

STRENGTHENING HIGHER EDUCATION FOR A SUCCESSFUL WORKFORCE

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Introduction



Shukran Abdul Rahman and Munir Shuib

As life is becoming more complex and society turns to be more multifaceted, the need to prepare individuals with necessary quality is essential so as to make them function judiciously and experience life harmoniously. The never ending issue on human development encompasses the role of HE in producing human resources who serve as important agents in nation building. Around the globe, Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) have been playing the role of producing manpower or workforce for industries, and other job sectors. In line with changes in social, technological and human lifestyles, the role of HLIs has changed. Governments of virtually all countries, including Malaysia, have embarked on Higher Education (HE) reforms meant to strategise the effort of strengthening their HLIs so that they are relevant to the current need, and prepare workforce to face the future. In this regard, this chapter introduces HE reforms in some selected countries, which could drive some awareness on the importance of HE in workforce development later discussed in the rest of this book.

While the issues examined in this book are specific to Malaysian HE, it is worthy to note the HE reform in the neighbouring down south country. In Singapore, the Government is setting up more universities in order to provide more places and choices for students to enrol in HE system. This is part of the efforts to meet the country manpower need, and students' aspiration (Davie, 2007). The government is strengthening its HE by establishing the fourth or fifth university in the republic, which will be of different structure, emulating the model of overseas universities especially the technical universities of Europe, the American liberal arts universities, or foreign specialised-degree institutions. The thrust of HE reform efforts include enhancing access up to 30 per cent of each year school cohort by the year 2015 as opposed to 15 per cent in 1990 and 20 per cent in 2000. The present rate is 23.5 per cent. Besides, the reform plans for sensible pace of enrolment so as to avoid oversupply of graduates in addition to the effort of offering quality education relevant to the marketplace. As for the enrolment of students, there will be a mechanism which ensures that access to

HE is made upon informed choice, instead of blind admission to the system. HLIs will collaborate with various stakeholders in offering quality programmes and serving the job market in a new way.

Down under, the Australia HE transformation has its root in the Winston Churchill's view that the 'empires of the future will be empires of the mind', driving the Government to putting efforts to mobilise the capacity of its universities to facilitate critical thinking, undertake world-class research and pass the soul of the nation from one generation to the next. Australia thus has the aim of becoming the world provider of HE (Nelson, 2006). In 2002, the Commonwealth Government of Australia conducted a review of Australia's HE system, aimed at strategising a ten year vision for Australian HE, with more than \$2.6 billion of additional Commonwealth funding being invested in the sector over five years. Nelson (2006) said that the vision for Australian education is to facilitate every Australian to find and achieve his or her own potential, requiring the efforts to strategise social and economic changes in order to transform the entire communities in Australia. Thus it is the education system which should prepare young Australians for the future and more importantly to equip them to create the kind of future they want. For that they need to possess competencies which could be driven particularly by HLIs in their research, teaching and scholarship.

Despite the high domestic and international reputation for excellence that Australian universities are enjoying, Nelson emphasised the need to take steps in order to ensure the future of HLIs is built on solid foundations. The Government's blueprint for reform of Australian universities rests on a number of thrusts:

- i. Accessing to more resources – both public and private. It is proposed that there is an increased government investment of \$1.5 billion over four years linked to progressively introduced reforms.
- ii. Ensuring efficient governance, improving HLI administration, enhancing regulation and providing incentives for institutional and individual behaviour.
- iii. Reforming teaching, workplace productivity, governance, student financing, research, cross sectoral collaboration and quality.
- iv. Securing government's recognition of a substantial increased public investment required to secure the future.
- v. Preparing workforce to respond to globalisation.

- vi. Dealing with massification of HE, a revolution in communications and the need for lifelong learning.
- vii. Putting priorities on sustainability, quality, equity and diversity.
- viii. Collaborating efforts amongst the numerous stakeholders in the HE sector, from academics, unions, students and vice chancellors through to industry and regional communities, who engage in the 'Crossroads' review constructively.
- ix. Student financing, (improved financing arrangements – public financing, increased funding, subsidised loans and scholarship, income contingent loan).
- x. Facilitating access to HE through student financing (No student, including those who take up a full fee paying position, will be required to pay fees 'up front').
- xi. Promoting and supporting research activities.

In Australia, the government is strengthening its HE by taking a number of initiatives particularly to fill in the gap in a rapidly ageing population caused by the retiring of baby boomers. Besides targeting on young, skilled, professional migrants, the government HE thrusts are associated with the initiatives of (a) striving for quality learning, teaching and scholarship, (b) setting firm foundations through the effort of financing Australian HE, (c) promoting varieties of excellence especially in the area of diversity, specialisation and regional engagement, (d) achieving equitable and appropriate outcomes particularly on the indigenous Australians in HE, (e) meeting the challenges faced the governance and management of universities and (f) establishing varieties of learning that promote the interface between HE and vocational education and training.

In the United States of America, universities have been mandated to advance human civilisation in many dimensions of human life; universal good, human civilisation and public good. Religious university, land grant university, private university, state university, corporate university are categories of HLIs in the U.S., all with their own agenda. It was found that the universities' lack of responsiveness to government agenda has led the universities to perish especially among the religious and liberal university, but not among private and land grant universities due to their high responses to the government aspiration. In short all HE systems must respond to the national agenda. HE in the U.S. has been recognised as an important partner of the government to conduct

research that improve the U.S. economy, health, national security and provide training for future science and technology workforce. This partnership has been made equitable and effective in order to sustain U.S. leadership across the frontiers of scientific knowledge (Clinton, 2000).

In Malaysia, efforts to substantiate HE system has been given due attention by its Government. The National Higher Education Research Institute or *Institut Penyelidikan Pendidikan Tinggi Negara* (IPPTN) was established by the National Council for Higher Education (MPTN), and was officially launched on 21 August 1997. It undertakes relevant research in developing the public and private institutions of higher learning and in advancing them towards achieving excellence in teaching, publications and research. The Institute was set up to develop a platform for research and policy making that will make Malaysian public and private universities centres of excellence in education. The Institute aims to enhance and expand research efforts in all aspects of HE that encompass research on policies, curriculum, governance, human resources, infrastructure and their joint-sharing. In 2007, the government launched the Action Plan and Strategic Plans for Malaysian HE system which are now in place at all HLIs. The plans aim to strengthen HE services so as to make HLI essential agencies which produce competent workforce for the nation. This book will provide some elaborated input on the action plans, and complement the initiatives outlined in the strategic plans.

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