Persistency in Malaysian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Higher Education (HE) is becoming an increasingly complex phenomenon throughout the world due to observable major contemporary trends such as diversification, privatization, globalization and internalization. Higher Education Institutions which were originally for the elites are now accessible to the diverse populace to the extent of open (universal) admission policy in some countries. Diversification and its resultant massification has good intent but with attendant negative repercussions. Most notable of the later are reduced government funding, shift in purpose from a public good to private good and less academic autonomy. The effects of the afore mentioned are weak admission policy, quality control problems, and persistency on the part of the students amongst others. Persistency is the situation in which students are still in enrolment at some predetermined point(s) in time following either commencement or attendance. The aim of this paper is to investigate one of the effects of diversification that is persistency in the Malaysian context as a voluminous amount of research has been carried out in the developed world but the issue has not been adequately addressed in Malaysia.
Keywords: Persistency, Diversity, Higher education, Malaysia

ABSTRAK

Pendidikan Tinggi adalah sebuah fenomena yang semakin kompleks di seluruh dunia kerana ianya dikaitkan dengan trend utama kontemporari seperti kepelbagaian, globalisasi, penswastaan, dan pengantarabangsaan. Institusi Pendidikan Tinggi yang asalnya untuk golongan elit, kini telah dibuka kepada pelbagai masyarakat sehingga adanya dasar terbuka (universal) di beberapa negara. Kepelbagaian dan `kemassaannya` yang mempunyai tujuan yang baik boleh mendatangkan kesan yang negatif kepada golongan yang terlibat. Kesan paling ketara adalah pengurangan pembiayaan kerajaan, perubahan matlamat yang kaitkan dengan awam kepada matlamat individu dan kurangnya autonomi akademik. Antara kesan awal kepada perkara tersebut adalah kelemahan dasar, masalah kawalan kualiti, dan persistensi kepada para mahasiswa. Persistensi adalah situasi di mana pelajar masih berdaftar pada tahap-tahap tertentu selepas pendaftaran atau permulaan pengajian. Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengetahui kesan salah satu elemen kepelbagaian iaitu persistensi dalam konteks negara Malaysia di mana sebahagian besar kajian telah dilakukan di negara maju, tetapi ditangani sepenuhnya di Malaysia.
Kata kunci: persistensi, Kepelbagaian, pendidikan tinggi, Malaysia.

Introduction

A major issue affecting higher education institutions across the world is the persistence of students in their studies as a result of the change in the admission policy. From being exclusively elites oriented (Altbach, 2007; Trow, 2004) to mass access by the widening participation of under-represented student groups thus increasing students' diversity (Altbach and Forest, 2006). Resultant consequences of these are personal impact on students in terms of financial, moral and social implications (and their families). There is also

financial and reputational implications on institutions as fall-out of low students' persistency and high student attrition figures can be damaging for institutions which leads to probing the educational quality in the current competitive and globalised higher education. Most societies (Malaysia included) and their economies are affected through the loss of potential skills and knowledge in their workforce (Yorke and Longden, 2004).

Malaysia Higher Educational System (HES)

Malaysia dedicated the first three decades after independence (1957) to strengthening her identity as a multi-racial; multi-lingual; multi-religious nation after which, the economy restrategized and became manufacturing based in meeting global needs. During the Eighth Malaysia Plan (2000-2005), high priority on accessibility to higher education was emphasized.

Malaysian Government has linked the development of the higher education sector to the requirements of economic growth, articulating the following complementary policy objectives:

   i.   Establishing a world class university system;
   ii.   Making Malaysia a regional education hub; and
   iii.   Transforming Malaysia into a knowledge-based economy.

To respond to the objectives, the government of Malaysia carefully laid the foundation for the expansion of the higher education system in its Ninth Malaysian Plan (2006-2010). It emphasizes on increasing accessibility to higher education to create a critical mass of trained, skilled and knowledgeable workforce who would sustain economic growth, increase competitiveness, and support a knowledge-based economy. The Plan provided for a series of measures to improve the quality of education, especially in science, mathematics and foreign languages for a more advanced technological future, and to promote and develop Malaysia as a regional center of education excellence (Burton, M.J., 2007).This has been achieved as influx of international students increases yearly (MOHE) and therefore, diversity is now a common phenomenon in Malaysia higher education institutions.

The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) was established in March 2004 with the responsibility of providing strategic direction and overseeing the development of the sub-

sector. Before 2004, Higher education governmental administration was under Ministry of Education (MoE).

The Higher Education System (HES) in Malaysia comprises public and private HEIs, polytechnics, and community colleges. Both public and private HEIs offer certificate, diploma, first degree, and postgraduate degree. Public HEIs consist of universities and university colleges; Private HEIs consist of universities, university colleges, colleges, overseas branch campuses, open universities, virtual/e-universities, and IT academies. Polytechnics offer certificate and diploma as a source of semi professional workforce. Community colleges offer full time academic programs and short courses, based on the request of the local community.

Diversity in Higher Education

According to Altbach (2007), Higher education is the process of transmitting, preserving and interpreting knowledge. Higher education in its origin was meant to prepare the elites which were the ruling class for their later function in the society by shaping both their minds and characters. Then it was perceived as a public good in which the society funds it and later the society benefits majorly from its services. After the World War II in which despotism was ruled out, democratization of higher education began and coupled with labour migration, there arose a growing demand in the economies of industrialized nations for a workforce which had more than secondary school education. To meet the demands of these mass access students', higher education had to provide a range of modular, semi structured sequence of courses to serve economical purposes required by the society. This quest was not fulfilled in some countries and with the growing use of technology, it led to internalization and globalization of higher education. Internalization is the integration of an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching and learning process (Knight, 2006) while globalization is a multi-faceted process of flow in technology, economy, knowledge, people, values, and ideas across borders. Both led to interconnectedness, wider interaction, more collaboration among higher education institutes and also universal assessment movement.

The global financial meltdown of 2007 affected most countries as most nations had to reduce governmental expenditure and higher education is not spared. Reduction in governmental funding has implication on the academic autonomy, academic productivity as well as it being accepted now as a private good because the recipient (or immediate family) bear most of the cost and are the primary beneficiaries. It has also aided the springing up of

more private institutions to serve the teeming diversified and globalized market. These finally resulted in universal access of which the whole students' diversified populace can gain access if they so wish to meet the rapid technological demand.

Though mass and universal admission policies have good intentions, however, some issues and challenges arise such as:

i. Weak admission policy.
ii. Quality control.
iii. Accountability.
iv. Financial support.
v. Persistency (students' perspective).
vi. Retention.
vii. Completion rates
viii. Worthwhileness of the educational experience and
ix. Competency in employment. (Severiens, S. and Wolff, R.P. 2008).

The average traditional student's characteristics which were early adolescence, straight from secondary education, registered full-time, whose parents are of middle or high socio economic status and mostly white is no more the case. The diversity in students' population however has some attendant problems. Primarily, their access does not automatically translate to high completion rate, success or better employability which are all indicators of the persistence rate (Paulle, B. 2005). For example, in an ethnic minority research in United Kingdom, Richardson (2008) states that African Americans have one-third while Asians have half probability of obtaining a good degree. The case is no different in the Netherlands as ethnic minority groups record 50% and 40% graduation rate within six years of enrollment compared to the majority group of 68% and 55% in colleges and universities respectively.

Persistency

According to Bahr, (2009), persistence was defined as "whether a given student was still in attendance at some predetermined point(s) in time following either commencement of attendance or some other arbitrary point of initial observation". The prevalence of mass participation of diverse groups of students in Higher education institution has been achieved to a large extent in most countries. The main crux now is their persistence in higher education and thus has been the focus of investigation for many years. Some have argued

that students' persistence rates are a fundamental measurement of students' success which is critical to an institution's continued survival, and high levels of attrition adversely affect an institution's funding, facilities, and long term planning.

It is evident that persistence is an interplay of various factors broadly sociological, psychological, financial or personal factors as well as interactions between these factors. However, there is a growing consensus on several important factors explaining persistence in higher education institutions. Most factors are included in the composite model of Rovai (2002) shown below.
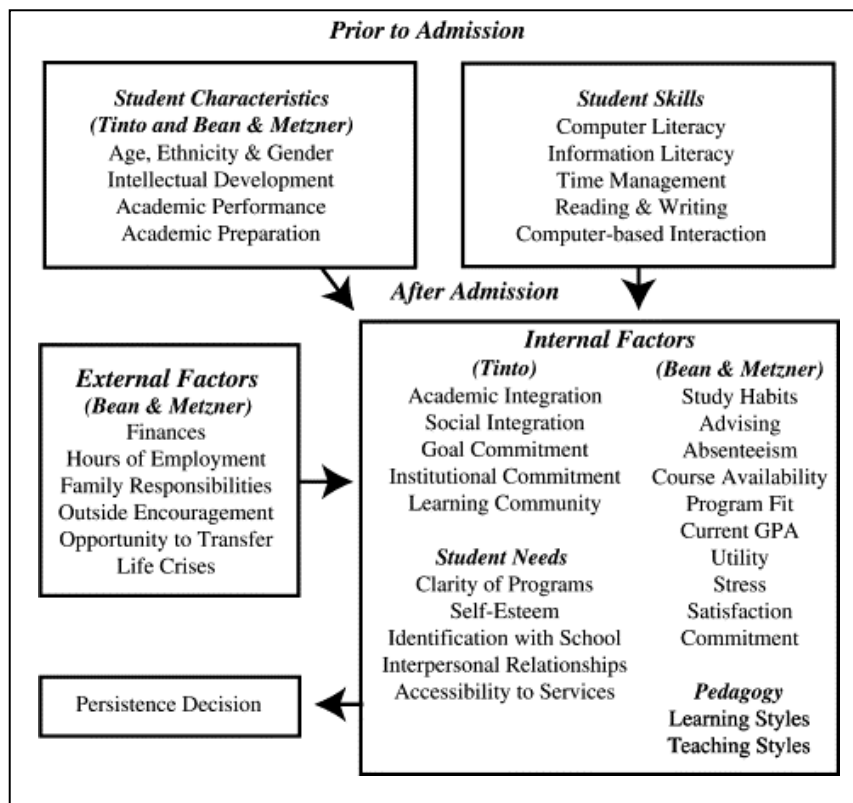

Figure 1: Rovai's Composite persistence model

The composite model synthesizes the persistence models of Tinto (1993) and Bean and Metzner (1985) with the skills required by diverse students groups and the requirement to harmonize learning and teaching styles into a single composite model. This model is divided into student characteristics and skills prior to admission and external and internal factors affecting students after admission.

Factors affecting persistence before admission.

Race, gender, age and socioeconomic status are all ascribed characteristics, that is to say, these are characteristics about which children and adolescents can do nothing. As people reach adulthood, characteristics such as residency and socioeconomic status become acquired as individuals enact their own preferences (Read et al,2003). In the higher education-bound age group, however, most students have as little control over their economic circumstances as they do over their race or gender (Murphy et al. 2010). Despite the importance of demographic characteristics, it is even more important to consider the effect of high school preparation on college persistence and graduation. Research has shown the importance of high school performance and standardized test scores on persistence. Student prior characteristics and skills can affect student persistence as cumulative grade points from secondary education as well as SAT scores have been highlighted as strong determinants (Johnson, 2006).

Study skills (Le et al, 2005),literacy skills, generic skills are necessarily as students are expected independently to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information. Deficiencies in these special skills can lead to academic difficulties and attrition.

Factors affecting students after admission

Naturally, the experiences of students subsequent to college admission can have a profound effect on a student's persistence decision. These experiences are divided into external and internal factors.

Internal factors

Internal factors after admission are also important. Accordingly, the first year experiences of new students are determinants to whether students will continue with their studies or dropout. They can be categorized from the institutional perspective as well as the students' perspective.

Students' Perspective

On the students' perspective, paramount is students' involvement (Berger and Milliem,1999) and engagement in the educational process as these are essential elements for persistence and ultimately success. Engagement entails both social and academic integration. Social integration according to Tinto (1993) could either be assimilation or adaptation. The major difference between the two terms is that in the case of the former, the student should fully imbibe the norms and values of the institution but for the later it is the institution that should accommodate students' diversity and bridge the gap between students' cultural origin and adsorption and not vice versa. Both are exemplified when students begin to develop interpersonal relationships with peers and faculty members such as frequent social contact and participation in student activities. Students who have many friends at school, feel at home and enjoy going to school develop a sense of belonging as Hicks and Lehr, (2003) states that students who achieve social integration find it easier to come to terms with their academic demands. On the other hand, academic integration involves the contacts related to studying and the programme, contacts between peers on matters of learning. Such contacts often revolve around collaborative work - for example, the ways in which students experience working together on tasks. Especially in disciplines where project work is a substantial part of the curriculum, the quality of co-operative work may be an important determinant of student persistence.

Institutional Perspective

According to Moore et al (2008), major institutional practice to enhance persistence are recruitment practices, orientation and induction, campus racial climate (Thomas, L., 2002)., administrative and academic regulations stress management and career planning programs. For example, factors such institutional and course mismatch occurs when there is insufficient information about institution and courses, it gives rise to some students not meeting their expectations or out rightly offering the wrong course. (Yorke and Longden 2004). The proactive and sincere commitment by universities and their professional staff can be one of

the most important facilitators of minority integration and persistence to graduation (Murphy et al., 2010).

Likewise Upcraft et al. (2005) states that for students to persist and succeed in higher education, the curriculum must be challenging. The level of intellectual work expected of the students and the degree of how students see the learning process as challenging improves the self satisfaction of the students' which in turn increases the rate of persistence. Also, Iinstitutional academic and social systems must also be supportive by providing access to support services such as bookstores, library, financial aid offices, and advisers. As pedagogical approaches are not only ways of reaching all students but also has the advantage of helping all students ,faculty members should therefore incorporate varied pedagogies that matches diverse learning styles by tailoring instructional design to the medium and to the learning needs and styles of the diverse students(Zepke et al,2006).

As higher education aims to inculcate active and lifelong learning, students should have the ability to:

i. identify and set personally meaningful goals for their own learning;
ii. develop and use a wide range of learning strategies appropriate to different learning tasks;
iii. work independently and with others to achieve their learning goals; and
iv. persist to overcome obstacles in order to achieve their learning goals.

Students who are not self-directed will likely perform better in a lecture format, while students who are self-directed can do independent projects with the teacher functioning more as a consultant. Self-directed learning recognizes the significant role of both motivation and volition in initiating and maintaining learners' efforts.

External factors

The external factors of the composite model consists mainly environmental variables, such as finances, hours of employment, adjusted working schedules, family responsibilities, and outside encouragement. Also, additional demands on the time of nontraditional students such as life crises, e.g., sickness, divorce, loss of a job, etc., can adversely affect persistence.

Other factors affecting persistence not included in Rovai's composite model include:

i. **Level of Cultural Capital**

The major proponent of this factor is Pierre Bourdieu in his Theory of Social Reproduction of Cultural Capital (1973). He explained that cultural capital comprises the norms, values and practices of a society. Those having ready access to the various sources of capital are the influential in the society. They have the power to determine norms and practices, including the knowledge to be valued and taught. The collection of accepted norms and practices are reproduced in educational institutions. Students, who by virtue of their ethnicity, age, gender and/or socio-economic status, for example, do not share in the prevailing habitus, find themselves in unfamiliar and possibly alienating situations. From this Berger (1999) theorizes that such students may not succeed in institutions where their cultural capital are neither recognized nor valued and therefore leave early. Yorke and Longden (2004); Zepke et al. (2006) also agree to this fact.

ii. **Student support**

This is also important. It could either be academic support in form of supplemental instruction, peer tutoring, study group ; or social/ welfare support such as counselling, mentoring, student centres or financial in terms of information, advice and grants, aids, loans or scholarship etc.

Conclusion

It is evident that Malaysia as a multiracial, multilingual and multicultural society has moved her higher education institution from being elite to mass accessibility as the total enrollments in HEIs in 2005 accounted for 649,653, representing 29.9% of the 18–24 population. Also Malaysia has established itself has an educational hub centre as more international students enroll yearly. The lingual, cultural diversity of these students and that of Malaysian students need to be studied as it influences their persistence among other things

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