

Star educate



Making education a priority

Stakeholders bring up the issues that they want newly appointed Education Minister Dr Maszlee Malik to look into and solve. > 6 & 7

Cover Story

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DR MASZLEE MALIK was relatively unknown until Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad decided the Education portfolio as well.

When Dr Maszlee was named the 19th Education Minister, the public was confused as to why he was appointed, particularly among parents and academics - the biggest stakeholders in the education sector.

It did not help matters that he has supposedly been in support of controversial Muslim preacher Dr Zakir Naik.

Since then, Dr Maszlee has insisted that he did not support the content of what Dr Zakir said but was in support of the preacher's right to freedom of speech.

There was even a petition in favour of Dr Mahathir as the minister because Dr Maszlee was seen as an inappropriate choice.

On May 22, Dr Maszlee told *The Star*, in response to those critics, that "being religious is not a crime."

Just three days earlier, Bangi MP Dr Ong Kian Ming has spoken up in support of Dr Maszlee's appointment in response to critics citing his alleged "support" for Dr Zakir.

"Firstly, his CV is impressive and he should not be pigeonholed as 'just an Islamic scholar'," said the DAP parliamentarian, citing Dr Maszlee's background from his profile page on the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (Ideas).

The former International Islamic University Malaysia lecturer and Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, though surprised by the appointment himself, promised to give his all during his tenure.

During his maiden address to all department and section heads at the ministry after clocking in for the first time last Tuesday, said the Pakatan Harapan Government would give special attention to the education sector, which is seen as an important pillar to form an inclusive, moderate and great Malaysia, as outlined in the 'Buku Harapan' (Pakatan's election manifesto).

Dr Maszlee's to-do list seems like a tall order but despite the initial scepticism, stakeholders nationwide are hopeful and believe he can pull it off.

Dr Maszlee will be dealing with a huge

Ready to serve

Newly appointed Education Minister Dr Maszlee Malik needs to know what has to be done to bring improvements and changes to the sector.



Tan says NUTP wants to meet with Dr Maszlee soon to discuss pressing matters affecting teachers.

ministry, from students in schools to exams, teachers' workload, bullying, English proficiency, soft skills to the needs of the higher education industry.

Of ongoing policies and changes

SMK Kuala Selangor English teacher Faridah Kassim hopes the ministry will consider bringing back a policy similar to the Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English (PPSMI).

The PPSMI policy was initiated by Dr Mahathir when he was prime minister and implemented in phases, beginning with Year One, Form One and Lower Six students in 2003.

The Government announced the reversal of the PPSMI policy in 2009.



EDUCATION MINISTER

Dr Maszlee Malik
Age: 44
DOB: July 15, 1974
Education background:
> Bachelor's degree in fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and usul al-fiqh (principles of Islamic jurisprudence) from Al al-Bayt University, Jordan and Master's in same subject from Universiti Malaya
> Doctorate in the field of Good Governance from University of Durham, United Kingdom
> Other positions: Simpanan Renggam MP, board member of Ideas Autism Centre, adviser of Teach For The Needs

In 2011, it was announced that students who have started learning Science and Mathematics in English will continue to do so until they complete their studies in Form Five.

Faridah says that when the policy was overturned, it left teachers frustrated and students confused.

"We must have a policy to encourage our students to use more English to expose them to the world."

"Many of our students have a weak grasp of the language, and do not know how to express their thoughts and ideas."

"Initiatives like PPSMI is a way to encourage them to improve their proficiency in the language and their confidence in speaking it," explains Faridah.

Sarah, a teacher based in Petaling Jaya wants to see the end of the Dual Language Programme (DLP) and the reintroduction of PPSMI.

She believes the PPSMI initiative was more beneficial as she claims "the DLP is not standardised and students who choose the other option don't get as much exposure to English."

Another English teacher from Petaling Jaya, Premala Devi asks that schools be given more leeway when it comes to implementing the DLP for their students.

Currently, schools have to fulfil certain criteria, which include having the written consent of parents, enough qualified teachers and classrooms, and a score above the National Grade Average in Bahasa Malaysia before they can apply for the DLP.

The DLP which gives students the option to study Mathematics and Science in either Bahasa Malaysia or English, was announced during Budget 2016.

"Many schools which did not fulfil the criteria have lost many students to international schools and homeschooling, especially the high achievers," she laments.

Parent Action Group for Education Malaysia (PAGE) chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim hopes the new minister will continue the DLP and train more teachers, to allow more schools to apply for it.

"PAGE hopes the National Science Action Plan and the National Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Centre will continue," she adds.

Mother of two Rajes Muthusamy voiced her concern over the DLP, describing it as inconsistent as not all schools can implement the programme.

"All classes in my daughter's school conduct Maths and Science in English but the teachers aren't equipped to deliver.



Dr Maszlee clocks in for the first time at the Education Ministry in Putrajaya on Tuesday.

"Students are then unable to understand and follow what's happening."
"It is vital to ensure our teachers are prepared to teach in the language," she says.

Focusing on core duties

Teachers have too much clerical work to do, which take up a lot of time and as a result, are unable to concentrate on their real job, which is to teach, says Faridah.

Retired English teacher Wong Chiew Lee agrees with Faridah's sentiments.

"The time we have in school should be spent interacting with students and helping them with school work."
"Many of us are dedicated to our vocation. We stay back to give extra lessons simply because we lacked time during classes," she adds.

Wong says teachers have to wrestle with a computer server and software that are not user-friendly.

A teacher in Kuala Selangor, Jaycee, says long hours are spent on documentation online and offline that are subjected to certain criteria.

Besides feeling like administrators, she says many of her colleagues opted for early retirement as they cannot handle the stress.

Former National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP) secretary-general Datuk N. Siva Subramaniam says that in the past, teachers had the opportunity to submit written suggestions to the Government towards education reform.

On another issue, Wong hopes that Dr Maszlee will look into the school curriculum.

"Subjects like Moral Education tell our students how to think. Instead, they must be given room for creativity," says Wong.

Aliya, an English teacher in Sabah, echoes Wong's concern over Moral Education.

"Special attention should be given as the values and definitions are too rigid, which discourages the use of creative and critical thinking."

"Memorising isn't enough, students must

know how to react to situations and apply that in their answers," she says.

Aliya feels that the curriculum is still too exam-oriented.

"It's time to focus on equipping students with capabilities that they need once they leave school," she adds. Jaycee adds that analytical ways of assessment, interactive teaching aids, better classroom conditions, sporting facilities, and reasonable allocations are very much needed in schools.

SMK USJ 12 teacher Shirley Tan wants the ministry to fix the teaching facilities that are available in schools, including computers.

"We are not given proper tools and yet they expect us to deliver the goods," she says.

"In my school, I was surprised that the computers provided are at least 15 years old. They are very slow. Using these computers frustrates the students."

She adds that the Internet connection and online learning platform are also slow and not user-friendly.

NUTP secretary-general Harry Tan hopes the union can meet Dr Maszlee soon to discuss issues concerning schools and the education fraternity.

These include administrative bureaucracy, shortage of English Language teachers, the lack of fencing and guard houses in some schools, CCTVs placed in locations not for safety but to monitor teacher activity, closure of teacher education institutes and no replacement teachers for those on maternity and long sick leave.

A parent who wants to be known as Cheng hopes Dr Maszlee will give special attention to students with special needs.

"My wife is a special education teacher and we have seen how parents with special children struggle when they are not given the right attention."

"We hope there will be more inclusivity and support for special children."

"Either bring in expert teachers who are able to educate them and accept them into a normal school environment, or train existing teachers," he says.

Dr Maszlee's "To-do list"

- Making the national school system the choice of parents and students.
- Lightening teachers' workload by appointing teaching assistants, having smaller class sizes and reducing clerical tasks.
- Giving special attention to the early schooling years to remove the emphasis on exams and rote learning. The process of learning and teaching should be fun and joyful.
- Using the latest technology, including information technology (IT) in the teaching and learning process to give maximum exposure and experiences to the students.
- Encouraging students to be proficient in multiple languages.
- Strengthening technical and vocational education training (TVET) and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education.
- Providing more opportunities in STEM and TVET education to special needs students.
- Meeting and obtaining feedback from all stakeholders including teachers, lecturers, students and parents on the education blueprints.
- Allowing fresh graduates who draw a salary below RM4,000 to postpone repaying their PTPN loans until they start earning RM4,000 and above.
- Abolishing the Universities and University Colleges Act (AUKU) Act 1971, to provide academic freedom and to lift higher learning institutions to the international level.

Source: The Star

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Under one roof

SOME time is needed to restructure the former higher education ministry as it is now back together with the Education Ministry.

Higher education has always been part of the education ministry until 2004 when former prime minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi split the education ministry up to the education and higher education ministries.

The creation of the two ministries then were to ensure both sectors received equal focus as it was thought to be too unwieldy under one.

Subsequently the two ministries were merged back in 2013 and split up again in 2015.

Following the recent win by the Pakatan Harapan Government, Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced that there will only be one ministry in charge of all matters regarding education.

Newly appointed Education Minister Dr Maszlee Malik believes the merging of the Higher Education and Education Ministries is "not a big issue".

Sunway Education Group and Sunway University senior executive director Elizabeth Lee says that over the years the two ministries were split to allow more focused attention on the needs and rapid development of the two different areas of education.

"We hope that the same attention, if not more, may be devoted to address the needs arising from the fast changing trends and aggressive competition in the light of globalisation, especially in higher education," she adds.

She suggests that an executive board comprising representatives from different stakeholders in higher education be set up.

"This is to promote better understanding and communication between the stakeholders, policymakers and regulators and to empower the higher learning institutions to develop in tandem with global institutions and trends," she says in welcoming Dr Maszlee's appointment.

On the same wave

UCSI University vice-chancellor and president Senior Prof Datuk Dr Khalid Yusoff welcomes the appointment of a fellow academic as education minister.

Dr Maszlee, he adds, will understand how universities work as he is from academia as well.

Support for both candidates

SOON after Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad decided not to hold the Education Minister portfolio and named Simpang Renggam MP Dr Maszlee Malik to take his place, Malaysians wasted no time and registered two petitions on change.org in support of both candidates for the role.

The first petition was registered on May 18 shortly after Dr Mahathir's announcement, backing the premier to take up the ministerial role.

As of press time, it has garnered 88,916 signatures.

The second petition, in support of Dr Maszlee, was registered on May 19 and has accumulated 166,501 signatures.

Dr Mahathir's supporters described him as a great role model and the best choice for the role, in the petition's comment box.

A netizen stated that the nonagenarian has perhaps identified the problems prevalent in the education system and has thought of solutions, thus the decision to name himself.

Separately, on Dr Maszlee's petition, supporters said the nation needs bright people to work with Dr Mahathir for the betterment of the country.

Some said to give Dr Maszlee a chance while others said he is a qualified candidate for the role.



Lee suggests the setting up of an executive board comprising representatives of different stakeholders in higher education.



Prof Pradeep hopes that private education institutions will get more financial incentives from the Government.



Dr Parmjit says Mapcu is looking forward to working closely with Dr Maszlee.



Senior Prof Khalid welcomes the appointment of a fellow academic as education minister.



Prof Syed Arabi says Dr Maszlee is a respected academic at home and abroad.

"He will be able to put substance to form, bring in meaning to performance and achievement, put values back in higher education and steer the course with confidence," he says.

Dr Maszlee has impressive credentials that make him suitable for a ministerial role.

"He has a PhD on Good Governance, speaks four languages and has a very active social involvement.

"These will provide the much needed extra dimension in making our universities great and socially responsive.

"The academic fraternity is eager to move forward with him," says Prof Khalid.

Former International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) rector Prof Datuk Dr Syed Arabi Idid has nothing but praise for Dr Maszlee who is also Simpang Renggam MP.

In fact, he recalls Dr Maszlee as an individual involved in political research that focused on Islam while at the varsity.

"He holds a moderate viewpoint," he says.

Dr Maszlee has previously served as an IIUM lecturer and Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science.

He is a respected academic at home and abroad and gets along well with students and academic staff.

"Education is the bedrock of our nation's future.

"He is a young minister and he will be expected to provide the solutions to the various issues," says Prof Syed Arabi.

Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities (Mapcu) is looking forward to working closely with Dr Maszlee on talent development.

Its president Datuk Dr Parmjit Singh adds that he has known Dr Maszlee from his participation in various working groups.

"I believe he will transform Malaysia into a knowledge-based economy by steering the education sector towards embracing technology to meet with the challenges of Industry 4.0," he explains.

On the merging of the two ministries, he says that it made "a lot of sense."

This is to ensure a seamless and synchronised education system from preschool to tertiary studies.

"It supports the Government's aspirations to optimise on resources and reduce public expenditure," he adds.

Carrying out the vision

Taylor's University deputy vice-chancellor and chief academic officer Prof Dr Pradeep Nair says that although Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has removed himself as the Education Minister, he believes Dr Maszlee will be able to carry out the former's visions for education.

"Dr Mahathir's vision of making Malaysia the regional centre for educational excellence for higher education have been the true north for almost all private higher education providers.

"We hope Dr Maszlee will remove unnecessary regulatory requirements which have often stifled the growth of private higher education and created an unequal playing field for us," says Prof Pradeep.

He hopes that private education institutions will get more financial incentives from the Government to make education more equitable and accessible to the larger population.

Prof Pradeep points out that private higher education institutions today make up almost 60% of total tertiary enrolment and can become an even more powerful engine for human capital development.

"Dr Maszlee may be relatively young and new, but his ideas are fresh, daring and untainted by past legacies," he adds.

IIUM student Hazwan Dani, who studied an Islamic history subject under Dr Maszlee, describes him as a "learned and open minded" person.

"Lessons were enlightening because his knowledge of Islamic history is vast, as well as his general knowledge because he reads a lot.

"He conducts interfaith dialogues with students:

"Once, he invited a Christian friend of his over to class to talk about peace and had an open discussion with us on the similarities of our religion despite our differences.

"So, accusations against him for being an Islamist is not true. In my experience, he was always objective," says Hazwan who is a fourth year International Relations major, with a minor in Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Heritage.

Describing Dr Maszlee as always punctual, Hazwan says he is techno savvy and up to date. — By REBECCA RAJAENDRAM