

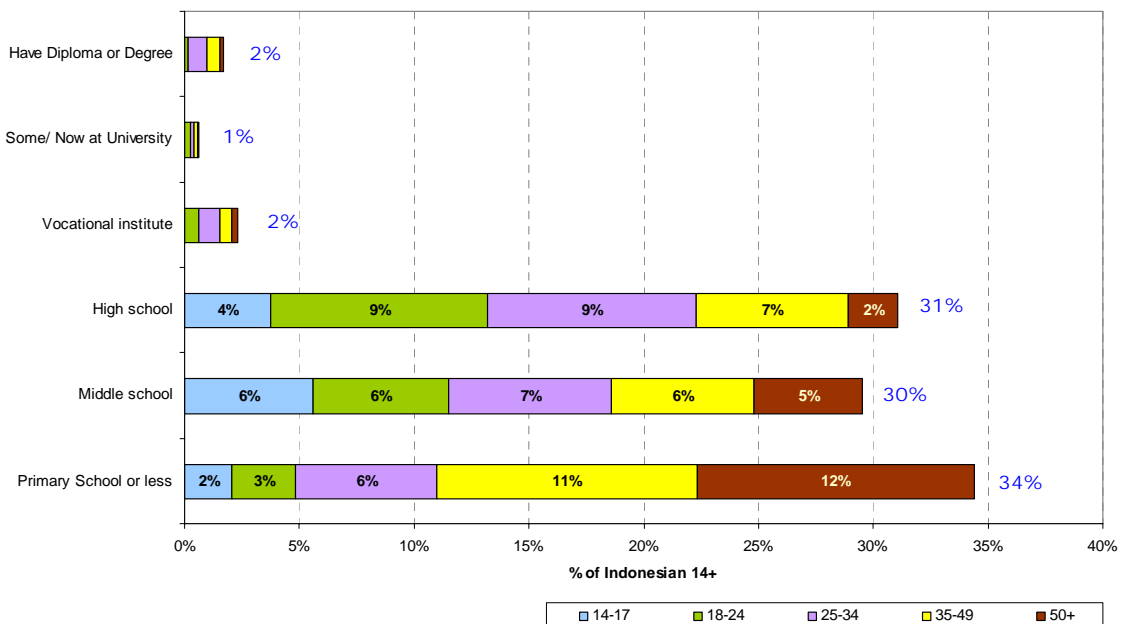
## What is the real cost of education? Or the lack of it?

Teachers Day, November 25. It has come and gone, as it does every year. But in a special poll conducted by Roy Morgan Research among 1999 respondents nationwide, the people voted overwhelmingly to recognise their importance in the life of Indonesian society. Asked if “the government should immediately fulfil its promise to increase the budget for education”, a staggering 93 per cent agreed. Asked if “the government should immediately increase teachers welfare packages”, 79 per cent gave the nod. That should help decide the recent debates that have gone on, in public.

If I heard him right, President SBY hadn't been waiting for the poll results. In Bali recently, he reiterated his government's commitment to increase spending on education by 20 per cent. That will go a long way in raising salaries of some 2.7 million teachers from Rp. 2 million to Rp. 3 million per month, with additional allowances for certification, remote schools and camps. That will put teachers in the Top 5 cent of Indonesian wage earners, a deserving spot for the people who influence the future of a nation. There is probably no other country in the world that can lay claim to such an achievement.

All the signs for Indonesia's march into a well-educated future are positive, improving as time goes by. The younger generations are better educated than their grandparents are, with scores improving across genders. That is an open invitation for local and international enterprises in the education sector to invest, for mutual gain. The quality of education provided is as important as education itself, a key factor in preventing children from dropping out in Middle School. All efforts to keep youth in school will pay off in a myriad ways, not least of which will be the spurt in university graduates.

Education Level by Age



Asked if “most secondary schools today place too little emphasis on academic achievements” 53% of the population agree, reconfirming the demand for quality not just quantity. But the government will need much more money to meet those pressing needs in the education sector. It isn’t enough for businesses and armchair politicians to grumble and make demands of government, comfortable with doing little else for society at large.

Whether driven by the motive to make money, or to meet obligations of Corporate Social Responsibility, businesses big and small can all contribute to the greater education of Indonesia. There can be no bigger satisfaction. That does not necessarily mean that the burden of education can be conveniently placed on only those businesses involved in the education sector. Scholarships for the children of long-serving staff, scholarships as prizes for opening a bank account, scholarships as incentives for all sorts of rewards: all it requires is a little imagination and not much effort, on the part of all businesses regardless of industry.

These observations are based on Roy Morgan Single Source, the country’s largest syndicated survey with over 27,000 Indonesian respondents annually, projected to reflect 90% of the population over the age of 14. That is a universe of 140 million people. The results are updated every 90 days and used by more marketers, media and creative agencies than any other syndicated survey.

Equally, every freedom-loving nation in the world needs to recognise Indonesia’s capability to influence the Islamic world, its voice of moderation and its commitment to democracy and religious tolerance. This is the world’s single-largest Moslem population, after all. Anybody who has had any experience of Indonesia and its people will know that they are among the most laid-back, tolerant and courteous people, in the main. Lunatics on the fringe exist everywhere, in Indonesia’s Central Java as well as the Bible belt in the US “heartland”. While terrorists in business suits are just as lethal as their counterparts in pajamas, the likelihood of an educated person turning to extremism has got to be lower than an illiterate picking up a machine-gun.

Taking note of Wahabi money flowing into Indonesian madrasas, it is praise-worthy that the Australian government is helping to build 2000 schools around the country that will teach a secular curriculum. Palestinian children being taught in school to hate Jews of all shapes and sizes cannot be good for world peace. Nor can the billion dollars a day spent on keeping the American military machine well oiled. Imagine the power of half that money spent on educating under-privileged children around the world, every day.

Anybody who really wants to fight a war on terror, needs to help spread the word of peace. What will help the world do that better and faster is an army of well-paid teachers, not well-armed soldiers. Any wise general in any army will tell you that. I have asked a few and I know their answers. They will tell you that intelligence of all kinds have a role to play in building a safe and secure future, not just military intelligence.

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