

Headline	Get em while they're young		
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Reaching out to youth: Sekolah Seni Johor Baru students having a blast on stage as they perform during Fesco 2013. It is one of Malaysia's two Arts Schools, part of an initiative to expose young talents to the performing arts and help them grow.

By NATALIE HENG
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The final part of our series on the performing arts in Malaysia looks at the role of education and outreach in cultivating an arts-loving nation.

THERE IS nothing like the plasticity of a young brain – it is often said that if you want to teach values to children, get 'em young. But we don't, and that's the problem, says arts educator and practitioner Joseph Gonzales.

"The arts is not in our national school syllabus," he points out.

"We don't nurture an arts-loving population from the time people are young."

The Dance Faculty dean for Malaysia's only university specialising in the arts – the National Academy of Arts Culture and Heritage (Aswara) – Gonzales feels this is a critical point.

Certain countries, for example Australia, England and Singapore, have formalised performing arts subjects. Students can opt to include things like Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Music and Visual Arts as part of their core curriculum.

The rationale? These subjects help develop creativity, imagination, understanding, critical thinking and self-confidence in students. They help young people learn how to communicate ideas about their individual and collective worlds to others in meaningful ways.

The opportunity to analyse and immerse oneself in the diverse works of artists from all over the world also helps young people

develop into more well-rounded individuals because they gain a better understanding of local and international cultures, traditions and histories.

In Malaysia, however, such enrichment tends to be ad hoc – schoolchildren are lucky if they have the option of joining a drama or dance club during co-curricular sessions.

That's not to say that the Government hasn't made any effort.

The Ninth Malaysia Plan noted ambitions to "create a Malaysian society that is well balanced, outstanding and appreciative of arts".

And in 2007, Malaysia got its very first Arts School or *Sekolah Seni*, an arts-focused school run by the Education Ministry. Those who successfully audition for places get to experience secondary school life through a system which incorporates planned and systematic arts education on top of the normal syllabus.

Such schools are supposed to have equipment, facilities and programmes geared towards the stated objective of polishing and nurturing students' potential and talent to participate in arts and cultural activities.

Such schools do face challenges of their own, from getting parents to see the value in sending their children there, to teething problems such as getting soundproofed rooms and a full complement of quality equipment. The schools are, in many ways, still finding their feet.

There are only two such schools at present, one in Johor Baru and one in Kuching, out of over 2,200 secondary schools and 2.2 million students in the country (2011 statistics).

The question arises: should we be making more effort to make the benefits of the arts

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more accessible to all students, not just for those who are interested to pursue a career in the field?

The missing pieces

Malaysia's Arts Schools represent a collaboration between the Education Ministry and the National Department for Culture and Arts, a portfolio which has suffered something of an identity crisis over the years.

Malaysia can't seem to make its mind up over the role and relevance of arts and culture to society; between 1987 and today, the department has been under various ministries including Youth and Sports; and now most recently, under the freshly-minted Tourism and Culture Ministry.

Deriving a clear sense of the value that arts and culture bring to the nation would seem like an important objective.

Is development of the arts mainly a means to attract tourist dollars? At policy level, is the development of the arts seen simply as a fulfilment of our responsibility to preserve our cultural heritage?

Or can the official stance acknowledge a more intrinsic and inward-looking value, where arts and culture are seen as more than just a tourism asset, or emblem of our collective cultural identity; but also an avenue for self-enrichment at the individual level?

Despite the constant flux, the department has managed to get some long-term initiatives off the ground; one example is an outreach programme running since 2000 that aims to instill a better appreciation for the arts within schoolchildren.

"We work through the co-curricular curriculum," says department director-general Datuk Norliza Rofli.

"We don't envision that they (the students) all become actors, but at least, they will know what acting is about."

Under the programme, trainers are sent to schools once a week for six months each year, working through the arts societies to teach students about theatre or acting. Sometimes, the content is tailored to teaching specific art forms, for example *Mak Yong* and *Wayang Kulit* in Kelantan, or *Cak Lempong* in Negri Sembilan.

Norliza says about 1,000 schools participate in the programme.

Even so, for just one hour a week, the programme captures a small section of Malaysia's schooling population. What's more, it is overshadowed by a larger problem: a lack of trained teachers.

In fact, this is one of the major limiting factors to piecing together a functional infrastructure for nurturing the performing arts, and creating an arts-loving population.

Mohd Anis Mohd Nor, a professor of Ethnochoreology and Ethnomusicology at Universiti Malaya's School of Performing Arts in Kuala Lumpur, points to a glitch in the fac-

tory line.

"You have music teachers coming out of Sultan Idris University of Education (a teacher training college) because music is offered as an O-level or SPM exam paper.

"But dance and theatre aren't O-level or SPM subjects. Hence, at the moment, we don't have teachers graduating in dance, theatre or other forms of the performing arts."

Of course, tertiary institutions are producing a stream of undergraduates and post-graduates qualified in the performing arts, Prof Anis adds.

"But they are being snapped up fast by the market as a whole, because in this industry, there is a dearth of qualified people. Between teaching and being creative, most graduates would rather be in the creative side, right?"

Building baby bridges

There is one more missing piece to the puzzle.

Institutions such as Universiti Malaya may offer undergraduate and post-graduate courses in the performing arts; the road to get there, however, is often bumpy unless a candidate is able to impress the interview panel.

Undergraduate courses usually entail specific entry requirements. If you want to study science, you are expected to have some science subjects under your belt after completing your STPM or matriculation courses.

Those qualifications act as a bridge to bachelor-level degree programmes.

Unlike subjects like engineering, accounting or the sciences, however, there isn't much available in terms of subjects that prepare students for the arts.

Perhaps the scarcity of such a link can be blamed on a lack of coordination and foresight, arising from the separation of Education and Higher Education as portfolios held under two separate ministries (since reunited under the Education and Higher Learning Ministry following the 2013

Leaders of tomorrow

Cabinet reshuffle).

Either way, Prof Anis explains how entry into UM's degree programme in Performing Arts works: "Applicants are put through an aptitude test. If they choose to major in music or drama, for example, we will ask them to play an instrument, or dance," he explains.

"The trouble is, out of the many potential students audited from STPM level every year, very few usually qualify because they don't have a background in the subject."

Prof Anis isn't worried about practition-

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ers who decide to build on their knowledge through further education, because such applicants don't usually have a problem making it into the course.

As an educator, however, he feels it is necessary to provide as many bridges as possible for those who are interested to pursue their interest in the arts.

This is why he wants to add on to the current entry points. At the moment, these generally consist of getting a diploma in the subject area through an institution like Aswara, or displaying an exceptional degree of talent or experience during the aptitude tests.

Hence, Universiti Malaya is tabling a matriculation programme of its own that is specifically geared towards the performing arts and connect directly to its degree programme – something it is qualified to do, being a research university.

“As we have matriculation for the sciences already, we are now creating (a programme) for the arts. After obtaining their SPM, students can do a one-and-a-half-year course, completing both a general course component

as required by the Education Ministry, along with a secondary component geared towards specialisation in the field,” Prof Anis said,

Nothing is set in stone yet; the university has forwarded its blueprint to the ministry. If all goes well, he says, there is an indication that other universities will follow suit.

“Universiti Malaya already has a full-fledged Performing Arts programme, from a Bachelors degree to PhD level,” Prof Anis points out.

This is a move that closes the loop, creating a streamlined pathway for more youths to pursue their interests and gain formal skills in the field of performing arts.

In fact, deepening the existing functions not immediately associated with the “creative” is something that practitioners like June Tan feel needs to be done.

A producer with the Five Arts Collective, Tan thinks this includes getting better at producing, stage management, production management, project financing and publicity.

“We need to take a good look at how we place the arts in our education system,” she adds.



Colourfully-costumed students performing a traditional dance at the Citra Karya Aswara. The Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan (Aswara) is Malaysia's only university specialising in the arts.

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Prof Anis says we need more teachers qualified in the arts.