

## BACKGROUND OF MALAYSIAN PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING AND CHALLENGES FACED BY ACADEMICS

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### Abstract

Private institutions of higher learning (IHLs) are as important as the public ones in preparing Malaysia as an educational hub in the Asian region. This article discusses background of Malaysian private institutions of higher learning and career challenges faced by the academics. The background consists of their account of establishment to the current development. The challenges include uncertain career path of academics, problems of tasks in teaching versus research due to lack of funding, opportunities for sabbatical leave and pursuance of higher education as well as participation in conferences abroad. Thus understanding challenges is important for the academics in private IHLs to prepare, plan and develop their careers.

**Key words:** Private Institutions of Higher Learning, Academics, Challenges, Career.

### 1. Introduction

There have been an increasing number of universities set up in Malaysia to support the role of tertiary education. One aspect of an ideal educational objective is that it continues to strive towards quality teaching to prepare for the country's human resources needs in the various sectors of development. Although this objective needs to be in line with the current development of Malaysia, tertiary education should also be able to continue contributing to the building of Malaysia into a developed nation. The Malaysian government also needs to match this ideal objective with its existing resources, and if the resources are not sufficient, efficient and intact, the objective will need to be revised. This is done, for instance, by allocating appropriate personnel to appropriate responsibilities, training the individuals efficiently, looking at their career advancement, taking a fresh look at the structure of higher education bodies, and revising the higher education long term strategies. In the context of the advanced developing nations, Malaysia has set a good example by coping with any problems and challenges that have arisen as it expands its tertiary education system (Hussin, 2004). At the time of independence in 1957, Malaysia had only one university. By 2007 the number has increased to 20 public and 18 private universities.

While numerous studies have been carried out to examine academic career in Malaysia (Sohail, Jegatheesan and Nor Azlin, 2002; Amin, 2002; Leathermen, 2004; Siron, 2005; Maimunah and Roziah, 2006), however, none of them has focused on the background and challenges faced by the academics in private IHLs. This study therefore, aims to fill in this knowledge gap by focusing on the background and career challenges faced by academics in the growing educational sector. The paper uses literature review of past research and documents on the background, growth and challenges faced by academics in private IHLs and comparing with those in the public sector. The article is organized into several sections. First, it starts with an overview of background of the private IHLs in Malaysia. It is then followed by reviews on the

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academic career and challenges faced by academics. The paper then concludes on the challenges and efforts should be taken by the academics and institutions in order for them to excel in the fast changing industry.

## 2. History and Background of Private Institutions of Higher Learning in Malaysia

In general, higher education institutions can be categorized into public and private universities. These universities provide undergraduate, postgraduate and diploma programs. The public universities are those that are fully controlled and funded directly by the federal government and indirectly by the public sector (Selvaratnam, 1992). There are currently twenty public universities in Malaysia, established between 1962 and 2007. All these universities are offering programs of various disciplines ((MOHE, 2008).

On the other hand, private universities in Malaysia vary from the universities that are supported by government business agencies such as Multimedia University of Malaysia, National Power University of Malaysia, Petroleum National University of Malaysia, to those supported by political parties in the present alliance government e.g. University Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), an education arm of the Malaysian Chinese Association, a political party. In addition, there are also some branch campuses of foreign universities in the country, e.g. the campuses of Monash University and the University of Nottingham. There are also local private universities owned by individual's owners. In brief, there are 18 private universities at this moment, two of them are of virtual type, out of about 500 private IHLs to support the tertiary education demand in such a rapidly developing country. Details of the private universities and year of establishments are as in Table 1. They are categorized into two phases which is the first established from 1999 to 2002 and second phase is from 2003 to 2007.

The private universities have been vested with the right to award their own degrees at all levels, and the foreign universities award identical degree programs at the host university. This will obviously mean that the number of academic staff must be increased. Table 2 shows the total number of academics according to their qualification from 2001 until 2007. The table shows that there is a huge demand for academics especially with the PhD holders since their proportion to the total number of academics is still small.

The programs offered are based on the focus of each private IHLs whether social science programs, science and technology programs or technical and vocational programs. Data also show that private IHLs offered more social science programs rather than science and technical programs. Basically, private universities have founded by individuals or organizations.

**Table 1: Private universities in Malaysia and year of establishment**

Year of establishment (1999-2002)	Year of establishment (2003-2007)
Universiti Teknologi Petronas (UTP) (2000)	Wawasan Open University (WOU) (2005)
Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN) (1999)	Al Bukhari International University (AIU) (2006)
Multimedia University (MMU) (1999)	Swinburne University of Technology (SUT) (2004)
Universiti Industri Selangor (2001)	Asia e-University (AeU) (2007)
Malaysian University of Science and Teknology (MUST) (2000)	Al Madinah International University (MEDIU) (2007)
Universiti Terbuka Malaysia (UNITEM) (2001)	
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) (2002)	
International Medical University (IMU) (2001)	
Universiti Kuala Lumpur (UniKL) (2002)	
Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR) (2000)	
Monash University Malaysia (MUM) (2000)	
University of Nottingham in Malaysia (UNiM) (2000)	
Curtin University of Technology Sarawak (CUTS) (2000)	

Source: Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), 2008 (website: www.mohe.gov.my).

**Table 2: Number of Academics in Private IHLs with levels of qualifications (2001 – 2007)**

Degree/Years	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
PhD	235	767	868	1,030	1,338	1,463	1,070
Masters	2,016	3,919	4,744	5,958	5,344	6,077	6,846
Bachelor	5,108	7,231	7,030	6,753	5,887	6,601	7,754
Diploma	1,050	2,475	1,539	1,070	867	877	1,811
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,409</b>	<b>14,392</b>	<b>14,181</b>	<b>14,811</b>	<b>13,436</b>	<b>15,018</b>	<b>18,081</b>

Source: Ministry of Higher Education, 2008 (website: www.mohe.gov.my).

**Table 3: Number of Programs Offered by Private IHLs (2004 - 2007).**

Programs offered / Year	2004	2005	2006	2007
Social Science programs	716	817	850	620
Science and Technology programs	382	439	449	357
Technical and Vocational programs	166	194	189	140
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,264</b>	<b>1,450</b>	<b>1,489</b>	<b>1,117</b>

Source: Ministry of Higher Education, 2008 (website: www.mohe.gov.my).

Therefore, they faced financial instability to offer more technical and science based programs. In addition, social science programs only required less capital, equipment, land and manpower to operate and maintenance. Furthermore, the demand for social science programs is still very high due to the educational policy at the secondary level which focuses on art stream beginning in 1970s and 1980s. Table 3 shows the details of the programs offered by private IHLs.

The development of the higher education sector in Malaysia, especially private IHLs looks encouraging when considering the increasing number of institutions in recent years; but this does not mean that the demand for tertiary education in Malaysia is fulfilled. The Nine Malaysian Plan 2006-2010 has a goal to achieve the target of 40 percent participation rate of the age group 17-23 years in tertiary education by 2010. Enrolment at the post-graduate level will also be expanded to meet the target of 25 per cent by 2010. The number of students enrolled in IHLs in 2005 was 731,698 students. During the plan period, enrolment in tertiary education institutions of all levels is expected to increase to 1,326,340 students in 2010 and by 2020, student enrolment is projected to increase to 2,267,800 students. To cater for the projected increase in the number of tertiary education population, the public IHLs themselves could not afford to fulfill this aim. Hence, private universities play a vital role to achieve the vision.

### 3. Significance of Private IHLs

There is indeed an emphasis laid by the academics in private universities in Malaysia on their need to continuously improve their teaching, research and administration services in the universities. The requirement for them to attain a degree of excellence in all necessary aspects is therefore very challenging. There are two explanations that are closely related to this scenario in the country. First, there has been an expansion in the number of private universities in recent years. Traditionally, public universities were responsible for providing undergraduate and post graduate studies. However, the demand for university places has

outstripped the availability within the public university system. Hence, a policy has been made to allow for the development of private IHLs. While private institutions have been in existence in Malaysia for the last ten years, the government has been actively supporting them since 1995 to develop their own unique and innovative education career path. This has been necessitated due to the structural transformation of the economy, and the emphasis of the educational policy, which has been directed towards building a pool of well-educated and skilled professionals (Sohail, Jegatheesan and Nor Azlin, 2002).

Since the Asian economic crisis in 1997, Malaysia, as well as other countries in the region, has devised innovative ways to improve qualities in higher education. The strategy pursued for growth and development of education has been to encourage private sector to meet the needs of tertiary education resulting in a market sensitive educational system. Private institutions are since allowed to offer various types of courses. At the level of the bachelors' degree, they may offer courses leading to a degree under an inter-institutional collaborative arrangement with either a local or foreign university. The Malaysian government has linked economic development with education and envisioned that the country will be a regional educational hub. To this end, the government established the National Accreditation Board (LAN) to regulate activities related to all aspects of education such as infrastructure, curriculum and human resources to increase the efficiency and standardized education, particularly in the private higher institutions (LAN, 1998). Now this organization has been taken over by Malaysian Qualification Agency since June 2007 holding similar functions and responsibilities.

The second situation that indicates the importance of academic development in Malaysia is following the setting up of the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Learning in March 2004. It is a progressive move in the education sector in the country. This establishment shows the government role in strengthening and developing the tertiary education sector in Malaysia, which was formerly under the Ministry of Education. The policy of the new ministry must be closely associated with efforts to improve the quality of academics, which becomes the core element in the universities' operation towards the main clients, who are the students (Abd. Rahman, 2004). The roles of both students and the academics are equally important in making the universities run successfully. Hence, if careful attention is given to what should be done by the academics, the outcome will be shown in two ways. When academics perform their roles to their full potential, the students will gain by looking at their performance. Likewise the talents and potentials of the students may easily fade out if no proper guidance by the academics is given to the students. On the other hand, attention should be given by the authority to the academics about their well-being, one of which their career development.

### ***3.1 The Roles of Academics***

Even though nobody will come to a conclusion as to what standard career pattern could apply to all academics, there are common career elements for them to embrace that include the ability in teaching, in doing research, the ability to do administration works and to contribute to community services (Taylor, 1999). This is supported by Levin (1991) regarding the importance of the four functions, namely, teaching and instruction, research work, administrative duties and community valued-added services. In the United Kingdom, academic careers have been understood as having five vital roles in teaching, researching, writing, managing and networking (Blaxter et al., 1998). In the context of the North America, academics have three basic roles which are teaching, research and administration. Similarly, research evidence shows that, from the academics' own point of view their performance will easily be indicated in terms of their involvement in research, teaching and community service (Taylor, 2001).

Administrative work becomes important roles and about one-third of the academic workload is characterized as administration (Blaxter et al., 1998). Malaysian universities follow the scenario of the British system; the roles of Malaysian academics are also therefore divided into teaching, research and administration. All these three key concepts of the academics' role are important for both public and private universities. Most of the literature on academics across different countries deals with outcomes in aspects of teaching and research (Blaxter et al., 1998). Drennan (2001) further demonstrated that while research is widely perceived as the main route for career advancement in the academic world of higher education, teaching is to be given a value equal to that of research.

### 3.2 Challenges Faced by the Academics

The academic system has unique features, which has made it a different bureaucratic model of careers and which now makes it a kind of leading indicator of change in the career system in other sectors (Baruch and Hall, 2004). According to Altbach (1996), working within universities has changed dramatically, in terms of increase in resource allocation, ongoing emphasis on more efficiency and performance-based, and faculty members are increasingly pressured to be productive while maintaining the quality standards. Therefore, in discussing the challenges, it is necessary to explain the academic path.

Competition with public IHLs is the major challenge faced by the private IHLs and the academics. As mentioned earlier, public universities are funded by government and fully operational by policy and appropriate system. The newly established private IHLs are at disadvantage in the competition era. In addition, private universities need to look for own financial assistance and operate by themselves with limited resources. Moreover, the challenges in terms of producing outstanding research making the university proud of them and teaching quality becomes major hurdles. Today's universities in both Australia and the United Kingdom, and in some research status Malaysian universities have a high regard on research activities and teaching quality in order to achieve an acceptable standard of quality assurance. For this, the academics work hard towards producing better graduates through providing a conducive teaching and research environment (Lent, Brown and Hackett, 1994). Generally, both teaching and research play their own part in producing and transferring knowledge, the establishment and existence of any higher education system will always rely on them, and if one of them fails the whole university can collapse (Baruch and Hall, 2004). Therefore, in some of the private IHLs failed to uplift the both research and teaching quality due to so much concern on profit orientation.

Richardson and Zikic (2007) have advocated that career development in academia is challenging. They explain that a career does not only focus on intra-organizational mobility but beyond it that includes international career opportunities. In addition, Baruch and Hall (2004) have pointed out overseas sabbatical has been a long-standing feature of academia that has motivated them for greater career growth. These opportunities have really helped academics to plan and grow with certain career path. Many academics nowadays are making the specific career choice to engage in international mobility and overseas sabbatical. However, this opportunity have not widely exposed to the academics in the private IHLs, due to financial constraints and other obstacle such as teaching duties, administrative works and the emphases of the universities which are more profit oriented.

The academic career path is relatively called a flat structure even though some see it as having a linear and hierarchical pattern. It is based on a very few clearly identifiable hierarchical ranks. The stages within the structure do not necessarily mean a supervisor-subordinate kind of relationship except in terms of administrative functions.. Basically, the private universities have more levels or ranks than public universities. Therefore, the challenge is the academics in the private IHLs need to work hard to reach higher level and have stringent criteria to fulfill the each rank. Private IHLs have different requirements and criteria for promotion which have put more burden on their academics.

Many universities in the world including Malaysia have adopted the principles of acknowledging the knowledge creation of an individual in the form of intellectual capital. This means that any new knowledge in the form of research breakthrough or innovation is the property of the researcher, with a certain percentage goes to the university. The concept of intellectual capital, also called 'intellectual property' is one of the academic features which is similar to that in R&D institutions, and makes both types of institution very attractive to researchers or scientists. Due to this development, involvement in research has allowed the academics to progress in their career. The development of intellectual capital is also an important role of university towards wealth creation. The objectives of the private IHLs, which are too profit-oriented, have overlooked the notions of knowledge creation and intellectual capital. This to certain extent limits the basic philosophy of an IHL as a center in knowledge creation for societal gains.

A growing interest in the study of human resource development practices in the higher education sector is triggered by an increasing transformation of the higher education system. Typically, private higher education providers in Malaysia receive no funding from government and are operating in a very competitive

environment. With an increasing number of students, managerial practices in the higher education sector have transformed as the higher education service providers inculcate a market orientation (Buchbinder, 1993). Institutions are adopting aggressive promotional strategies and differentiating from themselves to maximize student output and income generation (Winter, Taylor & Sarros, 2000). Increasing challenges are being posed to the academics parallel the major transformation in the education system. Therefore, the staff motivation and commitment to make an effective contribution towards organizational success might have been effected.

Any public university has a proper planning for its staff development (Delamont & Atkinson, 2004). One of the priorities is to ensure that academics have their career plan for the next five years or so. Academics in public universities are also given provisions such as sabbatical leave, and programme for getting research funding in the forms of graduate research fellowship (GRF) scheme, graduate research assistant (GRA) etc, to facilitate and maximize staff potential in doing research. For example in Malaysia some of the universities have been recognized as “Research University” status where the universities received grants and financial assistance from the government. This strategy is non-existent in private IHLs in the country. This is one of the major challenges faced by the academics in private IHLs where the directions of research function are still unclear.

Today’s private IHLs are increasingly being characterized by student diversity, modern teaching technologies, changing public expectations, shifting emphasis towards the learner, expanding faculty workloads, and a new labor market for faculty (Austin, 2002). These characteristics indicate a major transformation in higher education (Rice 1998, and Schuster 1999). Generally, private IHLs are very much affected with this situation such as student diversity, higher workloads, demanding students, introduction of new technologies, and new company policies. Private IHLs seek for wider range of students form local and abroad in order to compete and survive in the globalization era. Therefore, academics have to be sensitive with the current development and this is another challenge they have to face compared to those in the public IHLs.

A current trend witnessed in the higher education system is the need for higher standards of English that have been a serious problem in facing internationalization and globalization needs (Zuraidah et al., 2008). Universities in Malaysia will increasingly have to operate not only as educators of the domestic young generation, but also as part of global university network. High standards of English are essential if Malaysian academics should play an effective international role. This has been one of the challenges faced by the academics in Malaysia because of the bilingual policy i.e. Malay and English as languages in school and higher educational system.

Another challenge faced by the academics in realizing the idea of partnership between university and industry is a need for the commercialization of research products. This idea is now further emphasized as an important indicator to evaluate the level of R&D achievement in the 9<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan. After more than 25 years since the emergence of the concept of university-industry partnership, the success story is yet to materialize. There is a need for the “Research University” to have another requirement for building networking and partnership purposes. From the perspective of academics in private IHLs this partnership is still at its rudimentary stage. This has led to poorer motivation and drove for better performance in R&D among their academics. Finally, is a drive towards gaining competitive advantage over others by upgrading academic qualifications and to establish a culture of teaching, research and services among academics in private IHLs. Evaluation of individual academics should take into account their performance in the three functions in their quest for high academic standards (Ismail and Murtedza 1996).

#### **4. Conclusion and Implication**

The scenario for private tertiary education institutions, which is the focus of this study, is such that although such institutions out-number public tertiary education institutions, student numbers and the range of courses offered by them are relatively few. Almost all of the private IHLs are profit enterprises. The majority of private institutions is required to generate their own revenues as in any other business enterprise and thus should be very innovative in their programs, fee requirements and the ever-changing needs of students. A

survey of private education institutions indicates that many of these institutions offer courses in fields such as accountancy, business studies and computer studies which do not require large capital outlay such as biological and medical-based programs (Lee, 1994). With a competitive trend for student numbers, cost-revenue calculations, limited scope for significant changes to work practices, funding for academic careers is unlikely to obtain high priority.

This review clearly indicates that challenges, if not appropriately managed, are inevitably becoming barriers for academics in navigating their career in the private IHLs. Challenges faced by academics in the private IHLs are numerous such as promotion issues, use of newest technologies, multi-task responsibilities, uncertain structure, funding issues and emphasis on research without proper facilities and remunerations. The study provides insights into background of the private IHLs and challenges faced by their academics in building their careers. The discussion also points to the complexity of academics career due to its multidisciplinary that has to integrate areas such as research, teaching, administration and social work. Therefore, these challenges should be considered in planning and implementing human resource development and management in private IHLs in order to make the institutions a better place for individuals to develop their academic careers.

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