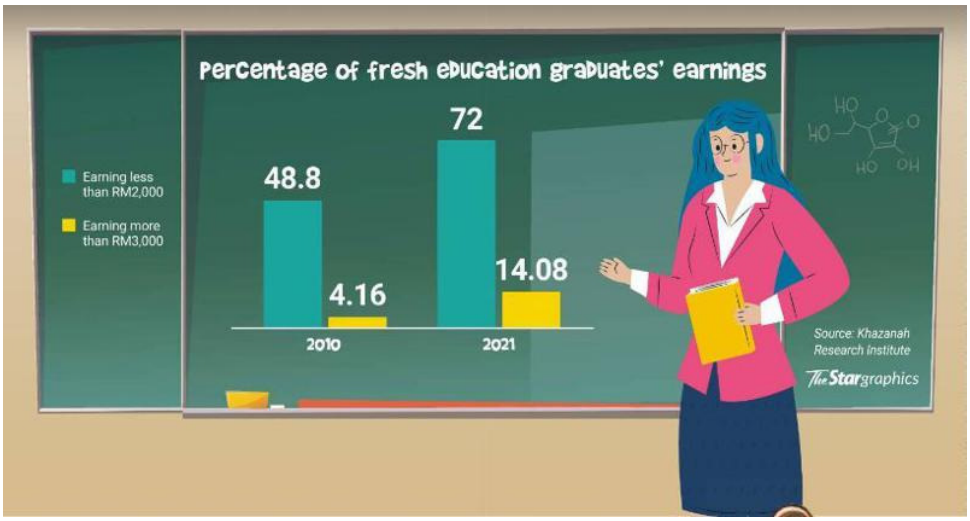
The Star

‘Better pay for teachers, please’

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THE government has been working diligently to improve our education system, as evident in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025.

There have even been steps taken to emulate world-renowned education systems through the abolishment of centralised examinations save for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM).

Recently, Education Minister Fadhlina Sidek said the new 2027 school curriculum would combine the currently used standards-based curriculum and a competency-oriented curriculum used in countries like Finland, which has consistently performed well in the Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

She said there would be targets in the upcoming curriculum that must be achieved by students in certain knowledge, skills and values; at the same time, the curriculum would promote active student learning, providing a more authentic and meaningful learning and assessment experience.

While we look to be on the right track, there is one crucial aspect of the Finnish education system that Malaysia needs to pay attention to if we are to attract professionals to join the noble profession and to implement these forward-thinking measures – teachers who possess a master's or higher qualification, like in Finland, are well-compensated and recognised for their expertise.

In Malaysia, however, more graduates in education are earning less compared to 10 years ago, a recent Khazanah Research Institute (KRI) report read.

According to the "Shifting Tides: Charting Career Progression of Malaysia's Skilled Talents" report published in March, nearly three-quarters of education graduates earned below RM2,000 in 2021.

"The education sector has had a striking 47.5% increase in graduates earning less than RM2,000 over the past decade," read the report.

The sector also has a low percentage of graduates – a mere 14.08% – earning more than RM3,000 in 2021, although this is an increase from some 4% in 2010.

The report also noted that over 20% of education graduates were still waiting for their job placements some six months after receiving their scrolls; with the rate of overqualification – a situation in which a worker has more education, training or experience than is required for the job he or she holds – doubling from 17% in 2010 to 35.5% in 2021.

UCSI University Faculty of Social Sciences and Liberal Arts Education Department head Assistant Prof Dr Zaida Mustafa said low starting salaries pose a real challenge in attracting and retaining qualified teachers, which can disrupt the continuity and stability in schools due to high teacher turnover.

"Persistently low salaries can lead to a cycle of declining education quality, as it may discourage highly qualified individuals from pursuing teaching careers, with the best candidates opting for other professions," she told StarEdu.

This, she said, can lead to a less competitive teaching workforce, where many graduates may be overqualified for their initial jobs, accepting low-paying or semi-skilled positions to avoid unemployment.

This, she added, can affect their career trajectory and satisfaction level.

Zaida, who is also the varsity's Master of Education programme acting head, said the reason more educators are receiving less than RM2,000 per month could also be due to a rise in the number of graduates who are genuinely passionate about the profession and want to make a positive impact on students' lives.

These talents, she said, could be seeking job stability and security within the public sector.

The situation could also have arisen due to the limited job options available for education graduates, she offered.

"Some graduates may face limited job prospects due to an oversupply of talents in the sector or their own lack of relevant experience in the field," she said, adding that education graduates only require an additional teaching certification to become a teacher.

Zaida, a former teacher, revealed that the basic salary for national school teachers at the entry level grade, DG41, is about RM2,000, excluding additional allowances and benefits.

"I would have been keen to remain in the teaching profession if there is an increase in the base pay and additional perks, a new pay scale that commensurates with one's highest academic qualification and experience, and comprehensive healthcare benefits.

These factors, she added, would prove helpful in addressing the "low pay – low commitment – low satisfaction" cycle our education system is facing.

Unhappy teachers adopt ineffective teaching practices in the classroom, which leads to low learning outcomes and a low-quality education system, she said.

Prof Dr Shameem Rafik-Galea from the SEGi University Malaysia Faculty of Education and Languages said even with a master's degree, akin to their counterparts in Finland, newly qualified teachers would not be guaranteed a better salary.

Unlike public sector teachers who are on a fixed salary scale, most private school educators are offered salaries that are lower.

The well-established private schools, however, do pay more than national schools, Prof Rafik-Galea said.

In the private sector, salaries are paid according to the budget allocated and are based on the number of students.

“This should not be happening as low salaries send a message that an education degree is not as highly valued as compared to the paper qualification of other professionals.

“It is almost as though we are sending the message that anyone can teach as long as he or she has a degree,” Prof Rafik-Galea, who is also the Malaysian Association of Applied Linguistics president, said.

Fair rewards

Prof Dr Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan Abdullah from the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) School of Educational Studies said the country needs to adopt a more careful and fair approach to reward the high-performing teachers so that the under-performing ones can be motivated to improve.

The criteria should be fixed, clear and fair, he said, adding that different tracks could be created so that equal opportunity could be given to all.

For example, he suggested a cocurricular track for teachers guiding and producing national athletes; an academic-track for teachers who produce thinkers and first-class students; a management track for principals and headmasters who steer and guide their schools into excellent schools; and a community track for teachers who contribute meaningfully to the surrounding communities.

Pandemic effect

Educators, however, are not only confined to schoolteachers but also include academics and lecturers and higher learning institutions.

Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities (Mapcu) president Datuk Parmjit Singh said while statistics show that there was a greater percentage of education graduates earning below RM2,000 in 2021, consideration must be given to the fact that it was during the period when Covid-19 had the greatest impact on employment.

The pandemic caused jobs and salaries in several sectors, including education, to be heavily affected, he said.

“It would be unwise to make very general conclusions as the drop was seen in a year ravaged by the full force of the pandemic,” he said.

Parmjit, who is also Asia Pacific University of Technology & Innovation (APU) president, said a graduate’s starting salary is usually influenced by “demand versus supply” factors.

“From the demand side, economic factors tend to have the greatest impact and it would naturally follow that employers in sectors that are doing well would be in a better position to offer more attractive salaries.

“However, even within sectors, there is a disparity in practice where multinational companies, government-linked companies and large corporations may typically offer higher starting salaries than those in the small and medium scale categories,” he added.

Parmjit also pointed to KRI’s data that shows an almost three-fold increase in the percentage of graduates across most sectors including education, earning more than RM3,000 in the same period.

“This may indicate that graduates who demonstrated a stronger ability to adapt very quickly and more successfully to new norms, including remote working and online digital learning during the pandemic, were perhaps in greater demand.

“The higher overall percentage of graduates earning more than RM3,000 in 2021 may also indicate that employers were willing to pay premium salaries to graduates who were seen to be able to truly add value to their organisations as they navigated the prolonged lockdowns and subsequent recovery period,” he added.

Waiting to teach
It was a long wait to get my placement at a national school so I became a part-time educator at a school in Muar, Johor, filling in slots of teachers who were away for maternity leave. The monthly pay was about RM1,700, which was not much but it was enough as I was living with my parents at that time. Now, I am a full-time teacher at a national secondary school after a five-year wait. I am glad I waited as I was able to put my teaching degree and passion to good use.

Anita, 30, Mathematics teacher
I graduated with my degree in education from a local university two years ago and am still waiting for my placement although the government is hiring teachers to address the

current shortage. I am still hopeful of getting a job in the public sector but until then, I am teaching Science to primary school students at an international school. From what I heard, my salary is not that much higher than a DG41 teacher but I do not get allowances. However, I like my job. Teaching at an international school allows me to use creative methods when conducting my lessons but I still want a job at a national school due to the lack of benefits (like allowances and bonuses) here.

Brian, 26, Science teacher*Names were changed to protect the identity of the teachers