

FOREIGN POLICY SOUTHEAST ASIA
16TH APRIL 2011
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FOREIGN POLICY: Asia is the world's fastest growing consumer and economic market. It is anticipated that 70% of student demand will come from this region by 2025 or so. How do you feel Malaysia is preparing itself for this kind of development?

TAN SRI AWANG: The region is highly populated and the number of potential students in Southeast Asia is massive. Malaysia has always focused on education, and we feel that we can offer education for students in the region. We have a long history of education using English, which is very much an international language. In that sense, we have a good basis and the market for education in this region is very big because everyone wants to learn English. That is a good basis to start with.

We are also open in the sense that we need to bring expertise from other countries, and that is why we are inviting universities from the UK, the US, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and many other countries so they can set up facilities here. As far as the Government is concerned, we are making things easy for foreign investment institutions to set up centres here to bring over expertise and bring foreign students over to study here.

FOREIGN POLICY: There is an obvious advantage to education and that is a knowledge-based society and the increase of wealth in society. As far as image is concerned, what do you think this investment in education will do for Malaysia's image in the international press and community?

TAN SRI AWANG: Malaysia has always been viewed as a country that focuses on education. I have met many people throughout the world and they think that Malaysia is an example when it comes to budgetary expenditure on education. We feel that the best investment is in human resources. We are very committed to education and the quality of education. That is why we spend a lot of money on providing scholarship support and facilities for teachers and lecturers. Everybody has the opportunity to be successful in education in this country – it does not matter if you come from a rural area or an urban area. We have to ensure that poverty or low income is not a hindrance to education.

FOREIGN POLICY: I have read about a number of scholarship programs that illustrate that very clearly. There is an overwhelming amount of opportunity for gifted students. The Education Service Commission was established in 1973 and a Royal Decree was created to oversee the prevailing state of academia within Malaysia. In your opinion, what makes Malaysia truly unique?

TAN SRI AWANG: One thing is the amount we invest in education. Secondly, we have English teachers from the UK, and that reflects our seriousness in this respect. Thirdly, we are multicultural and that is a strong advantage. You can come here and face the reality of the world. Sometimes unfortunately if a student from Africa, Central Asia or the Middle East goes to the US to study, it can be quite difficult to apply that to their own country, because the gap is so wide. But here the environment is such that it is closer to home, not only in terms of knowledge but also in terms of cultural similarities. That is a big strength for Malaysia to be a hub for education.

Fourthly, we place a lot of emphasis on upgrading teachers and training in this country. We are also quite central and there are direct flights to most countries from here. Foreigners are also allowed to buy properties here so they can make a home here.

FOREIGN POLICY: Malaysia has been growing between five and 10% per annum. It has seen exceptional growth despite the global economic downturn and the recession.

TAN SRI AWANG: Yes. We are quite industrialized and a lot of tourists come in. If people want to learn about business, architecture, engineering or ICT, they can come here. You can experience real development – all the ICT companies are here so you can do practical work here. The learning environment and the whole scenario is one of our strengths. We have some of the best public services in the world.

FOREIGN POLICY: How attractive do you think Malaysia is to Western students? Do you think it will become more appealing in the next few years?

TAN SRI AWANG: I think there is a lot of potential. I am sure the Western students will want to learn about other cultures. At the end of the day, they want to be global citizens. A lot of Westerners have misunderstood Islam for example as a result of the media, but they can study all different religions here. That is a big attraction. Secondly, you can study ecology and medicine here. There should be more joint programs where you spend two years in Europe for example and maybe six months or one year in Malaysia. I think that will facilitate future interaction, whereas in the past it has always been one way, with us

studying in the West. Students need to be more seamless and understand more. Malaysia is a reflection of cultural assimilation.

FOREIGN POLICY: How does the Commission actively promote students going to study overseas outside the region?

TAN SRI AWANG: We have an agreement for transfers, but I think we need more of these agreements. We are prepared for that. I am sure that will facilitate the quality of education. We have a fairly comprehensive quality control system in this country, so foreign investors need not worry about that. More effort is needed between universities and countries.

FOREIGN POLICY: How do you see this investment in Malaysia contributing to the Government's 2020 initiative and the 2016 educational goals?

TAN SRI AWANG: We are progressing well as regards the 2020 initiative with continuous economic growth and there is a private sector transformation plan and implementation plan. There is a clear plan towards us becoming a developed country, including education. It is clear what we want and we have the strategies to do this. There are good prospects for success. The Government is committed to this, not only in terms of monetary investment but also in terms of it being willing to open up the country and facilitate foreign investment, including in the field of education. That is attractive. We will get there.

FOREIGN POLICY: What do you consider are the by-products of a society having a good education? How do you feel the supply and demand of jobs are going to grow together?

TAN SRI AWANG: We do not just want education per se, but we want the right quality of education based on prospective market demand. I do not mean that universities can offer a new course just because somebody wants it, but they have to be related to growth sectors, like ICT etc. Education is preparing for that. We provide guidelines for students at school level, and the Government is setting up computer labs in schools for example. They are involved in primary schools and they are extending it to pre-schools. We want at least 87% of Malaysian children to go to playschool by 2012 for early planning to prepare for the future. The development of education is structured.

FOREIGN POLICY: Investment in education must start as early as possible.

TAN SRI AWANG: We have to supply the workers of the future with jobs but we also have to create entrepreneurial industries so that they can create new opportunities in the future.

FOREIGN POLICY: Given your past experience, you have the benefit of having been involved in government and the private sector. In your opinion, what message would you like to convey to our readers?

TAN SRI AWANG: As we become more globalised, we need to learn more about each other in terms of our cultures, the way we think and the way we manage things. Malaysia is a multicultural and multi-ethnic country and people can come here from around the world and learn a lot and gain experience. That is where Malaysia can play a role - not just in business education but education for a peaceful and more integrated world in the future. We need more interaction among the global community, and Malaysia can play a role in this. We need education to coexist and with it we can connect the East with the West.

FOREIGN POLICY: Thank you very much.