

The evolution of education

We've come a long way from providing short courses to developing internationally-recognised degrees, say private education pioneers. In conjunction with Malaysia Day, StarEduca looks back at the country's private education journey, and what lies ahead.

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PRIVATE education in Malaysia is at its peak.

Today, half of our tertiary students are graduates of private institutions, Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities (Mapcu) president Datuk Dr Parmjit Singh said.

"Private education was born out of necessity. Our growth was demand-driven. Now, even foreigners are flocking here because they know that with our degrees, they can get jobs when they go back home," he said, adding that the best indicator of a good private education, is employability.

Dr Parmjit, who's also the founder and executive director of Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation (APU), offered a glimpse into the rise of private education in the country:

versity grew, and they wanted more options from the private sector.

1990s

Twinning and credit transfer programmes remained popular until the financial crisis hit in 1997. Families who could afford to send their children for twinning programmes suddenly couldn't. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, who was the then Education Minister, approved the 3+0 degree programmes, allowing students to earn a foreign degree without leaving the country. Only 10 institutions were allowed to run the 3+0 programme then. But it was such a success that the 3+0 programme – which also gave students the option of going abroad if they wanted to, eventually superseded twinning degrees.

1960s

In its infancy, private education catered to students who didn't qualify for public university. Colleges offered short courses for skills like shorthand, and book keeping, to those who wanted to earn foreign certifications from popular institutions like the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry and City & Guilds of London.

1970s

Private education reinvented itself when a growing number of qualified students couldn't get into public universities because of the limited capacity, nor could they afford to go abroad. Higher level courses by established professional bodies like the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA), Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators (ICSA), and University of London (UOL), were offered. These qualifications are equivalent to degrees.

1980s

Colleges started developing their own qualifications that were validated by foreign universities, and offering credit transfer programmes. Some colleges established relationships with these foreign universities which led to the degree courses being partially taught here. This was the start of twinning programmes. The number of students qualified for uni-

The birth of private university colleges and private universities offering their own qualifications.

Sunway Group founder and chairman Tan Sri Jeffrey Cheah was among those who responded promptly to the government's call for the private sector to jointly develop higher education here.

The call led to the founding of Sunway College, which eventually grew to become the Sunway Education Group comprising Sunway University, Monash University's first branch campus in Malaysia, the Jeffrey Cheah School of Medicine and Health Sciences, Sunway International Schools, and Sunway Colleges.

Sunway Education Group (SEG) and Sunway University senior executive director Elizabeth Lee said the main challenge in the early years was establishing the reputation and stature of private education.

From offering secretarial and vocational courses to serious university programmes, and from being institutions for dropouts to higher education institutions which could rival the public universities, Sunway, like other pioneers, had their work cut out.

"Sunway College pioneered twinning degree programmes in the 1990s to give local students an opportunity to obtain a highly accredited foreign university degree minus the high cost of living overseas. Back then, there was less than a handful of private colleges and universities offering such programmes."

The number of private institutions of higher education (IPTS)

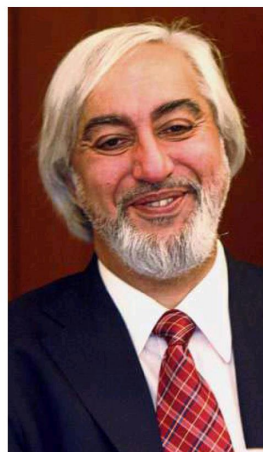
inclusive of branch campuses (as of April 2017)

State	Private university	Private university college	Foreign university campus branch	College	Total
Johor	2	2	3	25	32
Melaka	1	2	–	16	19
Negri Sembilan	3	2	–	19	24
Selangor	22	7	3	105	137
Federal Territories	13	6	1	90	110
Kuala Lumpur					
Federal Territories	1	–	1	–	2
Putrajaya					
Kedah	2	1	–	7	10
Perak	4	1	–	22	27
Perlis	–	1	–	2	3
Penang	1	3	–	28	32
Kelantan	–	2	–	11	13
Pahang	2	2	–	12	16
Terengganu	1	2	–	10	13
Sabah	–	2	–	24	26
Sarawak	1	1	2	27	31
Total	53	34	10	398	495

Source: Higher Education Ministry (MoHE)



Without a solid education sector, other industries will struggle with the lack of quality human resources, says Prof Chan.



Dr Parmjit says foreigners are flocking to Malaysia because its degrees can get the students jobs in their home countries.



The challenge in the early years was establishing the reputation and stature of private education, shares Lee.

Now, students are spoilt for choice. The challenge today is to provide holistic quality higher education that isn't solely focused on text book knowledge, she shared.

In 1986, HELP University vice-chancellor and president Prof Datuk Dr Paul Chan and its CEO Datin Chan-Low Kam Yoke laid the foundation for the HELP Group. It was an ambitious, back-breaking dream powered by passion.

"We didn't have financial means,

a huge talent pool, or partnerships. What we had, and still have, is a conviction to help Malaysians get equal access to higher education," Prof Chan shared.

So, with just a shoplot as a campus and no facilities, the small team did everything themselves, including cleaning the toilets.

Much has changed since. HELP grew, as did the industry. Technology, he said, changed the

entire education eco-system.

Crediting Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh's innovative spirit for digitising the sector, he said Malaysia was among the world's first to achieve that status.

"I've spent 52 years in education. It's vital that we have quality education not just for the young students but also for adults. Many

> TURN TO PAGE 3

> FROM PAGE 2

need re-skilling."

Describing the sector's expansion as multi-faceted, he said the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) is highly regarded globally.

Every decade since the beginning, has been significant in our story of success, said Dr Parmjit.

"Institutions reinvented themselves to respond to student needs. The evolution process was necessary because it led to us developing our own courses – which I strongly believe, are on par, if not better, than foreign degrees."

Elaborating, he said local private

A brighter future for private institutions

institutions have vast experience offering 3+0 degrees from countries like Australia, the United Kingdom and the US. We withstood scrutiny from their accreditation boards and that experience has helped us develop our own degrees."

Predicting a brighter future for private education, he expects more foreign students to enrol here.

"We're at the pinnacle of private education now. Moving ahead, we must be active in research activities," he said.

Advising private institutions not to rest on their laurels, he stressed on the need to keep at the forefront of development.

"Continue investing in the best team, strengthen your reputation, and make sure you're generating graduates that the industry wants."

Education is a necessity for the development and progress of any nation, Lee added. And while it seems like a lucrative business, cost is high as it's hugely dependent on highly qualified and skilled

professionals. Academic reputation comes at the high cost of research, she noted. Private education today, she opined, is more important than it's ever been.

The dawn of the digital age means that the world moves at a much faster pace. And, the young generation must learn to adapt, think fast and creatively on their feet, and keep up with what's going on around them and globally.

The private sector, said Prof Chan, creates opportunities for

Malaysian youths to pursue quality education while creating jobs and wealth in auxiliary industries like accommodation facilities and support services. And, without a solid education sector, other industries will struggle with the lack of quality human resources.

"Market forces evaluate us, so all of us must constantly improve. We invest and build the human capital of the nation. Our future is assured if we have a robust and future-oriented education system."