

# ECONOMIC EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA: A BRIEF REPORT

C.A. Rao

Malaysia was a British colony for about a hundred years prior to gaining independence in 1957. The Malaysian educational system, like many other aspects of Malaysian society, reflects the British influence up to the present day. One instance of British influence on the educational system in Malaysia is the extent and scope given to the teaching of economics at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of Malaysian education.

The educational system in Malaysia is a uniform national system — without variation from region to region or state to state. The structure of this system is as follows: six years of primary (elementary) schooling, five years of secondary schooling, two years of post-secondary education and three-to-four years of college education — leading to a baccalaureate degree. Entry into the formal school system is at six-years-of-age.

In the curriculum of the primary, or elementary, schools, the emphasis is mainly on the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. A considerable amount of time is devoted to language skills as all children are required to learn two languages: Bahasa Malaysia, which is the national language, and English, a compulsory second language. In addition, students of Chinese and/or Indian origin learn their respective languages. A fair amount of the curriculum is devoted to the teaching and developing of an interest in the sciences: part of a trend to emphasize science and technology in the developing countries of the world.

## Economics in the Malaysian Curriculum

As a consequence of these considerations, economics as a formal discipline, or even as part of the social sciences, is not taught at the primary level of Malaysian education. This has important implications in view of the fact that in Malaysia today, only 80 percent of those who complete primary education go on to secondary schools. Those who terminate their formal schooling at the end of the six years of primary education do not have an opportunity to acquire economic understanding.

At the present time, economics is not taught as a

separate discipline at the secondary level. However, in the first three years of the secondary school curriculum (the equivalent of junior high school in the United States) commerce is offered as a course in a limited number of schools. Although the government is keen on making this offering universal, it is not able to do so, due to a shortage of trained and competent instructors.

The commerce syllabus includes a fair amount of economic principles and concepts related to the market mechanism. There is little or no treatment of macroeconomic concepts, such as Gross National Product. The commerce syllabus incorporates basic bookkeeping and accounting knowledge, as well.

At the fourth- and fifth-grades of the secondary-school system, commerce — as a course — is absent. In its place is a course on Principles of Accounting.

Thus, in the five years of the secondary-school system, the sum total of economic knowledge given to the student is confined to the area of the commerce syllabus where a few economic concepts are treated. There is, in addition to this, a certain amount of economic knowledge conveyed incidentally through civics, geography and history courses. Given the fact that all those subjects are being taught by teachers who have had no formal training in economics, it may be concluded that hardly any knowledge of economics, as such, is being imparted to the students.

In the upper-secondary schools,\* students are streamed into the Arts and Sciences groups. By and large, only those students in the Arts groups are given the opportunity to study economics. Here, the economics course is offered over a two-year period and the content of the syllabus is fairly extensive.

It consists of microeconomic and macroeconomic theory and also some applications to the Malaysian economy. The general coverage would be equivalent to two semesters of Principles of Economics courses offered at a university in the United States.

At the university level, economics is offered at all

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\*Only about five percent of those who complete secondary education go on to the upper-secondary level.



five universities in the country. Apart from those students who major in economics, others majoring in other disciplines take some courses in economics. If we take note that only 20 percent of those who complete upper-secondary education go on to the universities, the total number of students who would have had an exposure to economics in the school system or the universities is extremely small.

One may conclude, on the basis of the above survey, that interest in economic education is lacking in Malaysia. While this is true, the importance of economic education for the general citizenry of the country has, from time to time, received forceful statements from academicians in Malaysia.

Professor Yip Yat Hoong, an eminent economist with the University of Malaya, has advocated, very cogently, the need for economics to be taught as an organized subject at the secondary-school level in order "to increase the students' understanding of the Malaysian economy and to develop their capacity to use rational and objective analysis in making decisions on economic matters."<sup>1</sup>

Another advocate for the teaching of economics in the Malaysian secondary school is Professor T.H. Silcock. His argument was that "it was important to educate the citizens in the fundamentals of economics because, if governmental policymakers in Malaysia operated in the context of an informed public opinion, they would be more effective."<sup>2</sup>

In spite of such forceful advocacy by a few academicians, the educational policymakers and curriculum planners have not been persuaded to incorporate economics as a course at the secondary-school level, let alone the primary grades.

In Great Britain, Professor Lionel Robbins exercised considerable influence over the teaching of economics for a very long time. He firmly believed that economics was too abstract a discipline to be suitable for learning at the high-school level. It required, he argued, a considerable degree of experience to cope with the abstractions contained in economics. It was due to the influence of his thinking that, in Great Britain, economics was excluded from the high-school curriculum until very recently. Even now it is offered only in a limited number of schools.

### Some Recent Developments

Beginning in January 1976, a Master of Arts in Economic Education (M.A. Econ. Ed.) has been

started at the MARA Institute of Technology (MIT). This is a degree offered by the Department of Economic Education, Ohio University, on a contract arrangement with MIT. The first class of 11 graduates (consisting of economics instructors from MIT and economics teachers from upper-secondary schools) completed the program in December 1977. A second group of 18 began the program in January 1978.

This program is an important development in the long-term strategy to introduce economic education at every school level in Malaysia. The participants in this program will be able to provide the required leadership and support for the teaching of economics at each school level.

One of the common excuses given for not providing a more extensive teaching of economics at all levels is that there is an inadequate number of competent and trained staff. Over the next six to eight years, it is hoped that there will be about 60 to 80 teachers with M.A. Econ. Ed. degrees produced through this program to serve in various capacities in the economic education movement.

The Master of Arts in Economic Education program is being offered on a part-time basis. Teachers attend classes on Fridays and Saturdays for a period of two years. Some of them commute up to 200 miles to attend classes.

There is, currently, some interest in the development of an ASEAN Joint Council On Economic Education — encompassing the five ASEAN nations, i.e., Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and Philippines. Although thinking such as this is in its infancy, it indicates that there are great possibilities for the economic education movement in this part of the world.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Yip Yat Hoong. "A Case for the Teaching of Economics in the Secondary Schools in Malaysia," in *Kajian Ekonomi Malaysia*, 4:65-67, June 1967.

<sup>2</sup>T.H. Silcock. "The Teaching of Economics in Southeast Asia: A Reply to Dr. Wharton, Jr.," in *The Malayan Economic Review*, 14:16-18, October 1959.

C. A. Rao is Chairman, Centre for Economic Studies, MARA Institute of Technology, Shah Alam, Malaysia.