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An Overview of the Malaysian Higher Education Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The development of the Malaysian Higher Education System began with the establishment of the Medical College in Singapore in 1905 which later became the origin of the University of Malaya in 1962. Over the years more than twenty universities have been established with fine campuses located at least one in each state of the country. With the passing of two education laws on Higher Education in 1996, new provisions have been enacted giving opportunities for the universities to be corporatized. Since then, the management and leadership of the Universities have been focused on developing strategic policies of human capital development. With an increase in the budgets of the higher education system in recent years, new initiatives had been undertaken not only to upgrade qualifications of academic staff but also to enhance quality research and development opportunities and expand new programs especially in the internationalization of university student participation from overseas.

Keywords: *Higher Education System, University, Management, Leadership*



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Brief Historical Development

The first college-level institution in Malaysia began with the establishment of the Medical College in Singapore in 1905. Singapore then was under the Straits and Malay States Government under Great Britain. In 1912, the School changed its name to King Edward VII School of Medicine in honour of the then King of Great Britain. Subsequently in 1921, the school was elevated to the status of a college. In 1928, another institution called the Raffles College was established to conduct a 3-year programme of education with the aim of producing arts and science graduates and the training of teachers. With the merger of Raffles College and King Edward College of Medicine in 1949, the University of Malaya was established, based in Singapore. In 1962, the University of Malaya, a branch institution, was established as an autonomous division of a single University of Malaya in the territory of Malaya and Singapore based in Klang Valley, Kuala Lumpur.

From 1969 onwards, several more universities were established in Malaysia including the Science University in Penang, the National University in Kuala Lumpur and over the years onwards, more than 20 universities have been established in the country. Currently, all the 13 states and Kuala Lumpur have at least one university and the distribution of the university is in Table 1 as follow:



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Table 1
Profile of the 20 Public Universities of Malaysia

No	Name of the University	Original Name / Entity	Year of Establishment of the New Entity ()	Site
1	Universiti Malaya (UM)	King Edward VII College of Medicine	1905 (1962)	Kuala Lumpur
2	University Sains Malaysia (USM)	Universiti Pulau Pinang (Penang)	1969 (1972)	Penang
3	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)		1970	Selangor
4	Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)	Universiti Pertanian Malaysia	1973 (1997)	Selangor
5	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM)		1974	Johor
6	Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (UIAM)		1983	Kuala Lumpur
7	Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)		1964	Kedah
8	Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP)	Kolej Universiti Kejuruteraan & Teknologi Malaysia (KUKTEM)	2002 (2007)	Pahang
9	Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM)	Kolej Universiti Teknikal Kebangsaan Malaysia (KUTKM)	2000 (2007)	Melaka
10	Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM)	Kolej Universiti Teknologi Tun Hussein Onn (KUITTHO)	2000 (2007)	Johor
11	Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT)	Kolej Universiti Sains Terengganu	1999 (2007)	Terengganu
12	Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM)	Kolej Universiti Islam Malaysia (KUIM)	1996 (2007)	Negeri Sembilan
13	Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)	Institut Teknologi MARA	1956 (2002)	Selangor
14	Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)		1993	Sarawak
15	Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)		1994	Sabah
16	Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI)	Sultan Idris Training College (SITC)	1922 (1997)	Perak
17	Universiti Darul Iman Malaysia (UDM)		2006	Terengganu
18	Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK)		2006	Kelantan
19	Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia (UPNM)	Akademi Tentera Malaysia (ATMA)	2006	Kuala Lumpur
20	Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP)	Kolej Universiti Kejuruteraan Utara Malaysia (KUKUM)	2001 (2007)	Perlis

Source: Koh Aik Khoon et. al (2011). Growth of Public Universities in Malaysia. *College Student Journal* (ProQuest Education Journal)

Since 2004, all public universities were placed under the jurisdiction of the newly organized Ministry of Higher Education. As suggested by Koh Aik Khoon et. al in their research on "The Growth of Public University in Malaysia", even though most of the Malaysian universities are less than 20 years old, overall they have already organized their academic programmes with fine campuses 'well in-placed'. Currently, not only local students but also many



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international students from the Asian, West Asian and African regions seem to find Malaysia as a conducive environment for undergraduate and postgraduate studies since the cost is much less than they would have incurred if they studied elsewhere especially in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada.

It is apparent that with the high level participation of international students, the environment of learning in Malaysian universities has become more and more multicultural in nature and international in character. With respect to the legal structure of Malaysia universities, prior to 1996, two major laws and their Amendments have been enforced to regulate the education system in Malaysia, namely the Education Act, 1961 and University and University Colleges Act, 1971. However the two laws have now been replaced by two new legislations which were debated in Parliament in late 1995. With the passing of the two new legislations in early 1996 and one other legislation which was tabled in July 1996, education in Malaysia is now being governed by five major laws. These are:

1. Education Act 1996 (EA, 1966)
2. University and University Colleges Amendments Act, 1995 (UUCAA, 1995)
3. Private Higher Educational Institution Acts 1996 (PHEIA, 1996)
4. National Council of Higher Education Acts 1996 (NCHEA, 1996)
5. National Accreditation Board Bill, 1996 (NABB, 1996) (adopted by Parliament in July 1996).

University and University Colleges (Amendments) Act, 1996

The University and University Colleges (Amendments) Act, 1996, is an amendment to the original University and University Colleges Act of 1971. The principal aim of the amendments is to update as well as to incorporate, among other matters, new provisions to enable the corporatization of public universities. Some of the major aspects of the amendment Act are:

- Governance and management system, of public universities;
- Right-sizing of the senates of the public universities;
- Flexible and proactive financial management system;
- Accountability and contract procedures; and
- Student welfare and disciplinary procedures.

National Council of Higher Education Act, 1996

The main purpose of the National Council of Higher Education Act, 1996 (NCHEA, 1996) is to enable the creation of a body that will be responsible for the planning and strategic policy formulation of higher education in Malaysia. This law is part of the continuing efforts to reform higher education in the country.

The University and University Colleges Act (Amendments) Act, 1996 enables public universities to be corporatized as public corporations which will be endowed with flexible powers in finance and personnel management as well as academic and research and services matters.



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However, the universities will remain government-owned and will be supported by government grants. The establishment of many private universities, and the corporatization of public universities, has necessitated the creation of an effective regulatory agency to monitor and ensure that higher educational institutions function in line with national policies and requirements.

The Act provides that membership of the National Council for Higher Education shall comprise representatives from government, public and private universities and individuals who have the expertise and experience in relevant Acts.

Private Higher Educational Institutions Acts, 1996

With respect to the private higher education system, the Private Higher Educational Institutions Acts, 1996 (PHEIA, 1996) was formulated to enable the establishment, registration, management, regulation and quality control of private higher educational institutions in Malaysia. Among the more important focus of the provisions of the law are:

- Procedure concerning the setting up of private institutions of Higher Education with the status of university or university colleges and branches of foreign universities.
- The system of governance and constitutions of private higher education institution, the conduct of courses of study after approval by the government, and standards of physical facilities and infrastructure.
- Power of the Minister with respect to the medium of instruction, required core subject areas for local students, and the rules and procedures of student discipline are generally the same as for public universities.

The purpose of PHEI, 1996 is to facilitate the establishment, management and development of quality private higher education in Malaysia to complement that which is provided for by the public sector. The governance structure of Malaysia's PHEI has 10 major functions (Soaib, A. & Suffean, H., 2012):

1. To develop an efficient and innovative management system for PHEI.
2. To manage the appointment of senior officers of PHEI.
3. To supervise the administration and management of PHEI.
4. To plan for the establishment of PHEI including university colleges, university branch campuses and faculties.
5. To establish centers of excellence at PHEI to upgrade the higher education of the country.
6. To plan and implement the establishment of learning centers/chairs in various fields of specialization with foreign universities.
7. To revise and recommend for updating the Universities and University Colleges Act and other relevant acts.
8. To study, draft and update Universities' Constitutions.
9. To coordinate the system of degrees' conferment of all PHEI.
10. To function as the secretariat for MPTN (National Council of Higher Education)

The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) which is now under the main organization of the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) has the vision to turn Malaysia into a Center of Excellence for Higher Education (MOHE 2008). It also has the mission



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To develop and put in place a higher education environment that encourages the growth of premier knowledge centers and individuals who are competent, innovated with high moral values in order to meet national and international needs. (MOHE 2008)

The Ministry was very ambitious to translate this vision and mission through its objectives as quoted next:

1. To ensure that at least two of the country's universities are continuously listed among the best 200 universities in the world and that one of the said universities is listed as among the world's top 50 universities.
2. To develop at least 10 centers of excellence which are internationally recognized in terms of research output.
3. To ensure that at least 75% of the lecturers in the public institutes of higher education possess the Doctor of Philosophy qualification.
4. To produce competent graduates to fulfill national and international manpower needs with 75% of the graduates employed in their relevant fields within six month of their graduation.
5. To encourage the internationalization of the country's higher education environment by attracting overseas students, equivalent to 10% of the total student population at the diploma, graduate and postgraduate levels.
6. To increase the cohort of individuals (17-23 years of age) with access to higher education to 40%, for all forms conventional and non-conventional higher education.
7. To ensure that there is continuous improvement in other sources for the funding of public universities at a ratio of 30% university funded to 70% government funded.
8. To make available adequate and quality higher education infrastructure facilities comparable to standard international practices.
9. To make available funding facilities for potential and qualified students to gain access to higher education.
10. To raise the strategic relationship between local institutes of higher education and institutes of higher education overseas, as well as renown local and foreign research institutions in the fields of research, development and commercialization.

(MOHE 2008)

However, strategic policies for human capital development through the public higher education system take a different form. New initiatives have been undertaken, though to date, not fully accomplished. Nonetheless, the initial initiatives under the planning and commitment of the government have indicated that some encouraging progress under Phase 2 Action Plan of the Strategic National Higher Education Plan. These include the launching of innovative human capital action plan at tertiary-level Metro Polytechnics and Young Leaders Programme as well as the disbursement of Research Grants under the 10th Malaysia Plan (2011-2015).

The goal of these initiatives is to enhance the role and capability of the higher education sector so as to become one of the critical contributors in the National Transformation Plan (NTP) of the government of the day. This is demonstrated in the Budget of 2012, whereby about RM12.9 billion has been allocated to the higher education sector compared to RM37.2 billion that goes to Ministry of Education as a whole. The purpose of all these initiatives is to upgrade the quality of academic staff of the higher education system, enhance the quality of research and development (R&D) capability, internationalization of the higher education system, and to improve the programmes of student personality development, particularly in the domain of soft skills competencies. The assumption is that through good academic staff development programmes in the higher education system, the



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production of quality graduates in the human capital development agenda would be realized. The following five (5) critical strategies for the public higher education system have been adopted through the Budget 2012:

- Enhancement of quality academic staff through an increase of advanced degree programmes allocations especially in the disciplines of pure and technological sciences.
- Enhancement of research and development (R&D) capabilities through bigger Research Grants for high impact research activities focusing on Innovative Human Capital Incubator Programmes, with the purpose of generating patented design, industrial and business products and the creation of Centers of Excellence (CoE) in the higher education system.
- Development of ideal student personality and competencies through several sub-strategies including:
 - ✓ Professional Recognition Programmes
 - ✓ Graduate Marketability Programmes
 - ✓ Graduate Business Development Programmes
 - ✓ Excellence in Sports Programmes
- Internationalization Programmes to be promoted to the immediate developing countries in the region, particularly, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV), and regional branding of Malaysia through confidence building programmes (Soft Power).
- Streamline of technical and vocational training through the establishment of polytechnics in order to empower the population so as to become highly skilled human capital and to improve the performance of polytechnics comparable to that of university as well to ensure that the polytechnics serve as alternative institutions for students who want to pursue their higher education in the advanced technical and technological domains.

From his analysis (Hussein, 2012), it is observed that statistically there seems to be a strong emphasis on the production of university level graduates in comparison to diploma and certificate level graduates from the polytechnics and community colleges in Malaysia. For example, in 2009, in terms of ratio, the universities seemed to have produced about three (3) times more than the number of graduates from polytechnics and community colleges in the country.

This has a serious implication with respect to the absorptive capacity of public and private organizations to accommodate the university level graduates, thereby leading to a situation of more university graduates who are unemployed. Apparently, most of the graduates have committed themselves to government-sponsored loans which have to be repaid in a given timeline. However, graduates who hold diplomas and certificates from the polytechnics and community colleges are easily marketable because their semi-professional qualifications in scientific and technology-related fields are in greater demand by the private sector industries. Therefore, it is critical that the manpower planning strategies be re-examined periodically so that the production of university-level graduates are in alignment with the demands of the marketplace, especially in the allied scientific, technology and business administration fields of study.

The number of government tertiary education institutions for year 2009 with respect to entrants, enrollments and graduates at Degree, Diploma and Certificate level is indicated in the following Table 2:



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Table 2

No. of Government Institutions, Entrants, Enrolments and Graduates in 2009

No. of Universities	Entrants	Enrolments	Graduates
20	153,470	437,420	104,870
No. of Polytechnics	Entrants	Enrolments	Graduates
27 (Diploma Level)	26,526	60480	19,316
Certificate Level	11,936	25,950	12,110
No. of Polytechnics	Entrants	Enrolments	Graduates
63 (Diploma Level)	431	846	443
Certificate Level	8,714	16,415	7,242
Level	No. of Graduates		%
Degree Holders	104,870 (Universities)		72.8
Diploma Holders	19,759 (Poly & Com. Colleges)		13.7
Certificate Holders	19,352 (Poly & Com. Colleges)		13.5
Total	143,981		100

Source: Adapted from EPRD, MOE and MOHE - Malaysian Educational Statistics 2010

PARADIGM SHIFT

There is, in fact, an active debate among policy makers in Malaysia as to what exactly the new paradigm should be to ensure all institutions of higher education in the country, public as well as private can effectively operate and contribute to the new '1 Malaysia' society of the 21st Century.

In general, several concerned educationalists have suggested that the higher educational process must move from:

- Instructor/lecturer-centred instruction styles to resource-oriented and problem – solving learning culture.
- Provider-driven curriculum to user-centered curricular modules and packages
- Closed systems to open systems without rigid disciplinary parameters.
- Classroom to work and performance-based learning context.
- Insolated environment to networked environments.
- One-way instructional methodology to highly interactive instructional teaching methodologies
- Local to national and global understanding of issues and perspectives and vice-versa.
- Change resistant to open and anticipatory changes in educational management style.

The paradigm shift is a most challenging task for institutions of higher learning to grapple with. Even more challenging in the paradigm shift is that the change process should and must be driven by the higher education sector itself. Otherwise, it could result in the output profile of graduates being heavily shaped and manipulated by market forces which focus on short-term return and profits to the few individuals, rather than for long-term benefits of the wider net of individuals in the society in general. Indeed, all institutions of higher learning in



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Malaysia have constantly been urged to take a proactive role in engendering all the necessary mission of a modern 21st century institution that emphasizes a broader and more dynamic model of higher education system.

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH INNOVATION, CREATIVITY AND CHANGE

In essence, in Malaysia, innovations are necessary especially for old but established institutions of higher learning (such is the case of the University of Malaya). They must possess the proactive features necessary to face the challenging but daunting task of transformation and change, head on. This is because institutions of higher learning in the country are expected face up to the challenges or perish in the waves of the globalisation era.

Hence, the higher education policy directions and missions must be governed by concrete strategies and actions in:

- Offering quality higher education programmes, training and research
- Ensuring entry, based on intellectual merit without sacrificing equity and equality
- Pursuing high intellectual scholarship, development and professionalism
- Exhibiting total institutional commitment to social development of the community
- Offering lifelong learning opportunities for all, regardless of creed and backgrounds
- Establishing links to the world of work for graduates nationally and internationally
- Engendering social debates and healthy criticisms from within and without
- Providing impartial advice and expertise for decision makers and implementers
- Upholding academic freedom, justice, integrity, morality and high ethical standards
- Serving local, national, regional and international development needs.

For Malaysia to achieve the transformation process effectively, a whole range of issues and challenges will require close scrutiny and deliberations. In general, these include: well-organized institutional profiling of the student body, participatory leadership and management training of staff and student leaders, constant innovation in teaching, training and research activities, provision of excellent essential services such as career counseling, graduate placement and tracer studies, recognition of cultural diversity, and total commitment for the inclusion of marginalized social groups.

CONCLUSION: STRATEGIC POLICY AGENDA

The new social expectations of the role of higher education in Malaysia seem to reflect a tall order as underlined in the discussion above. In terms of university-level leadership and governance, the social expectations are underpinned by four specific policy perspectives. They are: relevance, quality, management and finance. These perspectives are critical in the transformation process of higher education of the public and private institutions.

In terms of “relevance”, higher education must essentially be considered in relation to its fundamental social role in society, and to its mission of providing education, training and research. Also, equally important is its links with the world of work and in the context of its relationship with the human capital development policy of the country.

As a second policy perspective, quality is inseparable from social relevance. The quality of higher education is dependent on the quality of academic staff and their level of intellectual productivity, programmes and curricular



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content, diversity of student compositions, up-to-date research infrastructure and facilities, and evaluation systems and mechanisms. These factors are fundamentally critical to be continually addressed by all public institutions of higher learning in the country.

In respect of management, policy related examination of higher education is posited on the conviction that a set of sub-systems which include philosophy, visions, missions, structures, resources, procedures of admissions and the intellectual climate should interact harmoniously with one another at the national and the supra national levels. The management of higher educational institutions cannot be reduced to the level of book-keeping operation and activities solely on the basis of economic considerations. The management policy function should also embrace the criteria of social relevance, quality of instruction, training and research, and productive consultancy services.

In terms of finance, the funding of higher education faces the huge challenge of mass number of intakes and admissions into the public universities, and the related costs and services as required of the procedures and requirements. Policy-related research in the areas of higher education financing is an indispensable activity that must be undertaken by the system.

In general, the activities related to the perspectives outlined above will invariably include regular reexamination of the following: institutional profiling of student body, advanced leadership and management training of university leaders and administrators, periodic reviews of programmes and curricular content toward improvement and relevance, updating of methodologies of instructions based on new innovations in effective teaching, training and research activities, regular reviews of essential student services through studies and career counseling.

Indeed, in order to achieve the intended transformation of higher education in Malaysia, a whole range of policy issues as well as any teething problems must be continually addressed. The issues and problems require close scrutiny in terms of policy-directed research, reviews and reevaluation by the concerned stake holders.

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