

# STRENGTHENING HIGHER EDUCATION FOR A SUCCESSFUL WORKFORCE

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## **WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION: PREDICTORS AND IMPLICATIONS**

*Noraini M. Noor*

### **Introduction**

This chapter addresses women's increased participation in higher education in Malaysia, focusing on the social, cultural and psychological factors that have made this possible. To understand the present education system in Malaysia, a brief history of the country is first presented.

Malaysia, with a population of 26.75 million, is a multiethnic society comprising a mixture of Malays (54.2 per cent), Chinese (25.3 per cent), Indians (7.5 per cent) and others (13.0 per cent) (Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006-2010). The Malays of Peninsula Malaysia, together with the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak, are collectively known as *Bumiputera* (sons of the soil). The three main ethnic groups, Malay, Chinese and Indian, differ in terms of their geographical distribution, occupation, religion, culture and language. Thus, Malaysia is not only multiethnic; it is also multi-religious, multicultural and multilingual.

Furthermore, although the terms Malay, Chinese and Indian are generally used as if each denotes a homogeneous group, they are in fact highly differentiated.

The British, with their "divide and rule" policy, laid the foundation for pluralism in Malaysia with the Chinese in trade and commerce, the Indians in estates and the Malays in the traditional agricultural and fishing sectors. This policy of divide and rule was also implemented via the education system designed to create a divided population. Both the Malays and Indians were given only six years of elementary education. While the objective of education for the Malays were to familiarise the boys with basic math, to develop better hygiene and train the sons of Malay aristocracy in English to serve them, the policy was made to Indians to deny them both economic and geographical mobility (Abdullah, 2004). With respect to the Chinese, the British did not consider it her obligation