

# LIVING IN SARAWAK'S INTERIOR NO OBSTACLE TO EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

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BELAGA: Living in the interior regions of Sarawak does not necessarily mean that one is stuck with an inferior standard of education, poor access to schools and amenities.

At least not these days, as testified by the rising number of rural Sarawakian students who are scoring good grades and pursuing higher studies.

Eighteen-year-old Alastair Beluluk, who is from the Lahanan ethnic group, is among the locals who have benefited from the vast improvements seen in Sarawak's interiors, especially in terms of educational facilities and infrastructure.

He aced the SPM examination last year, scoring two A+, two A, two A-, two B+ and one B.

Alastair resides in one of the longhouses in Sungai Asap, located about 60 kilometres from Belaga, which is one of the gateways to the remote regions of Sarawak.

To this bright lad, living and schooling in an area far removed from modern amenities and conveniences is not at all a stumbling block to success.

"All we (students) need to have is the determination to excel in our studies and work hard, as well as harbour a burning desire to transform our lives for the better," he said.

Soon he will be heading to Labuan to study at the Education Ministry's matriculation college there, after which he hopes to study medicine as his ambition is to be a doctor.

Fellow top scorer Ferdinand Lawai, 18, is not only academically-inclined but also active in sports, notwithstanding the fact that he had to travel two hours on road just to get to his school in Sungai Asap from Kampung Data Kakus where he lived.

Ferdinand, who scored three A+, two A and four A- in his SPM last year, said: "I didn't expect to do so well in my exam as I had to miss some classes due to my sports activities but I made it a point to catch up on my lessons and revise as well." He has received an offer from Universiti Teknologi Petronas to do a course in petroleum engineering, he said, adding that he hoped to return to his village after completing his studies so that he could serve the local community.

BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE

A higher level of awareness of the importance of education among Sarawak's Orang Ulu communities, especially those living in the remote regions, has translated into a better quality of life and employment opportunities for them.

Mujan Surang, 28, a longhouse dweller from Sungai Asap, is a shining example of a Orang Ulu who is now doing well, thanks to her good educational qualifications.

She studied at a primary school in Belaga before she was accepted into Sekolah Menengah Sains Miri, where she completed her secondary education.

Then she studied at the Labuan Matriculation College before pursuing a course in mechanical and manufacturing engineering at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UMS).

Today, she is working for Sarawak Hidro Sdn Bhd as an operations engineer.

(Sarawak Hidro is the operator of the Bakun dam and hydroelectric power plant.) Mujan, who is currently pursuing a Master's degree, is of course a firm believer in education, stressing that it was key to elevating one's status in life and becoming successful.

"I'm ample proof that even people living in remote areas can become successful.

In fact, the place I originally came from was impacted by the (Bakun) dam but that didn't mean that I couldn't ever attain success," she said.

## REDUCE DROP-OUT RATE

Alastair and Mujan's families were among the 10,000 people from 15 longhouses at the Sungai Balui area who were relocated to more modern longhouses in Sungai Asap in 1998 and 1999 to make way for the massive Bakun dam project.

To make schooling more accessible to the longhouse communities in Sungai Asap and deter students from dropping out, a secondary school – Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan (SMK) Bakun – was established in 2002.

It had to conduct its classes at another school in Kapit until it moved into its own premises in Sungai Asap last year.

SMK Bakun was opened by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi last October.

From 100 students initially, the school now has an enrolment of 1,371 and teaching staff of 90.

SMK Bakun Principal Roger Peter said 95 per cent of the students were from the longhouses in Sungai Asap while the rest comprised the children of Sarawak Hidro employees.

He said with the help of the government, as well as Sarawak Hidro, the school has been able to increase its enrolment and reduce the drop-out rate.

“We want this school to be known for producing students who are able to make it big, despite being far away from modern facilities and infrastructure,” Roger told Bernama recently during a visit by the Sarawak Hidro management to SMK Bakun.

The school has been “adopted” by Sarawak Hidro under its “Adopt a School” programme, which is a corporate social responsibility initiative by the company.

## FULLY COMMITTED

Sarawak Hidro Managing Director Zulkifle Osman said various activities like English camps and motivational programmes were being organised for the students but they were mainly targeted at the school’s 211 fifth formers.

“We want them to score excellent results in the SPM exam,” he said, adding that his company may also expand the English camp activity to the other secondary school in the area, SMK Belaga.

“We’re hoping that both SMK Bakun and SMK Belaga will eventually become elite schools.

And, in the coming year we may focus on primary schools, in particular their Standard Six pupils.

We’re fully committed to helping the local communities here in whatever way we can.” Zulkifle added that Sarawak Hidro was also planning to add more books to SMK Bakun’s library, as well as provide more street lamps on the road leading to the school as a safety measure for the students.

Member of Parliament for Hulu Rajang Datuk Wilson Ugak Kumbong, who was also present during the school visit, said if communities living in remote regions had the same access to education enjoyed by their urban counterparts, many of them would be able to further their studies and contribute to the nation and even the world.

“Children living in the interiors are also capable of attaining academic excellence but they need more attention.

If they can get the support (of the government), then they too can stand out,” he said. — Bernama