

The Neoliberal Agenda of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025: A Framework for the Development of Cosmopolitan Nationalism

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Abstract: *The socio-economic structure of Malaysia today derives from a blend of neoliberalism and unique domestic circumstances. Therefore, any attempts at reforms to escape the middle-income trap and become a developed nation must take into consideration the socio-cultural needs of various ethno-religious groups to ensure that the other goal of national unity is also achieved. This study employs a critical text-oriented discourse analysis, integrating Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Policy Studies, to examine the 2013-2025 Malaysian Education Blueprint's (MEB) language and rhetoric, revealing how neoliberal values interact with Malaysia's diverse educational and socio-cultural context. This paper argues that the MEB, while embracing neoliberal values, whether deliberately or inadvertently, is developing the unique concept of "cosmopolitan nationalism". This is shown through the types of skills emphasized throughout the blueprint, the adaptations of the national curriculum to international standards, the introduction of an international curriculum in national schools, and also the expansion of privately-funded international schools in Malaysia, which all points towards the fact that the government has given in to neo-liberal pursuit of achieving international competitiveness while trying to preserve its unique national multicultural identity. This paper, therefore, highlights the potential for Malaysia to leverage neoliberal ideas to further develop economically by transcending primal ethnic divisions.*

Keywords: *neoliberalism, cosmopolitan nationalism, multiculturalism, Malaysia, Malaysian Education Blueprint*

I. INTRODUCTION

Neoliberalism as a concept first appeared in Europe and Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s but did not appear in full force until the 1970s (Nef & Robles, 2000, 28). A neo-liberal economy is characterized by privatization and deregulation in both the product and labor markets, and the opening to international movements of resources. Due to neoliberal reforms all around the world, world trade has grown rapidly, and the power of capital has increased although trade is still not totally free. Despite constant challenges to free-market dogmas from nationally “governed markets” and “developmental states” and the challenge of its hegemony from the global financial crisis, the current shape of the international economy is still a neoliberal one. For countries that have embraced the global economy through export-orientation, international markets are paramount. This is the case of the Asian Tigers and the Tiger Cubs, Malaysia included. Neoliberal educational policies tend to focus on the application of knowledge that increases the level of productivity, not just for the individual, but for the overall economy, measured through Total Factor Productivity (TFP) levels (Spring, 2015). It has also been suggested that one manifestation of neoliberalism in education is the expansion of international curricula such as the International A-Levels (IAL) and International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP) which is governed not by a national entity, but an international one, such as the International Baccalaureate Organization, Cambridge Assessments & International Education (CAIE), or Pearson (Tay, 2023). This

trend is consistent with the other neoliberal ideas of reduced state intervention, increased privatization, and increased deregulation which leads to more competition and choices.

However, as Morrow & Torres (2000, 84) has observed about neoliberalism in the 21st century, at the very moment that nations were losing some control over economic policies and were cutting expenditures, educational policy took on even greater significance. The state is not powerless in the face of globalization, but different states have varying capacities to manage “national interests” (Rizvi, 2010, 68). At the same time, the philosophy of education looks like it is changing - from creating ideal citizens of a border-constrained national entity, loyal to that specific entity, to creating global citizens who are unconstrained by national borders, whose only loyalty is in the international markets. It is in this capacity that the research in this paper on the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) of 2013-2025 was framed. This paper argues that there is a middle ground to this dichotomy, cosmopolitan nationalism. Whether inadvertently or deliberately, the MEB, through its neoliberal values, could be seen as developing a sense of cosmopolitan nationalism in the next generation of Malaysians which could safeguard the Malaysian government’s wider policy agenda to achieve the macroeconomic objective of growth in the 21st century while maintaining social cohesion. This paper begins by reviewing the literature on the concepts of “Actually Existing Neoliberalism” and “Cosmopolitan Nationalism”, followed by an explanation of the methodology used. Then, the relevant features of the MEB and its progress is analyzed, focusing on the language and rhetoric used in the document and the rationale behind them in the context of a diverse ethno-linguistic society that is Malaysia. This is followed by a discussion of how the policy is neoliberal in nature but is balancing the needs of the various ethno-linguistic communities, to form a cosmopolitan nationalist identity.

II. RELATED LITERATURE

Actually Existing Neoliberalism

A neoliberal society is socially imagined to be a society that prioritizes individual rights, freedom, responsibilities, and the pursuit of self-interest over collective welfare (Evans & Sewell, 2013). In the neoliberal production function, the strength of the economy depends on the quality and quantity of its factors of production, namely land, labor, capital, and enterprise. Therefore, citizens of a country are regarded as a factor of production, labor, or more commonly referred to as human capital. The development of human capital can lead to further growth and development of an economy. The higher the quantity and quality of education that one gains, the better the human capital is, and therefore, the faster the economy can grow. In other words, getting education can be seen as investment capital, dedicated to increasing wages and economic growth, rather than citizenship, cultural preservation, or “education for its own sake” and “education as a pure luxury” (Brown, Lauder & Cheung, 2020). Employers, as rational actors, will hire based on merit and hire the most able, irrespective of their social background. This social imaginary therefore sees the perks of education as instrumental, to get students jobs in the future. This view was guided by the neoliberal evangelization by Bretton Wood institutions which most likely dictated domestic policies, including the General Agreement of the Trade in Services (GATS) by the World Trade Organization (WTO). These multinational institutions promoted a simple new strategy that focuses on learning as a mean to develop knowledge, skills, and competencies for growth, development, and poverty reduction (Spring, 2015; Sidhu, 2007)

In practice, however, there are marked and constitutive discrepancies between the utopian and romantic idealism of the neoliberal narratives mentioned above and the variegated realities of those governing schemes and restructuring programs variously enacted in the

name of competition, choice, freedom, and efficiency (Peck, Brenner, & Theodore, 2018, 3; Rodrik, 2023). Neoliberal commentators, for example, saw the emergence of a few developmental models as free-trade models (Berger, 2006, 118); however, even the Asian Tiger economies, the World Bank's poster child of economies that grew rapidly due to trade liberalization, was not fully adhering to every single conception of neoliberalism. There was no doubt that these economies did grow due to exports and their participation in the international economy (World Bank, 1994; Lee, 1981; Woronoff 1992; Wu, 1989); however, it was not simply a laissez-faire system that facilitated this export orientation. Most of these Asian economies had to work hard to develop their comparative advantage in manufacturing and it was the government's ability to mobilize this domestic transformation through strong government support and leadership in the economy (Lee, 1981; Chang, 2003). In addition, instead of promoting competition and greater opportunities for small and medium businesses, many of these "Miracle Economies", were characterized by a growing concentration of economic power in the hands of a small number of large oligopolistic corporations such as the Chaebol in South Korea and the Keiretsu in Japan which led the way in exports and economic development (Nolan, 2001 in Berger, 2006). Therefore, a more appropriate term to explain their success could be "export-promotion" rather than "export-orientation".

It is the "flexible credo" of neoliberalism and the existence of it in conjunctural forms that has warranted a need to analyze this phenomenon through the lens of "actually existing neoliberalism", not ignoring the domestic political histories that may refract international economic paradigms differentially (Peck, Brenner, & Theodore, 2018; Thachil, 2009). For example, in the case of Malaysia, Joseph's (2018) conceptualization of "ethnicized neoliberalism" may be more encompassing. She argues that besides the clearly Keynesian reaction towards the 1997 Financial Crisis, the Malaysian path to development at other times has fitted with the neoliberal imaginary but it also contains significant influence from precolonial and postcolonial socio-economic models that considers the positioning and needs of different ethno-religious groups. This has given rise to an economic system where competition may not be as fair and equal and where the state may not be as absent as the neoliberal ideal would suggest.

In fact, Malaysia's liberal economic order can be traced all the way back to the 15th century during the Golden Age of the Malacca Malay Sultanate, if not earlier, when this city became an entrepôt, taking full advantage of the high level of trade traffic and the trade winds on the Straits of Malacca. Since then, international trade has been its main source of income which attracted both colonialism and inward migration. Throughout the centuries, as traders and laborers started migrating, the most significant of which were the migration of the Chinese and Indians in the 19th and early 20th centuries, which further fueled economic growth but at the same time increased inequality between the different ethnic groups. Various attempts have been made to try to reduce the socio-economic divide amongst the ethnic groups, the most prominent of which was the New Economic Policy (1971-1991), which tried to increase the share of Malay equity ownership and created a new Malay middle class, through preferential treatment in various aspects of civic life. Except for a brief attempt of import-substitution in the 50s and 60s, modern Malaysia promoted export-led industrialization and continued somewhat with a laissez-faire economy left behind by the British. Further liberalization in the global economy in the 80s and 90s also meant that Malaysia needed to follow suit, and the government had to find new avenues to stay competitive. The solution was increased privatization and trade liberalization, not only under the rule-based multilateral trading system of the World Trade Organization (WTO) but also the pursuance of regional, bilateral, and "mega" trading arrangements to complement the multilateral approach to trade liberalization (MITI, 2023). However, leading these reforms is still an "ethnocracy", a state founded, during colonial times, on ethnic politics where there is

still a dichotomy between the Malays and indigenous groups called the *Bumiputera* (sons of the soil) and the non-*Bumiputera* (Wade, 2009; Gibson & Bailey, 2023).

Cosmopolitan Nationalism

Cosmopolitanism refers to the idea of a citizenship which is not tied to a bounded political community whereas nationalism refers to a Westphalian concept of citizenship which demands loyalty to a specific political entity which is competing with other sovereign states (Hutchings & Dannreuther, 1999). The idea of cosmopolitanism can be traced back to John Locke who claims that citizens of a state are first and foremost individuals who are members of, and participants in, a universal order and that national politics is subordinate to natural law. In fact, a pure cosmopolitan may see the concept of “them” or “others” as non-existent. Therefore, cosmopolitanism can be seen as an antithesis to nationalism and some observers such as Cheah & Robbins (1998) have explored whether the former will displace the latter, in a situation where neither can live while the other survive.

Therefore, the term cosmopolitan nationalism may seem like an oxymoron due to its contradictory outlook of the world, as cosmopolitanism by the definition may require the citizens of one nation to honor obligations to peoples elsewhere and undercut primary loyalties, providing them the same treatment and giving them the same priority as the peoples of the same nationality (Yemini et al, 2022). However, this battle between cosmopolitanism and nationalism may not be a battle at all if a more nuanced approach towards the term cosmopolitanism is taken. The previous paragraph outlines a very idealistic, romanticized, and elitist image of a world without borders, but on the other hand, may also invoke a dystopian future where there are no cultural and individual differences. However, different types or even levels of cosmopolitanism should be taken into consideration. In Kleingeld & Brown’s (2019) taxonomy of contemporary cosmopolitanisms, she noted three types of cosmopolitanism – moral, cultural, and economic. Moral cosmopolitanism was divided into two major categories – strict and moderate. Strict cosmopolitans do not treat anyone differently while moderate cosmopolitans do acknowledge that there are special duties to compatriots. In the debate over cultural cosmopolitanism, a similar division can also be seen, where one group encourages cultural diversity and appreciates a multicultural *mélange* while the other has a strong objection to the rights of minority cultures. The middle ground may be a situation where the importance of cultural attachments for the good of human life can be acknowledged but that a person’s cultural identity should not be defined by any bounded or homogenous subset of the cultural resources available in the world. Both moderate views of cultural and moral cosmopolitanism resonate with Kwame Anthony Appiah’s ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’, which recognizes local identities as being compatible with a cosmopolitan view of the world (Jones, 2022).

The final form of cosmopolitanism, economic cosmopolitanism, unsurprisingly promoted by neoliberal economists, is the view “that one ought to cultivate a single global economic market with free trade and minimal political involvement” (Kleingeld & Brown, 2019). Rizvi (2009) develops upon this idea of Economic Cosmopolitanism but calls it Corporate Cosmopolitanism, which he defines as cosmopolitanism that is a natural outcome of the neoliberal market economy where national borders inevitably become less significant, and in which individual freedom has the potential not only to produce greater mobility and innovation but also result in greater cultural tolerance. However, for any market to function, there needs to be market actors and in this case the market actors could be seen as rooted in national entities. For example, the World Bank’s Global Competitiveness Index and the Ease of Doing Business Index, KOF’s Index of Globalization, INSEAD’s Global Talent Competitiveness Index all rank national entities, putting them in competition with one another. These rankings have, amongst other things, put the onus on governments and

national policy to pave the way for the success of a nation and its citizens in international markets. This can be seen as a revival of nationalism in which there is a state-led fusion of global voyages in various aspects of national policy making through the national cultivation of the political ‘we’ and this is what Yemini et al (2022, 322) calls ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’.

The neoliberal world order which is also rooted in the idea of trade and specialization under comparative advantage conditions, also creates a social imaginary where success in the international markets can be seen as a positive-sum game, not a zero-sum one, unlike the consequences of mercantilism. This is like Reich’s (1991, 311) conception of “positive economic nationalism”, in which each nations’ citizens take primary responsibility for enhancing the capacities of their countrymen for full and productive lives, but who also work with other nations to ensure that these improvements do not come at other expense. When governments are added to the equation in the economic history of the 20th and 21st century, then this conception of cosmopolitan nationalism becomes very similar to the idea of the developmental state, where the government is helping develop an economy’s comparative advantage to be able to compete in the international markets. At the earlier stages of economic development, this comparative advantage may simply be a low-cost labor force for simple manufacturing, but as an economy advances, more complex skills may require development.

Malaysia fits within this discussion on cosmopolitan nationalism in multiple ways. Malaysia herself can be seen as a cosmopolitan country, through the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of this country as described in the previous section. This has created lots of room for moral and cultural cosmopolitanism to develop, as various groups work together to create a stable and prosperous society, albeit limited to one geographical area in the world. In addition, within the cosmopolitan mix of people in Malaysia, one specific community stands out as being cosmopolitan by itself, my own community, the Straits Chinese, a community that has grown from the intermarriage of Chinese immigrants to the local Malays since the 15th century (Jones, 2022). The merging of two distinct cultures throughout the centuries has created a unique ensemble of traditions, food, attire, and language. In addition, when the British arrived, it was the leaders of this community that were most equipped in their cosmopolitan outlook of the world to act as an intermediary between the new colonial power, new immigrants, and the locals. Many Straits Chinese became officers of the British empire, speaking not just Chinese dialects, but also Malay and English fluently. This community “articulated a cosmopolitanism that embraced multiple, layered identities while simultaneously negotiating a place for themselves in a potentially egalitarian British Empire and a deterritorialized Chinese nation” (Jones, 2022, Ch. 5 1). Even until today, in independent Malaysia, this community continues to negotiate the space between being categorized and fully assimilated in the same group as the Chinese who migrated to Malaysia in more recent waves, or to push for official recognition of a status that is closer to the majority Malays, as *bumiputera*. Zooming out from Malaysian society again, together with the rest of Malaysia, its people are finding themselves navigating between their ethno-religious identity and a more agnostic global citizenry.

Put the government in the picture and we see an interventionist government in Malaysia who is trying to educate its citizens in both national and international values to be effective players in the neoliberal world order to foster growth and development for the country. In this case, the pressures of cosmopolitanism and nationalism sometimes work together. As Maxwell et al (2020) noted, this is very similar to the policies of other countries, where despite the ‘global turn’ through which policy and curricula provision offers an international inflection, the motivation behind such initiatives is deeply embedded in nationalistic rationales. However, there are also “conflicting pressures within national education structures

to promote internationalization and a global gaze, while also seeking to remain locally relevant and a primary contributor to national projects of economic development, social cohesion and creating the ‘right kinds’ of citizens” (Maxwell et al, 2020, 846). For instance, the possibility that the education system is creating global citizens may undercut the primary loyalties citizens have towards their own countries and in some way, help promote brain drain. This could push the liminal existence of some citizens over the fence as can be seen from the high number of emigrants from Malaysia.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a critical text-oriented discourse analysis to scrutinize the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) of 2013-2025, focusing on language and rhetoric that promote market-oriented values and principles. The research approach combined Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with Critical Policy Studies (CPS) to uncover how language (re)produces social practices and privileges particular ideologies, as outlined by Mulderrig, Montesano Montessori, and Farrelly (2019). CDA was utilized to examine how language shapes, contests, and transforms social issues, driving social change, while CPS provided a framework for understanding the role of meaning-making practices in policy formulation and interpretation. This integration emphasized the importance of both discourse and contextual analysis in policy studies.

The chosen methodology was designed to capture the complex ways in which policy language reflects socio-political dynamics, cultural values, and ideological stances. Data were collected from the MEB itself (Ministry of Education, 2013), along with various evaluations, including official reports (Ministry of Education, 2014; Ministry of Education, 2023) and academic analyses (Kamaruddin & Mohd. Matore, 2020; Ramli, Awang, & Yusoff, 2021; Selamat, Kamaruddin, & Abdul Musid, 2019). This data collection aimed to uncover the genesis and significance of the MEB and to critically analyze the language used to understand its underlying assumptions and ideological perspectives.

The methodology integrates reflexive thematic analysis, which was crucial for interpreting the policy document and revealing insights into the educational strategies proposed. Initially, the MEB was read and re-read to develop a deep familiarity with its content. A systematic coding process was then applied to highlight relevant phrases and statements. Themes were collated from these codes, and a thematic map was generated, capturing patterns of response and meaning related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes such as "competitiveness," "efficiency," "accountability," and "performance outcomes" were identified as indicators of neoliberal ideology, while themes like "multi-ethnicity," "bilingualism," "religion," and "culture" reflected the Malaysian societal context. The analysis also investigated how the blueprint framed education to produce human capital for a globalized economy, emphasizing standardized testing and measurable results.

To enhance methodological rigor, the study employed several strategies to manage potential biases and ensure the reliability of the analysis. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, acknowledging the researcher's positionality, as a Malaysian from a “cosmopolitan heritage”, an educator, and an economist, and its potential impact on the analysis. Additionally, the study used techniques to ensure the validity of the themes, including cross-checking codes and themes with additional literature.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 is a comprehensive policy document that outlines strategies and objectives for the entire education system except for Higher Education (which is covered in the Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint 2015-2025). It outlines the issues facing the Malaysian education system, five aspirations of the education system, and 11 shifts to transform the system, all with an objective to create students who will have 21st century skills. The first shift out of the 11 shifts outlined in the MEB to transform the education system is to “provide equal access to quality education of an international standard” (Ministry of Education, 2013). However, even before introducing this specific shift, it is clear what the goal of this transformation is – to create an education system that develops 21st century skills and knowledge required to drive the country’s economic growth and prosperity in an increasingly competitive global environment (Razak, 2013).

The MEB recognizes the diversity of the Malaysian education system where neoliberal discourses of economic globalization, capitalism and the free market sit alongside discourses of what it means to be Malay, Chinese, Indian, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, to name a few. The importance of ethno-religious collective values and behavior alongside capitalist values and behaviors are clearly reflected in the education system, from early childhood education to higher education. Since the times of British colonial rule, different school types took shape along ethnic, religious and linguistic lines to prepare them for their allocated role in the colonial scheme (Noor & Symaco, 2017). These separate schools that use Malay, Chinese, or Tamil as the medium of instruction and Islamic and Christian Missionary schools, still exist today and nearly all of which are supported by the government to appease the needs and wants of the different communities. The latest addition to this mélange of schools in Malaysia is the Type C International Schools (Hayden & Thompson, 2013) which has grown rapidly due to the continued spread of neo-liberal imaginaries. These International Schools, which once only catered to the expatriate community and were not part of the national education system, have opened their doors to locals and Malaysians now make up most of the student body in these schools. This started in 2006 when the government started allowing Malaysians into international schools but with a quota of only 40% of the entire student body but then was fully liberalized in 2012 when this quota was abolished (Ministry of Education, 2006; Ministry of Education, 2012) Figure 1 below summarizes the entire primary and secondary education system in Malaysia.

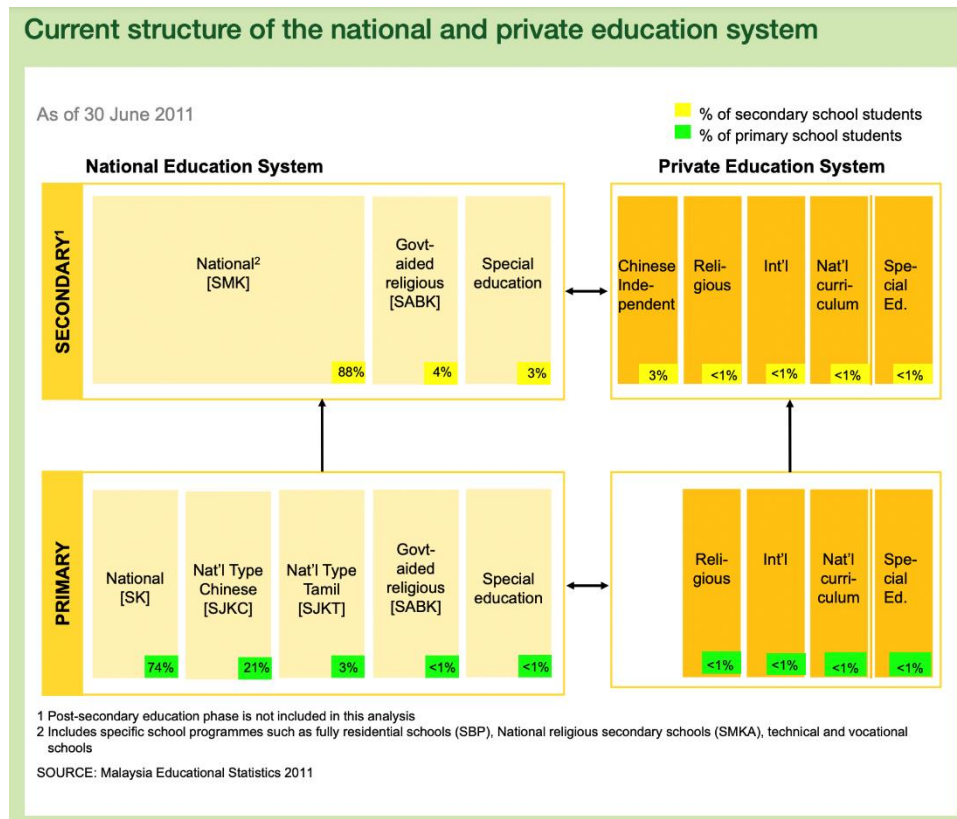


Figure 1: Current Structure of the Primary and Secondary Education System in Malaysia (Taken from the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2015)

At the same time, recognizing the evolving demands of the contemporary world, the policy framework emphasizes that traditional academic proficiencies, encapsulated by the "3 Rs" - Reading, wRiting, and aRithmetic - are insufficient in the interconnected and fast-paced global landscape. In addition, both anecdotal evidence and the blueprint recognized that Malaysian students have historically always excelled at reproducing subject content but struggle with higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). The MEB also singles out the underperformance of Malaysian students in International Large-Scale Assessments such as PISA and TIMSS, mentioned in the blueprint more than 100 times, which indicate that "Malaysian students are less able to apply knowledge and think critically outside of familiar academic contexts" (Ministry of Education, 2013, 2-5). Although subject content is still needed, it is important to be able to reason, to extrapolate, and to creatively apply their knowledge in novel and unfamiliar settings. Therefore, the MEB places a premium on developing a generation capable of innovation, problem-solving, and applying knowledge effectively across diverse contexts. Terms like 'creativity', 'innovation', 'knowledge', 'skills', 'globally competitive', and 'critical, creative and innovative thinking skills', peppered throughout the MEB, embody the neoliberal emphasis on producing a workforce geared for the demands of the global market. The emphasis on the perception of multinational companies and "global competitiveness" also points to this. For example, it was through surveys that were conducted with Malaysian and multinational companies that suggested that Malaysian students fall short on soft skills such as leadership skills. This also aligns with the focus on HOTS, reflecting a neoliberal aspiration for an education system that caters to higher-order cognitive abilities, seen as critical for the contemporary economic landscape.

To achieve this, this blueprint started the revamping of the national curriculum. A new national curriculum was envisaged, the Primary School Standard Curriculum (KSSR) and Secondary School Standard Curriculum (KSSM). Compared to the old primary school

curriculum, for example, Reasoning is now being emphasized as well as Reading, wRiting, and aRithmetic – making it a 4R approach instead of a 3R. Additional school-based assessments were integrated into the curriculum and student assessment during primary school will no longer consist of an external examination. In the only remaining external examinations, the Year 10 examinations called the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM), 50% of the examination will test HOTS. This would also be part of the reforms that are intended to put Malaysia’s performance on TIMMS and PISA in the top third of the global rankings by 2025, matching other high-performing education systems in terms of standards, performance, and budget. In addition, the higher emphasis on HOTS also makes the Malaysian national curriculum more comparable to international examinations such as the International GCSEs (iGCSE), International A-Levels (IAL), and the International Baccalaureate (IB) where these HOTS takes a significant portion of the assessment objectives, up to 75% for some exams.

The MEB also outlines plans to pilot the IB Middle Years Programme (MYP) “to enhance the quality of teaching and learning” in 10 secondary schools around the country (Ministry of Education, 2013, 4-6). This is in addition to a handful of fully residential government-funded schools in Malaysia who have already implemented the IB Diploma Program and iGCSEs. In these pilot schools, the guidelines and rules set by the IBO such as the application of the IB Learner Profile and Approaches to Learning framework of communication skills, social skills, thinking skills, research skills, and self-management skills, must be adhered to (Kamaruddin & Mohd. Matore, 2020; Ramli & Yusoff, 2021). In addition, students, at the end of the MYP, in Year 10, will have to complete the MYP Personal Project where each student will use the knowledge and skills (research, thinking and communicative) which they have learnt and practiced since Year 7. The intention mentioned in the MEB of doing this is not to see whether the MYP can be implemented in more schools, instead, the findings from this pilot will be used to help with the further development of the national KSSM curriculum. In fact, the MYP will use the Malaysian curriculum and the only thing different is the approach towards how the Malaysian curriculum will be taught. Students are still required to sit for the SPM, and it is compulsory for them to pass the Malay Language paper.

In addition, it was recognized that the growth of private schools has outstripped the public sector and therefore it is vital that the role of private education was also included in the narrative towards the achievement of the national goal. The MEB recognizes four different types of schools which operate outside government funding:

- Schools which teach the Malaysian National Curriculum, called “Private Schools”
- Schools which teach an International Curriculum, the most popular curriculum offered include the IB Programs, iGCSEs, IAL, South Australian Matriculation, American Degree Programs, and Canadian Pre-University, called “International Schools”
- Schools with an emphasis on Islamic education, which may or may not teach the national curriculum, called “Religious Schools”
- Schools which teach a curriculum developed by Dong Jiao Zong, an educational organization in Malaysia that advocates for and overseas Chinese vernacular schools, promoting Chinese language and culture within the Malaysian education system, using the Chinese language as the main medium of instruction called “Independent Chinese Schools” (Ministry of Education, 2013, 7-11)

Of these four types of schools, the growth of international schools was specifically focused on where the “scaling up international schools” was part of the first wave of reforms to transform the entire education system (Ministry of Education, 2013, A-34). The growth of international schools is also identified as a subsector under the National Key Economic Areas

(NKEA) to drive the economic growth of the nation. Under this policy measure, the growth of international schools was encouraged through the provision of Investment Tax Allowances, the removal of Malaysian students' quota, the deregulation of tuition fees and the promotion of Malaysia as the preferred education destination. This may be one of the few instances where a very specific sub-sector of education is targeted as part of an economic policy, proving how intertwined education and the economy are in a neoliberal environment.

Discussion

The Malaysian government's push for an internationally competitive education system resonates with the neoliberal belief that in a globalized world, nations must produce skilled individuals who can compete on the international stage. This is clearly an approach that emphasizes the development of human capital in Malaysia, where human value is based on the person's contribution to the labor force. The approaches in education outlined in this blueprint is intending to "help children develop the skills they need for the 21st century" and "help train young Malaysians who will ask questions and look for answers, and who are willing to think in new ways, design new solutions, and create new opportunities" (Ministry of Education, 2013, 7-1). The emphasis on knowledge and innovation-driven industries echoes the neoliberal conviction that knowledge and innovation are pivotal for economic growth and development in the contemporary era. Education is not merely a public good but to enhance economic productivity and national competitiveness. The increased similarity between the Malaysian examinations and international examinations and the openness of the government to the usage of international curricula in Malaysia can also be seen as evidence of the neoliberalization of education in Malaysia. Such adherence to international standards is not uncommon in the Malaysian education system. Despite having its own examination board and own national examinations, external reviews of the examination papers are conducted by internationally recognized bodies such as Pearson Education Group and CAIE. The inclusion of HOTS such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation in the newer exams stem from the recommendations of these bodies. In addition, in the English Language paper at SPM, candidates also received a grade based on the UK General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) criterion, through the Cambridge English 1119 paper code.

However, the neoliberal underpinnings of Malaysian education policy were not something brand new that only appeared in the MEB. Already back in 1996, in the preamble of the Education Act, it was stated that "the purpose of education in Malaysia is to enable Malaysian society to have a command of the knowledge, skills, and values necessary in a world that is highly competitive and globalized, arising from the impact of rapid development in science, technology, and information" (Government of Malaysia). The Act also added that "education plays a vital role in achieving the country's vision of attaining the status of a fully developed nation in terms of economic development, social justice, and spiritual, moral and ethical strength, towards creating a society that is united, democratic, liberal and dynamic" and that it is the government's mission "to develop a world-class quality education system which will realize the full potential of the individual and fulfill the aspiration of the Malaysian nation" (Government of Malaysia). In essence, the recognition that the world is "highly competitive and globalized" and the desire to create a society that is "united, democratic, liberal, and dynamic" in the Education Act of 1996 foreshadowed the increasingly neoliberal trajectory of Malaysian education policy, laying the groundwork for subsequent blueprints like the one being analyzed. It emphasizes a longstanding dedication to neoliberal principles in education, indicating that the adoption of these ideas in the 2013-2025 blueprint was not a sudden departure but a progression of a pre-existing paradigm deeply entrenched in the Malaysian education system. In fact, it was the policies of Mahathir Mohammed, the prime minister of Malaysia who first took the helm in 1981, that led to

Malaysia's emergence as a neoliberal state where competition and efficiency was emphasized (Rao, 2009; Juego, 2018).

The pre-existing paradigms brought about by the ethnic and historical diversity makes the Malaysian education system and path towards development in a neoliberal world unique. This uniqueness also paves the way for an easier route to create global citizens which will do well in the international markets and help with the growth and development of the nation. An easy starting point with regards to this is language. Although the national language of Malaysia is Bahasa Malaysia, it is safe to say that Malaysians are bilingual, with English and Bahasa Malaysia often being the languages involved in this bilingualism. Trilingualism is also not uncommon, especially amongst those whose first language is neither Bahasa Malaysia nor English. It was even highlighted in the MEB that a 17-year-old Malaysia won the English-Speaking Union International Public Speaking Competition in London in May 2012. In addition, according to the EF English Proficiency Index 2023, the English Proficiency of Malaysians is 25th in the world and 3rd in Asia, out of 113 countries surveyed (Education First, 2023). This puts Malaysia high on the list in terms of possessing cosmopolitan characteristics i.e., the ability to speak the current lingua franca, English. This is not just important because English is the Business Lingua Franca (BELF) but also because English is a religious vernacular (Karhunen, Kankaanranta, & Räsänen, 2023; Lin, 2017).

However, to be able to effectively reap the most out of the international economy, the current command of these languages is still not good enough and the MEB intends to remedy this. Poor English proficiency among fresh graduates, since 2006, has been consistently ranked as one of the top five issues facing Malaysian employers (Ministry of Education, 2013, E-12). A survey of HR managers on university graduates around the world has also confirmed that this is an issue amongst graduates from low-wage nations (Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2011, 46). The level of English spoken in Malaysia is still not as high as in Singapore, where command of the lingua franca of globalization has caused Singapore's spectacular economic progress, opening countless opportunities to Singaporeans (Kenway & Koh, 2013; Green, 1997; Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2011). To be able to achieve sustained economic growth, the Malaysian economy needs to shift from manufacturing-led to a knowledge economy and to do this, English fluency is needed (Segawa, 2019, 152-153). Therefore, the 2nd shift outlined in the MEB is to increase bilingual proficiency. This will be done by rolling out new Bahasa Malaysia curriculum for national-type schools where the command of this language is the lowest and provide intensive remedial support for students who require it, expanding the Literacy and Numeracy Screen (LINUS) Programme to cover English language literacy as well as Bahasa Malaysia literacy, upskill English teachers, make the English Language SPM paper a compulsory pass, and expand opportunities for greater exposure to the English language (Ministry of Education, 2013, 3-14).

What makes this approach uniquely Malaysian is the *Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris* (MBMMBI) policy. This policy, translated, reads "To Uphold Bahasa Malaysia, Strengthen the English Language". While Bahasa Malaysia will remain the medium of instruction in national schools, extra emphasis will be given towards improving the command of the English language. The target set by the MEB is for 90% of all students sitting for the SPM to achieve a credit in Bahasa Malaysia and 70% of all students to achieve at least a credit in English. This policy approach is consistent with the Ministry of Education's stated goals in the blueprint for the learning of languages of "fostering a unique shared identity between Malaysians anchored in the ability to be proficient in the use of a common national language, Bahasa Malaysia" and "developing individuals that are equipped to work in a globalized economy where the English language is the international language of communication" (Ministry of Education, 2013, 4-10). In other words, this policy objective is leveraging on Malaysia's inherent multicultural heritage to enable all Malaysians to

participate in professional, academic, and social life nationally and internationally by being multilingual i.e. Bahasa Malaysia for domestic use and English for international use. “Malaysia’s multicultural society makes it a natural environment for producing students who are proficient in more than one language” (Ministry of Education, 2013, E-12). This will maximize the “employability in the global workforce” but still make sure that every student develops a “sense of national identity” (Ministry of Education, 2013, 4-10). Therefore, even by just looking at Malaysian students in terms of language ability, the intention could be to create Cosmopolitans who are fluent in English and able to communicate with people from all over the world, but Nationalists at the same time, as they are speaking Bahasa Malaysia, a national language.

However, it must be noted that within Malaysia’s unique multi-ethnic context, even the idea of Bahasa Malaysia as a unifying language is not universally accepted in Malaysia and may exacerbate further societal inequalities. Bahasa Malaysia fulfills the two key conditions of being a unifying language as it is being spoken by most of the population and that it is related to other languages in the region, although not the third – being politically neutral (Cheong, Hill, & Leong, 2016, 78). There are also pressures from various groups, the strongest being from the Chinese educational groups for the promotion of Chinese as a main language in primary and secondary education. The introduction of a third language may be an answer to this, especially with Chinese being a language of huge importance in international markets today. The neoliberal era provides an opportunity for various groups to agree based on practical and rational reasons, rather than primal ones.

Another element of the blueprint that may seem contradictory is the promotion of the growth of international schools which use an international curriculum, nearly all of which uses English as the main medium of instruction. In fact, in Malaysia, international schools are desired by families as it provides an opportunity for children to learn English, alongside children from other countries and being taught by foreign teachers with international skills and knowledge, who are mainly native English-speaking teachers (Ignatius, 2002; Oxford Business Group, 2016). However, in the MEB, it was made clear that even in such international schools, the learning of Bahasa Malaysia will be compulsory for all Malaysian students in international schools to help them develop “a sense of national identity” (Ministry of Education, 2013, 7-11). In fact, due to this policy, CAIE with the cooperation of the Malaysian Ministry of Education has even come up with two subjects at the iGCSE Level to promote Malay language understanding and fluency through the iGCSE Malay as a Foreign Language and iGCSE Malay as a First Language. This language policy may also seem contradictory with the idea of nationalism, especially given Malaysia’s colonial past, being under the British for more than 100 years. However, even one of the most nationalist prime minister Malaysia has had, Dr. Mahathir Mohamed, argued that “learning English was in keeping with the promotion of nationalism as English competence was essential for attaining national goals such as Vision 2020 and for maintaining economic growth and prosperity” (Mohamed, *The Star* 10 September 1999 in Segawa, 2019, 154). Dr. Mahathir even tried to change the national curriculum to make Science and Mathematics to be taught in the English language, instead of Bahasa Malaysia but the policy was subsequently reversed after less than a decade of implementation in 2012. This was due to a culmination of factors including a practical one which is the lack of qualified teachers to do this, but most significantly was the pressures from both Malay and Chinese groups who claimed that this would erode the learning of Chinese and the status of Malay. However, even after this, the commitment towards improving the level of English did not erode as more English teachers were employed, including bringing in Fulbright Scholars from the US, and other policy measures that have been outlined in the blueprint. Today, schools have a choice on whether to teach Science and Mathematics in English or Malay.

All these point towards creating an education system that creates competitive global citizens but with a unique identity as Malaysians (Razak, 2013). The 3rd shift in the MEB is to “develop values-driven Malaysians” and the values identified are universal values such as integrity, compassion, justice, and altruism, values closely aligned to a global citizen, but at the same time developing a strong national identity (Ministry of Education, 2013, E-13). The Malaysian values will be developed by enhancing Islamic and Moral Education, with a greater focus on unity and fostering stronger bonds with students and reinforcing the requirement for every student to participate in one Sport, one Club, and one Uniformed Body, amongst others. The development of universal values will be supported, for example, through the inculcation of the IB Learner Profile amongst students which enables them to develop their potential holistically in facing the global challenges, consistent with the six student aspirations that has been set in the MEB as shown in Table 1 below. The Malaysian government’s attempt to develop active global citizens is supported by the MYP which allows for the development of such students with values and concern with local and global issues (Kamaruddin & Mohd. Matore, 2020). Overall, success in achieving this objective will mean that

“Every student leaves school as a global citizen imbued with core, universal values and a strong Malaysian identity. The values they have learnt are applied in their day-to-day lives, leading to more civic behavior such as an increase in volunteerism; a willingness to embrace peoples of other nationalities, religions and ethnicities; and a reduction in corruption and crime. Every student also leaves school prepared to act as a leader, whether in their own lives and families, or as part of the broader community and nation.” (Ministry of Education, 2013, E-13)

This means that when they leave school, students will have world-class knowledge and skills, strong moral values, and will be capable of competing with their peers in other countries. Therefore, the cosmopolitan values are upheld together with Malaysian-values.

Table 1
Comparison of the IB Learner Profile and the Malaysian Education
Blueprint 2013-2025 Student Aspirations

IB Learner Profile	Key Student Aspirations in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025
Inquirers Knowledgeable Thinkers Communicators Principled Open-minded Caring Risk-takers Balanced Reflective	Knowledge Thinking Skills Leadership Skills Bilingual Proficiency Ethics and Spirituality National Identity

The MEB undoubtedly is trying to increase the inclusiveness of the entire education system. For example, additional opportunities and resources for groups with specific needs such as gifted, special needs and indigenous and other minority groups (Yassin, 2013). However, the complex societal make-up of Malaysian society makes policy making a difficult task, especially if there are various pressure groups with conflicting objectives. One of the main issues from the blueprint is the idea of inclusivity, especially when the wording

of the first shift is to “provide equal access to quality education”. In fact, neoliberalism puts society’s focus onto the pursuit of efficiency and equity is pushed to the sidelines. The gains in efficiency in the economy have been marred by the exacerbation of several economic, cultural, political, and social inequality (Plehwe, 2005, 24; Evans & Sewell, 2013). Privatization and the promotion of privately funded international schools may inadvertently perpetuate disparities in access to quality education, as they are often financially exclusive. This may also coincide with an increase in ethnic disparities. For example, the liberalization of rules for Malaysia to enroll in international schools coincided with the end of teaching Mathematics and Science in English, which resulted in the national school’s language of instruction being entirely in Bahasa Malaysia (Gibson & Bailey, 2023). This led to the national schools becoming even more dominated by ethnically Malay students, while non-Malays flocked to international or Chinese schools. In fact, the MEB did point out the increased homogeneity in the various types of schools, especially in primary schools, where the percentage of Malay students studying in National Schools is 97%, the percentage of Chinese students studying in National Type Chinese Schools is 96%, and percentage of Indian students studying in National Type Tamil Schools is 56% (Ministry of Education, 2013, E-8). In addition, the increased use of English is fraught with post-colonial sentiments, with English continuing to be perceived as a reminder of colonial rule (Khor, 2009; Gibson & Bailey, 2023). The growth of international schools, in general, could also be seen as largely Eurocentric, engaging with local culture as an “other” (Gibson & Bailey, 2023). English is also certainly not “class neutral” with the language spoken by those in the middle- and higher-income groups, who are mainly living in urban areas (Chua, 2007, 922 in Kenway & Koh, 2013, 278)

A critical examination of the policy also reveals the need for a more explicit and detailed articulation of how the education system plans to instill and assess these 21st-century skills while fostering a unique and unified Malaysian identity. There is an inherent challenge in precisely defining and measuring these skills and characteristics, necessitating a robust and adaptable assessment framework. Furthermore, ensuring that these are seamlessly integrated into the curriculum and pedagogy is vital to realize the blueprint's vision fully. Striking a balance between fostering traditional knowledge and developing unified Malaysian values while nurturing these contemporary proficiencies will be instrumental in aligning the Malaysian education system with the demands of the 21st century. For example, at the time of writing, one of the latest controversies is the implementation of a new module in schools to teach 'Imam Al-Nawawi's 40 Hadith' which is intended to foster a sense of love and enhancing religious understanding. Although the module is to be first only introduced in National Religious Secondary Schools (SABK) and Government-funded Religious Schools, this was seen as a “divisive policy” and against the goals of promoting national unity by non-Muslim groups as it is specifically promoting Islamic values, rather than Malaysian values and due to this, the Ministry of Education had to come up with a statement to clarify that this was only for Muslims (Kasinathan, 2023).

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the opening of markets and globalization, there is an opportunity for countries like Malaysia to get ahead by giving its citizens the opportunity to hone in the various kinds of capital required for the global economy – not just by providing them with a qualification on paper but with the right skills as well – the skills of a Cosmopolitan Nationalist. This paper posits that the types of skills emphasized throughout the blueprint, the adaptations of the national curriculum to international standards, the introduction of an international curriculum in national schools, and the expansion of privately funded international schools in Malaysia,

all points towards the fact that the government has given in to neo-liberal demands while trying to create a stronger national identity. The transformation of the education system outlined in the blueprint is consistent with the neo-liberal idea of achieving higher levels of international competitiveness, but it is still grounded in Malaysia's unique multi-ethnic and post-colonial context. The strengthening of neoliberal ideas may provide an opportunity for Malaysia to finally move on from their ethnic divisions, where universal skills for international markets can transcend ethno-religious associations. Thus, the development of cosmopolitan nationalism may be an opportunity to bring education excellence to its forefront. This may enable Malaysia to change from a society of ethnicized neoliberalism to cosmopolitan nationalism which could pave the way for Malaysia to escape the middle-income trap, benefiting the society.

However, those who have relied on preferential treatment based on ethno-religious associations may feel that such policies will erode their economic opportunities in society and their power in the socio-political structure of Malaysia. This transformation will also risk exacerbating the rural-urban divide, unless emphasis is also put into reducing the current inequity between rural and urban areas in terms of education provision specifically and in general, the wider economic opportunities. The tension between the neoliberal economic drive and the need for an inclusive and equitable education system is a challenge that must be navigated to ensure that the policy benefits all segments of society. Neoliberalism may weaken the stranglehold the government has over the education system, and this will make achieving the goal of equality even more difficult and therefore the government may have to try to develop a more symbiotic relationship with private education players, both from within Malaysia and internationally. Regulations are needed but the possibility that regulations are perpetually playing catch-up is very real (Cheong, Hill, & Leong, 2016, 83).

In terms of the growth of international schools and the increased adoption of international standards, this should not be seen as a threat to the sovereignty of the nation-state but seen as a method to further increase the competitiveness of the nation in this neoliberal version of the world we are living in. Two possible scenarios may become apparent in Malaysia, either the national education system and national schools are improved to standards accepted by the general populace and therefore not requiring international schools at all in the future, or if the transformation fails to fully improve the national schools and international schools will grow even further in popularity which will then require the government to set even clearer agendas for international schools, absorbing it fully into the national education system. What Malaysia is doing and will be doing could also serve as a framework for other countries that are grappling with the rise of international education in their domestic context as well and such strategies could serve as a possible development strategy.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that this study has focused only on one specific blueprint, one which is also soon reaching the end of its time, and one which was introduced by a different government than the one ruling at the time of writing of this article. How the government follows up with this blueprint in future policy documents will really show whether the government is fully committed to the current trajectory of neoliberalism in the education system and whether there really is a strong commitment to move away from a society that is based on primal ethnic divisions. A further study into other government blueprints such as the Malaysia Productivity Blueprint, the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, and the current government's plans would reveal whether the neoliberal trajectory of the MEB is consistent with other government plans and whether this trajectory will continue. At the time of writing, there is still no follow up to the MEB.

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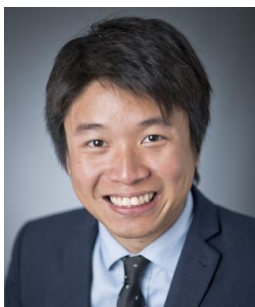
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