



Ong Kian Ming

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EARLIER this month, at the launch of the June issue of the [World Bank's Malaysian Economic Monitor](#), country director for Southeast Asia Ulrich Zachau called for more [data to be disclosed](#) to be used for better policy-making. He gave the example of how GRAB, an e-hailing service provider, was sharing its data with the government in order to find ways to better manage traffic flows.

With the advent of big data coupled with behavioural economics, “nudge” units have been set up by governments around the world with the specific aim of [using policy incentives](#) to change behaviour and using data drive approaches to analyse the effectiveness of these policies. Cass Sunstein, co-author of the best-selling book “Nudge” was recruited by President Obama to run a nudge unit under his administration and is probably the best-known advocate of this policy approach.

While “Big data” is often used as a buzzword by policy makers and politicians, many do not know what big data is and how it can be utilised. In fact, many of these policy makers don't realise that the data ecosystem in Malaysia, especially when it comes to data analytics, is very under-developed.

While the various government agencies do collect a lot of data and information, not all of it is published. A study by the World Bank shows Malaysia [underperforming](#) in relation to its GDP when it comes to our open data ranking. The same World Bank study also shows a correlation between a country's open data score and its publication and citation ratios. The higher the open data score, the higher the number of academic publications (See Figure 4 below).

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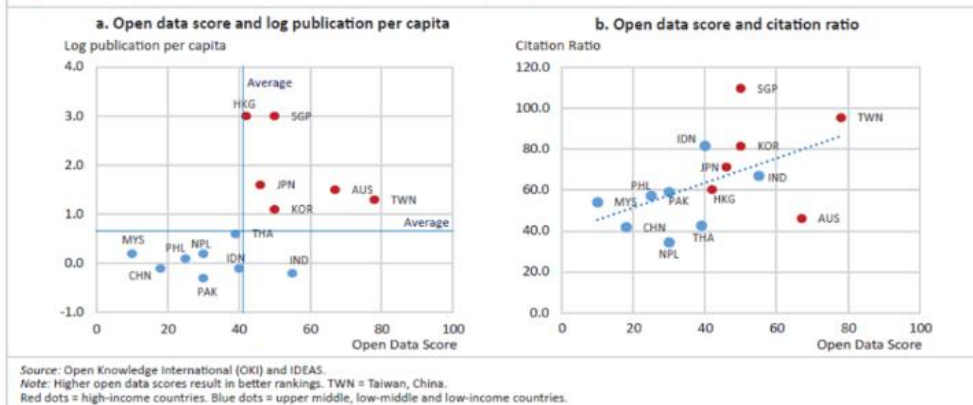
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Figure 4. Data Openness is Positively Correlated with Publication per Capita and Citation Ratio



This corresponds to the experience which many academics in Malaysia have in terms of accessing data especially at the more granular level. For example, even though the Department of Statistics (DOS) has individual level data in its Household and Income Surveys, it does not release this information to the public so that academics can study the figures in more detail and publish their findings. Concerns about the privacy of individual level data being released can be easily overcome by anonymising the data.

Even in cases where some of this data can be released to the public, it is often costly to purchase. In contrast, the individualised data for the decennial census in the US is released publicly and is a very useful tool for social scientists to use in their academic writings and analysis.

There have been some recent steps to improve the data ecosystem in Malaysia. The Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) is on the vanguard in pushing for the use of big data especially in the private sector. The Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit (MAMPU) is spearheading an initiative to consolidate the publication of government data in one location (www.data.gov.my). At the recent World Bank Event, the Minister in charge of the Economic Planning Unit (EPU), Rahman Dahlan, has called for the collection of data at a more refined and localised level including by parliamentary district.

The Penang state government is doing its part by releasing detailed information at the state level in the data.gov.my including a list of all [201 nasi kandar](#) outlets in the state! The Penang GIS center (PEGIS) was also established to make GIS and mapping [more accessible](#) to users including businesses who want to 'tag' their location on PEGIS maps and cycling enthusiasts who want to 'tag' their favourite cycling trails.

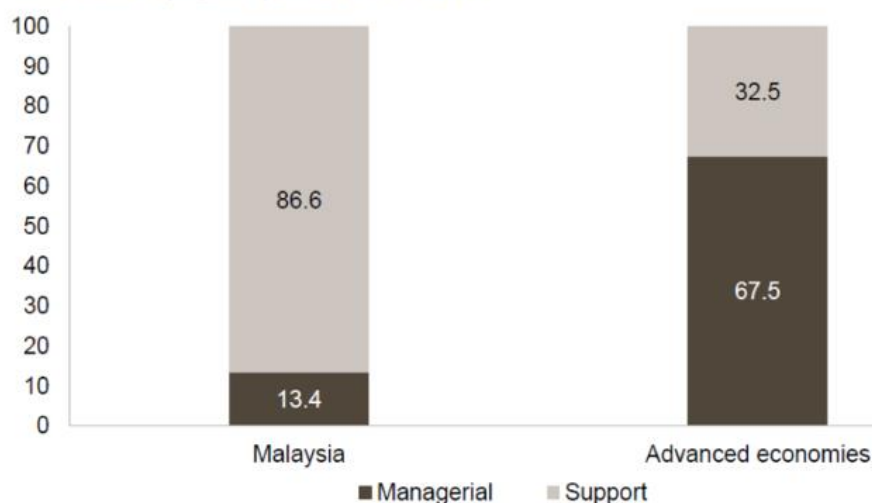
In addition to data accessibility, Malaysia is also behind the curve in terms of knowledge workers who can adequately understand and analyse big data. Analysis by the World Bank shows that only 13.4% of the statistical workforce is at the 'managerial' level in Malaysia compared to 67.5% in advanced economies (See graph below).

Data generation needs to evolve and achieve similar standard as high income economies

Collect

- ✓ The statistical workforce should reflect current and future demands, and technology needs

Number of employees, percent of total, 2015



Source: DOSM, World Bank

27 Note: High income countries is the average of Singapore, Spain and

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To build a more conducive data ecosystem, one not only needs more data but also more people who can put the data to good use and to make better policies. For example, a team of data scientists, academics and social workers can work together to evaluate the effectiveness of BR1M payments over the past five years and to see how it can be improved. The local government can make use of information provided by WAZE so that it [can repair potholes](#) in a more timely manner.

So the next time a politician or policy-maker talks about big data, ask him or her how this data can be analysed and used to improve public policies. – June 26, 2017.

** Dr Ong Kian Ming is the Member of Parliament for Serdang, Selangor and is also the General Manager of [Penang Institute](#) in Kuala Lumpur. He holds a PhD in Political Science from Duke University, an MPhil in Economics from the University of Cambridge and a BSc in Economics from the London School of Economics.*

** This is the opinion of the writer or publication and does not necessarily represent the views of The Malaysian Insight.*