

Strategies and plans for education transformation

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ABSTRACT: *Strategy is the end product of strategic planning process, which normally also incorporates the control mechanisms for guiding the implementation of the strategy. Strategic planning looks into the future to paint a picture of that future based on current trends. This presentation describes the strategic planning process of developing the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, which is used as a reference to transform the Malaysian education system in accordance to the demand of 21st century. The Blueprint was developed with three objectives: 1) Understanding the current performance and challenges of the Malaysian education system, with a focus on improving access to education, raising standards (quality), closing achievement gaps (equity), fostering unity amongst students, and maximizing system efficiency, 2) Establishing a clear vision and aspirations for individual students and the education system as a whole over the next 13 years; and 3) Outlining a comprehensive transformation program for the system, including key changes to the Ministry. Multiple perspectives of inputs were considered in the development of the Blueprint. These included inputs and assessment from various experts and agencies from international and local, the general public and analysis of past policies documents and research reports. From these inputs, two aspirations were established - firstly, those for the education system as a whole, and secondly, those for individual students. These two aspirations set the stage for transformation of the Malaysian education system. The Blueprint suggested 11 shifts that will need to occur to achieve the envisioned education's goals. Each shift addresses at least one of the five system outcomes of access, quality, equity, unity and efficiency, with quality as the common underlying focus across all shifts because this dimension requires the most urgent attention. Each shift comes with the underlying initiatives. As such, prioritization of initiatives is crucial to avoid overtaxed and execution fatigue and transformation is sequenced to occur in three waves. To ensure successful transformation as envisioned in the Blueprint, the Ministry has identified and committed to four differentiated actions in delivering the roadmap.*

KEYWORDS: Strategy; plan; strategic management; transformation.

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1. Introduction

Today, strategic management has moved beyond for-profit business to non-profit organization, education sector included. The term of strategic planning is increasingly referred to in education field. In the context of national education development, strategic planning is the process in which a direction is set forth and the ways and means for following that direction are specified. To put it simply, strategic planning process produces a physical strategic plan which can be defined as a set of decisions about what to do, why and how to do it. It embodies the guiding orientation on how to run an education system within a larger national development perspective, which is evolving by nature and often involves constraints.

In October 2011, the Ministry of Education Malaysia embarked on a journey to develop a strategic plan to be used as a reference of action in the Ministry. The process started with a comprehensive review of the education

system in Malaysia. The decision was made to cater to the following needs: 1) raising international education standards, 2) the Government's vision of preparing Malaysia's children for the needs of the 21st century, and 3) increased public and parental expectations of education policy. The Blueprint development process took 15 months (October 2011 to December 2012) to complete. The Ministry drew on multiple perspectives of input, which include i) education experts from UNESCO, the World Bank, OECD, and six local universities, ii) stakeholders including principals, teachers, parents, students, and other members of the public from every state in Malaysia. The result is a Malaysia Education Blueprint that evaluates the performance of current Malaysia's education system with considerations of historical starting points against international benchmarks. The Blueprint also offers a vision of the education system and student aspirations that Malaysia both needs and deserves, and suggests 11 strategic and operational shifts that would be required to

achieve that vision.

The strategic plan, named Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (preschool to post-secondary education) was ready for use in 2015.

2. Aspiration

It is important that an education system is anchored to a set of aspirations that are closely tied to its particular national context. Malaysia aspires to move from middle-income to high-income status as outlined in the New Economic Model and the 10th Malaysia Plan. This ambition will need to be fueled by competitive talents in the nation who are globally competitive. The advent of Industrial Revolution 4.0 added another competitor to the eco-system. The competition is no longer between people within the country and abroad but between people and robots too. From the inputs gathered at fieldwork, almost all stakeholders agreed that Malaysia's education system must do much better if it is to live up to the ambitions of all Malaysians.

In order to properly address the education needs of all Malaysians, it is crucial to first envision what a highly successful education system looks like, particularly in the local context. What kinds of students are needed to meet the challenges of a 21st century economy? What kind of education prepares them for this rapidly changing world? These aspirations comprise two aspects: firstly, those for the education system as a whole, and secondly, those for individual students. This vision, and these aspirations, will set the stage for the transformation of the Malaysian education system.

System Aspirations

The Blueprint stated five aspirations for the Malaysian education system: 1) access to success, 2) quality of a high international standard, 3) equity for all students, 4) fostering unity among students, and 5) delivering with greater efficiency. These aspirations emerged from the review of past Education Reports which remain relevant today. In the first education policy report, the Razak Report 1956 envisioned 1) a national education system that guaranteed access to a seat in school for all children regardless of their ethnicity or socio-economic background, and 2) to provide all children with a learning environment that celebrates unity in diversity. Subsequently, the Cabinet Committee Report 1999 reiterated Malaysia's goals for its education system, with a focus on educating students holistically, and preparing a nation for the future to come. Most recently, the Education Development Master Plan 2006-2010 aimed to improve access, equity, quality, efficiency and effectiveness. These five elements of education system are also in accordance with the aspirations articulated by

participants at the National Dialogue.

Student aspirations

The Malaysian education system aspires to ensure that every student, regardless their geographical location, ethnicity, socio-economy and religious background, is given the opportunity to achieve their full potential. For this to happen, everyone who has direct influence on student learning, including school leader, teacher, parent, and the community plays an important role to ensure that young people in their charge are moving towards these aspirations. They must be informed of their responsibilities.

Student aspirations in the Blueprint were derived from 1) the National Education Philosophy's vision of developing all rounded individuals in the areas of physical, emotion, spiritual and intellect, 2) feedback the National Dialogue, 3) learnings from high-performing systems. A set of specific attributes and competencies that students will need to succeed and thrive were articulated as 1) knowledgeable, 2) possess thinking skills, 3) possess leadership skills; 4) proficient in Malaysia language and the English language, 5) observe ethics and spirituality, and 6) national identity.

3. Process of Developing Strategic Plan

The beautifully envisaged ideas need a proper plan to see it through. As a way of strategic management, the education system could be regarded as having inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes. The inputs included resources such as teachers, building, equipment, ministry officials go through a process (throughput) whereby they are mixed (input mixed), combined and/or moved along to achieve results. The results (outputs) are tangible, such as enrolments, graduates and learning achievement. Outcomes, on the other hand, refer to the benefits of education for the students, their families and/or society.

The development of strategic plan is an activity of strategic planning which is a subset of strategic management. Despite not having a "single perfect way" to conduct strategic planning in the literature as each institution has its own particular interpretation of the approaches, there are the four basic stages carried out in similar sequence: 1) analysis, 2) planning, 3) implementation, and 4) evaluation. In other words, it can be said that the process is a continuum of successive stages as follows: critical analysis of a system, policy formulation and appraisal, action planning, management of monitoring, review and evaluation. The development of a plan in education sector consists of: 1) sector analysis, 2) policy formulation, 3) action planning. All these stages can be observed in most educational strategic plans, including the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025.

3.1. Sector Analysis

Sector analysis is the first stage of sector development planning. It involves data collection and critical analysis of aspects related to the education sector. In the context of Malaysia Education Blueprint, sector analysis involved a comprehensive review and diagnostic of the education system. This phase started with a detailed evaluation of the performance of the Malaysian education system, focusing on student outcomes, assessing the root causes and key drivers for this level of performance, and recognizing existing examples of excellence in the education system as models for emulation and replication.

Student Outcomes

In order to establish the current level of performance of the education system, analyses were focused on the five dimensions of access, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency; which have been consistent with objectives of previous national education policies, starting from the Razak Report 1956 to the more recent Education Development Master Plan 2006-2010. The analyses are based on both national data and international benchmarks available on Malaysian student outcomes.

Key Drivers

Analysis was done to examine the root causes of Malaysian student outcomes, evaluating key drivers and causes of student performance such as teacher quality, school leadership, and parental and community involvement. Apart from that, analysis also covered standards in curriculum and assessment, with a focus on comparing Malaysia against international benchmarks. Finally, it evaluates important implementation elements such as the organization and delivery capacity of the Ministry itself across federal, state, and district levels, as well as how to ensure resources allocated towards developing basic infrastructure in the education system are used efficiently and effectively.

Examples of Excellence

Attempts were made to identify numerous instances of schools and districts across the nation that have achieved outstanding results and shown dramatic improvements. These examples show that excellence does exist across the system, and that there are many opportunities to learn from within. The Blueprint therefore does not just pinpoint issues and gaps, but also seeks to identify, highlight, opportunities that exist within the education system for replication and emulation.

Data Gathering Methods

Fieldwork was conducted at both urban and rural

schools to understand actual issues on the ground. Various school types (island schools, schools with a majority of students from indigenous and other minority groups, fully residential schools, religious schools, vocational schools, schools with special programs and independent Chinese schools) were chosen as a representative mix of student performance levels, student population sizes, sociocultural contexts, and geographical zones;

Apart from that, face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and workshops were conducted across Malaysia. A total of more than 200 principals, 200 teachers, 300 federals, state, and district officials from the Ministry, and 100 parents were involved. Besides, a nationwide survey of nearly 750 principals, nearly 15,000 teachers, and over 22,000 students was also launched to provide additional quantitative data. This does not include approximately 14,000 interviewees and survey respondents in the fieldwork conducted by the public universities.

Further inputs were generated from the National Dialogue and the Government Transformation Program (GTP) 2.0 education. This is the addition to the multiple perspectives gathered from various experts and international agencies identified in the earlier stage.

Apart from data collection from people, in-depth analyses of documents were also carried out. It involved the detailed analyses of past policy documents, such as Razak Report 1956 to the more recent Malaysia Education Master Plan 2006-2010 and related policy documents produced by other agencies such as the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2007-2020 and the Blueprint on the Enculturation of Lifelong Learning for Malaysia 2011-2020.

The findings from these work-streams were then triangulated against several independent sources, including 1) Research conducted in 2011 by six local public universities on the quality of curriculum and assessment, teaching and learning, teachers and principals, human resource management, governance and management, infrastructure development, policy planning and implementation, and school structure and type; 2) 2011-2012 review by UNESCO (The Malaysia Education Policy Review) on the quality of curriculum development and implementation (with a focus on Mathematics and Science), student assessment and examination, ICT in education, technical and vocational education and training, teacher education, and planning and management; and 3) 2011 review by the World Bank (The Public Expenditure Review), on public education expenditure, including the effectiveness and efficiency of resource use.

All findings from the different work-streams were critically reviewed by a Taskforce comprising senior leadership at the Ministry of Education.

3.2. Policy and Strategy Formulation

A clearly policy can play an important “operational” role as a reference for action. The formulation of a “good policy for education” is a necessary step in promoting the emergence and effective implementation of action plans, programs and projects. In the case of Blueprint, this phase involved the building upon the findings from sector analysis to identify a set of priority areas and detailing a comprehensive transformation program of policies and initiatives to be undertaken over the next 13 years, between 2013 and 2025. Priority interventions for the transformation of the overall education system were decided at this stage.

In the Blueprint development process, four aspects of the education system were analyzed critically: 1) student learning, 2) the roles of teachers and school leaders, 3) Ministry transformation and 4) system structure. This is followed by suggestions of initiatives to address emerging issues, challenges and opportunities. The initiatives comprise what the education sector must do. The questions asked at this stage include what overall results (strategic goals) the system should achieve and the overall methods (strategies) to implement policies designed to bring about such objectives.

In this context, the Ministry reviewed all of the findings and suggestions carefully, and integrated them into the Blueprint based on four criteria. 1) Any action undertaken had to contribute to the system and student aspirations described above. This meant that initiatives that delivered one outcome at the expense of another, or that would lead to a different end-state were deprioritized. 2) The Ministry drew on international evidence to identify and prioritize the factors that make the most difference in system and student improvement. 3) The proposals had to be relevant to the system’s starting point and be within the Ministry’s ability to deliver. Initiatives were thus sequenced to evolve in complexity as the capabilities and capacity of the Ministry officers, teachers, and principals were developed. 4) The benefits of implementing the proposal had to outweigh the financial and operational downsides.

Shifts for Education Transformation

To this end, the Ministry has identified 11 shifts that will need to occur to deliver the change in outcomes envisioned by all Malaysians. These shifts represent the government’s public commitment to the future operation of implementing the Blueprint. Each shift addresses at least one of the five system outcomes of access, quality, equity, unity and efficiency, with quality as the common underlying focus across all shifts because this dimension requires the most urgent attention. Some of these shifts represent a change in strategy direction. Others represent operational changes in the way the Ministry and school

have historically implementing existing policies. Regardless of whether it is a strategic or operation shift, they represent a move from current practice.

To cite an example of the 11 shifts suggested in Blueprint, Shift 5 is cited as an illustration. Shift 5 mentions that “Ensure high performing school leaders in every school”. This shift simply means that for the achievement of the envisaged aspirations to happen, all schools must be led by high performing leaders.

Empirical studies found that the quality of school leaders is the second biggest school-based factor in determining student outcomes, after teacher quality. Several international research on school leadership shows that an outstanding principal is one who focuses on instructional and not administrative leadership. Effective school leaders can raise student outcomes by as much as 20%.

Analysis on how the system functions found that the current selection criterion is driven primarily by tenure rather than leadership competency. Additionally, 55% of today’s principals received no preparatory or induction training before or during their formative first three years of principal-ship. This means that the current cohorts of principals may enter, ill-prepared for their new role. It was also discovered that 40% of principals were due to retire within the next five years. All these findings suggested there is an opportunity to upgrade the cohort.

To ensure that school leaders are high performing, there are two underlying initiative in Shift 5: 1) Enhance selection criteria and succession planning processes for principals from 2013, 2) Roll out a New Principal Career Package in waves with greater support and sharper accountability for improving student outcomes.

Enhance Selection Criteria and Succession Planning Processes for Principals from 2013

The Ministry will move from tenure-based selection criteria to one that is based on the demonstration of leadership competencies. Every principal will also be required to complete the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) at *Institut Aminuddin Baki* (IAB) before they can be appointed to their positions. In doing so, the average age of a principal is expected to drop, allowing principals to serve for longer periods in schools and in the system as a whole. Furthermore, the Ministry will institute a succession planning process that identifies and cultivates high-potential individuals to ensure that there is a ready pool of candidates that can be called upon as soon as an opening is available. Once these mechanisms have been set up, the Ministry will expand their planning focus to include assistant principals, as well as subject and department heads.

Roll out a New Principal Career Package in waves with greater support and sharper accountability for improving student outcomes

Principals will receive greater support to help them achieve their full potential and will therefore be held more accountable for the delivery of higher student outcomes. Among the programs planned for them are: 1) Soon-to-be appointed principals will benefit from a new on-boarding programme in which they spend one month under the mentorship of the principal outgoing principal. 2) Newly appointed principals will be supported (coaching and mentoring) by experienced principal or School Improvement Partner (SIPartner+), 3) individualized CPD course at IAB and other places. IAB will also ensure that comparable CPD opportunities are available to assistant principals, subject heads, and department heads.

School leaders will have the flexibility to serve at a primary or secondary school through a new, common civil service track. They will be assessed annually on a new evaluation instrument that focuses on their leadership abilities and improvement of student outcomes. High-performing principals will enjoy faster career progression opportunities. Incentives will also be revised to encourage high-performing principals to take up positions in rural and/or underperforming schools. Principals who struggle to meet the minimum standard will receive extra coaching support. Nevertheless, principals who consistently underperform despite this concerted support will be redeployed to a teaching position.

All school leaders (principals, assistant principals, department heads and subject heads) will be prepared to fully utilize the decision-making flexibilities accorded to them. This includes instructional leadership matters such as school improvement planning and curriculum and co-curricular planning, as well as administrative leadership matters such as allocation of school funds. The aspiration is to create a peer-led culture of professional excellence wherein school leaders mentor and train one another, develop and disseminate best practices and hold their peers accountable for meeting professional standards.

3.3. Action Planning

Action planning is the process whereby the policy statements (options and strategies) are translated into executable, measureable and accountable actions. In other words, it involves preparation for implementation. An action plan aims to translate into operation terms the policy directions that education authorities intend to implement in a given period of time. Planning includes specifying objectives, outputs, strategies, responsibilities and timelines (what, what for, how, who and when).

Due to the breadth and depth of the envisaged transformation, many initiatives been developed as part of the process. Each of the initiative has been regarded as important and meaningful, but it is crucial to streamline them so that the system is not overloaded. As a result, execution fatigue can be avoided. For this, the Ministry of Education carefully sequences the implementation of transformation over a period of 13 years. The implementation is divided into three different waves with an initial focus on addressing the gaps in the current system, and laying the foundation for a radically new education system. Subsequent waves of transformation accelerate improvement, geared towards self-sustaining innovation, so as to achieve the aspiration of education system and students.

The transformation is executed in three waves. Wave 1 (2013-2015) focuses on turning around the performance of the system. The objective is to improve education quality to the point where Malaysia is at par with the global average by 2015 as this will then set the education system up for future success. The three main areas during wave 1 are: 1) Improving classroom instruction to ensure students develop higher order thinking skills (HOTS), 2) enhancing Ministry and school leadership to ensure that every principal prioritizes school improvement and the best leaders are in the top 150-200 pivotal positions in the Ministry, and 3) upskilling English teachers to ensure that they meet the minimum proficiency levels to teach the subject.

The identification of these three as focus areas does not mean that other initiatives will be sidelined. For example, initiatives that address other issues such as curriculum enhancements and infrastructure upgrades will be implemented as well. These three areas were selected as they are fundamental drivers for improving quality (teachers and principals) or required for the country's overarching economic aspiration (English language).

During Wave 2 (2016-2020), the focus is on structural changes aimed at accelerating the pace of improvement. The initiatives include 1) moving all 410,000 teachers and 10,000 principals onto a new career package, 2) restructuring the federal, state and district offices and aligning them to new roles to better empower them to support schools, and 3) introducing secondary and revised primary standard curriculum that addresses concerns regarding the knowledge, skills, and values needed to thrive in today's global economy. The planning for all these initiatives, however, will begin in Wave 1.

By Wave 3 (2021-2025), all schools, teachers, and principals are expected to be performing well above the minimum standard. As such, the Ministry will focus on increasing operational flexibility to cultivate a peer-led culture of professional excellence. The Ministry will

also move most, if not all schools, onto a school-based management model, and scale up successful models of instructional innovation. The goal is to create a self-sustaining system that is capable of innovating and taking achievements to greater heights.

Finally, to ensure that the well-conceived plan is delivered accordingly to achieve the expected results, the Ministry of Education consulted three sources of information: 1) research into the most improved school systems in the world, 2) examples of successful transformations from Malaysia, and 3) in-depth analyses of the specific challenges faced in attempting to improve the education system from within. The findings synthesized four critical elements: 1) Strengthening leadership commitment and capabilities in the Ministry, 2) Establishing a small, high-powered delivery unit to drive Blueprint delivery, 3) Intensifying internal and external performance management, and 4) Getting support from Ministry officials and engaging other stake holders

Strengthening leadership commitment and capabilities in the Ministry

It was found that leadership plays an important role in the success of strategy execution. Systems that improve rapidly place strong transformational leaders in the most pivotal roles at every level in the education system, be it national, state, district, or educational institution. These leaders champion the changes and keep the momentum going. Some of them are drawn from outside the school system or the Ministry of Education, many come from within it. These systems also identify, cultivate, and develop the leadership capabilities of the next generation of system leaders to ensure continuity and consistency in the transformation efforts.

The Ministry of Education strengthens several roles throughout the Ministry to enable them to successfully support the transformation effort. These roles include the 16 directors at State Education Departments and 138 heads at District Education Offices, as well as another 20 to 40 federal level roles. Collectively, these 150 to 200 roles are directly in touch with 27,000 Ministry staff and 420,000 principals and teachers. The Ministry has started reviewing competency profiles and developing succession plans to ensure that these roles are staffed with highly-skilled individuals capable of transforming the departments and schools under them. As with teachers and principals, the intent is to promote officers to these critical roles based on their performance and competency, and not by tenure. The Ministry will also ensure that these leaders receive the professional development they need to excel in their role. Further, top Government and Ministry leadership, including Prime

Minister and Minister of Education are committed to regular reviewing progress, providing guidance, and resolving issues related to the Blueprint.

Establishing a small, high-powered delivery unit

International experience shows that it is crucial to establish a small and high-power program office to support the leadership of the Ministry. This office monitors progress, solves problem, delivers, and manages the communication with regard to the transformation. For this, the Ministry establishes the Education Performance and Delivery Unit (PADU) to drive delivery of all initiatives across the Ministry and schools.

PADU will drive the execution of Blueprint initiatives and interact with the public to keep them informed of Blueprint progress and gather on-going feedback. PADU will integrate the current functions of the Delivery Management Office (DMO), and the Project Management Office (PMO). Driving the execution of education initiatives extends beyond tracking progress. PADU will also provide on-the-ground problem solving and act as the first point to escalate issues for the Ministry on a day-to-day basis. It is important to note that PADU will play a supporting role; the accountability for delivering remains with the key people in the Ministry.

PADU is headed by a leader who has a track record for delivering big, fast results, a broad range of influencing skills, and has knowledge of the ministry. The rest of the PADU comprises highly skilled employees, from both the public and private sectors. These individuals are from some of the top talent in Malaysia and possess a strong track-record in problem-solving, delivery and engagement.

Intensifying internal and external performance management

As a mean to ensure effectiveness and efficiency in delivery, the Ministry of Education establishes a performance management system that sets high expectations of individuals, rewards strong performance, addresses poor performance and provides support needed for individuals to achieve their targets.

Using the five system aspirations and the suggested initiative as a basis, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) will be set for individuals throughout the system. Firstly, KPIs will be set for the Ministry senior leadership—the Minister of Education, Secretary- General of Education and Director-General of Education. The Minister’s performance will be measured by the performance of the Blueprint as a whole while the Secretary-General’s and Director-General’s performances will be measured on the basis of the progress of the initiatives that fall under their purview. Once this is done, KPIs will be set

for the remaining 150 to 200 pivotal roles identified in the Ministry. Finally, KPIs will be cascaded down to individuals in the organization.

For purpose of monitoring KPIs, the Education Minister, the Secretary-General and Director-General will have half an hour of in-person meeting with individuals in pivotal roles to do a detailed performance assessments and feedback conversations. This practice should happen at organization level too. After the discussions, individuals will be provided with support to improve their performance (if needed). Individuals who continue to show poor performance over a long period of time may be deployed to other roles which they are better suited.

The Ministry will publicly commit to education targets and Education Minister KPIs for 2015, 2020, and 2025. Performance results will be published annually so the public can track progress on the Blueprint.

Getting support from Ministry officials and engaging other stakeholders

From the beginning of developing the Blueprint, the Ministry officials were consulted extensively through closed-door roundtable sessions, and town-halls were conducted in each state to solicit teachers' and principals' perspectives. Apart from that, the Ministry also solicited inputs and feedback from all sections of society including parents, teacher unions and other interest groups. The Ministry will stay engaged with stakeholders through extensive communication. Much of this will take place over multiple types of media such as the press and the internet. However, the Ministry will also set up two-way

channels of communication that will allow Blueprint execution to continuously adapt to public feedback. All these efforts are carried out to ensure buying-in of Ministry officials and stakeholders.

4. Conclusion

The process of developing the Malaysian Education Blueprint took 15 months long. The Ministry tries to be inclusive in its efforts. Concerns and views of stakeholders were solicited in the attempts to solicit their perspectives on future of education. Findings were reviewed by education experts from Malaysia and abroad. The Ministry published the preliminary report and engaged with the public further before producing the actual final version of the Blueprint. This commendable effort has the impacts of nation-wide participatory, thus developing national capacity and enhancing ownership of the plan.

Nevertheless, the production of the inclusive document is just the beginning of a long journey of implementation. The success of the Blueprint is not so much dependent on the plan but the outputs and outcomes achieved. The challenges lie with implementation sustainability. This requires specific skills, including the ability to change people mindset to accept the change, delivery skills especially those holding leadership positions, the ability to manage by system thinking, the ability to monitor and evaluate the progress, responding to the ever evolving environment within the system, etc.

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**** This paper is a synthesis of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025. It was presented at Vietnam Institute of Educational Science Conference, Hanoi, 5-7 February 2018 to illustrate strategic plan development in the education sector.**