

## Boosting Malaysian Graduates' Employability via the New MUET Policy

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Over the last few decades, Malaysia has commenced its effort to propagate the importance of English language as the world becomes increasingly inter-connected digitally and economically where English language proficiency has become a requirement for better employment and opportunities in the global arena. The far reaching effects of the English language as a global language is undeniable in the present digital era and it is crucial that Malaysian graduates have English proficiency to enhance their employability and marketability in today's era of globalisation. Countries like United Kingdom and Australia are using English as their native language, while Malaysia and India are learning it as second language but China and Korea are embracing it as an international language. In Malaysia, the pressing issue has always been that failure in securing jobs after graduation is related to the inability to communicate effectively in English and a common phenomenon is that one's success in today's competitive global world is associated with the mastery of the English language.

The use of standardised English proficiency tests like IELTS and TOEFL for admission and placement purposes is widely recognised in academic institutions throughout the world. Similarly in Malaysia, many tertiary institutions utilise the results of a localised version of such tests called the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) as a measure of students' proficiency level, a prerequisite for admission, as well as for placement in various academic programmes. MUET was implemented in 1999 to curb the decline in the standard of English and was intended to be a

required exit achievement of a stated Band (1-6) depending on the English proficiency requirements of each particular program or degree. MUET was deemed compulsory to Malaysian Certificate of Education and Malaysian Higher School Certificate graduates who aim to pursue tertiary education in Malaysia. MUET is a platform to test the proficiency of English language amongst pre-university students prior to entering the university. The purpose of MUET is to assess students' level of English language proficiency before they pursue their tertiary education. To date, MUET is a prominent examination that determines one's English proficiency. The MUET syllabus seeks to consolidate the English language ability of pre-university students to enable them to perform effectively in their academic pursuits at tertiary level, in line with the aspirations of the National Education Philosophy (Malaysian Examination Council, 1999, p.11). The examination takes place two times each year, mid-year and year-end. The MUET examination measures the four skills of language learning, which are listening, speaking, reading and writing: Listening (800/1), Speaking (800/2), Reading (800/3), and Writing (800/4). The examination tests candidates on their proficiency according to their cumulative score range of 0 to 300, which also relates to a banding system of Band 1 to Band 6, where Band 1 is the least proficient user and Band 6 as highly proficient user. MUET has a validation period of 5 years.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, when tabling Budget 2015 under Measure 8: Enhancing Graduate Employability, Point No. 95; announced that from the beginning of 2016, the new minimum entry requirement for public universities, previously at Band 1, was now Band 2 for arts and social science studies (graduation requirement of Band 3); science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Stem) was Band 3 (graduation condition Band 4), while Band 4 was fixed for law and medical studies (graduation condition Band 5). This new regulation, which was announced in the budget, is supposed to facilitate graduate employability as various studies have established that proficiency in English language especially communication skills affects employability and its significance in the professional context is undeniable.

The proposal to set a higher minimum band of Malaysian University English Test (MUET) for intake and graduation received mixed reactions from various quarters. Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said the decision to raise the bar was implemented based on diverse input from industry players, including

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multinational corporations (MNCs). The main aim of the ministry to increase the qualifying band for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) was to address the decline in English proficiency. Muhyiddin, who is also education minister, said the introduction of higher MUET requirements would ensure that universities produced skilled graduates with a good command of the language. Muhyiddin had elaborated that he had been updated by Tan Sri Mustapha Kamal Abu Bakar, “who is the man responsible for developing Cyberjaya”, of interviews held by MNCs in relation to particular areas and it was astoundingly amazing to note that, “More than 300 graduates came for the interviews, but only seven were employed. The majority of them failed miserably because they could not converse and write properly in English. This is one of the many cases relating to the poor command of English among graduates,”. Muhyiddin assured that the new requirements for MUET will not be implemented overnight and pointed out that the public universities will be given the flexibility and liberty to impose higher MUET enrolment requirements. He stressed, “For instance, a university can enrol students with a Band 1 MUET score, but it must ensure that the students graduate in a higher band. We are doing this for the betterment of the country and our students. This is a big issue. It is not a problem at the tertiary level, but also in primary and secondary schools.”

The Second Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh stressed that the intake of students by the public universities is subject to endorsement by the senate of the respective universities; therefore implementing the new policy will be based on the discretion of the senate. He reiterated that majority of the public universities applauded the new MUET policy. Due to the short period of implementation, he encouraged various considerations to be taken into account in terms of its flexibility in implementing the new qualifying conditions for the Malaysian University English Test which will start next year.

On the same note of assurance, Deputy Education Minister P. Kamalanathan said the ministry would give the public universities adequate time to ensure that strategic measures are adhered in the process of implementing the new requirements. He highlighted that the new conditions for MUET requirements will be implemented with due consideration and should not be perceived as a burden. This was in relation to Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Dr Mohamed Mustafa Ishak’s concern that the new requirements would result in a shortage of students to fill the places in several areas of studies offered by local universities. The Deputy Education Minister reaffirmed that the new MUET requirements should be taken in a positive stride because the ministry would be responsible in ensuring that educators at the school level will continue to work hard to help students equip themselves with a good command of English before they enrol into the universities. He reiterated that a good MUET score is construed as a prerequisite for graduates in the current global economic climate in terms of developing language skills that are valued highly by employers in virtually all professional fields. While the Government is taking measures to improve English proficiency among teachers through various training programmes and monitoring, fresh efforts now need to be stepped up by shifting the focus on preparing students to meet the challenges of the MUET policy.

The new MUET policy is a timely measure taken by the Malaysian government in addressing graduates’ employability. However, its sustainability has to be monitored and supported by strategic plans or programmes at the secondary level to consolidate its main aim. At the secondary level, students can be strategically introduced to the MUET syllabus structure that encompasses the four components of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Currently, the emphasis is severely lacking in all four components especially in terms of mastering each skill in relation to MUET requirements. Various programmes in partnerships at the national and global levels should be conducted at the school level to ensure that students secure their vocabulary and grammar skills besides the four skills which are perceived as important criteria for a good MUET score. The Oral Proficiency for Secondary Students or OPS English Programme introduced by the Ministry can further be strategised to improve students’ mastery of English communication skills by integrating listening, speaking and writing components.

# CALLING FOR ARTICLES

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1. Manuscripts should be written in English, typed using Times New Roman 12 point font, and double spaced on only one side of A4 size paper with ample left and right margins on Microsoft Word.
2. The length of the manuscripts should not exceed 1,500 words. An abstract of about 150 words should be included.
3. Authors are responsible for obtaining permission to use any published material. The publisher shall not be held responsible for the use of such material.
4. Citations in the text should include the author's last name and date of publication, e.g. (Ashton, 2001). If quotations are used, page numbers should be indicated, eg. (Ashton, 2001: 30).
5. Endnotes may be used.
6. Include tables and figures within the text. Number tables and figures consecutively.
7. The reference list should be arranged in alphabetical order and should include only works cited in the text.

### Examples:

Altbach, P. G. (2004). *The costs and benefits of world-class universities*. Retrieved 23 October 2005 from <http://www.aaup.org/publications/Academe/2004/04jf/04jfalhb.htm>

Mahadhir, M., Ting, S. H. and Carol, D. (2006). *Learning materials and human factors: Looking at the chemistry in the genre-based approach classroom*. Proceedings of 2<sup>nd</sup> Science and Art of Language in Teaching International Conference, 'Change: Bridging Theory and Practice', 20 - 22 November, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Pulau Pinang.

Watkins, D. (1998). A cross-cultural look at perceptions of good teaching: Asia and the West. In J. J. F. Forest (Ed.), *University teaching: International perspectives*. New York: Garland.

Wolfe, R. N. and Johnson, S. D. (1995). Personality as a predictor of college performance. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, Vol. 2, 177-185.

Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

8. All submissions should include a cover page containing the title, name of author(s), designation, affiliation, mailing/ e-mail address and telephone/fax number. A brief biographical note of the author(s) should also be included.
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