



UNIVERSITI
TEKNOLOGI
MARA

Cawangan Negeri Sembilan
Kampus Rembau

2024

RONA TINTA

e-BULETIN
EDISI
2024

FAKULTI PENGURUSAN & PERNIAGAAN
UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA
CAWANGAN NEGERI SEMBILAN, KAMPUS REMBAU



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eISSN 2785-9126



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THE 3M'S PROBLEM: IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR FUTURE PROFESSIONALS

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In recent years, there has been a growing concern in Malaysia over the three basic skills of students leaving school, namely the reading, writing and calculating skills (also known as the 3Ms). Despite completing their formal education, many students enter higher education or the workforce with inadequate reading comprehension and weak mathematical abilities. This issue is not merely an academic shortfall but has far-reaching implications for the development of skilled professionals in Malaysia. As the nation strives to achieve its developed country's goals and beyond, the production of capable, critical-thinking professionals is essential for the country's economic growth and competitiveness in the global market.

One of the primary factors contributing to this issue is the curriculum and teaching approach at the school level. While Malaysia has invested heavily in education, the focus often leans towards rote memorization and exam-based assessments, leaving little room for the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills. Students may be able to pass exams, but they frequently lack the ability to apply what they have learned in practical, real-world situations. This deficiency becomes glaringly obvious when students transition into higher education or enter the workforce.

For reading, students often struggle with understanding complex texts or synthesizing information from multiple sources. This can hinder their ability to engage with academic materials at university, where they are expected to critically analyze, compare, and evaluate ideas. In professional environments, weak reading skills can result in miscommunication, poor decision-making, and the inability to comprehend technical documents or instructions, thus lowering overall productivity.

On the mathematical side, poor numeracy skills are equally problematic. Professions in engineering, finance, data analysis, and information technology—key sectors driving Malaysia’s economic development—require strong mathematical foundations. When students are unable to perform basic calculations, interpret data, or solve problems effectively, they become less competitive and less capable of adapting to the rapidly changing demands of these industries. Furthermore, this weakness in foundational skills limits the ability to pursue more advanced knowledge, stifling innovation and creativity in critical fields.

The long-term impact of these skill deficits could be detrimental to Malaysia’s ambitions to become a high-income nation. Without a workforce that is proficient in reading and calculating, the country risks falling behind in terms of technological advancements and global competitiveness. The shortage of skilled professionals will affect industries that rely heavily on innovation and complex problem-solving, such as engineering, healthcare, and finance. Moreover, these deficits perpetuate inequality in education and employment opportunities, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds may struggle the most with basic skills and, thus, find it difficult to break into high-paying professional roles.

To address this issue, reforms are needed at both the policy and school levels. The education system must shift from exam-centric learning to a more holistic approach that emphasizes critical thinking, problem-solving, and the practical application of knowledge. Teachers should be trained to adopt teaching methodologies that engage students in deeper learning processes, fostering both literacy and numeracy. Additionally, higher education institutions could offer remedial programs to help incoming students strengthen these fundamental skills before advancing into their chosen fields.

In conclusion, the weakness in the 3Ms skills among school leavers in Malaysia poses a significant challenge to the country’s future professional workforce. As Malaysia continues its journey towards becoming a high-income, knowledge-based economy, it is crucial to address these fundamental gaps in education to ensure the development of competent, innovative professionals who can drive the nation forward. Without these essential skills, the future of Malaysia’s economic and social progress may be at risk.