

11 MAY, 2025

Teacher troubles

Sunday Star, Malaysia



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MALAYSIA is a country with a diverse landscape – from beaches and cities to kampungs and the deepest jungles.

With over 10,000 schools located all over the country, teachers sometimes have to leave the comforts of their homes to teach children living by the sea, along rivers or deep in the jungles.

Sometimes, these teachers also need to live in teacher quarters that are old and dilapidated, as there is no other nearby accommodation for them.

Still, these teachers do it all, even spending their own money to make their living space habitable, just so they can carry out their responsibilities to the nation.

UCSI University Faculty Of Social Sciences & Liberal Arts Education Department head Assistant Prof Dr Zaida Mustafa said teachers often pool their resources to fund minor repairs or share housing.

Others, she added, use social media to crowdsource supplies or highlight their plight.

"Despite the odds, educators demonstrate remarkable adaptability," she told *StarEdu*.

Widespread issue

Zaida said dilapidated teacher quarters are a widespread issue, particularly in rural states like Sabah, Sarawak and Kelantan.

She cited estimates from the Education Ministry in 2023, which showed that more than 1,200 quarters nationwide required urgent repairs.

Meanwhile, a 2022 survey by the National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP) found that 45% of rural teachers reported living in quarters with leaking roofs, broken plumbing or electrical hazards.

In Sarawak, 200 quarters were deemed "uninhabitable" as of 2023, while 20% of those in Peninsular Malaysia suffered from severe neglect.

"In remote regions, vacant quarters often become breeding grounds for pests or vandalism, exacerbating the problem," she said.

Zaida added that multiple factors contributed to the decay, including gaps in funding where maintenance budgets are frequently reallocated to urban infrastructure projects.

Then, there are bureaucratic delays, with repairs requiring approvals from multiple agencies, causing years-long waits.

"Some quarters are abandoned as teachers opt for private rentals due to poor conditions or isolation.

"There is also no centralised database that tracks the condition

of quarters, allowing neglect to go unnoticed," she said.

Adding on, NUTP secretary-general Fouzi Singon said many of the quarters, which were constructed under design-and-build concessions, have fallen into disrepair due to lack of proper maintenance and poor initial planning.

"A significant number of these buildings are located in suburban areas that already have ample private housing options, while critical areas such as Tioman Island, Cameron Highlands and remote Felda regions continue to face a severe shortage of accommodation for teachers.

"This misalignment in planning not only wastes public funds but also places undue financial and emotional stress on young teachers and new families who are forced to spend thousands of ringgit to make their living spaces safe and habitable," he said.

Adding to the burden of teachers stationed in these schools, housing and cost of living allowance cuts have also been imposed, but the basic facilities promised remain unfit for occupation, he noted.

Actions needed

Fouzi said the government, through the Education Ministry, should commission a nationwide audit of all abandoned and underutilised teacher quarters, while the National Audit Department and the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission must investigate any possible mismanagement in the planning and concession agreements behind these projects.

He also proposed establishing a dedicated maintenance fund for the restoration and regular upkeep of quarters that are still in use or in high-demand locations.

"For quarters that are beyond repair or located in impractical areas, the government should take swift action to repurpose or dispose of these buildings.

"Leaving them idle not only represents a visual blight but poses serious safety risks to nearby communities," said Fouzi.

He added that there needs to be collaboration with local

authorities and data-driven planning to ensure future projects align with actual demands.

"Moving forward, the Education Ministry should develop a more strategic and needs-based approach to housing for teachers," he said.

He asserted that the well-being and morale of educators are directly linked to the conditions in which they live and work.

"By addressing the issue of abandoned and dilapidated quarters, the government can demonstrate its commitment to supporting teachers and strengthening the education system from the ground up," he offered.

Zaida stressed that the issue of dilapidated quarters needs to be addressed urgently as poor housing drives teachers away from rural postings, worsening staff shortages.

It also affects teachers' mental health, with stress from unsafe living conditions impacting teaching quality.

"Rural students deserve educators who can focus on teaching, not survival," she said.

Teach For Malaysia (TFM) chief executive officer Chan Soon Seng suggested allowing corporations to assist in repairing the dilapidated quarters as part of their corporate social responsibility programmes.

"There will be companies willing and able to support the fixing of these quarters," he said, adding that the government should be transparent and provide the locations of these quarters to companies seeking to help.

It would also help, said Chan, if school leaders had more autonomy to use the funds allocated to their school for any necessary work or activity, rather than for what they were specifically allocated.

He pointed out that while most of the time, teacher quarters are unfurnished spaces equipped with electricity and water, this is not the case at all quarters, as there have been incidents where TFM fellows have had to buy drinking water from nearby towns and bring it back via boat to their accommodation.

TFM is an independent,

not-for-profit organisation on a mission to give all children the opportunity to realise their potential through quality education. It partners with the Education Ministry to reach high-need national schools and is one of the partners of the prestigious global education network Teach For All.

Reforms underway

On Feb 4, Education Minister Fadhlina Sidek said the repair and maintenance of teacher quarters were part of the ministry's education reform initiatives, namely Core 5, which focuses on teacher welfare, and Core 6, which focuses on efforts to renovate and upgrade schools with dilapidated buildings, especially in Sabah and Sarawak.

"This includes ongoing efforts to renovate and upgrade educational infrastructure such as teacher quarters to make them more comfortable and conducive to living," she said.

Fadhlina was responding to a question by Sabah's Sipitang MP Datuk Matbali Musah about the ministry's initiative to solve the problem of dilapidated and uncomfortable teacher quarters in the remote area of Sipitang, involving three schools – SK Long Pasia, SK Meligan and SK Ulu Bole.

Fadhlina said the ministry is taking proactive steps to solve the issue of dilapidated teacher quarters across the nation, adding that in 2024, RM330,000 had been specifically allocated to renovate four units of teacher quarters in Sipitang.

The scope of maintenance included roof repairs and electrical wiring, she said.

"The Education Ministry is studying additional requirements to ensure that teacher quarters in rural areas are always in good condition and meet comfortable residential standards," she said, adding that it will continue to strengthen cooperation between relevant agencies to expedite the upgrading and building of teacher quarters in the future.

Zaida said as Malaysia strives to bridge urban-rural divides, revitalising these spaces must be a priority.

"Teacher quarters are more than buildings; they are pillars of rural education," she concluded.

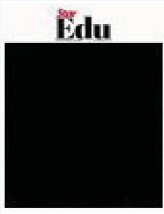
Attention needed

"My school is located within the Kapit region, deep in Sarawak. The only way to access the village it is in is by a two-hour boat ride. When I first came here, the condition was not at all what I expected. Everything was either old or spoilt – even the lightbulbs were not working. Mine was not the only space facing this problem, as all the rooms in the teacher quarters block were like this. We new teachers tried to raise the issue with the headmaster but were told nothing could be done as there was no funding to fix the quarters. So, we had to replace whatever was not working or damaged ourselves."

Andrew Ng, English language teacher

"The school I was placed in was in a rural part of Perak – about 1.5 hours from the nearest tarred road – and the students were all Orang Asli. The road conditions were poor and worsened during the rainy season. A few other fellows and I were given accommodation in the warden's room, which was very convenient as it was within walking distance of the classrooms. To make the space feel more 'homey', I brought my own cleaning equipment and basic cooking appliances, such as an air fryer and plates. One thing about that accommodation, though, was that during the rainy season, we would sometimes lose access to the Internet, water or electricity, as the entire school compound relied on solar power."

Aqilah, former TFM fellow



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SUMMARIES

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