

## **Universal News- ASEAN Education for distribution with Foreign Policy:**

### **An interview with Dato Saifuddin Abdullah**

#### **Deputy Minister of Higher Education**

#### **Malaysia**

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**INTERVIEWER:** Asia is the fastest growing region in the world and also the largest growing student demand market. It is anticipated that by 2025, 70% of global demand will come from the region. How do you feel South East Asia's economy is bracing itself for these developments?

**DATO SAIFUDDIN ABDULLAH:** First of all, the South East Asian economy is by no means a homogenous one. The gap between the lowest and the highest income is very large and it is definitely not like the EU. The European Union is perhaps a conglomerate of countries among almost equals but with South East Asia it ranges from developing to highly developed. On this score I think Malaysia is doing very well. We certainly want to be a bigger player both as a member of Asia but more importantly as a trading nation. Beyond this we are also looking at developing our country as a high-income economy. We have been independent for around fifty years but we still feel trapped in the middle-income economy. Some of us may not be getting what we are supposed to be getting. We need to provide economic opportunities for people to be able to venture further. The economic policy that was launched this year focuses on Malaysia as a high-income economy. Because of this we need to strategize some of our programs including education, to ensure we are preparing students for work where graduates can expect better jobs and pay. I am not trying to be egalitarian to say that our business is only producing good workers, as I believe our business is creating good men, because good workers may not necessarily be good men whereas good men will always be good workers. The issue is not just employability but to get decent jobs. This is in the context of the new economic model where we are looking at a high-income economy. Our biggest challenge in the ASEAN region is Singapore. There are other economies we must also consider such as Indonesia and Vietnam. So we do not only look at Singapore as our challenge, but also consider emerging economies such as Indonesia and Vietnam.

**INTERVIEWER: Malaysia has committed the highest amount of its GDP to education and in recent years other countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam are competing for this regional hub status. What in your opinion makes Malaysia unique?**

**DATO SAIFUDDIN ABDULLAH:** There are many characteristics that help Malaysia stand out. I think as far as higher education is concerned, the fact that we inherited the British system does help. I find it easier to explain the Malaysian education system to people from other countries in this way. People understand this better by looking at equivalents to A levels and GCSE's. Another factor is our use of English as the medium of education. Most private universities tend to use English throughout and public universities use Malay as the principal language but many subjects, especially technical ones are in English. Almost all of our postgraduate studies are in English. Thirdly, in terms of costs it is very affordable and competitive. Fourthly, foreign universities have come here to start their own branch campus, quite a few, including Nottingham and Newcastle. We are also hoping that some more from the U.K. and the U.S. will be coming. MIT has an arrangement with a local partner here, not a campus but a program. So, we are hoping for more established universities to follow. This will help as it brings confidence.

It is also a very peaceful country and you can walk anytime of the day in any part of the town and feel safe. It is very pleasant to stay and study and the people are very friendly. Besides the normal subjects that any university would offer I feel we are rich with indigenous knowledge, which is already there but yet to be integrated in courses. For example an architecture course here is no different to one in the U.K. If only we could incorporate more local knowledge on our own architecture into the course it would make it more exotic and original. Also if you want to study humanities, living in such a multicultural society with many ethnic groups for students of Anthropology or Sociology is great.

**INTERVIEWER: It is widely recognized that entrepreneurialism is one of the keys to a knowledge-based society. You stated that 'This is the time for institutes of higher learning to analyze social entrepreneurship and how it will help the country.' Can you tell us what the Ministry is doing in this respect?**

**DATO SAIFUDDIN ABDULLAH:** There are three things about entrepreneurship. There is entrepreneurship as in the entrepreneurial mindset, which is not necessarily about doing business. We look at entrepreneurship as extra curricular work. The other way of looking at it is soft skills. We have come up with an instrument to measure soft skills, it is seen as intangible so often difficult to analyze. The other way is entrepreneurship as in business, we find that a very small number of our graduates become entrepreneurs, less than 5%. This is much lower than developed countries. The U.S. and around Europe is from around 10% to 20% depending on the universities. We need to do more to universities as a training ground to excite and motivate people to do business. There was a time when we did encourage students to do business while studying but now we do. We encourage students to form their own business councils. Students actually register their businesses with the university. The third point is looking at social entrepreneurship; the reason why this is important is in the context of the new economic model. We are looking at inclusiveness. The Prime Minister recognized that 40% of the population is at the bottom of the pyramid and this is something which needs to be addressed.

For a long time since the early 1970s we have had our own affirmative action in trying to help the poor. There is a big debate on how successful this was. What is truly needed now is a new approach and I believe one of the best ways is through social entrepreneurship. I know there are many terms being used now, solidarity of the economy, social business, but to some of us working on social entrepreneurship has a very simple definition: solving social problems, the environment and overtly using a business model and to ensure sustainability. We believe that even those in absolute poverty can join in entrepreneurship if they want to. We have had some experiences in the past such as the micro credit system and are quite successful but we need to go beyond that. We want to encourage our universities to look at social entrepreneurship and maybe even have it as one of their subjects. Even if you do not introduce it as a subject perhaps it can be a topic in one of the subjects. We now have three universities committed to this cause, one is Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UKM) their niche area is entrepreneurship and Kelantan's women are famous for business. There is nowhere else in Malaysia where women are as involved in business. They have agreed that they will also look at social entrepreneurship. Another one is University College. This is the first to offer a degree and a Masters in Social Entrepreneurship and they also have their own center for entrepreneurship. Of course Social Entrepreneurship is different to CSR but for a department already teaching CSR it is easier to incorporate in their course. We are also

actually co organizing an Asian forum on social entrepreneurship in October this year and prior to that we will try and come up with some concrete ideas on how to use social entrepreneurship to look at inclusiveness for the new economic model.

**INTERVIEWER: You stated that 'Research universities should not only enhance their research and development, but determine their outcome of R&D for the country's development'. How do you evaluate how a university is doing in this area and consequently decide upon the allocation of funding?**

**DATO SAIFUDDIN ABDULLAH:** This is not easy of course as every lecturer will claim a solid proposal for R&D. What we need to do is differentiate between R&D for public consumption and that only to serve a good paper for journals and appraisals and promotions. I was looking at some literature on the success behind American universities and one thing that kept coming up is the impact on society. Research is not only for academic purposes but also with a solid impact on society. This will work and there are two reasons why this is important. Ten people can come up with the same design but which will be used in a practical sense and decide which will be used. The second important factor is that it will invite the business sector to come to you and invest in your research. I think this is one of our problems, we need to work closer with industries and until we prove that our research is practical and usable they will not come. We are new to research, with research universities only being established over the past four or five years. It is not like in the U.S. and the U.K. they do not have to pitch to the industries, they are already there. We have to market ourselves and produce results.

This brings us to another topic and that is the autonomy of the universities. We are yet to resolve which university and to what extent we are giving them autonomy. I look at it this way. Number one you have to trust a university to give it autonomy. Secondly, what is our philosophy of autonomy? A public university we own 100% but we have to come up with a road map. It is not as simple as becoming autonomous overnight. It takes time. The people and the industry must know what it means and that they can become shareholders. They will only come in a big way when they know the government is not heavily involved. The industry keeps on coming in as the government slowly moves away and provides autonomy.

**INTERVIEWER: There has been a huge shift over the past few years towards Islamic financial structures. They are seen as very secure financial measures. What is the importance of Islamic education for**

**Malaysia? How important is it that you remain a contender in this market?**

**DATO SAIFUDDIN ABDULLAH:** As far as Malaysia is concerned we need to have more universities that are Islamic in terms of their philosophy, but not in the traditional sense but Islamic universities in a modern, progressive and scientific sense. This is why IM started not with the Religious Department but Economics and Law, and with English as the main medium for instruction, of course Arabic is taught as a subject. We need these kinds of universities in Malaysia because we want to be a progressive Islamic state, not a traditional, conservative one. The other point is this, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is known as one with many possibilities as well as many financial problems, currently we are talking about bailing out countries. In the past during the Great Depression we were bailing out companies but never have we been in the position of bailing countries. Look at some of our friends in Europe; they are faced with many issues. This is important because many people have been talking about the failure of the current financial system. For years people have been calling for a new kind of business architecture and financial architecture. I see that Islamic finance is one way of solving some of these financial calamities that we are facing today.

**INTERVIEWER:** This year Malaysia hosted a major fair which played host to international companies such as Panasonic, Nestle, Sony and more. The government incentive is to reach 75% employment for graduates within six months after graduation. What steps are being made to ensure there is synergy between the supply and demand for the job market and also this dramatic increase in graduates?

**DATO SAIFUDDIN ABDULLAH:** We are doing what is humanly possible to work with the industries. On the one hand we are strengthening our industrial training, not all students go for this and we would like to have more involved. This is usually limited to certain courses. We would like industries to work with us on a bigger package, like the one we do with Western Digital. Normally industries just provide us with a number of places for students to undertake their training, but with Western Digital it is a more comprehensive package where they provide lessons for industrial training and also allow our lecturers on sabbatical to get some real industry exposure. We are also working on the possibility for R&D funding.

There is also a need to look at new job classifications. We probably need to come up with a new type of job classification we have administration and management at the top, technical second and down to support staff. I am

influenced by the former Secretary of Labor of Malaysia who classified jobs into three interesting and new classifications at the top creativity, then problem solving and then thirdly routine. So an engineer, who would usually be at the top of the ladder with the old system, would be at the bottom if it was a routine job. However, a shoemaker who is creative can earn more money than an engineer because they are at the top of the ladder. We are trying to tell the students that nowadays it is not about what you are but what you can actually give to the organization. You need to market yourself well and get a good job.

**INTERVIEWER: What is your final message to the readers of Foreign Policy?**

**DATO SAIFUDDIN ABDULLAH:** Beyond our strategic plans that we are committed to in making the universities great and attractive to international students, we are also looking at strengthening the academia, the notion of academic freedom and ensuring our universities have soul. We really want universities that are considered worth studying at for people all over the world. It is not just about what is measurable in KPI's and indicators but also the intangible. We want universities where debates are encouraged and strong academia is recognized; a place where ideas meet, are defended, debated and shared.

**INTERVIEWER: Thank you very much.**