

# The Changing Trends in University Governance in Malaysia: Issues and Challenges

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## **Abstract**

*Society has undergone massive changes in its socioeconomic and cultural facets. Thus the concept of knowledge society has got momentum with it, with education being a key motivator of these changes. Following the introduction of the “Wawasan 2020” (Vision 2020) and the subsequent declaration of the Transformasi Nasional (TN50) policy, increasing attention has been made in the effort to change the structure of higher education governance in Malaysia (Dzulkifli, 2011). The ongoing reforms in University governance are driven by the notion that Malaysia aims to set themselves up as a central node for better education in the region (Quddus & Ahmad, 2015) and as a nation aims to transform into “a nation of calibre, with a new mindset” (New Straits Times, Online - 21 October, 2016). As a nation, Malaysia also wants to be fully developed in terms of economic development, ensuring social justice, a system of good governance, quality of life and to uphold social and spiritual values, political stability, national pride, confidence, unity and social cohesion in the polity (“The Way Forward—Vision 2020” speech delivered by Dr Tun Mahathir, Source: <http://www.epu.jpm.my/02/28/1991>). This paper explores whether these particular reform initiatives introduced in relation to higher education management would help to achieve the declared objectives of the government of Malaysia. In analysing the impact of reform initiatives on the production of knowledge in Malaysia, and across the globe, this paper has explored the answers of the following questions: a) What are the major changing trends of higher education governance in Malaysia; b) How current reform initiatives relating to university governance will affect the “soaring upwards” motto of the government i.e. the ministry of higher*

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*education; c) what are the current challenges of university governance in Malaysia and how to resolve them. The findings of this study reveal that there are many innovative programs and policies relating to higher education management in Malaysia, however some of them are not supportive of and to some extent even contradict the objectives of the government and society at large.*

**Keywords:** Internationalization, Standardization, Talent management, 2u2i & 3u1i programs, Holistic graduates

## **Introduction**

This paper brings attention to the pattern of changes Malaysian higher education is going through that has major effects on higher education reform and governance, now that knowledge production and research is much more global. The primary method of analysis involved the review of documents to assess the historical and socioeconomic conditions wherein the Malaysian higher education entity developed and grew: i.e. 1957-2016. The significance of this study lies not only in lessons to be learned for Malaysia but also for other developing nations in the world.

## **History of Malaysian Higher Education Governance**

The effect of demand locally and abroad has resulted in large changes occurring in policy, objectives and governance strategies over the past fifty years. Early on, mass availability of basic education was a priority, as the early leadership considered that paramount for national development, constituting a “common good” for all citizens. As the nation transitioned from a low to middle income nation, a goal in “Vision 2020” was set, the outcomes whence the priority was shifted from basic education to higher education to accelerate socioeconomic and political growth. Similar to neighbouring nations such as Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia, higher education has taken on the responsibility to drive the nation towards a knowledge-based economy guided by the “mission of not just disseminating and generating knowledge, but also to translate them into products” (Dzulkifli, 2011: 236). The following discussion looks into the changes and progress higher education governance has undergone in Malaysia.

## **The Philosophy of Education under the Colonial Era**

During the colonial era, the British strategy to educate locals only extended to those handfuls few who could aid them in retaining their power. The Japanese, however, initiated a “Japanising” education system in Malaya where Japanese replaced the local languages in government affairs, and also importing Japanese staff. This had a strong impact on educational development in what would become Malaysia. Thereafter, the British, after returning from World War II, adopted the following principles of education: (a) To educate with an aim to allow for self-rule, though keeping loyalty intact; (b) All children to be granted equality, foregoing racial identity; (c) The establishment of University Malaya in Kuala Lumpur in 1949.

## Higher Education after the Independence

The outline after independence was to “localize” education in Malaya by setting up the Malay Language as the national language while also continuing the usage of other languages and cultures that were of the non-Malays. Based on the recommendations of the then Higher Education Planning Committee, general education gave way to vocational, technical and science based education; thus Institute Teknologi MARA (currently UiTM) was established in 1967 as an additional institution apart from the University of Malaya.

After the 1969 incident, in an attempt to equalize socioeconomically the gap between the various races, the construction of a fair and holistic higher education framework was attempted. Consequently, from 1969 to 1972, four more universities were established in Malaysia: they were University Sains Malaysia (USM) (1969), University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) (1970), University Pertanian Malaysia (currently University Putra Malaysia [UPM]) (1971) and University Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) (1972). The commitment to form them came out of a will to hasten national unity and modernization. Concerning the matter of higher education, the Second Malaysia Plan (1971-75) focused on the following four goals (Ismail & Musa, 2007, p. 21):

- a. To develop national unity and integration through a better education system;
- b. Tailor the education system to fulfill the national workforce needs;
- c. To upgrade the education framework to make a progressive population more educated in science and technology;
- d. To better the capacity for research, planning and the ability to implement national objectives.

Compared to the Second Malaysia Plan, the the motives for higher education with the government has changed tremendously in recent years, according to the Eleventh Malaysia Plan. In line with the “Vision 2020” Plan, the updated goals for higher education in Malaysia is such: a) To ensure adequate provision of qualified manpower to meet the nation’s needs; b) To correct economic and social imbalances through the restructuring of the local society; c) To encourage national unity as well as spread and generate newly crafted knowledge; d) Further encourage the concept and aims of life-long learning; e) To sustain the growth of the economy and treat higher education as a product to be exported; f) To aim, as a nation, to make Malaysia a central hub of the region. A higher education institution that would protect national identity, heritage and interest of the majority populace such as the Malay/ Bumiputera, were fulfilled through the establishment of the Institute Technology MARA, later known as UiTM. The need for the Malay Language as the primary instruction medium in an institute of higher learning was fulfilled with the establishment of the University Kabangsan Malaysia. In addition, the

establishment of the International Islamic University Malaysia and University Sains Islam Malaysia were a response to the growing want of a non-traditional education system based on Islamic ideals, for example, religious school leavers or for traditionally educated students; a development that was realized through the determination of Islamic intellectuals in the country.

### ***The Influence of Globalization and Liberalism on Management of Higher Education***

As a result of the New Economic Policy in 1971, an increased demand for Malaysian exports resulted in the continued prioritization of science and technology. Human resource development, in regards to the development plans and strategies the government would subsequently formulate, existed lower on the agenda. Following the introduction of the Private Higher Educational Institution Act, 1996, the private sector garnered much larger roles in higher education and human resource development. The supervision of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) is responsible for ensuring higher education institutions in Malaysia align by a centralized standard. In addition to implementing reform programs to improve teaching and learning, course quality, the capacity of the teaching staffs, special priority is put on the fields of research and innovation (Norizan, Mohamed, Omar, & Rainis, 2010).

### **The Major Changing Trends in Higher Education Governance**

Under its redesigning higher education agenda, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has emphasized that “education must be accessible to anyone, anytime and anywhere” (Soaring Upwards: Malaysian Higher Education, 2015/2016, MOHE, p.v). In order to make education accessible to all without any geographical restrictions, the Ministry has introduced and begun implementing a series of initiatives. The following are some major revolutionary initiatives related to higher education governance in Malaysia:

#### **Commercialization of Higher Education**

One of the main objectives of current higher education reform in Malaysia is to guarantee customer satisfaction and the best value for their money in addition to more client-targeted and commercial service delivery platforms in higher education (Rahman and Mahani, 2010). There is a distinct gravitation away from the concept of higher education being a platform for "common good" for all people as higher “education becomes more and more commodified into a tradable product” (Dzulkifli, 2011: 213).

The recent trend in higher education development in Malaysia is driven by the ethos that knowledge-based products can have a competitive market similar to any other free market commodity. In addition, the country’s economy is directed towards transformation into a knowledge economy; which, as an economy more appropriate for the modern global stage,

prospers best at a high level of privatization of knowledge to repackage them into distinct material or virtual products. Critics ( For example, Zulkifli, 2011) identified on going higher education reforms as contradictory to the national objective to reduce socioeconomic imbalance by ensuring social justice, free and open creation and dissemination of knowledge. For Halvorsen (2005), the process of knowledge creation is also a path to forge identity, and to bring together the “producer and consumer” within the common link of an institution such as a university. The university is a public place for communication and cultural transformation, though personal or social commitments. Most importantly, it is a hub of research, where one may reflect on ones life’s work and the consequences that come with it, and the consequences of achieving “certified knowledge”—has increasingly become tendency globally today an act of “shopped for” rather that sought out to be “achieved”.

Kaur and Pandian (2010) argued that globalization has had tremendous influence on the higher education governance and development in Malaysia. They consider commodification and commercialization has become the main factors for the formation and growth of private education in a country, forcing government to reform their public universities to compete with this trend. Globalization pushes higher education towards this pattern of "commodification" of knowledge-based products and research. Because higher education institutions are increasingly becoming like business entities, their output has also increasingly become akin to tradeable products. Dzulkifli (2011) stressed that higher education in Malaysia is moving towards elements of commercialization rather than pure academic and means of sociocultural development. He suggested that:

*It is therefore important to promote indigenous knowledge and wisdom as part of global knowledge if Malaysia is keen to move up the value chain where indigenous knowledge and wisdom can be a source of inspiration. At the same time, this demands that the rigid and outdated administrative structures which have thus far hindered the meaningful participation by universities in innovative activities must be reviewed, replaced or restructured.....so that they can expand into non-traditional developmental roles, without affecting the quality and value of education.(Dzulkifli 2011, p. 221)*

There is a debate and controversy regarding the issue of ‘autonomy’ and flexibility in running academic and research activities in institutions of higher learning in Malaysia in a similar manner to neighboring countries such as Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, and etcetera. On one hand, the government wants universities to run operations like business entities, but on the other hand, there is yet to be a post-bureaucratic knowledge production system in place. There are many important reforms being carried out in the higher education sub-sector, but the nation is still undergoing,

according to Tan Sri Murad Mohamad Noor, an "overly bureaucratic education system" (quoted in Dzulkifli, 2011, p. 204). Academic freedom for academic staff in universities and other higher learning sites are still bound by academic rigor of the standards of academic scholarship. (Azmi Sharom, The Star, 9 February, 2012). It is worth mentioning that higher education institutions in Malaysia are being slowly given more freedom, autonomy and flexibility, but their freedom in recent years has decreased remarkably. Azmi Sharom raised the question about autonomy of higher educational institutions by arguing that "...there is and the price [for financial autonomy] would be less public funding" (The Star, 9 February 2012). When that is the reality, then the resulting blowback is a ludicrous increase in fees for higher education needing to be supported by parents and guardians. Azmi Sharom further argued that "University is also a storehouse of knowledge, what will become of departments which have little perceptible economic value? Will they disappear? Go the way of the dodo and the philosophy departments in the country?" (The Star, 9 February, 2012). Malaysia has adopted a strategy of higher education expansion and reform policy in line with their economic values i.e. commercialization, network building and embracing steps to corporatize the country's higher education. These strategies stress the decrease of public fund/ grants in favor of encouraging the capacity to grow universities' own funds. Emphasis is put on strategies prioritizing the consumer market, cooperation with corporations by universities and greatly increasing priority for intellectual property trademarks. (Mok, 2010; Slaughter and Leslie, 1997), which would in fact put the future of the universities as institutions for human development to ensure social justice and the shaping of a public space at stake. In recent years, higher education in Malaysia is fast becoming an industry and an export commodity so as to bring financial returns to the country (Quddus and Ahmad, 2015).

### **Standards and Linkage as Forms of University Governance**

Under the 'Redesigning Higher Education' agenda, public universities in Malaysia are focused on a different role of producing "knowledge workers" who are effective at many differing but important areas. They are also to uphold and maintain 'standards' by developing new forms of partnerships and linkages between other universities, people and experts from industries locally and abroad to satisfy the needs of a constantly shifting national and global economy. In line with the above-mentioned role of universities, the "CEO @ Faculty" program has been introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education to appoint top local and international CEOs and industry players into Malaysia's universities as an "Adjunct Professor". Under this scheme, the CEO's would be considered an icon for students and expected to be able to improve the existing curriculum through the sharing of knowledge, experiences and their best practices to formulate a new integrated assessment scheme via a holistic learning curve. One of the main objectives of this program is to facilitate the participation of the industrial sector

through the induction of knowledge from industry leaders. By sharing their experience and expertise, a synergy is created between the industry leaders and the researchers and university students. Another important objective of this program is that it will improve graduates employability by enhancing the student learning experience and increasing the supply of students with relevant knowledge for the demand of the industry. Universities will also be able to attract, recruit and retain the best talent, especially from the industry practitioners by having multi-track career pathways. This program was introduced in 2015 with 24 CEOs (including senior public and private sectors officials) joining the program, with the number reaching 60 in 2016. A purpose of introducing this program is to “provide mentorship to university students and lecturers, and even guide universities on matters such as curriculum development to ensure industry relevance” (*Soaring Upwards: Malaysian Higher Education*, *ibid*, p.3).

In fact, oversight and review of standards of academic programs and curriculum and the regular peer review to update and upgrade standards with academic and industry members is vital for the modern university management in Malaysia (Anuwar *ibid*, p.45). In addition, there is constant pressure from the Ministry to set higher education to the level of international standard and commercialize their products, which are now a national objective and is a priority. Thus institutes of higher education have no other choice but to introduce and maintain academic programs in compliance with international standards and be benchmarked for comparison with the best institutes overseas (*ibid*). Malaysian universities are now striving to get their position in the QS Ranking and operate in accordance with the international “standards” to perform their ‘businesses’. Thus, like other developed countries, the MOHE and universities in Malaysia are currently focused heavily on science and technology based academic programs, research and innovation. They are also affected by outside effects such as globalization, internalization and the free market economy. This in turn puts a higher amount of strain on the development of higher education institutions and makes them face much higher levels of uncertainty. Some scholars argue that what is needed in planning higher education for the fulfilment of the needs of future generations in Malaysia is to focus on local needs, heritage and identity as well as the visions and aspirations of the nation itself. O’Sullivan (2001) also suggests (quoted in Dzul kifli, 2011:214):

*Our universities today flounder for want of a larger and more comprehensive context. Having no adequate larger context in which to function, our higher educational institutions operate within a splintered and fractionated world-view....One of the most common solutions to this vacuum is in the reinstatement of past forms of humanistic studies in a core curriculum, a curriculum which includes philosophy, ethics, history, literature, religious studies and some general sciences.”*

### **Internationalization of Higher Education**

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) or MEB (HE) identified 10 “Shifts” to allow Malaysia’s higher education system to reach new heights. Shift 8 MEB (HE) is “global prominence” i.e. to make Malaysia an international education hub through the making of significant gains in international student enrolment, raises global recognition on key dimensions such as research, publications, patents, and institutional quality, as well as becoming a top destination for international students. The MEB (HE) stated:

Malaysia will expand enrolment to reach 250,000 international students by 2025, and reach new markets through more innovative programmes and partnerships. Above all, Malaysia will be a globally-connected higher education player that is renowned for its academic and research expertise, particularly in niche areas like Islamic banking and finance, or tropical related science and technology. (Source: *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education)*, www.moe.gov.my)

In line with the Shift 9 MEB (HE), the Ministry of Higher Education launched ‘Malaysia MOOCs’ or ‘Massive Open Online Course’ in September 2015. According to MOHE, Malaysia MOOCs is intended to encourage online learning with shorter duration of studies and savings on tuition fees. Accredited MOOCs need not originate from Malaysia and can be from international MOOCs providers. MOHE also hopes that this provision will “encourage completion and empowers students by enabling them to obtain knowledge from diverse sources. This initiative is also in line with the Ministry’s lifelong learning (anytime, anyone, anywhere) agenda, which is Shift 3 MEB (HE) ‘A Nation of Lifelong Learners’ (*Upwards: Malaysian Higher Education*, ibid, p.5).

Although ‘internationalization’ of higher education and research is now a dominant agenda in relation to higher education management in Malaysia, critics argue that the concept of ‘internationalization’ of higher education and research promotes “knowledge shopping” rather than establishing ideas about “identity formation” of knowledge seekers (Halvorsen, 2005). The issue of internationalization that is a priority for higher education management can be traced back to the trend of the modern global market, which promotes unceasing competitions and the directive to recruit the best and brightest to increase their own revenue. Currently, higher learning institutes in Malaysia have to adapt to the guidelines of the global market. This is to fulfil their responsibility to guide the nation into a competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy by producing knowledge workers, committing to international cooperation and networking in research and curriculum development and etcetera. This is to distance them from their welfare state counterparts, but this threatens many citizens access to quality education, thus inhibiting the concept of quality ‘knowledge for all’. Thus, in reality

Malaysian universities are currently experiencing the dichotomy of contradiction between the notion of ‘knowledge selling’ and ‘identity formation’ for their local and international clients relating to their knowledge production, innovation and research for development. There are many actors and factors that are trying to shape the current changing trends in university governance in Malaysia but the utmost important one is the influence of globalization, internationalization and the effect of multinational organisations.

### **2u2i & 3u1i programs**

The 2u2i (or 2 years in university and 2 years in industry) and 3u1i (or 3 years in university and 1 year in industry) programs have been suggested in line with Shift 1 ‘Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduate’ and Shift 7, ‘Innovation Ecosystem’ of the MEB (HE). The motto of these programs is ‘learning through work and study’ and a few public universities<sup>2</sup> have already introduced selective academic programs under the 2u2i scheme starting from the 2016/2017 academic semester. Under this program, undergraduate students will get enhanced industry exposure during their studies by spending 2 or 3 years at the university focusing mainly on the theoretical aspects of their courses and 1 or 2 years in industry applying their theoretical knowledge there. The philosophy behind the introduction of this program is that it will facilitate Malaysian university graduates not only in industry or practical knowledge exposure but also through technical know-how of incorporating companies and running start-ups, which the students can continue to operate upon graduation. The 2u2i or 3u1i programs also seek to inculcate the spirit of entrepreneurship among Malaysian university graduates and encourage them from being job seekers into becoming job creators themselves. The main strategies of these programs are: a) enhancing the student learning experience; b) devising an integrated cumulative grade point average (iCGPA) system; c) Creating opportunities for students and academic staff to acquire entrepreneurial skills and pursue their own enterprises. One of the unique aspects of the current ‘redesigning higher education’ agenda is to produce holistic, entrepreneurial, and balanced graduates at institutes of higher learning (IHL). The iCGPA adopts a holistic student assessment system addressing the knowledge, communication, problem-solving and entrepreneurship skills of graduates and enables universities to provide ‘better feedbacks and improvement opportunities, and potential employers to better understand their future employees and their needs’ ( source: *Soaring Upwards: Malaysian Higher Education*, p2).

### **Challenges of Higher Education Governance**

Border-less and cross-border higher education, which has become very entrenched in Malaysia, undermines the authority of a country in determining its prerogative. Like any other country, higher education

management in Malaysia is heavily influenced by external factors such as globalization and market economy. The effects of these outside influences on higher education development and University management seem to contradict with the national objective to create balanced socioeconomic and sustainable development. By giving continuous emphasis on science and technology based higher education development, it means there is a lack of resource mobilization for non-science higher education, thus human resource development suffers. Although Malaysia follows market-driven knowledge production and research in higher education, there is a top down approach and lack of scope for democratization and autonomy in relation to University management in the country. The changes of learning environment e.g. 2u2i or 3u1i also pose a threat to the confidence of users and other stakeholders related to higher education institutions. Higher education management in Malaysia is now facing a greater degree of uncertainty with the introduction of “redesigning” higher education strategies. With the introduction and heavy emphasis on entrepreneurial ethos in teaching-learning, Malaysian higher education is directed towards private goods instead of public goods orientation. The desire to turn Malaysia into an international higher education hub exposes the country to a great deal of changes and development, which might not fulfil the future needs of citizen putting emphasis on local heritage and identity as well as the hopes and dreams of the nation set under the Vision 2020.

### **Conclusion**

In response to the question: “What are the major changing trends of higher education governance in Malaysia?” This paper reveals that Malaysian higher education management is undergoing tremendous changes and developments in recent years under its ‘redesigning’ agenda. Some of these developments include the introduction of ICGPA, CEO@Faculty Program, 2u2i or 3u1i Program, MOOC, etc. In addition, promoting internationalization, commercialization of academic and research products and university ranking or global recognition are also crucial to university management as part of the ‘soaring upwards’ motto of the Ministry of Higher Education. From the discussion mentioned earlier, it is clear that standards and linkages are being emphasized as forms of higher education management to produce holistic, entrepreneurial and balanced graduates as well as to accelerate the process of expansion or internationalization, commercialization and global recognition of Malaysian higher education. However, the new drive for growth and development of Malaysian higher education represents in itself an increased pattern to co modification and commercialization of education and research, which indicate that for ‘standard’ knowledge packages users need to pay more and more. Such a situation also implies that the quality and originality of knowledge production in general and research and innovation in particular have to be relaxed in higher education institutions in the country. In this sense, the role

of the higher education institutions may not align to shape individual intellectual capacity and originality, but to “certify and to classify” (Quddus and Khairil, *ibid*, 2015). While internationalization of higher education and research is an important role of university management under the current reform agenda of the government, it is not clear how universities will handle the issue of industry exposure of international students when that scope is limited in Malaysia. If students would be allowed to have industry exposure (which is half of their academic program) in their home countries under 2u2i program, then there must be a question of monitoring the quality of industry exposure in foreign countries. There is no doubt that international nature of education and research is a reality in today’s world and it goes beyond the needs of the individual nation state. However, the changing trends in Malaysian higher education management may seek to promote and protect at the micro level academic programs with high commercial values and at the macro level “trade mark the University”!

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