

# PAV-ing the Way to a High Income Economy\*

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One important part of the vocational education transformation plan that was launched by the Deputy Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, recently is the Basic Vocational Education program (BVE), or *Pendidikan Asas Vokasional (PAV)*. Beginning with a pilot run this year, BVE will gradually replace the vocational subjects that have been taught in regular secondary schools since 2003.

BVE is a step in the right direction in achieving a 50 per cent skilled workforce by 2020. But will it be able to increase student enrolment in technical and vocational education and training (TVET)? The target enrolment for BVE under the transformation plan is five per cent.

Targetting of student enrolment in TVET has been carried out by the government previously. A Cabinet Committee Report in 1979 aimed for TVET enrolment of at least 50 per cent at the upper secondary level while the current target is 20 per cent by 2020. Malaysia's current enrolment rate of eight per cent at secondary level and 18 per cent at upper secondary level can be compared to the 44 per cent average enrolment in OECD countries.

The most obvious difference between vocational subjects and BVE is that BVE, taken at the lower secondary level, leads to a Malaysian Skills Certificate (MSC) at levels 1 and 2. Vocational

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*Vocational training*

subjects, taken at the upper secondary level, do not lead to any certification. BVE students can continue to the upper secondary level in vocational colleges – the other important part of the transformation programme – to earn the Malaysian Skills Diploma. This option, of course, is also open to non-BVE students.

The BVE enables students to enter the workforce with a recognized certificate when they finish their lower secondary level. With MSC levels 1 and 2 preparing trainees for occupations at the production and operation level, that is, it prepares students as low-level blue collar workers. This is good for students who otherwise would drop out of school.

But with the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* qualification valued more highly and being a requirement for public sector employment as well as entrance to higher education institutions, some parents may worry that their children may drop out of school before finishing upper secondary school, so as to work.

Most schools offer only one assigned vocational subject despite being allowed a maximum of four.

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This is because the provision of facilities is costly and there is a shortage in the supply of trained teachers. In the BVE pilot run, each school offers only one course. Schools offering the maximum number of courses will depend on the availability of facilities and teachers, and demand by students.

Students will be limited to either taking the courses offered by their school or not participating at all. Therefore, they are often left with no other option as they are also often limited to attending schools closest to home.

For the BVE to be meaningful, there should be a large enough number of courses or subjects to choose from in each participating school, and at least one school in every district. Students opting for the BVE should not be restricted to having to go to schools closest to home. This way, the option to choose the vocational path will be fully open to all students, without them having to apply nor involving competition for limited space.

The Ministry of Education is planning to upgrade vocational schools to vocational colleges. Along

with this, regular schools will also be converted into vocational colleges. But a vocational college is an upper secondary level institution.

The MOE should stretch this further by converting regular schools into full-fledged vocational schools – schools with a full vocational stream that begins at lower secondary level. This is an extension of the BVE. Rather than having five per cent of students in a particular school participating in the BVE, we should have the whole school participating. The dual education path has contributed to a large skilled workforce in countries such as Germany, Finland and South Korea.

The vocational education transformation plan, if successfully implemented, will bring about a major change in the Malaysian education system. Therefore, besides the equipping of schools, teachers need to be trained, so the higher education sector needs to step up to this role quickly.

We are already one-fifth through the decade to 2020. If Malaysia wants to have a 50 per cent skilled workforce, the government must be bolder in its student TVET enrolment targets. Executing the transformation requires the strong will of all those involved. But it is by no means impossible. Within the next five years, the BVE and the transformation plan must eventually lead to a dual education path with equal standing. Will we be successful in moving in that direction? Only time will tell.