

# MALAYSIA BEYOND NATIONAL EDUCATION

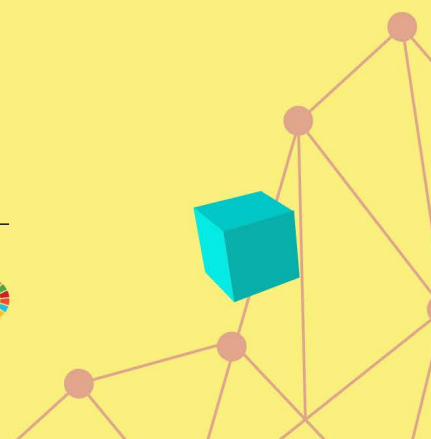
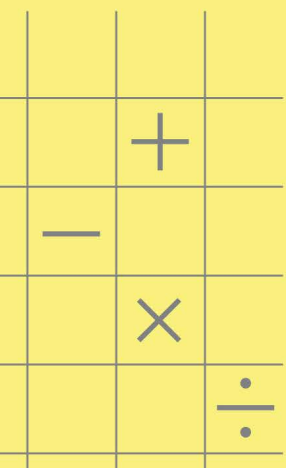
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS 2021

— Prepared by Yap Jo-yeo / January 2022 —

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# FOREWORD

## Mr. Christian Echle

Director, Regional Programme Political Dialogue Asia  
Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung, Singapore

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While countries across Asia have made substantial progress in the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on education in the last years, there was a substantial setback due to the outbreak of COVID-19. With schools and education institutions being closed in around 188 countries, nations across the world explored alternative ways to provide continuous education using diverse technologies and other means. While home-based learning with the support of digital platforms cannot fully substitute the traditional classrooms, there is a need to see how the education system in various countries have adapted to the challenges of the pandemic and whether the new changes meet the needs of the society. Further, how can countries ensure that education is made available to all and that no one is left behind?

Every democratic actor might have different roles to play in society, but they should not be working in silos if we want to help the government achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. They must coordinate their efforts to complement the government's efforts, instead of competing with each other's interest and agenda. There is a need to explore and innovate new frameworks in engaging different democratic actors, in particular, how to best implement this framework at the local level.

As such, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) through the KASpaces Program facilitates countries and regions to come together to share experiences and best practices they have used in facing today's challenges, and to ensure education is provided to all – not just during times of challenges, but in the years and decades ahead. These meetings of stakeholders in education are important both to see how education systems in various countries have been implemented during the pandemic and to transform the systems in order to produce more credible and effective models for the future.

Malaysia has made major leaps in improving its national education system, though more work

remains to be done. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deep-rooted challenges occurring due to school closures and poor access to remote learning. This has resulted in learning loss and widening education inequality.

To bridge these education gaps, several best practices were identified during the education sector's transition to adapt to the new normal. These include embedding social-emotional skills in teachers' training; investing in excellent pedagogical training; equipping teachers as coaches; recognising and developing affordable micro-credentialing courses; equipping households with key enablers for learning to take place; and forming partnerships to address broad challenges.

Non-state actors such as micro-credential-offering institutions, civil society organisations, and social enterprises have also played a key role in championing education in the country. A case study on the Finnish education experience was also provided, highlighting the importance of decentralisation in the education system to empower local authorities and schools with the necessary skills and autonomy to play a larger role in creating quality education.

We are very pleased to present this report from our KASpaces national webinar in Malaysia. This report showcases not only the best practices but also the ways various challenges were overcome in Malaysia. The report reflects the perspective of various stakeholders from teachers, policymakers, IT companies as well as students. The discussions in the student's forum in which we had the strong participation of stakeholders from different parts of Malaysia sharing their rich experiences have also been reflected in this report.

We would like to thank our partner Penang Institute for their cooperation in the implementation of this webinar.

# LIGHTING FUTURE FIRES

Dato' Dr Ooi Kee Beng

Executive Director, Penang Institute

*“Education is not the filling of a pail,  
but the lighting of a fire.”*

— W.B. Yeats

Long before the pandemic forced the world to rethink all aspects of modern life, how education was being affected by digital technologies was already a big issue being discussed, but with no clear answers identified. With Covid-19, there was no longer any doubt teaching and learning were being transformed beyond recognition, and different age groups and different professions would have to adapt as best they can.

It was therefore a most welcome invitation that Penang Institute received in early 2021 from Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, which under its umbrella project KASpace, to organize a conference on education, to bring together major innovators, to discuss the future of education in Malaysia.

We decided to title the conference “Beyond National Education”. Somewhat provocatively, this heading sought to direct attention to the fact that in times of profound change, education is much more a family matter than a political one. The urgency of change in the earnest eyes of parents and students is much more real than in the lethargic plans of governments and bureaucrats.

The need to innovate is therefore strongly felt among educationists who are knowledgeable about new trends in education in the world and who are in close contact with anxious students.

A brainstorming conference with such stakeholders could not but be illuminative.

The major points brought up by these innovators included the following:

1. There is a great need for quality infrastructure, digital or otherwise;
2. It is important for teaching to be human-centered and holistic;
3. Teachers can no longer be mere transmitters of information. Instead, children need their teachers to be leaders who can inculcate discernment in their pupils; mentors who stimulate thought and instill character, and; innovators in teaching methods.
4. National education has to guarantee basic access to education for all citizens, and strive towards teaching children to self-thinkers and not just regurgitators of information.

Penang Institute is proud to partner with KAS in pushing the agenda for Quality Education. While hoping that the insights and accompanying case studies serve as a useful reference for practitioners and policymakers, I am certain that the contacts and connections made during this conference will lead to new projects and exciting discussions with positive repercussions that we cannot foresee.



# contents

02	Foreword
05	Executive Summary
06	Introduction to Education in Malaysia
07	Impact of the Pandemic on Education
08	Greater Education Inequality
09	Best Practices
09	—Infrastructure & teachers' development
13	— Inequality in education
17	— New actors in education
20	Conclusion

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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While leaps have been made in national education, Malaysia remains acutely aware of the need to improve its education system. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, deep-rooted challenges in education have intensified, and will continue to do so, due to school closures and poor access to remote learning.

The Beyond National Education Conference, held on 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021, brought together education stakeholders in Malaysia to identify issues, discuss best practices, and construct a shared vision for education.

## — Best practices identified from the Conference are —



These are some of the best practices being implemented by non-state local actors, who have emerged as trailblazers and champions of educations in Malaysia, and include:

1. Institutions offering micro-credentials
2. Civil society organisations and social enterprises

In particular, the Finnish experience also highlighted the importance of decentralisation in education. It showed that local authorities and schools can play pivotal roles in creating quality education if empowered with the necessary skills and given sufficient autonomy to organise their resources.

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# Introduction to Education in Malaysia

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Malaysia is one of the largest investors in education. For the past 10 years, the country has been spending upwards of 16 per cent of total government expenditure on education. The average for upper middle-income countries is only 14.2 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

The progress of national education has been remarkable. At the time of its independence in 1957, only 8 per cent of Malaysians had attained secondary-level schooling or higher, and 56 per cent had not had schooling. By 2010, the tables had turned. Malaysians without formal schooling made up only 9 per cent of the population. Those with secondary education or above were at 76 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

According to the National Education Philosophy for Malaysia (1988), the school curriculum “is committed to developing the child holistically”, and this includes intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical aspects. The national school system pushes these forward through mandatory

participation in at least one sport, one club and one uniformed body activity in secondary school. Moral Education or Islamic Education is also compulsory for all students.

However, gaps remain to be addressed. Education inequality is high, and undocumented children in Malaysia do not have access to formal education. Education access gaps and quality gaps continue to exist between rural and urban households, as well as between high- and low-income families. Employers also lament a serious skills gap, and a workforce that shows little interest in continued learning. These are symptomatic of unresolved root issues.



## Beyond National Education Conference

The Beyond National Education Conference held on 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021 brought together education stakeholders to identify issues, discuss best practices, and construct a shared vision for education. A total of 60 participants and 17 panelists were part of the Conference.

The learnings captured in this report are organised as follows:

- a. Impact of the pandemic on education
- b. Best practices
  - i. **Infrastructure & teachers' development**
  - ii. **Inequality in education**
  - iii. **New actors in education**

<sup>1</sup> The World Bank. 2019. Government expenditure on education.  
([https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GB.ZS?most\\_recent\\_value\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GB.ZS?most_recent_value_desc=false))

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Education. 2013. Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2015

# IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON EDUCATION

The learning crisis in Malaysia was already serious before Covid-19. Every two minutes, one student dropped out of school in Malaysia. Given that 86.8 per cent of occupations in Malaysia require *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), the certificate for upper secondary education, as a minimum qualification, effectively, 40,000 Malaysian students annually are shut off from the overwhelming majority of jobs in the country, creating socioeconomic risks and perpetuating poverty<sup>3</sup>.

The learning crisis and inequalities in education have intensified, and will continue to do so, as a result of the pandemic, due to school closures and poor access to remote learning.

## Learning Loss

Learning loss is one of the most visible impacts of the pandemic on education. It is the combined effect of school closures and poor learning infrastructure at home.

In total, Malaysia has had 37 weeks of full school closures and 11 partial closures, one of the longest in the world<sup>4</sup>. Households, whether urban or rural, were ill-equipped for online learning when the pandemic struck. According to Universiti Malaya, nearly half of national secondary school students in Malaysia attended classes intermittently or not at all.<sup>5</sup> This means that almost half of the country's students lost a year of education. Official surveys by the Ministry of Education show similar results.<sup>6</sup>

Low-income households more than others wanted their children back in school, mainly due to the lack of study spaces at home (49 per cent) and an inability to supervise their children's learning (43 per cent).<sup>7</sup>

On-the-ground experience among the panelists also show that poorer families did not expect school closures to last when initially announced, and held off the purchase of digital devices for learning. When it became clear that the pandemic had taken a turn for the worse in Malaysia, families began purchasing smartphones, but siblings were forced to share them, and more often than not, eldest children sitting for important exams were prioritised over their younger siblings.

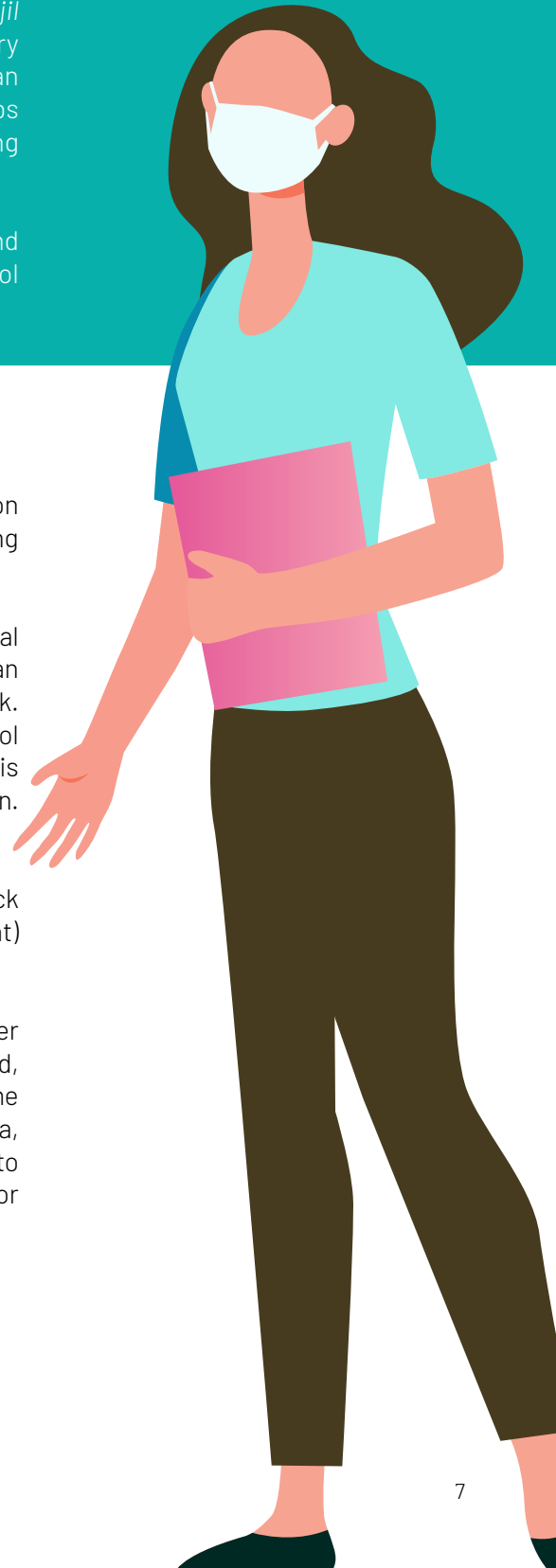
<sup>3</sup> UNICEF. 2021. Slides presented at Beyond National Conference.

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO. 2021. Global monitoring of school closures. (<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse#durationschoolclosures>)

<sup>5</sup> The Star. 2021. PdPR: How effective is it?

<sup>6</sup> The Edge. 2021. Effectiveness of PdPR method at moderate level, says MOE. (<https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/effectiveness-pdpr-method-moderate-level-says-moe>)

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF. 2021. Families on the Edge (Issue 4).





# Greater Education Inequality

The issue is complicated by the fact that the more deprived a child is, the harder it is for them to return to school. Children are generally more exposed to layers of social risks, such as crime, teenage pregnancy, and malnutrition, while out of school. They also receive fewer essential resources since schools provide much more than education. The experience of UNICEF showed that students had less nutrition, and opportunities to develop social skills.

The impact of the pandemic has hit vulnerable segments of society especially hard. Female-led households which have often had lower



standards of living were most affected by school closures. Children from those families were more likely to lose interest in their studies due to the long periods of lockdown (65 per cent of female-led households vs 61 per cent of total households).<sup>8</sup> Parents of lower-income households also were at a loss as to where they could find learning content for their children, and needed help understanding the national curriculum.

## In response, UNICEF has emphasised the need for countries like Malaysia to:

**A** Bring all children back to school safely

**B** Develop cohesive policies to remedy learning loss

**C** Empower teachers

This will be an uphill battle, and entails correcting the trajectory of children who have dropped out of school entirely or attended intermittently, addressing insufficient education budgets, and making large shifts in education policy. To be sure, the Conference indicates that change can begin at the local level, led by non-governmental actors such as educators, community leaders, and corporations.



<sup>8</sup> UNICEF. 2021. Families on the Edge (Issue 4).



# BEST PRACTICES

Three key themes raised during the Beyond National Education Conference were:

**1** Infrastructure and teachers' development

**2** Inequality in education

**3** New actors in education

The following sections detail best practices and insights relevant to each theme. These are based on real-world examples presented at the Conference by social enterprises, non-profit organisations and educators.

## INFRASTRUCTURE & TEACHERS' DEVELOPMENT

Students were not the only ones to struggle during the pandemic. Teachers found themselves ill-equipped to transition to digital learning. Digital illiteracy, previously a minor nuisance in a world with physical classrooms, is now a tall wall that stands between teachers and their students in a virtual classroom.

Panelists also highlighted longstanding issues such as teachers' classroom management skills, pedagogy, social-emotional skills, and autonomy. Discussions of these topics were distinctively shaped by the collective observation that teachers' roles have evolved. In

an age where data is freely available, no longer are teachers the deliverers of information, but curators of IT and coaches. As their roles change, so do the skills required in a classroom.

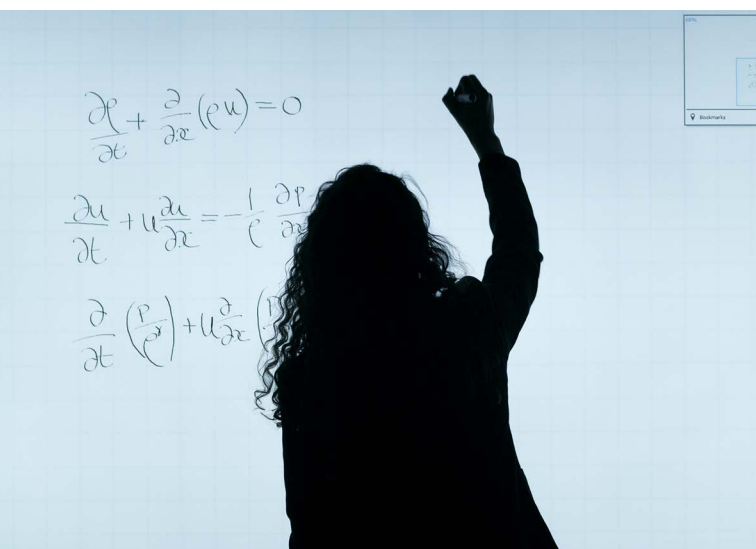
### Embed social-emotional skills in teachers' training

Students who find it challenging to learn are typically those who have developed a bad relationship with the act of learning. Due to past experiences, they now judge themselves as bad at learning (low self-efficacy), and are therefore unwilling to try again.

Social-emotional skills are crucial in any classroom setting, whether it is online or offline, and teachers mediate students' relationship with learning by first connecting with students, and establishing good teacher-student relationships.

Further, teachers are best placed to become the first point of contact whenever students experience emotional issues, and to create a safe space for students to process their feelings.

Despite the importance of social-emotional skills in the classroom, teachers are ill-equipped to manage emotions in the classroom, whether these are positive or negative ones.



### Case study: Teach for Malaysia

Teach For Malaysia (TFM), an independent, non-profit organisation that works with the Ministry of Education to develop leaders in education, has been gradually incorporating self-development modules for teachers in their training in relation to social-emotional skills. Teachers are taught the importance of managing their own emotions and their students', as well as the methods to do this. To crystalize the training, TFM has developed a guidebook for teachers specifically on social-emotional skills.

As an example, TFM teachers conduct a temperature check in the first few minutes of classes to assess students' state of health. The activity also conveys the message that it is acceptable to express and talk about feelings in a healthy way.



## Invest in Excellent Pedagogical Training

### Case study:

#### *The Finnish education system*

Recognizing that all educators share the same goal, i.e. to develop the child holistically, the Finnish education system has developed better teaching performance by trusting its teachers to teach in optimal ways for their students.

As a result of the trust afforded to them, teachers are not expected to submit reports for regulation on a frequent basis, and they have a large amount of control over what goes on in their classrooms. School inspections were removed in the 1990s<sup>9</sup>. This is in contrast to the case of teachers in Malaysia who spend close to 30 per cent of their time on administrative work and reporting, at the expense of lesson-planning or teaching<sup>10</sup>.

Crucially, the basis for this trust is the amount of learning teachers in Finland go through. Equipped with practical skills and theories,

even new teachers are given a lot of trust to choose appropriate methods for their classrooms. The education system recognises that students learn in different ways, and teachers therefore need to be flexible and discerning enough to identify suitable learning methods for their students. To be able to do this, teachers have to first understand different pedagogical tools, which include design-thinking, flipped learning, spaced learning, play-based learning, digital tools, and gamification, amongst many others.

Experimentation is what drives the Finnish education system forward. Teachers are trained to adopt methods based on research and evidence. Successful methods are shared and implemented in other classrooms/schools.

The decision to decentralise decision-making in education plays a key role in enabling effective teaching. Reforms in the 1990s empowered local municipalities, teachers and principals to take the best course of action for their students (See **"New actors in education"** for further details).

<sup>9</sup> Centre for Public Impact. 2019. Education reform in Finland and the comprehensive school system. (<https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/case-study/education-policy-in-finland>)

<sup>10</sup> Malay Mail. 2014. Malaysian teachers spend 29pc of their time on admin work, says study. (<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2014/06/26/malaysian-teachers-spend-29pc-of-their-time-on-admin-work-says-study/694769>)



## Equip Teachers As Coaches

The massive amount of information on the internet means that teachers are increasingly required to teach students *how* to learn, and to deliver information in curated, engaging ways.

One of the concerns of Malaysian society is that its citizens lack a desire to pursue lifelong learning. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are frequently touted as the technology that will finally democratise education and make it available to anyone, anywhere, at accessible prices. But they may fall short of expectations simply because of the lack of lifelong learners. The process of building a learning society begins as soon as the child starts to learn, and teachers play key roles. Lifelong learning requires a high level of discipline, and the ability to self-direct the learning process. These are skills that need to be taught by teachers.

### **Case study:** **Finnish education system**

The Finnish education system places stress on classes being student-led. Teachers are expected to teach students to take ownership of their own learning. This is so that students would be lifelong learners, able to self-direct their learning after formal education has ended.

### **Case study:** **Arus Academy**

Arus Academy is a social enterprise that wants to “empower today’s problem-solvers to create a brighter future for themselves and everyone else around them”<sup>11</sup>. The organisation creates content that prompts students to think about who they are, and how they are interconnected with others as individuals. It emphasises the importance of purposeful teaching that helps students appreciate the subject matter, arouse curiosity, and inject meaning into what they are learning.

One of the ways it has done this is through project-based learning. The Global Citizenship Education Projects, created together with the Ministry of Education Malaysia and UNICEF Malaysia, tie school syllabus to current events and the Sustainable Development Goals. This allows students to see how classroom content helps them understand the world around them, and the impact their solutions can make.

<sup>11</sup> Arus Academy. <https://arusacademy.org.my/>

# Box 1 :

## Creating Engaging Digital Content: **What's Important?**

### **Interactive**

The content must require input from students.

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### **Educational**

The content should be clearly mapped to fit the syllabus.

Students need to understand what they are learning, and the purpose behind it.

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### **Meaningful**

Students should be able to see relevance in the content, and be able to relate to it.

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#### Example: **Voices of the Covid Generation<sup>12</sup>**

"Voices of the COVID Generation (VOCG) was a response to the lack of avenues for our children to process and make sense of the new normal. The learning journey aims to alleviate confusion about the pandemic by taking students through an educational experience to understand the different elements of Covid-19; its origin, spread, science and its effect on the way we live. Beyond that, students get to explore how Covid-19 affects countries, communities and individuals differently, and explore the role they can play collectively in facing the global crisis.

VOCG is a programme that uses a project-based approach using Covid-19 as the central theme, with learning objectives aligned to four subjects within Malaysia's national curriculum and Global Citizenship Education (GCED).

VOCG wants to make remote learning meaningful by having both online and offline programme delivery for students across the nation. The online version is a website (self-learning

platform) and the offline version is a physical VOGC Box via postage. The programme aims to empower students to find strength and a role in adversity and to build advocacy around giving space to children to express thoughts and ideas even in times of emergencies.

The current cohort involves 19 VOGC Leaders (teachers) and 200 students from all over Malaysia. The programme allows all types of students to participate; those with tech access and without, special needs children and students from community centres.

Students' responses in the form of reflections and ideas are curated and showcased on World's Children Day through a virtual interactive exhibition on our platform. The programme aims to bring out six different voices, namely Hopeful, Reflective, Empathy, Leader, Innovative and Creative, to help them express emotions, ideas and reflections with regard to the global pandemic."

<sup>12</sup> Arus Academy. 2021. Voices of the Covid Generation. (<https://arusacademy.org.my/web/voices-od-covid-generation-vocg/>)

# INEQUALITY IN EDUCATION

In Malaysia, the vulnerable segments of society have always been most affected by negative shocks. Although all Malaysian households were affected by school closures, the poorest and the most deprived were least able to shield themselves from its negative effects. For example, children from female-led households were more likely to lose interest in their studies due to the long periods of lockdown (65 per cent of female-led households compared to 61 per cent of all households)<sup>13</sup>.

The issue was complicated by the fact that the more deprived a child was, the harder it was for them to return to school<sup>14</sup>. Children are generally more exposed to social risks such as crime, teenage pregnancy, and malnutrition while out of school. They also receive fewer essential resources such as shelter, food, or medical attention, and lack opportunities to develop social skills. Deprived households depend on these ancillary resources far more than others.

School closures have widened not only the education gap, but also the welfare gap, both now and in the future, as childhood education shapes the trajectory of life outcomes. This too will have implications for the long-term growth of a country.

Furthermore, inequality in education is growing because of the changing nature of the job market. Individuals are increasingly required to possess tertiary qualifications, and technological skills. The pandemic has also quickened the shift to digital, and displaced workers find themselves ill-equipped to adapt to this.

## Recognise and develop affordable micro-credentialing courses

Micro-credentialing, short-term and targeted courses, are possible solutions to reskilling and upskilling the workforce. These are often suitable for adults, because they can be taken outside of work hours, and owing to their shorter duration, are affordable too. Short-term courses are particularly well-placed to support those transitioning from school to the workplace, or the unemployed, to reduce frictions in the labour force.

Large-scale recognition of courses at workplaces will help increase interest in micro-credentials. However, this is still a work-in-progress in Malaysia.

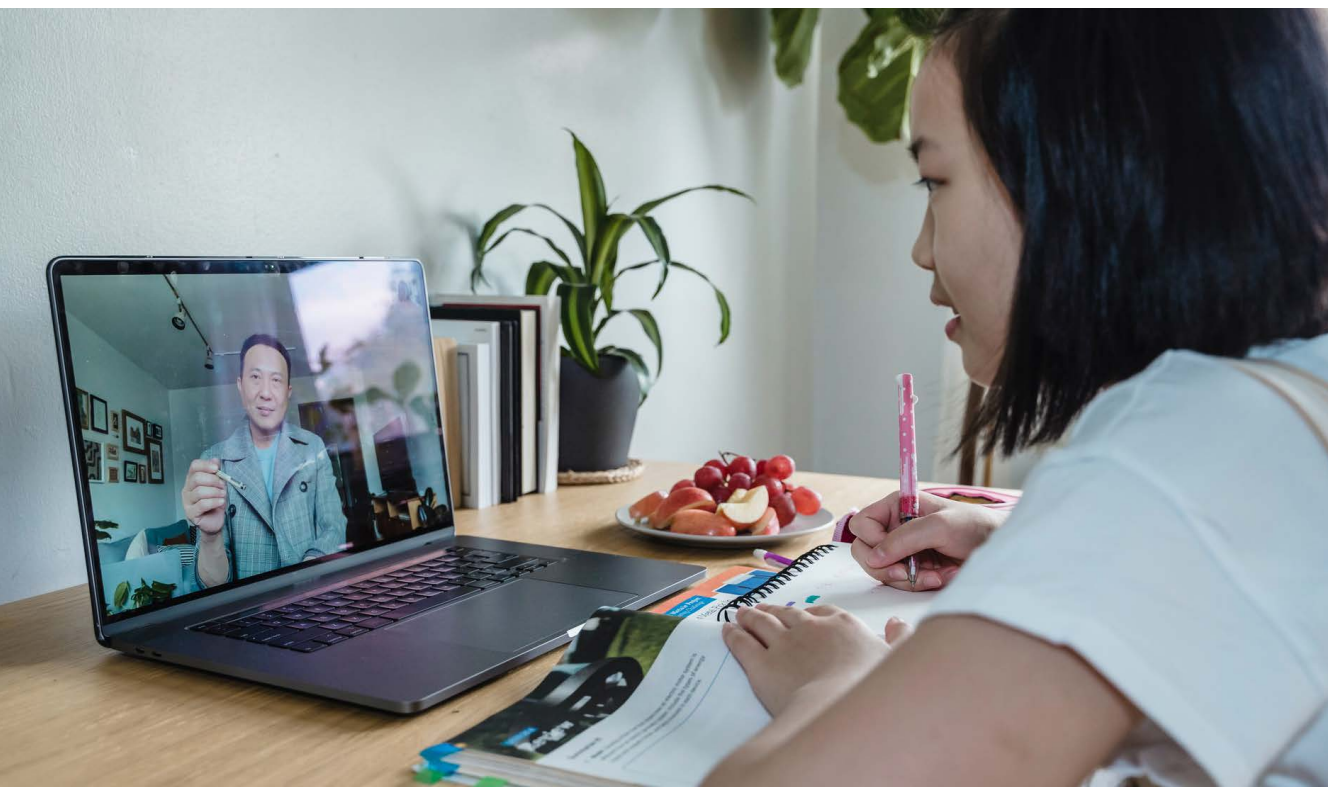
Care should be taken to make sure that these courses remain a viable option for low-income households, otherwise micro-credentials may only serve to exacerbate the ongoing inequalities.



<sup>13</sup> UNICEF. 2021. Families on the Edge (Issue 4).

<sup>14</sup> UNESCO. 2020. How many children are at risk of not returning to school?





### ***Case study: Forward School***

Forward School is a local institution offering online and on-campus training for digital skills. Its founder, Howie Chang, aims to make education accessible to anyone, anywhere. To achieve this, the school is mindful about scaling appropriately. Over the course of the pandemic, course recordings were made available online so that students could revise anywhere.

However, it recognises that quality education also needs to retain the human touch through student-teacher interactions, something that is not scalable. The school intentionally allocates sufficient office hours to provide this.

Courses range in duration from two months, for a specific skill such as Data Science, to two years for a full-time Software Engineering course. To accommodate working adults' commitments, some of them take place during weekends.

Forward School makes its courses affordable by:

- a. Working together with the Human Resource Development Corporation, a government body that subsidises corporate trainings.
- b. Offering various scholarships, some of which are made possible through partnerships with corporate funders.

The school curates course content in tight collaboration with local and regional industry partners, and experienced instructors, so that study outcomes are relevant to the local job market. The school also actively connects students and alumni to employers to address structural challenges in the labour market.



## Equip Households with Key Enablers for Learning to Take Place

The pandemic alerted us to the pressing necessity for proper infrastructure. The abrupt loss of the physical school, and along with it, its classrooms, canteens, exercise books, whiteboards et cetera, have forced upon everyone a rethinking of the essential enablers of education.

The experiences shared by panelists at the Conference show that both urban and rural households in Malaysia face immense challenges with virtual classes because of the lack of study spaces, internet access and devices. At the same time, families experience income drops that can result in intense emotional stress and poorer health, both of which affect learning outcomes too.

### **Case study:** ***Yayasan Generasi Gemilang***

Yayasan Generasi Gemilang is a charity organisation that seeks to meet education needs of the most vulnerable in society. Before the pandemic, it offered tutoring classes in person. This changed with Covid-19 lockdowns, and in the early stages of the pandemic, Generasi Gemilang made the quick decision to pivot onto a virtual platform.

The charity conducted a needs-assessment survey with its existing students and families during its planning. The survey revealed that devices and internet connectivity were high hurdles.

In addition, it also showed subtle inequalities within households and non-infrastructure constraints:

- a. In households with several children but limited devices, younger siblings were deprived of education because older siblings had upcoming national-level exams. Their classes and usage of devices were thus prioritised.
- b. Households were under immense stress because of income loss. Children were affected through poorer nutrition, and the ongoing emotional stress that other family members experienced.

Yayasan Generasi Gemilang acted swiftly by providing devices with internet connectivity. More crucially, it also dealt with intra-household education inequalities by creating more tutoring time slots.

The charity recognized that malnutrition and stress at home affected learning too, and that children could not study effectively if their most basic needs were not met. It was necessary to address these issues alongside the obvious lack of access to education.

To overcome these challenges, Yayasan Generasi Gemilang provided grocery packs for a total of 428 families for 15 weeks. They alleviated family stress and helped contribute to a better family environment at home. They also reduced the desperation to take just any paying job and allowed parents to make decisions that were in the best interests of their families. This is aligned with UNICEF's call for a wider social protection framework, to help families make healthier decisions for themselves.

In addition, to create a sense of normalcy for children, the charity also provided students with offline learning packs.

The experience of Yayasan Generasi Gemilang shows how education involves the whole family. Tackling the emotional stress of family members is just as important as providing students with the necessary infrastructure.

# Form Partnerships to Address Broad Challenges

Many of the Conference panelists highlighted the importance of breaking silos, in order to tackle issues that involve multiple stakeholders.

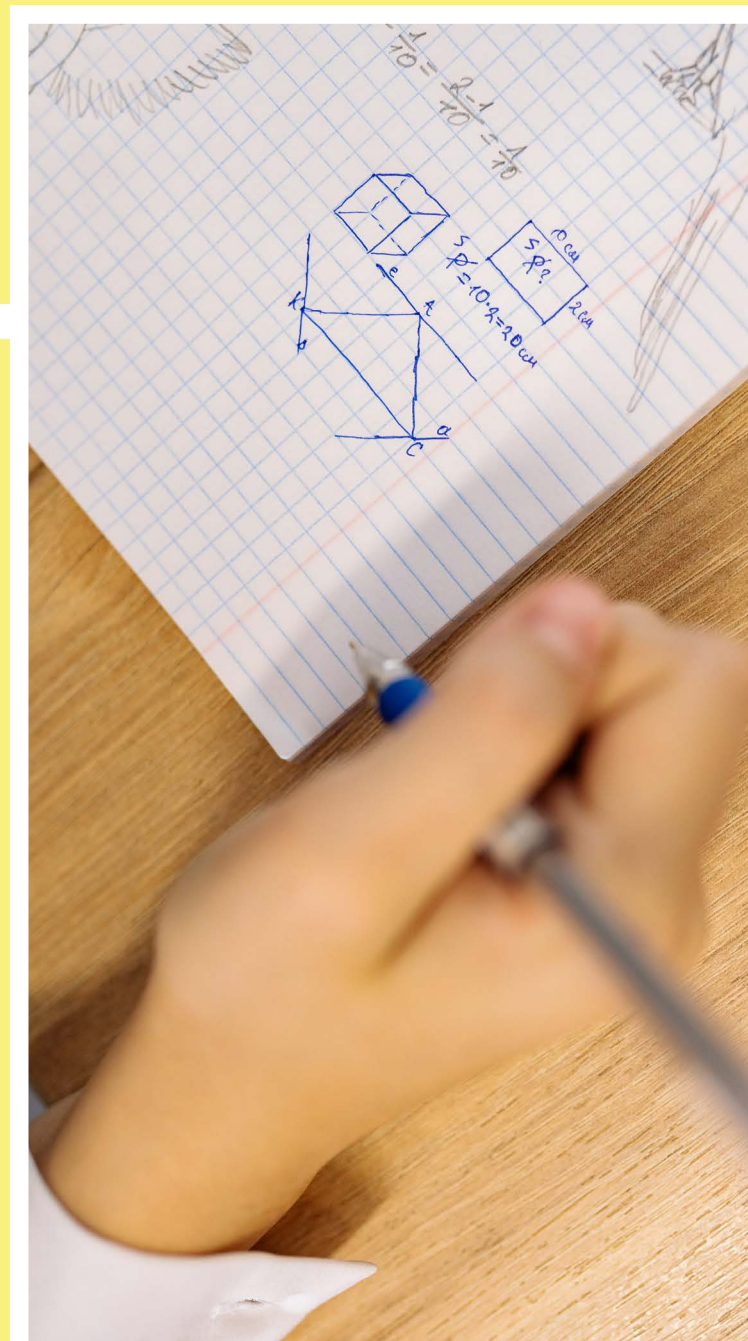
## Case study: YTL Foundation

YTL Foundation is a good example of how good partnerships can bridge gaps. Over the course of the pandemic, the charity worked in tandem with a broad range of stakeholders to overcome infrastructural gaps for education in Malaysia.

It partnered with FrogAsia, an edtech, to develop a mobile app for learning. App content is gamified to engage young learners effectively. Content creation was done together with Teach For Malaysia, MyReaders and other education providers.

To overcome device and internet access issues, YTL Foundation sponsored mobile phones and collaborated with Yes, a network provider. In total, the initiative gave away more than 100,000 mobile devices, and 450,000 data sim cards to students and teachers.

The effort resulted in enabling students from marginalized communities, such as undocumented children, refugees, and those from low-income households, to continue with education even during school closures.







## NEW ACTORS IN EDUCATION

Conference panelists highlighted new actors, and new roles that existing actors can take on to improve education. Below are new roles or actors who are changing the landscape of education:

### Institutions offering micro-credentials

As explained earlier, micro-credentials play an important part in developing lifelong learners and leveling the playing field by addressing structural challenges in the labour market.

To supply these short-term courses, institutions such as Forward School emerged. They provide individuals with options to reskill or upskill at any point in their lives, are typically privately-run, and are also sensitive to market needs. Existing education providers such as universities and colleges have also started to explore micro-credentialing.

Crucially, leaders of institutions are key players in this nascent effort to promote micro-credentials. They are responsible for identifying trends, acting as thought leaders within their sphere of influence, such as:

- a. Developing the case and narrative for micro-credentialing.
- b. Experimenting with innovative forms of education and encouraging implementation.

See **"Inequality in education"**, for a case study on Forward School.



## Local Authorities & Schools

Beneficiaries of education – parents, students, society at large – have diverse needs and aspirations that differ by locality.

Therefore, it is necessary to have sufficient decentralisation such that local authorities can organise resources according to each locality's needs.

### **Case study:** **Finnish education system**

Decentralized decision-making is a key feature of the Finnish education system. The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture draws out the broad strategy and general policies for education, and oversees education services tied to the state budget.

The Finnish National Agency for Education sits within the Ministry, and is responsible for developing curriculum and policy, based on independent research. Though funded by the government, it is steered by key stakeholders

such as the teachers' union, industry associations, local and regional authorities, welfare specialists, and student unions.

Independent units exist within the National Agency for Education. These are responsible for the evaluation of education and training, and the administration of the Matriculation Examination for upper secondary students.

Municipalities on the other hand organise basic education. Funding is a combination of municipality income tax revenue, and targeted grants from the Ministry of Education. Held accountable to both the Ministry and local taxpayers, municipalities are incentivised to provide services that local households require.

Furthermore, although curriculum and education strategy are set by the National Agency for Education, schools and teachers have considerable autonomy in deciding what happens in their classrooms<sup>15</sup>.



<sup>15</sup> Finnish National Agency for Education. N.d. About Us. (<https://www.oph.fi/en/about-us>)

# Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Social Enterprises

The experience of Conference panelists clearly highlighted how CSOs and education social enterprises are leading change in Malaysia. Local non-state actors are often nimbler, face fewer bureaucratic hurdles, and have a smaller geographical focus. These characteristics make it easier for them to respond swiftly to new changes within their localities.

For example, when the pandemic started in early 2020, organisations such as Yayasan Generasi Gemilang and YTL Foundation were able to carry out surveys and temperature checks to assess immediate needs of students and families. Importantly, they were able to act on evidence quickly as well. See “**Inequality in education**”, for case studies on the organisations.

The following is another example of how the private sector can drive institutional reform in Malaysia:

## ***Case study: Edvolution Enterprise***

Edvolution is a social enterprise working to develop leadership at different levels of the education system, by applying business leadership and management principles.

The organisation builds capacity in state and district education offices, through consulting and its flagship three-year leadership development programme – Teacher Empowerment for School Transformation (TEST).

The programme aims to develop collaborative environments in schools by empowering educators to lead change, thus improving teacher quality and ultimately impacting students’ learning and leadership competencies.

TEST uses the following framework to bring about school and community-level change:

- a. District Education Officers are first coached to empower schools as catalysts of change, and be peer-mentors. School Leaders are taught how data can be turned into action.
- b. Then, District Education Officers and schools are supported by skills learned through TEST to improve whole school outcomes – strategic planning, data analysis, coaching teams, change management and community management.
- c. Finally, District and School Leaders form a pipeline of educators who are competent instructional leaders able to transform their communities.

TEST is currently being carried out in more than 20 schools in northern Peninsular Malaysia. The programme reduced teachers’ absenteeism rates by 6 per cent within five months, and increased teachers’ social-emotional engagement rates with students by 54 per cent<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Edvolution Enterprise. N.d. Programme. <https://myedvolution.com/programme/>



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# CONCLUSION

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There are clear linkages between the best practices mentioned above. Several of them affect more than one theme. For example, investing in pedagogical training for teachers, recognizing and developing affordable micro-credentialing courses or equipping households with key learning enablers, address both infrastructure and teachers' development as well as inequality in education. This also reveals how teaching quality and infrastructure are important issues to be resolved, in order to tackle inequality.

Another key takeaway from the Conference is that reforms in the education sector do not necessarily have to come from top-down governmental directives. The initiatives and best practices detailed in the case studies did in fact not come from the public sector. Yet, they brought forth lasting impact. However, there is a nuance to this. While the Ministry of Education was not initiator or leader in the case study projects, it was a key partner in a few of them, and it was its endorsement that enabled these projects to scale.

Going forward, policy reforms are necessary for progress to take place. On one hand, the existence of education solutions from the private sector reveals that there are large, urgent gaps in the existing system. On the other hand, an unintended consequence of this is that policymakers now have a range of methods that can be studied, replicated and scaled across Malaysia. There is no better time than now to create change.