

# GLOBALISATION AND LIBERALISATION OF MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

*Tertiary enrolment of international students is to quadruple from 1.8 million in 2000 to 7.2 million in 2025. The key factors are liberalisation and globalisation of higher education. In Malaysia, these processes were initiated in the 1980's. Starting as an Import-Substitution Industrialisation (ISI), higher education had transformed into an Export-Oriented Industrialisation (EOI) in the 1990's, followed by another expansionary stage in the 2010's. These initiatives reflect Malaysian commitment in enrolling more international students into the local institutions. In another current development, Malaysia has been ranked as one of the leading nations in supporting the internationalisation of higher education, together with Germany. Thus, realising the positive impact of higher education on Malaysian economy, this sector has been identified as one of the National Key Economic Areas (NKEAs) which is expected to generate an additional income of RM2.8 billion by the year 2020.*

**Keywords:** higher education; trade liberalisation; globalisation; international student; Malaysian economic transformation programme

## INTRODUCTION

The business of tertiary education is a booming industry, particularly in the current globalised, borderless world. The enrolment of international students is expected to quadruple from 1.8 million in 2000 to 7.2 million in 2025. The biggest slice, approximately 70% of the total demand, will come from Asia especially China and India (Bohm, Davis, Mearns, & Pearce, 2002). Highlighted by the International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF), around 5 million students were scattered all around the world in 2015 as compared to 2.1 million in 2000 (ICEF, 2015). In the same report, China and India are the

dominant sources for international student mobility, followed by South Korea. These statistics are quite noteworthy as there were only 238,000 international students globally in the 1960's, and 700,000 fifteen years later (McMahon, 1992). As emphasised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the prospect of trans-border education is undeniable when there were two international students for every 100 enrolments in 2013 and the number keeps increasing (UNESCO, 2014).

The architecture of trans-border education has since evolved, with more countries are entering the market. The industry is not limited to the traditional providers such as the United States and the United Kingdom. Conventional importers of tertiary education have reoriented their compass and welcomed more international students lately. China, for example, has been identified as one of the global emerging competitors. Not just limited in seating students from the same region, China goes beyond by attracting more students from developed countries (Hawthorne, 2008). Other than China, Malaysia and Singapore have been named as emerging contenders in the field of education supply, ranked just below Japan, Canada, and New Zealand as written in the same report. In other words, globalisation has reduced possible physical and non-physical barriers. Bigger eyes should be opened to new patterns of international students mobility which are not limited to south-north movement (Mahroum, 2000).

### **Malaysian Higher Education: Three Phases of Globalisation and Liberalisation**

In "Malaysia di ranking (Malaysia ranked)," (2015), Malaysia was ranked the ninth largest exporter of higher education in 2014, an improvement from the eleventh place in 2009. This is in line with Malaysia's aim in becoming the sixth largest exporting country in higher education by 2020. In a recent development, Malaysia, together with Germany, have been recognised as the best performer on openness to international higher education. The report on 26 countries using 37 qualitative indicators in 3 broad categories was revealed by the British Council, on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2016. Both countries scored the highest marks in all three categories, namely openness and international mobility policies, quality assurance and degree recognition, and access and sustainability (Morgan, 2016). This reflects Malaysia's commitment and dedication over the years in championing the global higher education.

These successes would not have been achieved in a short time. The key factors were the globalisation and liberalisation of Malaysian higher education, which took place in early 1980s. 1997 was a turning point for Malaysia as the higher education industry not only absorbed the economic downturn, but also formed a basis for more sustainable economic growth (ICEF, 2012). 2011 marked the beginning of the expansionary stage for this journey, towards 2020. Thus, in having better understanding, this transformation can be divided into three phases: phase 1 (1981-1996), phase 2 (1997-2010), and phase 3 (2011-current).

### ***Phase I (1981 – 1996)***

Both transformational processes were initiated in the early 1980's. Two factors identified were the increasing demand for skilled manpower and excessive outflow of Malaysian currency due to locals studying abroad (Sato, 2005). Malaysia was crafted to move from agriculture-based to production-based economy under the fourth prime minister. Instead of relying on colonial assistances and expertise, the focus has been redirected to Japan and South Korea (Furuoka, 2007). Japan Inc. concept worked as a benchmark in the creation of Malaysia Inc., where both public and private sectors work together in developing the country (Siddiquee, 2006). In completing this mission, skilled workforce was a necessity and educational institutions were the mass producers as expected. Limited number of public universities, however, had become an obstacle for the transformation. In 1980, there were only five public universities with an addition of two more in the following 10 years' time (Selvaratnam, 1985).

Similar limitations have pushed more Malaysians especially non-Bumiputeras to pursue their tertiary studies abroad, with most of them being self-financed (Lee, 2012). Due to our colonialism history, institutional reputation, and medium of instruction, most Malaysians chose to study in the United Kingdom and Australia. Our dependency on these two western nations, however, was not reciprocated well by the hosts, where full fees were being imposed on international students by both countries (Sato, 2005). Additionally, the 1980's global economic recession placed burden, not just on the students' families, but also on the government in terms of financial sponsorship. An amount of US\$1.2 billion was estimated to be the annual cost for having Malaysian students studying abroad between 1981 and 1985. This was unavoidable as only three out 100 secondary leavers could be placed in public universities in the early 1990's, as highlighted in Dhanarajan (1987).

This financial issue had pushed Malaysia to change its view on the higher education sector. In line with Malaysia Inc. spirit, private sector was welcomed in solving the problem. Under the newly appointed Education Minister, three new bills were passed and two acts amended, only in six months (Sato, 2005). Two of them were the Private Higher Education Institutions Act 1996 and the National Accreditation Board Act 1996. The main purpose was to regulate private higher educational institutions which skyrocketed especially in the middle of 1980's (Zakaria, 2000). This was supported by statistical findings when in 1986, more than 580 institutions including both public and private, operated and offered tertiary programmes (Dhanarajan, 1987). The institutions, however, were only allowed to confer certificate and diploma (Wilkinson & Yussof, 2005). Though numerous private institutions were established before the acts, they were never officially recognised (Da, 2007).

In the 1990's, private higher education institutions (PrHEIs) no longer complemented public higher education institutions (PbHEIs), instead they acted as rivals for them. One of the reasons was language. English as a medium of instruction was used in generating more twinning programmes between PrHEIs and foreign universities. In addition, study terms such as 2+2 and 3+1 were significant marketing strategies in attracting prospective undergraduates among locals (Lee, 2004). 3+1 programmes for example, allowed students to have their first three-year studies in Malaysia with the remaining year to be completed in the foreign institution. Degrees would then be conferred by the respective twinning institutions. This approach has contributed to less cost especially on tuition fees and daily stipends. This scheme excelled when the number of Malaysians studying abroad dropped to 52,000 from 60,000 in 1990 (Sivalingam, 2007). This situation has created a comparative advantage for PrHEIs, since PbHEIs still used Malay as the official language (Da, 2007).

The flexibility of programmes offered is another comparative advantage for the PrHEIs. In filling up the posts related to information technology (IT) in Cyberjaya (Malaysian Silicon Valley), PrHEIs have first offered mass IT programmes. As a result, enrolments have increased by nine times in PrHEIs as compared to PbHEIs with merely double the number (Tan, 2002). The flexibility never ceased when PrHEIs introduced more delivery methods in teaching and learning such as distance learning programme, open learning programme, franchise programme (foreign university), and franchise programme (local university) (Wilkinson & Yussof, 2005). This flexibility was possibly driven by the profit-seeking characteristics sculptured by most PrHEIs. This resulted in 41,000 enrolments for 271 private institutions in 1998, as revealed in the similar study.

On the other hand, public universities were restricted by Universities and University Colleges Act 1971, especially on administrative and financial parts (Sirat, 2010). At the same time, the institutions were developed as education providers rather than education enterprises. In line with New Economy Policy (NEP) that ended in 1990, education has been listed as one of the affirmative actions in minimising the socio-economic gap between Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera communities. More seats were secured for students from rural areas and poor families. Raising the number of Bumiputera students in higher education institutions was also part of the plan (Lee, 2012). It is only that in 1995, the same act was amended in giving way for corporatisation among public universities, due to the implementation of National Development Policy (NDP) in 1991. The corporatisation process however only took-off in 1998 (Lee, 2004). In achieving the New Economy Policy (NEP) agenda, less action was taken by PbHEIs in enrolling more international students during this phase.

The closest was the establishment of Malaysian first public international university in 1983, namely International Islamic University Malaysia. In the early 1980's, Islamisation phase in Malaysia resulted in many Islamic products and services being manufactured. All sectors in Malaysia including banking, insurance, law, dress code, etc. have transformed and are aligned

with Islamic rules and regulations (Abbott & Gregorios-Pippas, 2010). Sharing the same intention was the education sector. Different from the older public universities, teaching and learning process is done in English and Arabic languages (Sirat, 2008). Academic experts are pooled from various Islamic countries and international students especially Muslims who are invited to enrol in this university. This reflects a unity among global Islamic communities, led by Malaysia as the host country (Mujani, Muttaqin, & Khalid, 2014).

### ***Phase II (1997 – 2010)***

As “Ringgit hits lowest,” (2015), the Asian financial crisis 1997/98 impacted most of the East Asia countries including Malaysia. Ringgit Malaysia (RM) depreciated as low as RM4.88 per USD, far from average value of RM2.50/USD. The economy was in chaos and this affected many things including overnight rate, stock trading, rating value, private investment, banking system, international trade etc. (Radelet, Sachs, Cooper, & Bosworth, 1998). The economy shrank especially in manufacturing and construction sectors. A different scenario, however, happened in the service sector especially tertiary education. Low RM value as compared to major currencies especially Pound Sterling and US Dollar, had attracted more international enrolments especially in Malaysian PrHEIs (Tan, 2002). Most of the students came from the developing bloc including the neighbouring countries. The early ideas of offering tertiary education to locals as a replacement to overseas seats had changed, as higher education was identified as a future sustainable economic commodity. Thus, Malaysia aimed for 50,000 international students in 2010 (The Observatory, 2003).

The largest action taken was an initiation of a new Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) Malaysia, by segmenting the Department of Higher Education and other relevant entities from Ministry of Education in 2004. In 2006, a special committee namely *Jawatankuasa Mengkaji, Menyemak dan Membuat Perakuan Tentang Perkembangan dan Hala Tuju Pendidikan Tinggi Malaysia* (Committee for Analysing, Examining and Verifying the Development and Direction of Malaysian Higher Education) has been established by the ministry. The main objective was to identify the status quo and proposing the betterment for Malaysian higher education (MoHE Malaysia, 2006). For public universities, the second top post was renamed as Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic and International). If the previous post was limited in managing academic matters, now the task of attracting more international students have been added to the portfolio, effective 2005 (Asari, Idris, & Daud, 2011). In another progress, a one-stop centre for prospective students, Malaysia Education Promotion Centres (MEPCs) were established overseas by MoHE. The first office was in Jakarta which opened its door in October 2003, followed by Beijing in November 2003, Dubai (April 2004), and Ho Chi Minh (April 2005) (Study Malaysia, 2011).

Long before the establishment of these centres, a one stop portal was developed as the quickest way in searching for potential students all over the world. StudyMalaysia.com portal

which was launched in December 1998 featured information on educational providers, academic programme, accommodation, entry requirement, financial assistance, and other things that are related to the Malaysian tertiary education. Also included were immigration procedure, country's background, and online help desk (Study Malaysia, 2016). In "Subsidi pelajar asing (Foreign student subsidy)," (2010), other than promotional activities, tuition fees for international students in PbHEIs were subsidised by the Malaysian government (until June 2010) as part of attractive packages in increasing more enrolments in public universities. Easing the immigration procedure is another assistance offered by the Malaysian government. Instead of applying visa from the Malaysian embassy in their home country, the visa will be issued to the students, prior to their arrival in Malaysia with proper documentation (Study Malaysia, 2015).

Malaysia as the regional centre for education in 2020 was tabled in the 9<sup>th</sup> Malaysian plan (2006-2010). Under this plan, the projection for international students in 2010 was revised from 50,000 to 100,000 students (including at elementary and secondary school level). Other than private institutions, technical providers have been urged to offer more seats for international students (Economic Planning Unit Malaysia, 2005). For systematic planning in managing tertiary education, National Higher Education Action Plan was launched in 2007. This plan was divided into four phases, where the first phase (2007-2010) focused on *Laying the Foundation*. Words rooting out from "international" were mentioned 30 times in the report. This occurred as the plan pushed for internationalisation in every aspect of tertiary education including academia, programme, infrastructure, environment, HEI's leader track record, networking, research and development, publication, MoU, benchmarking, pattern etc. (MoHE Malaysia, 2007). More importantly, *Intensifying Internationalisation* has been listed as one of the seven thrusts and works as a ground in attracting more students to study in Malaysia.

The amendment of Universities and University Colleges Act in 1995 has given more autonomy to the public institutions. In "Empat universiti awam (4 public universities)," (1998), the so-called corporatisation which started with Universiti Malaya in January 1998 was followed by four other public universities in March 1998. Public universities are allowed to establish their own subsidiaries in having more business activities for funding generation, where each of them is governed by its own board of directors. This is essential in reducing high dependency on the government especially on rising operational costs (Lee, 2004). It was fruitful, when in 2002, the Open University Malaysia (OUM) welcomed students (particularly part-timers) for online distance learning. A consortium formed by 11 public universities was invited by the government to set up an open university, in fulfilling the lifelong learning agenda. To date, OUM already has 18 convocation ceremonies, excluding special convocations in Vietnam, Maldives, and Bahrain (OUM, 2016).

As for private education, more varieties of institutions and providers have penetrated the market. As of 31<sup>st</sup> December 2010, there were 476 PrHEIs operated in Malaysia which can be divided into five categories; such as PrHEIs with university status and PrHEIs with college university status (MoHE Malaysia, 2011a). More international universities have opened their off-shore campus in Malaysia including University of Nottingham from United Kingdom and Swinburne University of Technology from Australia. Market liberalisation was made possible by allowing foreign providers to join Malaysian education. One of the reasons was the increase in the number of ‘glocal’ students; students who inspire globally, but study locally (Choudaha, 2012). Students now have chance to pursue studies of their favourite foreign university, at their home country or other countries in the same region. More money can be saved and less discomfort will be experienced. It was projected that the biggest portion would come from Asia.

Earlier, due to the limited number of public universities, Malaysian government has encouraged its prominent government-linked companies (GLCs), in establishing major private universities (Chai, 2007). As a result, Universiti Teknologi Petronas was established in 1997, by the Malaysian top Fortune 500 companies, Petronas - a leading company in the oil and gas industry. Two years later, two GLCs universities opened door to their first enrolments. Multimedia University under Telekom Malaysia Berhad (formerly known as the Institute of Telecommunication and Information Technology) and another one is Universiti Tenaga Nasional, wholly owned by the country’s biggest electrical provider, Tenaga Nasional Berhad. All these facts are available in an official report by MoHE Malaysia (2006). Initially, the major programmes offered in these three universities were totally based on their parent-funder core business. Throughout the time, more academic programmes have been introduced involving other fields such as business, management, and finance.

On the other hand, a humble beginning for several local institutions grew into the nation’s pride. As highlighted by Alliance on Business Education and Scholarship for Tomorrow, a 21<sup>st</sup> century organization (ABEST21), Management and Science University (MSU) which was established in 2008, started as a small college of Pusat Teknologi dan Pengurusan Lanjutan (PTPL) in 1981, now caters approximately to 17,000 students (ABEST21, 2008). In “Seven couples among,” (2012), in 2007, the first batch of medical students enrolled in MSU International Medical School in Bangalore, India and graduated five years later. Better things happened to Limkokwing University of Creative Technology (LUCT). Initiated as a private college in 1991, LUCT was upgraded to a full fledge university in 2007 and currently welcomes around 30,000 students from 150 countries in its 12 campuses worldwide (Study Malaysia Asia, 2015). Started its enrolment of international students in 1997, LUCT took their products offshore by opening its first foreign branch in 2007. Botswana was the first destination, followed by the United Kingdom in the same year. More importantly, LUCT was the first university from the Commonwealth nation which built up an off-shore campus in the UK, while others belong to the Americans (LUCT, 2016).

### ***Phase III (2011 – current)***

In 2011, the second phase of the National Higher Education Action Plan (2011-2015) emerged. For this phase, *Strengthening and Enhancement* was the theme and *Internationalisation* was the fifth pillar of the plan. Managing the challenges occurred during the first phase such as quality international students, lack of international academicians, funding constraint and inadequate international collaboration, was the first priority. Secondly, five action plans have been listed for this phase including mobilising of student/staff, more marketing activities, international quality recognition, and better experience for international students (MoHE Malaysia, 2011b). The potential of this industry provided the justification for the listing of education as one of the National Key Economic Areas (NKEAs) under the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP). Launched at the end of 2010, this ten-year plan aims for RM60.7 billion of the country's Gross National Income (GNI) in 2020, just from the education sector. Out of 13 Entry Point Projects (EPP), seven are linked to higher education, and *Championing Malaysia's International Education Brand* is the 12<sup>th</sup> EPP (Performance Management & Delivery Unit Malaysia, 2010). The same plan estimates that an extra RM2.8 billion will be generated for Malaysian economy, which will be contributed by the mass enrolment of 200,000 international students.

In another progress, Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) was launched in February 2013, for the purpose of easing up the applications for Malaysian tertiary institutions. In "EMGS looking into," (2013), instead of dealing with several government agencies that may cause delay in admissions, prospective students just need to deal with this single EMGS agency, and the completed student visa applications will be processed in 14 days. As highlighted in Keong, Naim, & Zamri (2014), the opening of this agency is important in reducing last minute approvals which caused losses of 15% in international admissions. This problem has also tainted the image of Malaysia as a major exporter of global higher education. Other problems are visa abuse, drug abuse, and anti-social activities among international students in Malaysia (Umar, Azlan, Noon, & Abdullahi, 2014). Thus, the government has ordered for a better cooperation between EMGS and Immigration Department in handling the issues. At the same time, better hospitality service must be offered to the international students in welcoming their enrolments (Jusoh, 2014).

In this third phase, more countries such as Netherland, Singapore, India, and China entered the Malaysian tertiary market. Netherland has its campus of Netherlands Maritime Institute of Technology, while Singapore through a joint venture between Raffles Education Corporation Limited and Education @ Iskandar Sdn. Bhd. (EISB) is having one international school and one private university. All these institutions are located in EduCity Iskandar Malaysia, together with Newcastle University Medical Malaysia, University of Southampton Malaysia, University of Reading Malaysia, and Marlborough College Malaysia (Iskandar Investment,



2012). In detail, EduCity Iskandar Malaysia is one of Malaysia's education hubs, located in Iskandar Malaysia, Johor, sharing the same student village and sport facilities. It is funded privately and welcomes around RM1.2 billion of investment. It is expected to further generate RM1 billion of GNI in 2020 and a new job creation of 1,000 posts (Performance Management & Delivery Unit Malaysia, 2010). It has been named as the 11<sup>th</sup> EPP in the Malaysian Education ETP.

Due to its success, Malaysia is looking forward to the next education hub. This time is in Nilai, Negeri Sembilan and welcomes both international and local educational institutions. Manipal International University, a member of the Manipal Global Education Group, headquartered in India, moved to its permanent campus in Nilai effective January 2013. In Mustapha (2013), this university which is built on a 140-acre property is able to cater to 20,000 students in four different fields: business, engineering, finance, and science. Another key player is INTI International University and Colleges. It is the first university in Malaysia that was permitted to offer Bachelor of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Hons.) degree programme, a combination of eastern and western curriculum. Its completion took 4 years, with 151 credit hours, 2,200 hours of practical training, and five months on external internship in selected universities in China (eTawau, 2016).

More importantly, Malaysia attained its first 100,000<sup>th</sup> student admission in this phase. In 2014, the total number of 107,838 international student enrolments was recorded. The numbers are comprised of 70% in PrHEIs and another 30% in public institutions. An amount of 74% enrolled in undergraduate programmes and the rest were post-graduate students. In "Malaysia has one," (2015), Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, and China were the top five importers, while there was an increasing pattern for students from the developed bloc such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Japan. One of the possible factors was a change in the university's academic calendar. In streamlining the academic calendar between Malaysia and other foreign countries, the July intake for first degree programme was forwarded to September and the complete change took place in 2013. In Lim (2011), under the old intake, the international applications could not be entertained in time and had to wait for another academic year. Furthermore, it could have contributed to better engagement for staff and students between Malaysia and its neighbouring countries.

## **CONCLUSION**

In general, the globalisation and liberalisation of Malaysia's tertiary education can be divided into three phases: phase 1 (1981-1996), phase 2 (1997-2010), and phase 3 (2011-current). From economic perspective, Import-Substitution Industrialisation (ISI) is the best phrase for the first phase. Instead of sending more students overseas, Malaysia offered local seats as replacements. This worked in reducing the fiscal deficit. Simultaneously, Malaysia was in the pre-take-off stage where more skilled and knowledgeable workforces were required.

Therefore, educational institutions were the answers. Though public institutions struggled with limited quotas and national agenda, the solutions came from the private bodies. Restrictions created more creativities, such as collaborations with foreign universities through 2+2 and 3+1 programmes, flexibility in teaching and learning, and more global medium of instructions. Thus, the success of this phase was mainly propelled by the private institutions.

The second phase can be described as Export-Oriented Industrialisation (EOI). The same services offered to the locals can now be shared by people from other countries and continents. Economic downturn revealed the importance of service sector to the country, as Malaysia relied more on Production-Economy before. The transaction in the service sector from the exporting country is profitable for Malaysia. Malaysia has succeeded in achieving its first target of 50,000 international students in 2010. More enrolments have been recorded not just in the private institutions, but also in public universities. Some local institutions went beyond by establishing their branches overseas. The restructuring of the Education Ministry and the opening of four promotion centres explained the government's seriousness in catalysing this industry. In addition, the first blue print that took internationalisation into account has successfully guided this industry and the term 'internationalisation' itself has spread out to each aspect of higher education.

The third phase is more on the expansion of the second phase and problem management. More education hubs have been initiated and more institutions are welcomed in expanding Malaysian tertiary education. Simultaneously, several problems must be managed urgently and continuously. This is important in regaining the good image of Malaysia not just in the eyes of the world, but also among the locals. The locals must be convinced on the bright side of the industry, instead of having negative effects of it. There is also an issue on quality, rather than quantity, in terms of students, lecturers, programmes, rankings, etc. However, please be noted that Malaysia is not a traditional provider. Most parts of the Malaysian education system are rooted in the colonial system. Globalisation and liberalisation in higher education is a must and Malaysia has no escape. All issues must be resolved systematically with the development of the higher education industry, in assisting Malaysia to become the sixth major exporting country in higher education by 2020.

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