Globalisation and internationalisation are trends that have brought about a new world order that is characterised by complexity, interconnectedness and diversity. These increasingly challenging contexts are entering a new phase of transformation that call upon an international dimension to higher education. To remain relevant in today's changing economies, institutions of higher education have a critical role to equip students with the relevant knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies to be able to live and work in an international and multicultural society. Henceforth, all institutions of higher education should strive to put into place national policies to address the key drivers of globalisation and internationalisation in order to remain relevant and keep up with current competitors around the globe.

To meet the demands of changing market economies Malaysia is evolving from a production-based economy to an innovative, knowledge-based one that requires the development of a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce. To ensure the growth of this critical workforce, there needs to be increased accessibility and flexibility to higher education. To date, Malaysia has close to 20 public-funded universities, 37 private universities and university colleges and approximately 300 private colleges (Ministry of Higher Education, 2008). Besides these, Verbik & Lasanowski (2007) highlight that the increase of foreign students in Malaysian institutions of higher learning and other international comparatives has made Malaysia one of the ‘emerging contenders’ as an international market for foreign students.

While such expansion is taking place, Malaysia is challenged to address some crucial issues related to higher education. Firstly, there is a quest for Malaysia to become a regional hub for educational excellence providing world-class university education. In order to fulfil this noble aspiration, higher education institutions have come under greater public scrutiny since no Malaysian institute of higher education secured a position in the Top 100 in the recent Times Higher Education (THES) World University Rankings 2007 (The Star, 13 November 2007). There is also growing concern for the number of unemployed graduates from the higher education system since 2000. The Labour Force Survey revealed that the number of unemployed graduates has increased from 42,500 in 2000 to 74,182 in 2004 (World Bank Report, 2007). It is against this backdrop of challenges and growing market demands that the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has put in place strategic goals for the transformation of higher education in Malaysia.

**The National Higher Education Strategic Plan**

An agenda for higher education in Malaysia is the repositioning of education for democratisation of education for the masses and simultaneously achieving excellence through internationalisation policies. Malaysia is proposing to use the ‘levelling-up’ approach to accomplish the twin goals of benefiting the socio-economically disadvantaged group while at the same time achieving excellence in human capital development. This transformational change of higher education has been put forward through the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP), which outlines a number of strategies that will be adopted to ‘reinvigorate’ Malaysian higher education in order to provide a solid foundation for the future. This Malaysian initiative is summarised in two documents: (i) ‘The National Higher Education Strategic Plan-Laying the Foundation Beyond 2020’, which provides the long-range direction and goals of higher education; and (ii) ‘The National Higher Education Action Plan: Triggering Transformation 2007–2010’, which outlines the implementation of the strategic plan in four distinct phases:

- Phase 1 – Laying the Foundation (2007–2010);
- Phase 2 – Strengthening and Enhancement (2011–2015);
- Phase 3 – Excellence (2016–2020);
- Phase 4 – Glory and Sustainability (beyond 2020).

The transformation framework also consists of the five pillars for strengthening institutions of higher education – Governance, Leadership, Academia, Teaching and Learning, and Research and Development (R&D). Running in tandem with these are the Critical Agenda Initiatives, which act as a catalyst for systematic change. These initiatives include the following: Apex Universities, ‘MyBrain15’ initiative, the ‘Lifelong Learning’ project, the Academic Performance Audit and the Graduate Training Scheme.

**Quality human capital**

The issue of unemployed Malaysian graduates has become one of concern – both in parliament and in open public debates. A study conducted by Morshidi et al. (2008) highlighted that close to 31,000 university graduates were still unemployed during the last quarter of 2006. The main reasons cited included graduates’ limited English language proficiency, weak communication, lack of
interpersonal and problem-solving skills, a lack of initiative, an unwillingness to learn from subordinates, narrow mindedness, and an over concern with hierarchy and status.

Henceforth, the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) can be viewed as a stepping stone towards promoting the development of quality human development and in helping Malaysia take up a strategic position as a regional hub of excellence in higher education. The former Prime Minister in tabling the 5-year Ninth Malaysian Plan stressed that the holistic model of human capital will emphasise the development of knowledge, skills, and intellectual capital in fields such as science, technology and entrepreneurship. The profile of the desired human capital under the Malaysian NHESP is based on three main principles that can be viewed as the main attributes of first class graduates. They are knowledge attributes, personal attributes and interpersonal attributes. Furthermore, to foster national unity among the multi-racial and multi-ethnic population of Malaysians, university courses will focus on intercultural understanding and diversity. The new dynamic and relevant curriculum and pedagogy would include programmes to stimulate creativity, innovation, leadership and entrepreneurship.

Working in tandem with the holistic development of graduates is the development of the university academia. In public universities, the total number of academic staff with doctorate qualifications in 2007 was 6,109 and staff with Masters degree was 12,717. This accounted for only 25 per cent who possessed a PhD or an equivalent qualification. The government hopes to raise this to 60 per cent by 2010 through efforts put forward by the critical agenda of ‘MyBrain 15’. The main aim of the ‘MyBrain 15’ initiative is to produce high-calibre quality human capital that is capable of developing its own indigenous research capability necessary for the creation and communication of new knowledge. One of the steps taken is to increase the enrolment of undergraduates through the process of democratisation of higher education. Another strategy is to create a pool of 100,000 high-quality graduates with PhDs in the next 15 years, of which 60 per cent would be in the fields of science technology and medicine, and another 20 per cent in the fields of humanities and applied literature. Besides this, the government hopes to reward academic achievements with awards and recognition in the form of career advancement opportunities to best performers. In this regard, Malaysian academics will be encouraged to publish regularly in recognised, high-impact international journals.

### Research and development

Under the policy development initiative of the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006–2010), one of the capacity-building initiatives included enhancing research and development capabilities. Among the initiatives include the intensification of training programmes, such as academic training schemes, and encouraging split PhD programmes. Malaysia also hopes to attract foreigners, especially international talents, to conduct research in the country. Another strategy is to lure back Malaysian research scientists and engineers (RSEs) working abroad. Furthermore, the desired outcomes outlined under the NHESP are listed below.

- To ensure 50 RSEs per 10,000 workforce.
- To commercialise at least 5 per cent of all R&D efforts.
- To create internationally acclaimed universities.
- To ensure five world-renowned R & D centres of excellence.
- To produce a well-functioning, thriving and collaborative national innovation system that facilitates efficient resource allocation, targeted research efforts, and access to global partners and markets.


As a long-term measure, the MOHE hopes to develop top talents as early as secondary school by providing pupils with scholarships and to ensure that the best brains are retained. The government has been increasing its research funding. Under the Ninth Malaysian Plan, the research funding has increased by 1.5 per cent of the country’s GDP, which signifies a three-fold increase in percentage terms compared to the allocations under the Eighth Malaysian Plan (0.49 per cent). In order to boost the R&D Pillar, the MOHE has encouraged public universities to increase their intake of postgraduate students from 18 per cent to 24 per cent by 2010. Furthermore, efforts are also being made for more collaborative R&D between university and industry, as such partnerships are still in their infancy stage in Malaysia compared to countries like the UK, the US and Australia.

### Concluding thoughts

Malaysia in her quest to become a regional hub of educational excellence must first and foremost address the challenges within Malaysian universities. The fall in the position of premier Malaysian universities like Universiti Malaya and Universiti Sains Malaysia in the THES 2005 rankings, and later in THES 2007, signify the crisis within Malaysian universities. According to the former Minister of Higher Education, these rankings cannot be ignored. He highlighted that there was no point complaining about the unfairness of the ranking system because it is used by universities to publicise their position in the world rankings. If higher education in Malaysia is to reach its noble aspirations laid out in the NHESP, then these rankings must be viewed as an important wake-up call for the country to tackle the fundamental problems within institutions of higher education in Malaysia. It is hoped that with the rating system for Malaysian higher education institutions (SETARA) in place, all local universities, both public and private, will work towards achieving a Band 6 (outstanding) on the ranking. Hopefully the confidence gained locally would spur them on to want to become strong contenders in the global higher education arena.

Moreover, Tan Sri Nordin, the President of the Association of Malaysian Universities (NST, 2007), feels that students should be allowed to select their university of choice. At present, the University Central Unit, referred to as UPU (Unit Pusat Universiti) at the MOHE, controls and monitors the intake of students in all public universities. Tan Sri Nordin has called for the abolishment of the UPU and feels that universities should be given the freedom to recruit students for their prime academic programmes as well as allow students to plan as early as Secondary One their route to their university of choice.

Tan Sri Nordin also highlighted the need for better governance of institutions of higher education. He reiterated that personnel
appointed to sit on the Board of Directors should be qualified individuals possessing good knowledge of universities output and the CEO (Vice Chancellors) should be given full authority to manage the process. He added that the VC should be given the not only to liberty to hire and fire but must also be the financial controller and chief strategist of the institution.

Furthermore, Malaysia needs to realise that the success of the current NHESP and related policy initiatives lie in the collaboration of all stakeholders. Both academics from public and private universities and politicians (government and opposition) must work collaboratively. Some quarters note that for far too long now, higher education in Malaysia has viewed private and public universities as two very different entities, which has resulted in private institutions being left out of the loop of development. Yet with the launch of the NESP, private higher education has to some extent been brought into the loop of development. However, issues regarding accreditation and credit transfer, involving mobility both between private and public local universities (and their collaborating international partners), still remain to be addressed. To ensure quality, the Malaysian Quality Agency (MQA) has been established with the purpose of implementing quality assurance of higher education in Malaysia.

The Malaysian HESP may perhaps be viewed as a ‘maturing’ of higher education in Malaysia. The good news is that there is now a document that charts a clear and systematic direction for the future of higher education in Malaysia. More importantly, there is also great political commitment and funding from the upper hierarchy of higher educational management, and a Project Management Office (PMO) has been established to ensure that what has been put on paper will be translated into practice to achieve both short and long-term goals in the quest for excellence in higher education.

References


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