

Research Summary

Look East Policy Post-Mahathir Era: Japan-Malaysia Academic Exchange Programme

The Look East Policy (LEP) was among the few new policies that were introduced by Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad when he was appointed the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia in 1981. After 25 years, is this policy still relevant in the context of post-Mahathir era?

This policy was conceived during The 5th Joint Annual Conference of Majeca/Jameca (Malaysia-Japan Economic Association and Japan-Malaysia Economic Association) on the 8th February 1982. During the 20th anniversary conference in 2002 to evaluate the achievement of LEP, Dr Mahathir said that - “ Malaysia identified what we believed to be the factors which contributed towards Japan’s success. They are the patriotism, discipline, good work ethics, competent management system and above all the close cooperation between the Government and the private sector. And so we tried to adopt these practices and instill these cultures in our people. And everyone now acknowledges that Malaysia has made better progress than most other developing countries. The fastest pace of Malaysia’s progress and development took place in the last two decades coinciding with Malaysia’s Look East Policy”.

The author has used several methodologies throughout this research. These include interviews with Malaysian students studying in Japan and officials from the embassy whom were involved in the implementation of this program. Information from secondary sources such as official reports, media, public agencies, speeches, journal and books were also used in this research.

The findings of this research show that there are changes in continuity of LEP under the new premiership of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Since 2005, the Malaysian government was able to sponsor all the students under LEP program without any financial assistance from Monbusho (Japan Ministry of Education). With this new arrangement, the students progress were monitored more closely by the respective officials from the embassy to ensure that this program produces quality and competent graduates with instilled Japanese working culture. After graduating, students are encouraged to gain working experience in Japan or in Japanese companies based in Malaysia. In recent years, more and more students were sent to study in new fields such as bio-technology, nano-technology, agriculture and veterinarian, instead of the traditional fields in engineering. This also enhanced the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Japanese government.

Future studies on the LEP program can be conducted to look at the impact of graduates from Japanese institutions on the working culture of Malaysia.