope of this article. For a primer, refer to The Potential of Independent Religious Schools: A Case Study of Al-Amin (Deviyati, 2016) and Three things about: Malaysia's (private/ state-funded) Islamic schools ().

[5] <https://www.espect.com.my/national-education-system/independent-chinese-schools/>

[6] "Imagine an Education Hub: Leveraging Penang's International School Ecosystem", Beh, MT (2023) <https://penanginstitute.org/publications/issues/imagine-an-education-hub-leveraging-penangs-international-school-ecosystem/#ftn1b>

[7] Median household income is RM6,502 per month in 2022. Computed with KL USD/MYR reference rate of 4.4132 as at 30th December 2022.

[8] Tze , Danny, Ken Wong, and Vivien Wong. "Chinese Education in a Multiethnic Society: Malaysia Experience." The Cultural Legacies of Chinese Schools in Singapore and Malaysia, edited by Cheun Hoe Yow and Jingyi Qu, Routledge, 1 Mar. 2021.

[9] <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2024/03/14/dlp-now-in-2501-schools>

[10] Although the Garis Panduan Pelaksanaan 'Dual Language Programme' Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia Tahun 2024 provides guidance to determine Malay language proficiency at Year Six for enrolment in DLP classes at the secondary

level (Section 12.4), there is no specific guidance on ascertaining proficiency at Year One. However, in a May 2024 statement to The Star, the Education Ministry stated, "Essentially, the eligibility of Year One pupils to participate in the DLP is based on their proficiency in the Malay language as stipulated in the guidelines."

[11] "Pihak sekolah hendaklah memastikan terdapat sekurang-kurangnya satu kelas di setiap Tahun/Tingkatan yang melaksanakan PdP (pengajaran dan pembelajaran) menggunakan Bahasa Kebangsaan/bahasa ibunda sebagai bahasa pengantar bermula dengan Tahun 1 dan Tingkatan 1 untuk sesi persekolahan baharu mulai tahun 2024/2025." (Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Bil. 5/2024)

[12] <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2024/05/04/dlp-ball-back-in-schools-court>

[13] Dewan Rakyat Hansard, 27th November 2023, p.103) - <http://www.parlimen.gov.my/files/hindex/pdf/DR-27112023.pdf>

[14] <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2023/04/01/tears-over-closing-of-two-secondary-convent-schools>

[15] See The Devoted Pioneers of Girls'

Education in Malaya in the January 2016 issue for background on the IJS.

[16] <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2023/01/15/new-plans-for-convent-school>

[17] https://ebrary.net/178285/education/education_1961_aftermath

[18] <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-vernacular-schools-education-chinese-tamil-malay-national-unity-4277276>

[19] <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2024/03/16/dong-zong-urges-unity-govt-to-recognise-uec#:~:text=However%2C%20the%20UEC%20is%20yet,%3E>

[20] <https://www.dongzong.my/v3/en/latest-news-2/notice-statement/1175-2022-78.html>

[21] <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2024/01/1004805/civil-servants-will-be-appointed-contract-service-system-pending-new>

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<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2017/04/29/three-things-about-malaysias-private-state-funded-islamic-schools/1366345>

THE GREAT EDUCATION DEBATE

As Penang parents increasingly seek private education options, a complex national issue comes to light: Malaysia's seemingly endless debate on how to run public schools—a tension dating back to the post-war period^[8] with the Barnes and Fenn-Wu reports.

The focus on **strengthening Malay language proficiency** in public schools, a longstanding national goal, can sometimes overshadow broader discussions about public education. Meanwhile, advocates for Chinese language education as well as Christian communities grapple with **safeguarding** their historical and culturally significant schools, established during a period of **diverse educational approaches**, in the face of a more **centralised national education system**.

On the other hand, private schools are mostly **shielded** from the contentious political debates that plague public education discussions in Malaysia. However, this creates a **two-tiered system**, potentially entrenching **social and educational disparities**.

DIFFERENT LANGUAGE

The question of language has been a central theme in Malaysia's national education system. Although Malay is the main medium of instruction in public schools, science and maths education shifted towards English under the Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik Dalam Bahasa Inggeris (PPSMI) policy during the Mahathir administration, and was subsequently reversed by the MBMMBI policy in 2010. The introduction of the Dual Language Programme (DLP) in 2016 provided some schools with the option to deliver science and maths in English, and is currently implemented in 2,501 schools across Malaysia.^[9]

However, a recent change adds a new layer of complexity. Starting in the 2024/25 academic year, students must demonstrate basic Malay language skills to enrol in DLP classes.^[10] Additionally, DLP schools need to meet overall Malay language performance standards and offer at least one class with science and maths taught in Malay or the mother tongue.^[11]

The latter requirement in particular has caused confusion and frustration, especially in schools with no interest in non-DLP classes. According to press reports,^[12] Year One students in Kuala Lumpur had to undergo extensive assessments in multiple languages and subjects to qualify for DLP enrolment, although the Ministry has clarified that it had not prescribed assessments to determine DLP eligibility.

Justifying the rule for non-DLP classes within DLP schools, the Education Minister cited low Malay language proficiency observed during field visits to five DLP schools, along with the need to safeguard the national language.^[13]

DIFFERENT SCHOOLS

Penangites marked the end of an era when SMK Convent Pulau Tikus (CPT) and SMK Convent Light Street (CLS) shut down as government-aided schools in 2023^[14], not long after SK Pykett Methodist closed its doors in 2019. Representatives of the Infant Jesus Sisters^[15] (IJS), owner of the Convent schools, said they plan to convert these schools to private schools; and in 2020^[16], ACE Adventure announced plans to set up a private international school on the grounds of Convent Light Street. Likewise, Methodist College Kuala Lumpur (MCKL) has established its Pykett campus on the grounds of SK Pykett Methodist, a 20-minute drive from the Wesley Methodist (International) School campus.

These closures follow in the footsteps of independent Chinese schools, which diverged from the national system in the wake of the 1961 Education Act.^[17] ^[16] Meanwhile, although Chinese public schools have gained popularity amongst non-Chinese Malaysians,^[18] concerns regarding government policies remain. Advocates for Chinese language education face frequent challenges, including the government's reluctance to recognise the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC)^[19] issued by Chinese independent secondary schools and a lack of transparency in funding^[20] for government-aided schools.

EDUCATING A DIVERSE POPULATION

The rise of private education in Malaysia presents a challenge and an opportunity. The government must prioritise a two-pronged approach to revitalise public schools and ensure a cohesive educational landscape.

Firstly, addressing the root causes of the shift towards private education is crucial. MOE must actively listen to parents' concerns, improve public school facilities and resources, and foster a more engaging and enriching learning environment. As the government moves towards rationalising civil service contracts,^[21] pay packages and working conditions must remain attractive to prevent an outflow of talent towards the private education sector.

Secondly, the government needs to take decisive steps to depoliticise education. The Ministry must fully embrace Malaysia's multilingualism as a core strength of the Malaysian education system, with a pragmatic approach to elevate Malay language proficiency while recognising English as the lingua franca of STEM, acknowledge the diversity of Malaysia's education stakeholders, while guaranteeing policy stability for parents, students and teachers alike.

By fostering a more inclusive and high-performing public system, Malaysia can ensure every child receives a quality education, regardless of background or socioeconomic status. This vision is achievable if the government prioritises open communication, invests in quality education for all, and embraces the richness of Malaysia's multicultural heritage.

REGAINING THE RIGHT TO ENJOY EDUCATION

BY BEH MAY TING

THE RECENT ISSUE of candidates failing to attend national examinations has sparked significant debate. 10,160 out of the 383,685 registered candidates for SPM 2023—or 2.64% of them—did not show up for the exam.

Coming from a background that prioritises academic achievement, I recognise that education is a basic necessity and higher education a privilege. But, while it is widely understood that education is the key to opening doors, the questions remain: which doors, exactly, and who decides their placement?

Malaysia's education system faces a dual challenge: the issue of school dropouts on the one hand, and an overly exam-oriented mindset among students on the other. These two phenomena, though seemingly distinct, stem from the same cause: an education system that places undue emphasis on examinations.

THE SCHOOL DROPOUT PROBLEM

School dropout rates are a significant concern in many countries. Students leave school for various reasons, including economic hardships, family issues, lack of interest in the curriculum and inadequate support systems. The consequences are dire: dropouts often face limited job opportunities and lower lifetime earnings.

One core reason for high dropout rates is the disconnection between the school curriculum and students' lives. When students fail to see the relevance and value of what they are learning, their motivations wane. Additionally, socio-economic factors play a critical role. Students from low-income families might prioritise work over education to support their families. Furthermore, schools often lack resources to provide personalised attention to students who are at-risk, making it easier for them to slip through the cracks.

AN EXAM-ORIENTED SYSTEM

In stark contrast to dropouts, students who want to do well in the Malaysian education system, where high-stakes testing determines academic and professional futures, find themselves entrenched in an exam-oriented culture. The pressure to achieve high scores can overshadow the intrinsic value of learning, reducing education to a series of hurdles to overcome rather than an enriching journey, conditioning students to view gaining knowledge as a competition.

This exam-centric approach can lead to several negative outcomes. It encourages rote memorisation and regurgitation of information over critical thinking,

creativity and problem-solving skills, jeopardising a deeper understanding and appreciation of the subject matter. This focus on grades also causes significant stress and anxiety, on top of creating a limited understanding of success and achievement in students.

That is not to say that a good education system removes all stress—I believe that healthy competition and learning to perform under pressure is beneficial for character development; but, like other life skills, students should also learn to manage stress and pressure alongside academic learning.

BRIDGING THE GAP: PROMOTING A LOVE FOR KNOWLEDGE

The way a nation's education system transmits and structures knowledge—influencing how students acquire, digest and generate ideas—shapes its people. Consider, for example, how the top museums in the world are curated: systematically, informatively and with effective storytelling, leaving visitors more informed by the end of their visit.

To address school dropout and the array of problems brought about by an exam-centric system, the education system must shift towards fostering a genuine appreciation for knowledge as well as integrating skills-based education into the curriculum to develop a broader range of abilities in students. Having a curriculum that is engaging and relevant to students' lives is crucial.

Moving away from purely exam-based assessments to a more holistic approach can reduce the pressure on students and encourage a deeper engagement with the material, while integrating practical applications of theoretical concepts can help students understand the value of what they are learning.

Teachers play a crucial role in fostering a lifelong passion for learning. Encouraging intellectual curiosity and promoting a growth mindset can help students appreciate the learning process rather than fixate on the outcomes. Educators should focus on inspiring students to ask questions, explore new ideas and embrace challenges.

Such an approach not only reduces dropout rates, but also ensures that students are well-rounded individuals prepared for the complexities of the real world. After all, the ultimate goal of education should be to cultivate a generation of learners who value knowledge and are motivated by the joy of discovery rather than the pressure of achieving high scores.



DR. BEH MAY TING is an urban anthropologist and a senior analyst at Penang Institute. She draws professional and personal inspirations from the finer things in life.

NORMALISING PERIOD TALKS— FOR ALL OUR SAKES

BY VALERIE WIRINHAR



MENSTRUATION CONTINUES TO be an uncomfortable topic of discussion today, especially in relatively conservative parts of the world. Akin to a terribly misunderstood lady, the truth about menstruation has long been enshrouded by unfounded conjectures.

In fact, Pliny the Elder, a Roman naturalist and philosopher, first described menstruation as a catastrophic existence in *Natural History*, immortalised in one of the earliest and most comprehensive encyclopaedias published in AD 77-79:

“Contact with [menstrual blood] turns new wine sour, crops touched by it become barren, grafts die, seed in gardens are dried up, the fruit of trees fall off, the edge of steel and the gleam of ivory are dulled, hives of bees die, even bronze and iron are at once seized by rust, and a horrible smell fills the air; to taste it drives dogs mad and infects their bites with an incurable poison.”^[1]

Thankfully, times have changed; but what remains insufficient is the understanding of what menstruation actually is. Hushed perceptions communicated to young girls through secrecy, the act of hiding menstrual pads and the fear of period leaks have conveyed the message that “periods are shameful” or “menstruation blood is dirty”.

Despite advancements in science and the many discoveries that we revel at, groundless claims about menstruation continue to be disseminated. This poses a few questions: Why can’t accurate knowledge concerning menstruation be served on a platter and spoon-fed to our young, as easily as how we teach the ABCs? Why can’t we talk about the topic leisurely over a cup of afternoon tea? Why can’t we familiarise society with the phenomenon and make it an established and well-informed concept?

CAPTIONS

1. Buttercup staff introducing menstrual cups during a body positivity session organised by The Noble Dr.

2. Introducing menstrual cups during a pop-up event.

FOOTNOTES

[1] [https://journals.openedition.org/mondessciens/4113?lang=en#:~:text=According%20to%20Pliny%20\(28%2C%2077,away%20by%20a%20menstruating%20woman.](https://journals.openedition.org/mondessciens/4113?lang=en#:~:text=According%20to%20Pliny%20(28%2C%2077,away%20by%20a%20menstruating%20woman.)

[2] <https://www.kotex.com.my/en-my/education/1-in-2-girls-report-wanting-to-skip-school-when-menstruating>



1

According to Catherine Lee, founder of ButterCup, a company that produces menstrual cups, there are several vital steps to take to eliminate menstrual prejudice at its roots to create a safe space for our younger generations. “If you start from young, a lot of problems we have now would not exist,” she says.

When interactions with parental or teacher figures exhibit social stigma repeatedly, children will deem them as normal. These early-age socialisations, upon being internalised, are oftentimes hard to alter.

Hence, these mentor figures are crucial in sparking societal change, especially when it comes to what constitutes a stigma. When children are at the “knowing age”, these authoritative figures should start to clarify such false myths by educating the young on women’s reproductive health, and encouraging them to strike a behavioural change.

Situations where parents expect teachers to teach their children about sex topics, and vice versa, allow key information to slip through the cracks, leaving these girls to find out what is actually happening to their bodies through friends or social media. Apart from physical sources of information, we easily assimilate beyond-the-classroom knowledge with our compact screens anytime and anywhere. What further contributes to the ease of digestion is the prominence of bite-sized content, exemplified by Instagram reels and TikTok shorts. Their vibrant and attractive visuals enthrall its audience in mere seconds, enabling them to remember the communicated information.

This highly-digestible format has proven efficacious with Gen Alphas, who have a comparatively heightened social awareness. For example, at the ButterCup pop-up booth, several teenagers told Catherine that they learned about menstrual cups through

TikTok. Evidently, with moderate usage, social media serves as a valuable platform that informs its audience on a multitude of topics and pressing issues. However, we know this is not adequate; there are other types of content out there that might swing viewers in the other direction—we live in a very polarised society, after all.

Therefore, if you have an open communication channel with a tween or teenage girl, let them know that menstruation is a normal part of growing up and it may appear irregular for the first few years. Assure them that there is no need to be scared or ashamed of these developments and that it is important to seek medical help for excessive bleeding, prolonged absence of periods or bleeding between periods. Maintaining a healthy diet rich in iron and folic acid is crucial to improving haemoglobin concentrations, and girls should disregard taboos about restricted food and drinks during their period.

A 2022 study by Kotex among Malaysian girls found that more than 50% of the girls surveyed wanted to miss school during their periods.^[2] This suggests menstruation remains a source of shame and discomfort, even though over 86% of girls acknowledged it to be a natural bodily function. The results highlight a need for open conversations about periods, not just at home but in schools. Sexual and reproductive health should be appropriately addressed among students during their primary school years. Healthy discussions among teachers and students, and among students themselves, will remove potential stigma about the subject. Painting blank canvases with accurate menstrual knowledge and period positivity would give birth to a generation that is knowledgeable and open about menstrual difficulties.



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A MISSING LINK IN
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I GREW UP in Sungai Petani, Kedah, son to a lumberjack and a housewife who successfully raised four children. My career path has been anything but linear. After graduating with a degree in Aeronautical Engineering from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), I explored various interests, briefly becoming a pianist before becoming an insurance agent. However, enrolling on a financial planning course to be a Registered Financial Planner (RFP) sparked a passion for personal finance, leading me to pursue it further. I then become more intentional about financial education.

I have, since 2006, shared my knowledge, insights and experiences openly through my posts at KCLau.com, and my offerings in financial education have burgeoned to books, articles, webinars and online courses.

Today, as a financial educator, I notice:

1. Around 52% of Malaysians struggle to raise RM1,000 in emergency funds.^[1]
2. Over 20% of those declared as bankrupt are youths.^[2]
3. Nearly 6.7 mil people have less than RM10,000 in their EPF accounts.^[3]

Even affluent parents—concerned about providing the best academic education for their children—might feel insecure about their finances afterwards, as they would be facing their own retirement.

So, what is amiss?

My take is “financial education”.

RAISING “HIGHLY-EDUCATED, FINANCIALLY-ILLITERATE” CHILDREN

Most parents tend to put their kids through school, tuition, music, sports, art and other extra-curricular activities. We want our children to be literate and well-rounded. It is best if they can speak multiple languages, excel in math and science, be musically inclined, possess bodily kinaesthetic intelligence, are socially competent, digitally savvy, and the list goes on.

Many children, especially in cities like KL, Penang and JB, are clocking in time in learning centres to enter universities. I have no doubt that our children will become more highly educated, but are they prepared for the real financial world?

I think not.

Our children can be academic geniuses yet clueless about:

- Income: How to earn/raise income?
- Budgeting: How to control expenses?
- Taxes: How to file taxes correctly and what strategies are there to get tax returns?
- Investments: How to pick good stocks to invest in?
- Real estate: How to find good properties to invest in?

- Insurance: How to shop for suitable insurance plans in the market?
- Estate planning: How to leave behind a financial legacy?

Can our children pick up such knowledge naturally? What we should commonly expect is that their financial skills will be restricted only to earning and spending money.

FINANCIAL SUBJECTS

If we want to get serious about our children's and grandchildren's future, quality financial education needs to be included in our education system.

At the very least, financial topics should be introduced to primary and secondary school students. This would enable them to read financial statements and, as they grow up, to:

- budget better,
- have greater control over their finances,
- identify and invest in good quality stocks for the long term, and
- turnaround their own (or their client's/employers) finances.

Subjects that can be introduced to build their financial intelligence include:

1. Entrepreneurship, where leadership, communication and cooperation, corporate and Tax Law, and sales and marketing are taught.
2. Investing, where competencies like valuation skills, Time Value of Money (TVM), portfolio building and management skills, stocks, ETFs, REITs and other real estate-related topics can be introduced.
3. Financial protection, such as the purpose of insurance, wills and trust are explained.

MORE TAX REVENUE?

What if we equipped our children with the skills to become entrepreneurs and investors? By making available opportunities to produce value via enterprises instead of just studying to get a job, the types of financial education listed above can empower them to build businesses and create jobs instead. They will then be able to fuel a cycle of rising income, spending, savings and investments, ultimately contributing to higher tax revenues for the government.

When more of Malaysia's citizens are financially literate, the government can potentially reduce expenditure on welfare, subsidies and “hand-out” programmes to the less fortunate. Even an eradication of such deficits would not be impossible.

In fact, it should all start with us parents, many of whom might still be financially illiterate. It is time to journey towards financial freedom, and one can begin by scouring through free resources that are widely available online and, of course (a little self-promotion here) at my website, KCLau.com. Alternatively, shop around for good books on finance and talk to those who are financially savvy about how they spend and budget. Financial freedom starts with education.

FOOTNOTES

[1] <https://www.hsbc.com.my/financial-wellbeing/build-emergency-savings/>

[2] <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/education/2022/11/27/young-and-broke>

[3] <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cna-insider/malaysia-afford-retirement-crisis-epf-pension-drawdowns-covid-pandemic-3877331>



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MAPPING ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN PENANG

MUHAMMAD AMIRUL NAIM ROSMI



MUHAMMAD AMIRUL NAIM ROSMI holds a Bachelor's degree in Human Sciences from the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM). His areas of interest encompass social history, intellectual history and political thought.

THE ROOTS OF Islamic education in Malaysia date back to the 13th century, with the arrival of Islam through trade and missionary activities. Early learning centres, usually held in palaces, homes of teachers and mosques, were established to teach the Quran, Hadith (traditions of the Prophet) and other Islamic knowledge.

During British colonial rule, the focus shifted towards secular education, causing a decline in traditional Islamic schools. However, the Muslim community maintained its religious education through “*sekolah pondok*”—village-based institutions where students lived and studied under the guidance of religious teachers. These schools were critical in preserving Islamic knowledge and practices.

The establishment of *pondok* institutions in Penang began in 1875, initiated by Sheikh Jalaluddin bin Muhammad Yusya' al-Kelantani, who founded Pondok Penanti; and Sheikh Zainal Abidin al-Fatani, who set up a *pondok* in Sungai Dua, Seberang Perai. This effort was further expanded by Sheikh Jalaluddin's three sons: Haji Zakaria, who led Pondok Sungai Dua; Haji Muhammad Saleh, who established a *pondok* in Kampung Setol; and Haji Abdullah, who opened a *pondok* in Permatang Buluh. These indirectly promoted the expansion of new settlements for the Malay community, leading to the establishment of privately funded religious schools in the form of *madrasahs* and national religious schools under the purview of the government. At the *pondok*, the approach is more traditional, where students sit in front of their teacher (*talaqqi*) during lessons and classical text readings.

Between 1890 and 1940, the Pan-Islamic movement gained momentum on the outset of the Ottoman Caliphate collapse in 1924. This period saw significant reforms in Islamic education. Penang became a hub for Islamic activists, philanthropists and scholars. These reformers established several *madrasahs* that integrated secular subjects like mathematics and science with religious studies. One *madrasah* of note was Madrasah Al-Mashoor in George Town. Burhanuddin Al-Helmy, an opposition leader, was an alumnus. He found the traditional methods in the *pondok* schools in Kedah (where he previously studied) restrictive, as they did not allow students to freely ask questions. Conversely, Madrasah Al-Mashoor adopted modern teaching styles.

The government recognised the importance of integrating Islamic education within the national framework post-independence in 1957. National Islamic schools, known as Sekolah Agama/Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama (SMKA), were established, offering a curriculum that combined religious and secular subjects. The number of private Islamic schools also grew.

TYPES OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA

As mentioned earlier, a *pondok* school is a traditional, community-based institution focused on classical Islamic texts and teachings. There are 13 *pondok* schools in Penang, with the majority located in Seberang Perai. Some offer open lectures attended by the public, like Pondok Darul Ulum Al-Filfilani in Balik Pulau, where its founder, Ustaz Shahul Hameed, organises public lectures for those interested. He also allows elderly retired folks who want to devote their time to worship (*ibadah*) to stay at the *pondok*.

A *madrasah*, however, offers a structured curriculum catering to students from primary through secondary levels. Integrated Islamic schools also offer a balanced curriculum of religious and academic subjects. These government schools prepare students for higher education in both religious and secular fields, promoting a holistic educational experience. There are 60 SMKA schools across Malaysia with 38,062 students—there are four in Penang. Alternatively, Sekolah Agama Bantuan Kerajaan (SABK) schools are owned by the State Islamic Religious Council. There are 162 SABK schools with almost 84,852 students in Malaysia—12 of these are in Penang.

SMKA and SABK differ in their syllabi—SABK includes additional subjects in Islamic traditions such as Arabic literature, the principles of Islamic jurisprudence (*Usul al-fiqh*) and Islamic law (*Shariah*). Their syllabus is based on the Azhari Curriculum, which uses the syllabus system from Ma'ahad Bu'uth al-Azhar from Cairo as a reference. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has collaborated with al-Azhar University, Cairo (the most prominent Islamic university) to establish a certificate recognised by both parties. This curriculum has been adjusted in state and private religious schools under a certificate known as the Malaysian Higher Religious Certificate (STAM). Meanwhile, SMKA students only focus on subjects included in SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia).

MOE has also expanded the concept of SMKA by introducing Religious Stream Class (Kelas Aliran Agama (KAA)) in national schools. Students enrolling for this stream must go through the same interview process required of SMKA students.

Students dedicate several years to mastering the Quranic text in Tahfiz schools. These schools also teach other Islamic knowledge to ensure a comprehensive religious education. There are 27 Tahfiz schools in Penang, 10 of which are located on Penang Island. The rest are located in Seberang Perai, including Sekolah Menengah Arab Tahfiz Ibn Al Qayyim (SMART IQ), linked with the Penang-born Perlis Mufti, Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin (famously known as Dr. Maza). SMITA (Sekolah Menengah Islam Tahfiz Al-Aminiah) is a vocational Tahfiz located in Bertam, which offers a TVET curriculum developed by community colleges and the JPK module (Department Skills Development) for the SLDN (National Dual Training System) as recognised by the Malaysian Skill Certificate (SKM).

WHY RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS?

Many Muslim parents want their children to possess a strong Islamic foundation as they believe it is the basis for developing a solid moral compass. Maisarah Khusaini, 42, a teacher under the MOE, believes that her goal is to provide her children with a foundation in religion, complemented by an environment compatible with her lifestyle.

When comparing with national schools, parents see that many Islamic schools are also academically competitive, which would prepare students for national exams and higher education. Two students from SMKA Al Irshad (Seberang Perai) and SMKA Al-Mashoor Lelaki (George Town) were among the top five students in the 2023 SPM, as announced by Penang Education Director, Abdul Said Hussain.

Islamic schools also assure Muslim parents of a safe, disciplined and culturally appropriate environment for their children. Shamsuki Azlan, who sent his son to study in a religious school, believes that the environment will strengthen his son's character and help him adapt to current challenges faced by youths.

For many, it is a continuation of family traditions and values. Parents who have received Islamic education often desire to provide the same experience for their children, reinforcing their religious and cultural heritage.

CHALLENGES IN ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

Two key issues that hinder the progression of private Islamic schools in Penang are financial restrictions and the quality of teachers. Due to limited finances, their respective management cannot offer competitive salaries and benefits compared to corporate jobs or government teaching positions. As a result, these schools struggle to attract high quality teachers.

Islamic schools in rural areas also grapple with inadequate infrastructure and resources for the same reason. This might include having outdated facilities and materials, affecting the overall learning environment for students.

The federal government offers a solution through the conversion of affected schools to be registered as SABK, where they would be provided with better infrastructure, qualified teachers, integration with the national education system as well as improved human resource management for students, teachers and the schools themselves. Thus, the ball is officially in their court for making systemic reforms and improvements by taking the opportunity to be transformed into an SABK, so that the school will be adequately equipped and no student gets left behind.

FROM THE GROUND UP: PDC IN PROPERTY AND INFRASTRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT



1

AT THE HEART of Penang's transformation as a thriving socio-economic and developmental hub lies the Penang Development Corporation (PDC), which holds the pivotal role of shaping the state's property landscape and transforming its infrastructure. As an urban planning government agency, PDC has provided liveable housing schemes for locals from different income groups and pioneered the establishment of industrial zones and public recreational spaces, all of which include high-quality features geared towards accessibility and sustainability.

THEN AND NOW: PDC'S ROLE IN HOUSING

In its early role as Penang's principal property developer, PDC created urban townships for the booming industrial areas of Bayan Lepas and Seberang Jaya. These townships provided affordable flats and landed housing options for Penangites and non-resident workers living nearby. From low- to medium-cost flats and landed housing options across the new townships of Bayan Baru, Seberang Jaya, followed by Gat Lebu Macallum and Jalan Kedah as part of George Town's urban renewal scheme, PDC's housing development not only enhanced the quality of life of Penangites, but broadened the state's economic base by building a formidable construction sector.

Recognising the present challenge of land scarcity and rising costs, PDC's subsidiary, PDC Properties Sdn Bhd (PDCP), has developed a wide range of residential/commercial developments. Central to PDCP's portfolio is the identification of emerging demographic trends and market demands. To the growing population, PDCP introduced affordable housing schemes that res-

onate with contemporary lifestyles such as the brand new Affordable Housing Scheme (AHS), also known as "New Talent Housing" (Rumah Bakat Baru), in addressing the burgeoning demand of Penang's young workers and first-home buyers. Estimated to be launched in 2025, this scheme will incorporate the latest Industrialised Building System (IBS) in building high-quality residences across Bandar Cassia, Batu Kawan and Seberang Jaya.

PDCP's long-term commitment to sustainability and diversity has also led to developments such as Jiran Residensi—an affordable, high-quality mixed development district with a total of 707 residential and 15 commercial shop office units equipped with multi-level parking, a multi-purpose hall, a playground and kindergarten, and an outdoor gymnasium.

If Penang aims to be a more liveable city, innovative and sustainable housing solutions are crucial. PDCP has now turned its focus to "SMART homes", integrating affordable pricing with smart technologies. This caters to a wider range of Penang residents and aims to bridge the gap between affordable and luxury housing, especially on Penang's limited land. They are introducing home concepts such as electric vehicle (EV) charging lots, free Wi-Fi, rainwater harvesting and solar panels for landed, high-rise and mixed developments that combine residential, commercial and recreational elements.

BUILDING PENANG'S INDUSTRIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

What feeds the housing industry are Penang's infrastructural transformations that began in the 1970s. PDC continues to initiate developments such as industrial

CAPTIONS

1. Flats in Seberang Perai.
2. KOMTAR, the tallest building in Penang, houses government offices and commercial outlets.
3. The transformed Sia Boey market that marks the first urban archaeological park in Malaysia.

Table 1: High-Impact Housing Projects underway by PDCP

PROJECT	TYPE	UNITS (NO.)
Bertam	Double-storey terrace and semi-detached	48
Bukit Jambul, Phase 1	High-rise condominium	200
Cassia Cempaka, Phase 1 - 4	Double-storey semi-detached, terrace and bungalow	233
One Mutiara	High-rise apartment	356
Burmah Square	Mixed development	518

facilities, transportation networks, urban spaces and sustainable green landscapes today. Projects with a larger footprint, such as land reclamation and the development of industrial parks, are built complete with essential amenities such as electricity, reservoirs, telecommunications and an integrated transportation system, securing connectivity and enabling Penang to be a magnet for both international and local investors.

The earliest example of such development was the Bayan Lepas Land Reclamation in the 1970s, and later Persiaran Bayan Lepas (now known as the Tun Dr. Lim Chong Eu Expressway) that connects the heart of George Town to Batu Maung in the south, stretching across the Bayan Lepas Free Industrial Zone with side links to the Penang Bridge (leading to the Prai Free Trade Zone), the Sultan Abdul Halim Muadzam Shah Bridge (leading to Batu Kawan Industrial Park (BKIP)), and the Penang International Airport.

PDC's latest project is BKIP 3, comprising SMART infrastructural facilities and a massive transportation network to facilitate traffic efficiency. Other developments PDC continues to oversee actively include BKIP 2, Bandar Cassia Smart Eco City, Bandar Cassia Technology Park, Penang Science Park South and Batu Maung District Park.



3

INVESTING IN URBAN, HERITAGE AND GREEN LANDSCAPES

Demand for urban spaces has increased alongside Penang's growth as a bustling state. As such, PDC-driven landmarks such as KOMTAR and SPICE Arena have sustained Penang's reputation as an administrative, business and tourism hub.

PDC has also revitalised heritage sites such as the Sia Boey Urban Archaeological Park—the first of its kind in Malaysia—a historical market transformed into a focal point for George Town's arts and cultural scene. Such initiatives not only preserve the state's aesthetic and historic appeal but also contribute to its overall economic vitality.

With global emphases on sustainability, PDC continues to integrate sustainable, green landscapes where people can exercise healthy lifestyles. An outstanding project from their portfolio is Bandar Cassia, where public parks such as the Square@Cassia, the BKIP Entrance Park and the ongoing 32-acre Linear Park, are furnished with recreational amenities such as bicycle lanes and walkways.

Looking ahead, PDC aims to remain at the forefront of the state's future-proof developments, with its latest ongoing project being Penang's longest sea-facing promenade, spanning from the Queensbay Mall roundabout towards the Sultan Abdul Halim Muadzam Shah Bridge (also known as the Second Penang Bridge). A shared-use pathway of approximately 8km will stretch alongside mixed developments, such as hotels and commercial facilities.

Testifying to yet another progressive outlook, PDC continues to drive Penang toward being a balanced, liveable and sustainable city for all.



2

FOOTNOTES

1. "Penang: Looking Back, Looking Ahead, 20 years of Progress", PDC's 20th Anniversary Booklet, 1990, pp.22-23.
2. "Jiran Residensi", PDC Properties, <https://pdc.com.my/properties/jiran-residensi/>, accessed on 3 May 2024.
3. "Rejuvenating break in city centre", The Star Online, 9 October 2021, <https://www.thestar.com.my/metro/metro-news/2021/10/09/rejuvenating-break-in-city-centre>, accessed on 30 April 2024.

ENCOURAGING SISTERHOOD IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN PENANG

BY JOAN LIAO

THE PANDEMIC HIT businesses hard. Yet, for one woman, it was an opportune time for her to realise her dream. All this while many restaurants and eateries ceased operations due to the dine-in prohibition during the Movement Control Order (MCO).

This woman is Shirley Saw, an entrepreneur who started Dream Burger, and who found a way to cater to consumers despite the rigid lockdown.

Always considering food as a strong cultural and interpersonal bond, she had dreamt of creating a healthy dining experience that draws people closer to one another. Advertising on Instagram, she delivered her homemade burgers to hungry customers all over Penang. Then, her burgers started making physical appearances at several events. By the end of 2022, Dream Burger began operating at its first physical location: COEX@Kilang Besi.

EMPOWERING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

Shirley was one of the esteemed speakers at the Accelerate Women Entrepreneurship with Exabytes (AWEWE) event, held to help women build self-confidence and to give women entrepreneurs startup advice.

The underlying theme was to highlight the importance of self-efficacy. One way to embark on this is for women to recognise product or service gaps and identify the strengths and weaknesses of their business strategies. Through the event, they hoped that the women in attendance who got to know each other would uplift each other and be each other's support system.

GENDER EQUALITY AND JUSTICE

Encouraging women entrepreneurs is essential for a balanced economy where women are properly represented among decision-makers. Currently, it is estimated that only about one in five MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises) are run by women.

The gender ratio for enrolment in higher education has always been higher for women. Women serve a crucial role in challenging society's perception of what



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**“EVERYTHING MAY SEEM
DIFFICULT UNTIL YOU’VE
DONE IT YOURSELF.”**



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CAPTIONS

1. Burgers and crispy fried chicken served at Dream Burger.
2. Sharing session with Shirley Saw (right) during AWEWE.

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS ALSO FACE BIGGER CHALLENGES IN COMPARISON WITH THEIR MALE COUNTERPARTS.

it means to be a business owner. The participation of women can redefine what it takes to be a business owner in predominantly male-dominated industries, paving the way for more women to be a part of it.

However, many women are conditioned into taking domestic roles, such as caretakers and housewives. They also lack the same degree of access to capital as men do due to their lower labour participation and lower wealth accumulation as many rely on their husbands as breadwinners. Their lowered wealth accumulation is also due to the gender pay gap between men and women, which currently sits at RM0.92 to every

RM1 earned by men. Furthermore, women entrepreneurs also face bigger challenges in comparison to their male counterparts—they experience greater socio-cultural hindrances within the patriarchal system.

This divide has left them lacking self-confidence. Due to systematic disempowerment, many women often feel unsupported when they try to be entrepreneurs. With sufficient guidance and help, they can step up to establish their craft or ideas through entrepreneurship, providing themselves with a greater degree of financial autonomy and independence.

MAKING WAVES IN BUSINESS

For new businesses, branding is important not only for brand recognition and expanding the customer base; it is also crucial to gain investor interest. A topic that was addressed during AWEWE pertained to what women entrepreneurs should know to get their businesses up and running.

When asked about the key know-hows of expanding a business, AWEWE speakers gave the following tip: create a short pitch deck that briefly explains the business to would-be investors. Many MSMEs are eligible for government funding from agencies and institutions such as the Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry (MITI), Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA), Malaysian Industrial Development Finance (MIDF) and SME Corp Malaysia. For a better chance of receiving the capital, women in business were encouraged to take the SME Competitive Rating for Enhancement (SCORE) rating with SME Corp Malaysia to measure their competitiveness. They should also acquire sufficient financial education. Financial skill sets such as bookkeeping, budgeting and investing, which are crucial when starting a business.

When asked about her advice for aspiring women entrepreneurs, Shirley Saw remarked: “Everything may seem difficult until you’ve done it yourself.” She hopes for women to take on this attitude when starting their own businesses, overcoming fear and bolstering their self-esteem.



JOAN LIAO is a Sabahan who moved up from KL to experience living as a Penangite. She also participates in advocacy, giving voices to those forgotten by society.

BEYOND BORDERS

BY CHENG VERN VERN

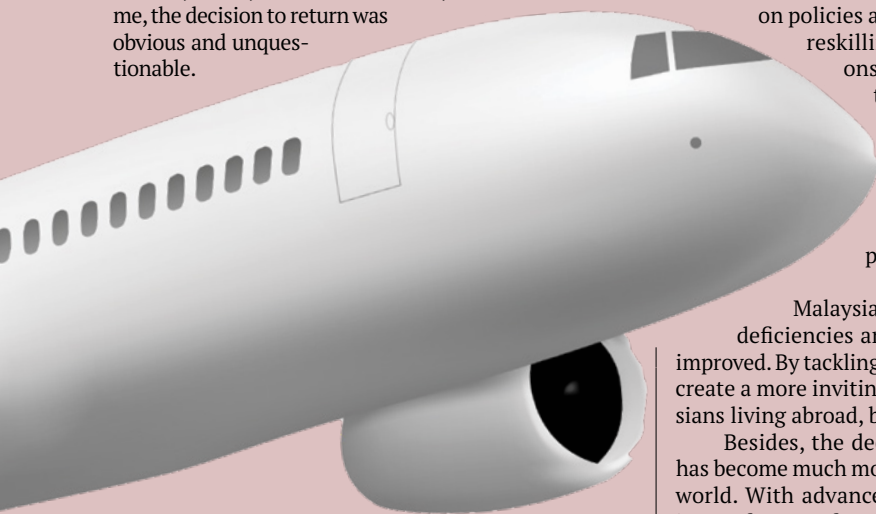


A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE ON BRAIN DRAIN

GROWING UP IN Penang, my early exposure to Hollywood movies and TV sitcoms painted an idealistic portrait of first-world living—independence, glamorous jobs, nice houses in upscale neighbourhoods and the freedom to pursue anything without constraints. They epitomised the essence of the American Dream; and I yearned for the day I could finally leave this small town and lead a big life. Yet, as reality set in, I chose Australia as the destination to pursue my tertiary education because of its proximity to Malaysia and its more affordable tuition fees (and the lovely weather).

It has been two decades since I returned home upon graduating.

What led me back to my homeland, when my heart longed for the adventure of living on distant shores? Hailing from a modest background, my parents supported my education abroad with the understanding that I would return upon completing my studies—to contribute to both my family and the community. For me, the decision to return was obvious and unquestionable.



IS THE GRASS ALWAYS GREENER?

Brain drain has been a chronic, and perhaps, even worsening, issue in Malaysia; most youths in the country harbour aspirations to pursue opportunities abroad. Reasons for this abound: political instability, inequalities and lack of economic opportunities top the list. Just last year, Malaysia's former Minister of Human Resources, V. Sivakumar, revealed that as of 2022, 1.13 mil out of 1.86 mil Malaysians who migrated abroad were living in Singapore. While Singapore alone absorbs over 60% of Malaysia's diaspora, most of the remainder reside in countries such as the UK and the US.

I had just spoken to a dear friend who had returned from Singapore a few years ago about life in Penang versus the hustle and bustle of the Lion City. She expressed her preference for the laid-back atmosphere of Penang, where she is closer to her family, and can lead a more peaceful and socially fulfilling life.

For her, the allure of Penang lies not just in its picturesque landscapes, vibrant culture or delectable cuisine, but also in the intangible sense of belonging and connection she feels here. It is a place where time seems to slow down, allowing for moments of quiet reflection and cherished gatherings with loved ones.

In contrast, she described Singapore as a city caught in the whirlwind of the rat race—a place where the pursuit of success and material wealth often takes

precedence over the simple joys of life. While acknowledging the vibrancy and dynamism of Singapore, she found herself longing for a different rhythm, a pace that prioritises quality of life over the relentless pursuit of success.

Listening to her reflections, I cannot help but resonate with them. While there are moments of envy when friends who are living abroad regale their experiences, I have also eventually found solace in the simplicity of my life here. In a world that often over-glorifies the fast-paced lifestyle of big cities, it is refreshing to be reminded of the beauty and simplicity of a life well-lived—one enriched by family love, community warmth and the timeless charm of a place like Penang.

THE BRIGHT SIDE

Government initiatives like the Returning Expert Programme (REP) strive to repatriate Malaysian professionals abroad, but there needs to be a broader focus on policies aimed at nurturing, upskilling and reskilling young local talents from the onset. If our talents are to be incentivised to stay and thrive within the country and contribute to its economic growth, it is first and foremost vital to reduce pay gaps to foster equitable workplaces and boost workforce productivity.

Other than wage disparities, Malaysia's political issues, infrastructural deficiencies and overall quality of life must be improved. By tackling these challenges head-on, we can create a more inviting environment for not just Malaysians living abroad, but also foreign talents.

Besides, the decision of where to live and work has become much more fluid in today's interconnected world. With advancements in technology and evolving preferences for remote work, individuals now have the flexibility and ability to work anywhere and at any time without being tied to a specific location or office. Could this be a part of the solution for Malaysia's brain drain issue?

All that being said, I still firmly believe that the diverse interactions with people of other cultures, backgrounds and ethnicities as well as immersion in foreign experiences are invaluable for both personal and professional growth.

Through my previous work engagements, I have had the privilege of visiting countries like Europe and the US, on top of a short working stint in China. These experiences enabled me to gain different perspectives, learn from the best and apply that knowledge locally. Access to diverse perspectives and valuable global expertise, particularly through opportunities that are not commonly available in the country, remain important for Malaysians to be competitive.

We often hold the misconception that those who are living abroad are the ones who have truly succeeded—however, there are accomplished individuals within our own borders, excelling in their respective fields. After all, every place comes with its own set of advantages and drawbacks, and decisions on where to live entail weighing these trade-offs carefully. Opportunities abound when we take a closer look, and with determination and the right mindset, we can succeed no matter where we are.



CHENG VERN VERN believes that no matter where life's journey takes us, all paths eventually lead back home.

FAMILIES HARD AT WORK



AT

PULAU TIKUS MARKET

BY
JENNIFER
DE SOUZA-
METHVEN

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PULAU TIKUS MARKET, located along Jalan Pasar between Jalan Cantonment and Solok Moulmein, first opened in the 1950s. The wet market is a vibrant, bustling place where families from different backgrounds gather each morning to sell fruits, vegetables, fish and poultry. It forms the core around which dry stalls sell items such as traditional medicine, kitchen and laundry items, bread, snacks and clothing.

Over the years, while Penang's street food hawkers have long enjoyed extensive social media coverage, the same cannot be said of such vendors. Through this photo essay, I hope to provide greater awareness of the stories, struggles and successes of these wet market vendors.

LIM LEOK HO

Lim and his parents start their day in the dark at 5am and make their way to the market, where they have been running their fresh fruit stall for over 20 years. He did not attend university, and decided instead, at a young age, to continue his family business when his parents retire. According to Lim, many young people do not aspire to go into this business anymore because they must wake up at 4am and take on strenuous work daily.

But Lim is content. He has been doing this since he was 10, including weekends and public holidays. Lim works seven days a week and only takes a break over Chinese New Year. After work ends in the afternoon, he watches TV and plays some basketball. Lim's last overseas holiday—a week in China—was 10 years ago. Perhaps he will go again this year. Perhaps not.

Lim speaks various languages, switching seamlessly between them depending on the customer. He works quickly but calmly, chatting with customers, weighing and bagging the fruit—expertly cut by his mum—calculating the price and receiving payment in a continual flow. Lim does not “keep the change”, and will catch up with you if you try to run off without your change.

Lim enjoys his work because he gets to meet and interact with customers from all backgrounds, but my safe guess is that he is also deeply happy to spend time with parents, who must be proud to see him take over the family fruit stall.



2

“
DO YOU FIND THIS
JOB VERY HARD?
”

“
OKAY LAH!
”



3

“
JUST RIGHT
FOR ME.
”

JULIE LUM

Julie Lum runs a dry goods stall selling items such as chillies, spices, ginger and dried prawns. Julie is elderly and has been working at the market for 12 years. Before that, she worked in a factory. She was happy to retire, but soon after, felt that she was left with “nothing much to do”. So, Julie started helping her father at the stall, and continued even after he left.

Julie has one day off each week, on top of one week of annual leave during Chinese New Year. Her hours are slightly more forgiving compared to most of the wet market vendors. She starts work later, at 7am, as there is not much preparation needed, and she closes around midday. By 2pm, Julie would have tidied up and prepared her stall for the next day’s trade. But when she gets home, she likes to do simpler tasks like packing dried prawns into small packets. Her daughter, Jolene, who has a full-time job, helps out with closing the stall on weekends.

Selling dried goods is perfect for Julie. Due to their small size, she does not have to do much heavy lifting; she also does not have to stand up all day or move about much. Instead, she mostly serves and interacts with her customers while seated. A well-spoken woman, Julie enjoys providing free advice on the best chillies and spices to use in particular dishes and how to prepare them.



5

“
WORKING
FOR A
LIVING, NOT
JUST MONEY.
”

SELVAN AND RATHAMBAL

Based on the number of customers I see always gathered at his stall, Selvan is a popular vegetable man. He and his wife, Rathambal, work together; this year will be their 10th business anniversary. Selvan normally heads off to the wholesale farm at 4am on his motorbike to bring back the best produce, while Rathambal prepares the stall. By 6.30am, Selvan arrives at the Pulau Tikus Market and unpacks the vegetables stacked high on his motorbike. He separates the local from the imported stock and arranges them. If time permits, Selvan takes orders on WhatsApp and gets back on his motorbike to make home deliveries. Selvan does not want to retire and “twiddle thumbs”. He points to a neighbour a few stalls down who still works at the age of 86, and says that he wants to be like him.

A Kedah native, he moved to Penang as a child and studied until Form Five. After graduating, he worked in a factory, but took a job at a vegetable shop in Hong Seng Estate in Mount Erskine a year later. He stayed there for 15 years until he was head-hunted to set up a stall at Pulau Tikus Market.

The couple takes one day off each week, usually on Mondays, when the market is less hectic. Overseas holidays are rare—they have only been to India once. After work, they relax at home—Selvan drinks coffee and Rathambal cooks dinner. Being vegetarians, most of the high-quality ingredients they need are at hand from their stall. Any produce that has wilted is given to a farm as animal feed.

Selvan and Rathambal both have winning smiles and are happy to work hard despite the heat, humidity and long hours at the market.

CAPTIONS

1. The night market comes to life at 5pm.
2. A happy exchange.
3. A stall along the side walk.
4. Julie trimming onions.
5. Mr. Selvan getting ready to open.
6. Daydreaming.
7. Organising papers to wrap vegetables.

4

“
ONCE UPON
A TIME, THIS
PLACE WAS
REALLY BUZZING.
”



7

DALLAS AND MARY

Dallas and Mary also run a vegetable stall, but they have an unconventional way of organising their lives—their morning preparations start the night before.

After the wet market closes, they go home to feed their cats, eat dinner and make a list of what they need to buy at the wholesale market at 10pm. Sometimes, to relax, Mary goes out with friends for karaoke or dinner. After that, the couple would head off to the wholesale supplier and handpick the freshest vegetables. They usually finish around 11.30pm. In the past, they had tried to get supplies delivered, but were unsatisfied with the quality. Dallas and Mary wake up at 4am the next day, skip breakfast and go straight to their stall at Pulau Tikus Market.

As for how it all began—well, this is where things get complicated. The vegetable stall has been operating for approximately 40 years. In the beginning, Dallas' brother was working for the father of a man called Muthu. Then, Muthu's father went back to India, leaving Muthu in charge. As Muthu aged, Dallas and his wife took over the stall from his brother, who had taken over from Muthu. Now in his old age, Muthu continues to work for Dallas and Mary, who have now managed the stall for about 20 years.

Dallas and Mary take one week off during Christmas; their overseas trips are rare, with the latest being in 2018. When asked why they enjoy selling vegetables

despite the hard work, long hours and early dawn start, Mary thinks for a moment and says, “Yeah, it's weird.” The easy answer is that her previous job as a shift worker was boring and paid very little. And like most people, Dallas and Mary have bills to pay and their child's education to fund. But of course, should Mary win a million ringgit, she would retire and take a big holiday.

Looking around, I suddenly realise that Dallas and Mary's vegetable stall is adjacent to Selvan and Rathambal's. I pluck up the courage to ask if there had ever been rivalry or friction between them, being so close together. There was none, says Mary, the relationship has been friendly. And if she runs out of a certain produce like kailan, she can also buy some from her neighbours to top-up if they have some.

While business is good overall, it is not as great as it was pre-Covid, possibly due to increased competition from online shopping and big supermarkets. These days, younger customers seem fewer too.

Pulau Tikus Market is sometimes known as “*pasar orang kaya*” (rich people's market), but this misconception plays down the realities and lives of the locals there. The vendors' produce is fresh, tasty and nutritious, selected by people who have dignity, integrity, tenacity and a never-say-no attitude. There are many stories at the market that have yet to be told—perhaps young parents and their kids could visit to hear for themselves.



6



JENNIFER DE SOUZA lives in Penang and loves to meet Malaysians and record their daily lives through their stories and photographs. Pulau Tikus market reminds her of a similar market in Singapore, a few steps away from where she grew up.

JOACHIM BERGSTRÖM: ON USING UNIVERSAL VALUES TO DRIVE DIPLOMACY

BY SHERYL TEOH



1

IN THE SHORT period of time that I have known the Swedish Ambassador to Malaysia, Joachim Bergström, and his team at the embassy, I have been struck by their unanimous and unwavering commitment to their Swedish values: egalitarianism, inclusivity and a deep, personal obligation to environmental sustainability. In events held by the embassy that I have attended, I witnessed high-ranking officials opting to walk to locations instead of taking the car—talk about walking the talk. As his tenure comes to an end, *Penang Monthly* sits down with the ambassador to talk about his team's efforts in introducing these universal values to the country, and how these can strengthen the bilateral relationship between Sweden and Malaysia.

Sheryl Teoh:

So, there will be a big turnover in the embassy these coming few months. You're leaving soon, Emma from Business Sweden is leaving and the interns too, who have been so much a part of your organising team.

Joachim Bergström:

Well, my posting here was for three years and the interns are usually here for six months at a time, but it is a little sad that we are all leaving at the same time.



SHERYL TEOH holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Linfield College, a liberal arts college in the United States, and majored in History with a focus on Classical Greece and Rome. Her interests include the study of philosophy as well as a range of humanities and socio-political issues.

CAPTION

1. Children's books featured in "Jom Kita Bincang" displayed during the National Day luncheon.

ST: I have attended several events organised by the embassy by now, and I have always been struck by how closely it works with Business Sweden; and in such a public and manifest way. I mean, you even call yourself Team Sweden—it's an inspiring show of unity and cooperation.

JB: I think we worked really hard at integration because we work on so many of the same issues—green transition, digitalisation and innovation are our three main pillars. Business Sweden works with these values from a business point of view, and we work with them from a policy and bilateral angle; from the embassy side, we want to stimulate a lot of exchanges and dialogues on these different issues.

So, I think we have worked really hard at finding ways to synergise, and it has been so beneficial. Because of this, we've been able to pool our resources—almost as if we're a joint venture. And we have regular joint planning days where we catch up and strategise together.

ST: You are also one of the ambassadors who are more active in the Malaysian public consciousness. You've initiated a lot of programmes—the WikiGap edit-a-thon and "Jom Kita Bincang" are two that come to mind. Is that something your predecessors have done? Or is it just your own initiative?

JB: We are given a broad mission when we take up the role of an ambassador. First and foremost is, of course, to nurture and cultivate the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Sweden as much as we can. This obviously encompasses trade and investment—the business community and the business interests of both countries—but it also encompasses multilateral and bilateral dialogues.

We want to work with Malaysia where it's possible within the UN system, we want to support Malaysia's growth in ASEAN. We also closely follow Malaysia's dialogue within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and we invite Malaysia to be a good partner for Europe as part of the ASEAN-Europe relationship.

But apart from that, I think we are given a very important opportunity to create a real bond between the two countries. And I think one of the ways we've done that is through programmes that circle around the issues we care about: sustainability, digitalisation, the green transition and innovation. To this end, we've tried to bring actors together regularly in workshops and symposiums, and also integrate journalists, civil society and government stakeholders.

Another important part of our work, I think, is promoting Swedish culture in the country. I've tried to work through cinema and literature—I believe that you can give people a lot of facts and information, but the way people remember is from making some kind of emotional connection with the place—through food, music, art and design. We've tried to showcase the Swedish lifestyle—especially where sustainability is concerned. But I've always said that the real ambassadors of Sweden in Malaysia are the Swedes who are living here and the Swedes who visit.

ST: You mentioned trying to stimulate more trade both ways. What are some obstacles you have faced in that sense?

JB: We have about 100 companies that are already present here that have been here for a long time and are making good development. The business climate here is good for the Swedish industries: there's stable political landscape, the lifestyle and quality of life here is very good, English is spoken everywhere... There are also good incentives in terms of investments, tax cuts and so forth. In my short time here, I've been to so many openings. So, I think there's good motion in the bilateral relationship when it comes to trade and investment.

Maybe one obstacle that I can think of is that, for some reason, Malaysia is under-known in Sweden. I think people know a lot about Thailand and Singapore—there is a very strong connection between Sweden and Singapore when it comes to innovation and green transition. But Malaysia is not as known as I feel it should be. I think there is also a lot of focus in Europe on Southeast Asian countries like Cambodia, Vietnam and Indonesia as investment destinations, but I think Malaysia has a lot to offer.

ST: How do you think Malaysia can push itself to be more known in Sweden?

JB: Telling success stories to Swedish companies and the business community there. For example, the other day, I attended the opening of a Sandvik factory in Negeri Sembilan. They had just set up operations in Malaysia and they're making mining equipment for the Asia-Pacific region. Malaysia won the competition between other countries that were in the bid—I think sharing these kinds of success stories with the broader business community in Sweden would be a very strong push for companies that are looking to expand into the region. I think Malaysia is also a very good stepping stone to the rest of the ASEAN countries.

ST: Sweden is world-renowned for its commitment to environmental sustainability. When Swedish companies set up business here in Malaysia, do they also impose the same strict standards for sustainability on their local partners and counterparts?

JB: I think many Swedish companies led the green transition not because it's a good thing to do, but because it's the economically viable thing to do in the long term. In fact, many Swedish companies have actually taken on harsher restrictions and higher benchmarks than what the public policy says because that is how to stay in business and that's also how many of them operate here—sourcing ethically, making sure that the supply chains are also operating in the most sustainable way, not only in terms of the green transition, but the whole 17 sets of sustainable development goals...

We (Team Sweden) together with the business community and local stakeholders here have remained in constant conversation about sustainability best practices, small changes that you can do in your operations to “go green”, how to digitalise your business, how the green shift is also driving innovation and so on.

Malaysia, I feel, has very good awareness around sustainability; the discourse is there. But, some steps remain to be taken, both when it comes to individuals—how they live their lives—and when it comes to the business communities. And I think Sweden will remain a very strong partner to Malaysia in knowledge sharing and support in this sense.

ST: You've been to Penang several times now, and Penang touts itself as a sustainable city. Do you think that we are there yet? And if not, what are our areas of improvement?

JB: [laughs] I'm not an expert on Penang, but I think public transportation and connectivity jump out as areas where improvement is needed. I think Penang has a lot to offer—not only in its richness in cultural, food and architectural heritage, but also in biodiversity. But having all these better connected can definitely make a difference. And, I suppose the broader ecosystem of the industries here, and how they could work in more integrated ways to reduce energy consumption and find ways to be more sustainable would be a good start.

ST: What are some lessons Penang can apply, in the local context, from what Sweden is doing in terms of sustainability?

JB: In the beginning of our sustainability journey, a lot of things that we have been able to change, in terms of how we do business as well as social development and social construction, has been top-down and political. But, there has always been a very strong, bottom-up approach as well from civil society, from education, from the cultural sphere... And I think that is also present in Penang.

I sense that there is a very strong awareness for environmental sustainability in the civil society, in the cultural actors and in the education sector in Penang, and I hope that these actors also feel that they have the agency, the credibility and the possibility to participate in conversations about the steps that Penang needs to take to be more sustainable. And of course, like I said, it takes both top-down political will and bottom-up public support for policy-driven transformations to happen.

Close integration with academia is also important—to always integrate academic research and innovation with social realities so that they are aware of the needs of the communities.

And then, the fourth pillar is, of course, the business community. And how they—even when they are foreign companies—can be part of a living and energetic ecosystem. There should be close and frequent dialogues among all these different stakeholders about the environmental impact of what they are doing, and also about the sustainable and responsible development of Penang.

This requires a lot of knowledge sharing, it requires—in a huge part—humility: when you go into these conversations, you need to be actually willing to learn and listen and change. There will be high initial costs, but I believe that eventually, and in the long term, this will be the most economic way to do business.

ST: The “Jom Kita Bincang” initiative that you started, which explores how children's literature can be used to educate children on sustainability, health and social issues—it's been well-received and successful, all things considered. Will it be continued by your successor?

JB: I hope so, and I hope that this will become a global thing. The idea of “Jom Kita Bincang” is to use the treasure trove of resources which already exists, which are children's books—and they can be from any country and of any language—and extract from them seeds for conversation on sustainability, human rights and social issues, better health, etc. After all, real transformation happens only when the young are exposed early in their lives to these topics.

2. Opening address at Team Sweden's "Pioneer the Possible – Green Production" Forum at Penang Institute.



3. The Embassy of Sweden team celebrating Raya with “plogging” in conjunction with Earth Day, together with Bernama and DBKL.

4. Arts and crafts at the “Jom Kita Bincang” workshop at the Penang State Library.



3



4

And again, the whole idea of “Bincang” also goes back to what I said about making an emotional connection to something in order to remember it. And this is where the programme has been so transformational, because we read books together with the children, we talk about what it means to us—took issue with some of the content, discarded a few ideas, but also embraced what felt right—and then we make crafts together to really metabolise the message of the book. And so, this whole idea of using children’s books to inspire conversations, I hope will not only continue with stakeholders, partners and friends in Malaysia, but also spread to the Swedish Embassies in other countries like Latin America, Africa, the US and Europe. Sustainability, human rights, health, equality—these are universal values, after all.

This is another thing—you know, I don’t believe that there are “European” or “Asian” values. I believe that these are universal values. And I take issue sometimes when well-meaning European politicians tout European values, and I think it triggers a negative response in other parts of the world because of the colonial legacy. There is an East-West divide, a North-South divide.

I believe that the right to dignity, the right to justice, the right to education, to livelihood, the right to take care of the planet for future generations... these are not Western, Eastern, Northern or Southern values. They are universal, and we need to fight for these issues in their universality. And if teaching these values can contribute to a shift in young people, then I’m all for it.

ST: How did you come up with the idea for “Jom Kita Bincang”? When did you start seeing the need for it?



I think, throughout my time here, I have been struggling a little bit with how to make an impact in Malaysia when it comes to... again, getting into conversations about who we are and what we believe in.

And so, when I went around in Malaysia and met with ministers, religious leaders and politicians, with academics and journalists and so forth, I wanted to listen and learn a lot from them, and I wanted to ask them how they perceive Sweden. What they said didn't completely match with what my idea of my country was and wasn't.

And one of the things I usually do when I meet these people is to ask them: "If you were me, if you were the Swedish ambassador in Malaysia, how would you approach the task of getting Malaysians to be more aware of the richness and complexities of Sweden?"

The advice that I got were:

1. Work closely with local partners: universities, the media, civil society, politicians, royals... Anyone who can be allies in promoting your country;
2. Create strong institutional bonds;
3. Change the conversation: If the conversation about your country is not what you are about, you can always step in and try to change the conversation;
4. Go back to your key values. What do you believe in? What are you willing to die for? What are the values that you think are driving this society?;
5. Work closely with the media, be generous with them and form strong relationships with them so you can also learn from them in conversations;
6. Go beyond KL. If you want to make an impact in Malaysia, you cannot stay solely in the Klang Valley.

In 2022, the IBBY International Children's Book conference was also held here in Malaysia, and a few of the actors and main stakeholders in the Swedish literature scene came. That gave us an opportunity to make strong connections with Malaysians and Swedes working in this space.

As for the themes that unfolded out of "Jom Kita Bincang"—these are straightforward because they are the core of everything we work on here. Like I mentioned, every conversation within Team Sweden is about planetary health, living more ethically with nature, supporting human rights, upholding democratic principles... If we don't have human rights, there is no democracy; and if there is no democracy, human rights will always struggle—it is a never-ending cycle.

What naturally comes up then is also the connection between literacy and democracy. If kids cannot read, or if adults cannot read and process information, then democracy—which really relies on the informed decisions of citizens—will be compromised. So, within my team—and it is a huge team effort—"Bincang" came about very organically; a chain of events that led one thing to another.

The name "Jom Kita Bincang" is deliberate. It's like the *bincang* that we're doing now: you're asking me questions and I'm trying to answer you as best I can—it's a conversation. So, we're hoping to convey the fact that we are not coming from Sweden to lecture anyone on what to do, we come with the seeds for conversation, and we want to learn with you and from you. We want to throw this idea out and hear how you react to it. And we want to do something together that you will remember for some time.

In an earlier conversation with the Raja Muda of Selangor, we spoke about doing "Bincang" together. He really enjoyed the idea and suggested using the Raja Tun Uda Library in Selangor as a meeting place and point of attraction for different partners in this programme.

As I was advised, we also took our initiatives to other states in Malaysia, like Kuching, Johor Bahru, Perlis and Penang. And I hope in the future these programmes would also be expanded to places like Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang... Places where embassies normally don't do outreach programmes.

ST:

And the demographics are so different too in all these states.

JB:

Yes, they are. Actually, another thing I hope for is that we move away from hierarchies. At the end of the day, we only have our own bodies and one planet. This is what "Bincang" is also about: to teach children that no matter how rich or poor or educated or disenfranchised we are, we should all have a willingness to learn and work on these universal issues across social, class and educational divides.

ST:

Thank you so much for your time, Joachim. I hope you have enjoyed your tenure in Malaysia, and come back for a visit soon.

BUKIT LANGKAP

**BY REXY
PRAKASH
CHACKO**

HIKE AT A GLANCE

LENGTH

1 hour (complete loop)

DIFFICULTY

Easy

INTEREST LEVEL

Medium

SIGNPOSTING

Yes

LIKELIHOOD OF GETTING LOST

Low

NUMBER OF HIKERS

Few





2

A MODEST HILL WITH A SPLENDID VIEW



3

S LIGHTLY NORTH OF Bukit Mertajam is a low cluster of peaks, including Bukit Gua Gempas and Bukit Langkap, with the latter bordering the Butterworth-Kulim Expressway (BKE). While looking for a new place to hike in mainland Penang, I came across many online references to Bukit Suling—which, after research, turns out to be a spot located on the slopes of the 180m-tall Bukit Langkap. Looking at photos of its summit views, I am immediately convinced to plan a hike there.

We drive to Bukit Langkap from Penang Island, getting off the BKE at the Mengkuang turning. A few minutes later, we see an unpaved road to the left. A signboard reading “Suling Hill” confirms that this is where the hike begins. We turn in and park the car here before walking along the unpaved road and crossing a small bridge over Sungai Mengkuang. Before long, we reach an open area. A clear view of Bukit Langkap becomes visible ahead of us.

CAPTIONS

1. Bukit Langkap.
2. View from Bukit Langkap towards Mengkuang Dam with the towering peaks of Bukit Mertajam and Bukit Seraya behind it.
3. Entrance to Suling Hill's campsite and chalets.



4



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4. The trigonometrical stone (T.S.) on Bukit Langkap's peak.
5. Fruits of the Langkap palm (*Arenga* sp.).
6. The summit of Bukit Langkap with a prominent TS.
7. Tawny Coster butterfly (*Acraea terpsicore*).
8. Cempedak.
9. The painted walls of a guest chalet.



7

Historical references to Bukit Langkap are rather “uneventful”, except for the fact that the area was gazetted as a forest reserve in 1912, only to have this status revoked in the late 1920s. Since then, it has been used as cultivated land.

Walking to the right of this open area, we take a laterite track next to neatly planted rows of rubber trees, crossing paths with several hikers who are making their descent. About five minutes in, the path gently ascends the slope, surrounded by durian, jackfruit and mango trees. Trudging up this track, we spot a cluster of palm trees with huge leaves, and looking closer, we spot round, green fruits. Turns out, this is a Langkap palm (*Arenga sp.*)—the very plant that lends its name to the hill!

Higher up the hill, the trail becomes more exposed, providing better views. About 20 minutes into the hike, we reach a small rest shed where we make a quick pit stop. Looking toward the south, we get an uninterrupted view of the waters of

Mengkuang Dam—the largest dam in Penang—which was completed in 1985, and expanded in 2011. Behind it, the towering peaks of Bukit Mertajam and Bukit Seraya rise in the distance.

After this rest shed, we spot a guest chalet, one of which immediately catches my attention as it has an ornately painted wall depicting pitcher plants, orchids and durian trees. As we stand appreciating this work of art, a fluttering orange butterfly in a patch of wildflowers nearby distracts me. It is a Tawny Coster butterfly (*Acraea terpsicore*), which has orange wings with speckled black spots. Originally found in open areas in India and Sri Lanka, it has been recorded further south in Peninsular Malaysia since the 1990s. Taking out our smart phones to quickly snap a few shots, we are surprised to find the butterfly staying still and cooperating throughout, spreading its wings in all its glory. Perhaps it knows that it needs to look good when featured in *Penang Monthly*!



8



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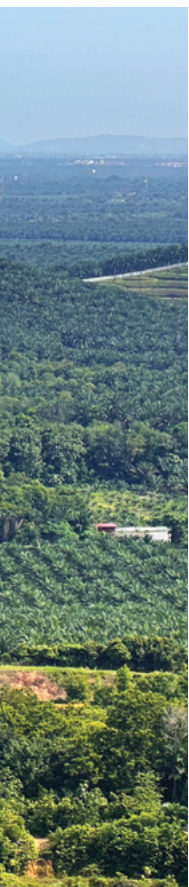
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12



14



13

10. Looking towards Bukit Gua Gempas.

11. Signboard on the way up to the peak of Bukit Langkap.

12. Huge durian sculpture at Suling Hill.

13. Common swamp pitcher plant (*Nepenthes mirabilis*).

14. Walking along the trail to Bukit Langkap.

It takes us another 10 minutes from the previous rest shed to reach the peak of Bukit Langkap, which is marked by a trigonometrical stone (T.S.) and a large signboard. We break here to celebrate our victorious ascent. While biting into a snack, my curiosity drives me to investigate the T.S. Gently moving my hands over its top to see if I could feel the outline of an etched numeral—as is common on a large number of these stones—I realise there is none, indicating that this T.S. belongs to an older, unnumbered series.

At the peak, we find that there is an alternative path down, and we follow the series of cement steps through a shady section of fruit trees. Occasional gaps in the canopy give us glimpses of the nearby Bukit Gua Gempas, whose sedimentary rock composition makes it a geological anomaly compared to Penang's granite hills.

We are eventually led to the Suling Hill campsite and chalets, where there is a well-tended garden with a plethora of ornamental plants and huge sculptures

of durians. The sculptures hint to the fact that, apart from glamping, this is a popular site for durian feasting—the six-acre compound houses about 15 durian varieties. There is a prominent view point here of the cityscape of Penang with its backdrop of rolling hills.

We trail the path out of the Suling Hill compound gently downhill and connect to another junction. Following the Strava app, we turn left onto an unpaved path as it skirts the BKE, occasionally seeing cars zoom past on the highway. Here, in the thin strip of vegetation separating us from the highway, I spot a common swamp pitcher plant (*Nepenthes mirabilis*) clambering over some ferns. While known to be the most widespread species of pitcher plants in the world, it is rather uncommon in Penang Island, and hence captures my attention. After taking a few photos, we continue along the flat path back to our car.

With its gentle terrain, fruit trees and superb views, Bukit Langkap is a short and pleasant hike on the mainland.



REXY PRAKASH CHACKO

is an electronic engineer by profession and a nature lover by passion. While he spends his weekdays earning a living at the Bayan Lepas Free Industrial Zone, his weekends are spent reflecting and recharging on the green hills of Penang.

NATIONAL HEROES TO REMEMBER AND REWARD

BY IAN MCINTYRE



IAN MCINTYRE is a veteran journalist with over 25 years of experience reporting for the mainstream and alternative media. He subscribes to a belief that what is good for society is likewise beneficial for the media.

THE LAST TIME Malaysians experienced a full-scale conflict in their homeland was probably more than 35 years ago, before the communist insurgency ended; notwithstanding the fact that there have since been two isolated security incidents—the Sauk siege in Perak in 2000 and the Sulu militant invasion of Lahad Datu in Sabah in 2013.

Both the latter incidents resulted in a limited loss of lives among the security personnel, namely in the Special Branch (SB) police division. Still, the security breach was mostly contained, with the aggressors subdued convincingly.

CAPTIONS

1. Paul with the international school students.
2. Paul showing a book about the security forces exploit.
3. Paul now and then.

This peace was not incidental. It came with sacrifices by the military, civil defence, civil servants and police officers, especially those who fought in the second communist insurgency from the 1960s to the 1980s, ending only when the communists signed a peace pact in Hat Yai, Thailand in 1989.

The first insurgency from 1946 to 1960 was mostly fought with the help of the colonial allied forces, namely the British, Indians, Australians and New Zealanders. But from the year 1960, it was mostly left to the newly independent Malaya/Malaysia's security forces to take on the communist guerrillas.

This they did successfully. Malaysia is regarded as the only country to win against communist guerillas, said Danyal Balagopal Abdullah, a retired Royal Malaysian Navy first admiral, who served briefly as Port Dickson's Member of Parliament in 2018.

"Communism was on the rise through the Soviet Union and China in the 1960s until 1980s. In Vietnam, the Americans lost the war and the defeat actually emboldened the communists in Malaysia," Balagopal explained.

Malaysia had a peculiar way of fighting its battle against local communism. This was done through the Special Branch (SB), who were highly trained operatives, infiltrating the guerrilla platoons. They managed to convince their opponents to surrender while the security forces, backed



by air power, encircled the remaining pockets of resistance in the jungles.

ENTER THE HERO

One of those skilled in the art of deceit and psychology was retired SB officer, Paul Kiong. Originating from Perak and briefly schooled in Penang at the St. Xavier's Institution, Kiong is one of less than 10 remaining recipients of the country's highest gallantry award—the Darjah Kebesaran Seri Pahlawan Gagah Perkasa (SP)—awarded by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong several years ago. The SP takes precedence over all other awards and medals in the country, even those that carry the title of Tun and Tan Sri, which were mostly awarded to community leaders.

Kiong is now on a one-man mission to remind Malaysians that the peace and tranquillity they enjoy today is the result of the blood, sweat and tears of three generations. He is on a crusade to share the tale of grit and determination with Generation X, Y, Z and beyond. Despite his age (he is currently 80), he soldiers on just like when he was a fit, young policeman, inspired by the call of duty. Kiong has given private lectures at public and international schools to retell his exploits to wide-eyed students.

Communism in today's world has morphed. For example, in Vietnam, the communist party has undertaken reforms to grow the economy and loosen restrictions to allow a level of freedom of expression—the mainstay of democratic principles. But during its height between the 1960s to the 1980s, it was rigid and violent, threatening to harm anyone who opposed it. It was this brand of ideology that Kiong fought against.

For six years of his life, Kiong, who retired as a Superintendent, literally slept with one eye open while carrying out what his superiors described as “suicidal” missions. He was deep undercover, posing as a communist sympathiser who rose through the ranks in a platoon. He was entrusted to provide food and supplies to communist units fighting government forces.



3

It was the second wave of the insurgency in the 1970s (the first led by the late Malayan Communist Party founder, Chin Peng had dissipated, with him fleeing to China in the 1960s) that Kiong was involved in. This battle, mostly fought by Malaysian forces, showcased the counter-insurgency exploits of the famed SB operatives, often said to be the best in the world then.

He stayed undercover for six years, impersonating a communist warrior and watching his enemies up close.

Kiong's negotiation and pacifying skills were said to be legendary, to the point where he could convince communist members to surrender to the police, while hiding his identity as an officer trained in subversive tactics in the jungles of Perak. He also singularly disrupted the communist food and provisions supply lines. He came close to being rooted out at least five times.

Through sheer determination and the art of persuasion, Kiong was instrumental in the surrender of up to 43 communists.

VALUING WAR HEROES

Kiong was recently saddened when his friend, another SP recipient, a corporal named Etim Anak Bijam from Miri in Sarawak, passed on of lung cancer. Etim, aged 86, was given a state funeral in Sarawak, but Kiong attested that more could have been done in terms of increasing his pension allowance, which was only RM2,000.

“The sum was halved by inflation,” he said.

Etim was part of a group of field force policemen escorting a convoy of lorries in Sibu, which was ferrying construction material, including explosives, to clear the jungle for development. At Jalan Oya in 1975, the convoy was ambushed by dozens of communist insurgents who were eyeing the explosives.

Despite being wounded and outnumbered, Etim fought back, holding his ground until backup detachments arrived, delivering a big blow against his adversaries.

One can see that it was the sheer grit and intelligence of the SB that held Balagopal's assertion that Malaysia was the only country in the world to defeat a communist insurgency—to which Kiong agreed. Other countries either just contained them or gave up and fled, such as in Vietnam.

However, more can be done now in terms of the archival of the nation's security forces' success against the insurgents and in terms of more retirement benefits for those who fought with valour, Kiong suggested. “There should be special lanes created for veterans at hospitals, discounts for medical treatments and perhaps jobs in the private sector.”

Kiong also wants more retelling of history about Malaysia as a nation that remembers its past so it will not be repeated.



FORKBEARD'S ODYSSEY LANDS IN PENANG



TRAGEDY, COMEDY, LOVE and adventure. The musical, *Forkbeard*, set in 11th-century Scandinavia, contains all the ingredients for an epic historical musical. This year, it finally premiered in Penang in April 2024 after the Covid-19 pandemic cut short its launch almost four years ago.

**BY
LIM
WAN
PHING**

Parallel to the Viking's spirit of courage and relentlessness, the people behind the show did not stop believing in their musical or give up hope of ever staging it again despite the heartbreaking start-stop of the many Movement Control Orders (MCO) in Malaysia.

The brainchild of Nancy Jenster, who has been based in Tanjung Tokong since 2013, *Forkbeard* is a tale of two kings and their thirst for conquest—Forkbeard of Denmark, the first Viking king of England, and Olav of Norway, most known for introducing Christianity to the Norse kingdoms.

Audiences at Wawasan Open University (WOU) were treated to two hours of the Viking musical odyssey complete with sword fights, naval battles, warrior costumes, dance sequences accompanied by original songs and live music performed by the Penang Island Chorus with percussion by Bernardine Abeysekra.

Taglined “an epic tale of friends turned foes”, the show delivered what it promised, featuring a diverse Penang cast recruited by Jenster's company, MYTH Productions (Musical Youth Theatre Happening), dedicated to fostering youth in theatre. A casting call, auditions and rehearsals all took place in January this year.

“Most cast members are new to the show and we worked together for 15 weeks,” says Jenster, the director and playwright, who also wrote all its original songs. “We were so pleased by the end result because those chosen were all at the top of their game, and I was so impressed by the actors bringing their courage to the forefront.”

A TIMELESS TALE THAT RESONATES TODAY

A deeply human tale about ambition, greed, desire and vengeance, *Forkbeard* may be set 1,000 years ago, but its themes of parental love, sacrifice, faith and fighting for freedom still resonate today. The script is based on true historical figures and real events of the Viking Age (793-1066), but Jenster took some creative liberties.

“The character I love the most is Olav, as he's the tragic hero of the tale,” explains Jenster. “Over the years, I've written him with more clarity, and he's definitely the most difficult character to play. So my hat's off to Villmett Thanakody, who played the role brilliantly. He is a young man with a great deal of talent and potential.”

Forkbeard has the usual makings of a grand epic tale: a heroic protagonist, supernatural elements, a vast setting, a quest for a powerful magical item, universal themes of life and death, love and loss, brotherhood and betrayal, and good versus evil.



CAPTION

1. *Forkbeard*'s wife Sigrid (Beth Webster), calls on the help of three witches in a forest. Image credit: David ST Loh



2



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3



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CAPTIONS

2. Audiences were in for a treat with plenty of sword fights and battle scenes. Image credit: David ST Loh

3. Forkbeard (Donovan Ng) leads the triumphant closing song "The Viking Life". Image credit: Lu Jia Chen

4. Olav and his wife Thyra (Su Lin Poh), discuss their quest for an amber ring. Image credit: Lu Jia Chen

5. Einar (Carlo D. Suzara) and Olav (Villmett Thanakody) in an emotional scene. Image credit: David ST Loh



LIM WAN PHING is a freelance writer based in Penang. She has a short story collection, *Two Figures in a Car* published by Penguin SEA.

MAGIC, MUSIC AND MONOLOGUES

In a moving scene, Forkbeard (played by Donovan Ng) performs a dream sequence and monologue with a line that goes, "Out of your shadow here I stand, one man." And akin to Shakespeare's Macbeth, the Lady Macbeth-like Queen Sigrid calls on the help of three witches in a forest, singing, "Sisters, sisters, are you here?"

There is a quest for an amber ring ("a ring to make all our dreams come true")—not unlike King Arthur's quest for Excalibur—and the story culminates in a final Battle of Svolder after Olav's crew is ambushed by Forkbeard's army on Freja's Island.

In true Norse tradition, the musical showcases songs of praise for "Odin is the king of all the gods" and a closing number that goes, "One day in Valhalla, we shall meet again" before the curtains drop to a triumphant number called "The Viking Life".

Other usual tropes include a travelling storyteller (Snorri, played by Aaron "Garu" Rahaman), loyal captains (Erik, played by Riz Izzudin and Finn, played by Owen Bekker), ambitious queens (Sigrid, played by Beth Webster and Thyra, played by Su Lin Poh) and a fierce archer (Einar, played by Carlo D. Suzara).

"Su Lin was the only actress who repeated her role, and she is perfect as Queen Thyra," recalls Jenster, whose husband is himself of Danish descent and is a 46th-generation descendant of Forkbeard. "Our cast this time turned out to be really diverse, and I really liked that about the talent pool in Penang. At the end of the day, it was about who could play the role with the most enthusiasm and talent."

BRINGING FORKBEARD TO THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

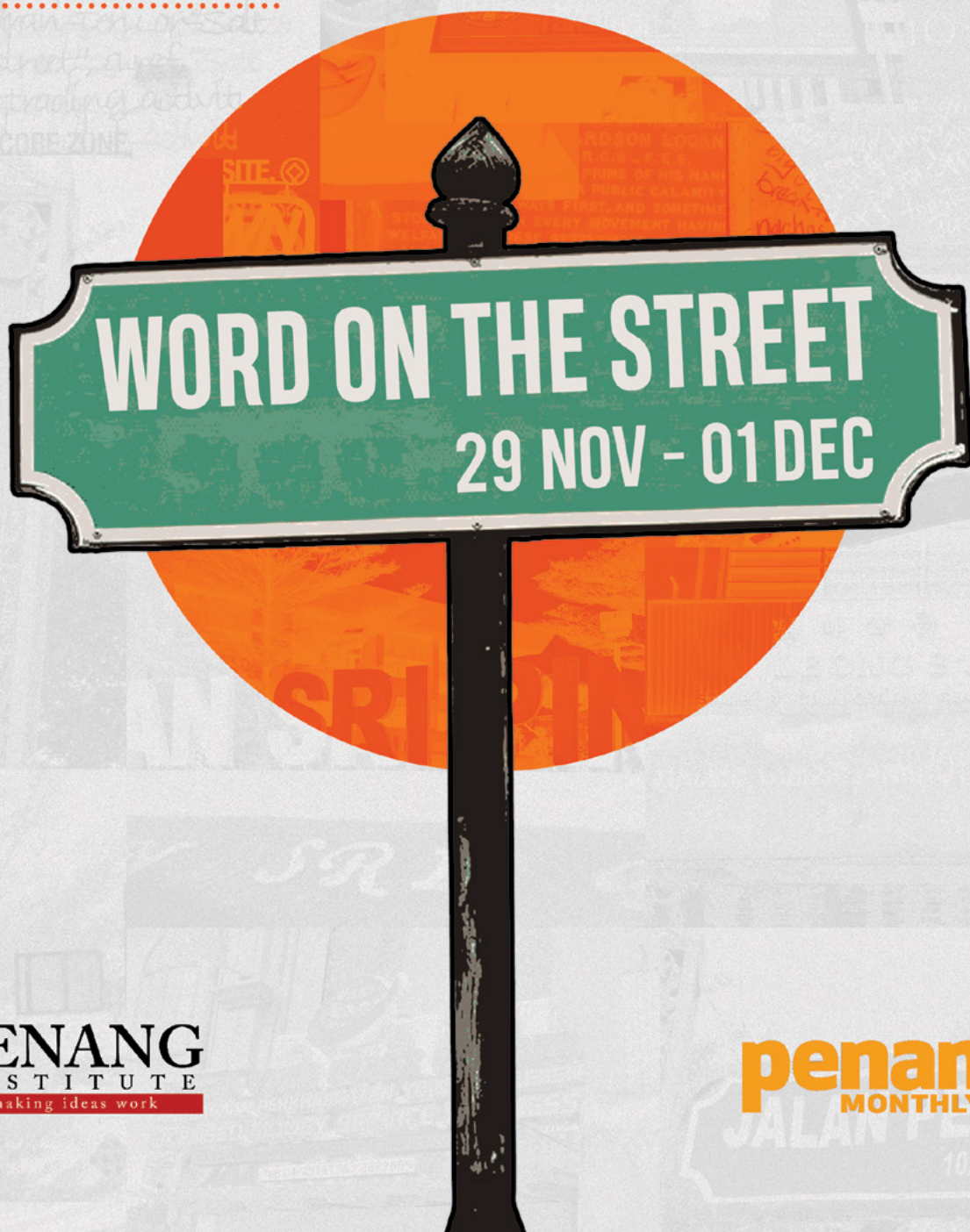
American-born Jenster has plans to bring *Forkbeard* to international audiences and has not given up on her dream to one day stage it in West End or Broadway. "10 years ago, we workshoped this musical in Ireland and then again in London. I had some interest at the time, and a number of people asked about the show with great enthusiasm," she recalls.

"However, I needed to revise it and tighten it, and it does take about 12 years for new original musicals to really gain momentum and take off. So, you just have to make it available in the best possible way, such as making good recordings of our shows in Penang and KL to be presented to critical audiences in London and New York. Every step is a good step forward."

Even as Penang provides the stepping stone for Jenster's ambitions, *Forkbeard* aside, she hopes to continue unearthing local talent, especially among the young, through her musical theatre production house.

"People do better than they think they're able to," she concludes. "They surpass their own expectations and go beyond their limitations. That's the purpose of my company—we try to help people grow and build their confidence so they can become stronger in their own beliefs."

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Distribution

Spearheading Sustainable Growth

