

Focus on critical areas

Parents, teachers and academics want special attention for online learning, teacher training and infrastructure improvements

What the students say...

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WITH RM50.4bil going to the Education Ministry and RM14.4bil to the Higher Education Ministry, parents, teachers and education providers are calling for the allocation to be judiciously distributed. These are some of the critical areas they have highlighted:

Online learning

Melaka Action Group for Parents in Education (Magpie) chairman Mak Chee Kin said funds should be set aside to train teachers in online teaching.

The most important aspect of spending is to ensure a positive outcome, he added.

Agreeing, Parent Action Group for Education Malaysia chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahman wants more to be done to ensure online classes are effectively conducted.

The RM420mil for free school meals is "generous" as parents are battling to keep their jobs and provide food for their children, but Noor Azimah said there is a serious need for students to receive effective online learning in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

"While 500 schools will receive laptops for their students, it is a far cry from what is needed considering students' access to connectivity," she added.

National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP) secretary-general Harry Tan said the union is "disappointed" that teachers were not given incentives to improve their digital competencies and reach.

"We hope this will be taken into consideration when the Budget details are being worked out.

"Additionally, we hope through the allocation, some money will be channelled for full-time wardens in schools with hostels.

"We also request that childcare community centres be set up for teachers and support staff who spend most of their time at the workplace," he said, while appealing to the government to provide special assistance for poor students so they can have their own devices to continue learning digitally.

He suggested that electronic devices be given duty-free status or that an interest-free scheme be introduced.

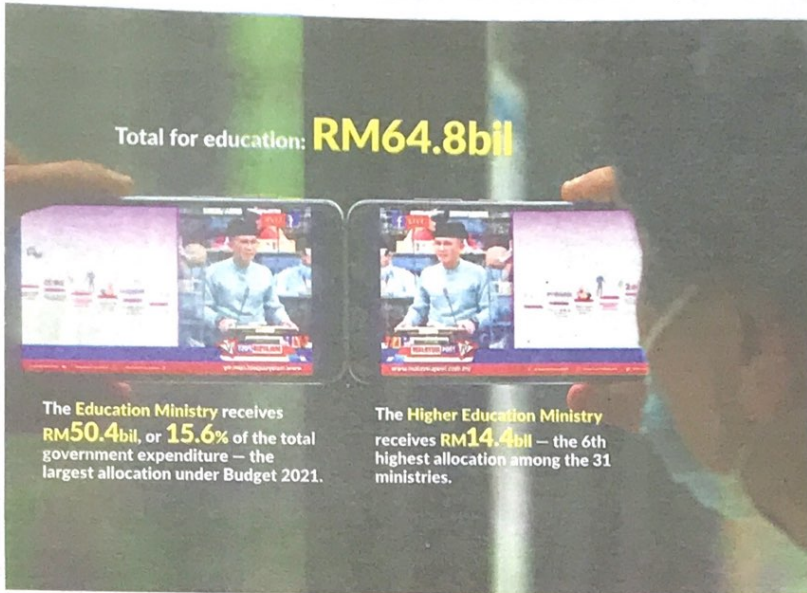
This, he said, would make the national education system more sustainable and equitable.

"Home-based learning is the only way to ensure the continuity of education but what about students from B40 families, Orang Asli students and those with special needs?" he said, pointing to how slow, unstable Internet connectivity, especially in suburban and rural areas, is. These, he said, were the main online learning issues highlighted by parents.

Technical, vocational education and training (TVET)

Bumiputra Private Skills Training Institution action committee chairman Nordin Abdul Malek said the RM6bil allocation showed that the government had prioritised TVET but he stressed on close, continuous engagement with stakeholders to ensure that the funds are properly utilised.

"Greater incentives must be



Live broadcast: Finance Minister Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Tengku Abdul Aziz tabling Budget 2021.
- Photo: Faizan Ghani/The Star

offered for labour intensive sectors like agriculture to encourage local participation," he added.

While the Federation of JPK Accredited Centres (FeMac) - an association comprising members who are accredited private TVET providers - welcomed the RM300mil for the Skills Development Fund Corporation (PTPK), its president P. Sailanathan said the sum was insufficient as it is to be shared with the public sector.

The amount is not for private TVET providers only. We had requested more as there are many students applying to study TVET."

PTPK received RM300mil under Budget 2021 to provide loans for 24,000 Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) trainees. Sailanathan, however, described the RM60mil for the National Dual Training System (SLDN) Plus programme as "good news".

Higher education

Academy of Sciences Malaysia (ASM) president and fellow Prof Datuk Dr Asma Ismail said RM50mil to upgrade the country's 20 public higher education institution (IPTA) facilities is not enough.

"The equipment and facilities at public varsities badly need upgrading.

"The RM400mil for R&D efforts under various ministries and agencies to support the development of science and technology will hopefully allow for the purchasing of equipment to upgrade the facilities and infrastructure at our varsities," she added.

Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) acting deputy vice-chancellor (Academic and International Affairs) Prof Datuk Dr Ahmad Farhan Mohd Sadullah said it is a widely known fact that the upkeep of its facilities has been poor.

"We need to provide the best learning environment for our students and we must ensure their safety.

"The allocation should prioritise

the older IPTA that have not received annual development budgets for years," he said, calling for such funds to be disbursed immediately.

Although he agreed that RM50mil is too small a sum to be shared among so many, it was still a welcomed start in ensuring that the facilities are well maintained. He, however, said the Apex varsity would still need to rely on donors and partners to help upgrade their facilities.

Prof Ahmad Farhan said the government should provide more incentives - for example tax relief - to encourage corporations and individuals to donate and help improve IPTA facilities.

"Under the new normal and with the 21st century learning, the design and layout of our teaching and learning facilities have to change."

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) deputy vice-chancellor (Academic and International Affairs) Prof Datuk Dr Mohd Marzuki Mustafa lauded the bigger budget for the higher education sector which, he said, sees the research university receiving a 13% increase in allocation compared to the previous year.

"We really appreciate this increase since our operating cost has been growing yearly with UKM investing more resources to provide better education and research opportunities," he said, noting that the pandemic has led to a drop in non-government grant revenues from its various income generating activities.

He also said the laptop loan scheme (BSN MyRinggit-i COMSIS) for National Higher Education Fund Corp (PIPTN) borrowers, is timely.

He said many

students have to share devices with their family members that result in scheduling clashes when they have online lessons.

"Having the right devices for online learning is very important in making learning effective.

"We hope this loan is structured in such a way so as to not burden the borrowers. Otherwise, it will not be effective in assisting financially disadvantaged students," he added.

Sunway Education Group chief executive officer Dr Elizabeth Lee said the Group had hoped that private universities would be allowed to set up tax exempt endowment funds but was pleased that education received the biggest share of Budget 2021 as it would greatly benefit public schools and universities.

"It is hoped that the detailed budget will see comparable incentives for the private education sector which is a formidable industry that contributes tremendously to the economy," she said, adding that the RM3,000 voucher to enrol in professional certification programmes in private and public universities will be very helpful in assisting graduates improve their employability.

Such programmes, she said, recognise the specialised knowledge and skill that differentiates them from other graduates.

"The laptop scheme is convenient especially for those in need. It is essential for every student to have their own laptop especially since we've all moved to distance learning which requires lessons to happen online. The necessity of a laptop is dependent on the course but I definitely need one for my computer engineering courses which require specialised software. It will be quite a hassle to borrow our friends' laptops as we would need to install a different software for our work."

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) student Nurul Fariesya Suhaila, 21

"Underprivileged students will greatly benefit from the laptop scheme as almost everything is now done online, including assignments. But how will these laptops be distributed?"

UPM student, Muhammad Fahmi Saleh, 21

"The RM3,000 voucher to enrol in professional certification programmes is much needed. Nowadays, it is hard to get a job especially for fresh graduates because of the lack of experience but this will allow them to improve their skills and have better job opportunities in future."

Universiti Malaysia Sabah student who only wanted to be known as Lalitha, 21

