

Gearing up for lifelong, future-ready learning

THE Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2026-2035 (RPTM 2026-2035) core reform lies in the transitioning of structured education and formal learning to the unbundling of education, lifelong learning and life-wide learning.

This shift, said Emerita Prof Datuk Dr Asma Ismail, who heads the development of the RPTM, is designed to prepare learners not just for immediate employment, but for continuous learning across different stages of life.

"Before determining what kind of education is needed, we must first define the kind of society we aspire to build.

"Therefore, the goal of higher education is to produce nation builders who are humanity-centred and purpose-driven, for a future that is harmonious, prosperous, progressive and sustainable.

"Nation builders must possess core values such as being humanity-centred, upholding holistic well-being, shared prosperity and sustainability," she said during her presentation of the RPTM 2026-2035 framework on Jan 20.

Prof Asma, who is the vice-chancellor and chief executive officer of IMU University, said the new Blueprint builds on the foundations laid by the Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2015-2025, which, despite facing major disruptions over the past decade, had achieved notable progress.

"Among these were an increased institutional income generation amounting to RM3.73bil, strengthened digital infrastructure for online learning post-Covid-19, and stronger public-private collaboration aligned with industry needs.

"Graduate employability had also reached 92.5% based on 2025 data, while 10.9% of graduates became job creators.

"Student enrolment among B40 groups also increased, including 68% participation among Orang Asli and persons with disabilities, alongside the recognition of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) as an equivalent academic pathway," she said.

The RPTM 2026-2035, she said,

was shaped through focus group discussions involving 6,410 participants, surveys of 1,816 respondents, and reviews of 58 studies and policy documents.

"In total, 8,226 stakeholders contributed to the process, supported by 181 experts and advisors," she said, describing the endeavor as the collective effort of Malaysians.

She also explained that the Blueprint emphasises several key areas to strengthen continuity between basic education and higher education, ensuring a seamless learning ecosystem.

"First, it identifies the risks facing Malaysian higher education and strategies to address them.

"Second, it outlines transformative leaps in the higher education system to ensure it remains relevant, competitive, resilient, and future-ready.

"Third, it provides the guiding philosophy and framework for the RPTM, highlighting the importance of linking higher education with foundational education in schools to ensure continuity and a seamless learning journey," she said.

Four quadrants

To ensure higher education is responsive to any change, Prof Asma said the system will be divided into four quadrants which she described as a gradual progression, starting from traditional models and moving towards more adaptive, learner-driven approaches.

"Quadrant one represents the traditional system, a curriculum-based education regulated by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA)," she said.

She, however, pointed out that the next generation of Gen Z, Gen Alpha, and Gen Beta are self-determined learners, necessitating the second quadrant, which is exemplified by what she called the "Jukebox University".

"Here, learners choose courses across institutions, and certifications are granted by institutions recognised through mutual agreements within university consortia," she said.

The third quadrant, she said,

represents adaptive change, also referred to as the "Uberised University."

In this quadrant, education is industry-driven, with learning occurring within workplaces rather than solely in universities.

"Courses offered by industry can be recognised through the Adaptive Industry Competency Accelerator (AICA), while pathways such as Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (Apel) enable progression from TVET to university degrees.

"These approaches ensure education can be made accessible to all," she said, adding that the fourth quadrant represents the vision of radical change, designed for learners who pursue learning for personal satisfaction and self-directed development.

To support this, she said the establishment of the National Higher Education Council has been approved, ensuring continuity from preschool through university.

"With that, we can ensure that education can be made accessible to all," she said, adding that the Blueprint comprises 10 transformation leaps, including a new emphasis on sustainability and planetary health.

"The Blueprint is a 'living document' that is responsive to emerging technologies and grounded in values.

"The impact of the RPTM 2026-2035 will include stronger economic resilience through skills alignment and employability, enhanced human dignity through mental health, inclusion, and stronger national unity through coordinated education governance across all levels—from preschool to higher education—driven and jointly administered by the National Education Council," she said.

With that, she said, the RPTM 2026-2035 plays a role in positioning Malaysia as a key driver of national progress and global competitiveness.

"Malaysians deserve to have access to the best education the country can offer, to nurture us and the world," she added.