

**Without quality education, the country will change fundamentally.**

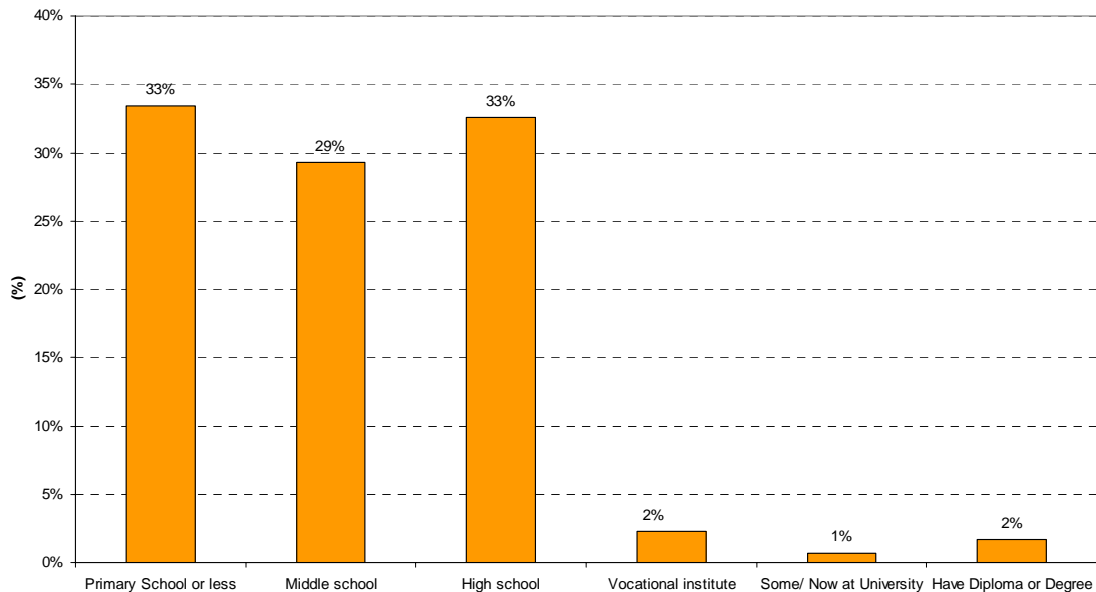
If knowledge is power, Indonesia still has a long way to go. That’s an opportunity for investors, not a pointless aspersion cast on the country. If all the facts were considered, it would make a lot more sense to invest in a school, rather than another shopping mall.

Of all Indonesians above the age of 14, only 5 per cent have any learning beyond school. Of the remaining 95 per cent, only 33 per cent have finished high school. Surprisingly, 80 per cent of the people are of the view that school graduates are adequately equipped to contribute to Indonesian society. Only 22 per cent think that the quality of education provided at “senior high school” and “university” levels are of poor standards. Half the population believes they are well rounded off graduates as well, with satisfactory levels achieved on morality and ethics. These views, expressed across the country, do not have any significant variances by age, or gender, or geography. These conclusions are based on a special survey on education recently conducted around the country. 2,051 respondents 14-years and older were interviewed for the purpose, conducted in tandem with Roy Morgan Single Source, the country’s largest syndicated survey. The opinions expressed are my own.

If popular perception is indeed reality, then all would appear to be well on the educational front. It is clearly not a political issue in the mind of most voters. But to anyone fortunate enough to have received a quality education, that perception should pose a problem. Without exposure to anything better, without the ability to make any comparisons, anyone of modest means is instinctively grateful for whatever he or she receives. In most developing countries, this is the paradigm the ruling elite use to exploit the less fortunate. Without empowerment, inequalities continue to exist without much protest, year after year.

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EDUCATION LEVELS ACHIEVED BY INDONESIANS



Yet, it should be obvious that economic power can only be built with a well-equipped workforce, in turn creating consumers with real spending power. In other words, this is a problem that represents a major opportunity. Not everybody needs a university degree. But everybody does need a particular skill to build a livelihood, to contribute to society, to help build the nation. But there are few schools in Indonesia that teach essential trades that would empower youth from even the most humble of homes to build a future.

Unfortunately, it takes more than a small business owner to start a school of any significant proportion. At the grassroots, the vacuum is also being filled with funds from overseas facilitating schools providing free education, many with religious not secular curriculum. Without much ado, the government recently accepted the view that laws influenced by sharia already implemented in some 50 mayoralities, are not unconstitutional. Instead of shockwaves rippling across the country, in lieu of howls of protest, there only seems to be a sense of quiet despair among the secular sections of Indonesian society.

The media has failed to draw enough attention to a fundamental change that will slowly change the very character of Indonesia. Emboldened by the first fifty, mayors across the archipelago will institute their own versions of sharia law, born of little other than ignorance and bigotry. Soon, Aceh will no longer be the exception where all schoolgirls are compelled to wear headscarves, regardless of denomination. Yet, anybody with even a cursory knowledge of Islamic traditions knows that the faith was born with the recognition of other religions, cultures and practices. Education is the primary defence against intolerance. In its absence, it took a dictator to enshrine and protect Indonesia's secular constitution, years ago. Today, a government with a popular mandate and high approval ratings is allowing that secular character to be whittled away. The world is watching, not just the nervous minorities.

The business community has also remained silent. If the secular nature of the country continues to be affected, we can expect big business to do what it has done before. Investments will dry up, capital will fly out of the country as it has in the past. If institutions like BAPENAS, KADIN, ISX and BKPM cannot see that coming, they are hiding their heads in the sand. If they don't raise their voices, they aren't doing their jobs. It may not be fashionable, perhaps there are no insider deals to be made, but unless the business community gets involved with education, it will also have itself to blame.

On the other hand, the opportunity is big enough for the government to encourage a coalition of forces, supported by appropriate incentives. Entrepreneurs, state-owned banks and provincial governments working together can build trade schools across the country, empowering underprivileged youth coming out of schools. There are businesses hiring untrained staff today who would benefit from alumni placements tomorrow. Privately owned universities have sprung up, there is visibly room for more. But more importantly perhaps, it is the millions of school graduates who need a helping hand. Again, no charity required. Just good business sense on the part of all concerned. That could include successful trade schools and polytechnics from around the world, looking at investment opportunities. After all, the future of a stable Asia could well be at stake, right here in Indonesia.

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