

Challenges and Evolution of Higher Education in Malaysia

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Abstract

Education is a process that develops human abilities and attitudes. Higher education began expanding its reach after WWII due to the growing political awareness of its importance for a nation's future prospects. This study focuses on how higher education impacted Malaysian graduates by reviewing the system's development from 1957 to present day and even beyond to 2025. A qualitative approach is used, based mostly on books, journals and qualified papers. We identify how Malaysia's system of higher education system ensured the future employment of its graduates. In addition, we provide the set of governmental guidelines that help maintain and enhance the system's production of marketable graduates; thus, ensuring their employability in the global job market.

Keywords: Evolution, higher education system, employment, graduates.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's system of higher education has experienced various trends and restructuring episodes that enabled the provision of high quality. Some researchers, like Malakolunthu and Rengasamy (2012) and Singh et al. (2010), believe Malaysia's higher education system has been reshaped in accord with governmental socioeconomic and development aspirations. Malaysia's economy, from 1960 to 1980, had been based on agricultural activities, but from 1980 to 2000 economic activities shifted towards industrial development in pursuit of contemporary financial trends. This took place prior to the emergence of a knowledge-based economy that demanded a highly skilled and better informed workforce in 2000 and beyond (Singh et al., 2010). Presently, there is great concern over high unemployment rates among Malaysian graduates, as reported by Grapragasem et al. (2014). For this reason, the writers focus on the system's development in tandem with the employability of Malaysian graduates. Grapragasem et al. (2014) reported that the 'employability problem' was particularly due to a lack of adequate skills required by employers. The implication suggests ineffective knowledge and skill delivery systems in Malaysia's institutions of higher education.

2.0 HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA PRIOR TO INDEPENDENCE (PRE-1957)

Higher education in Malaysia prior to independence can be categorised by two periods: one during British rule and the other during the Japanese occupation. Both systems were significantly shaped by the political and economic interests of the respective colonisers as elaborated below.

2.1 Education during British Rule

Prior to the British occupation, Malaysian informal education was directed towards the acquisition of basic living skills (Grapragasem et al., 2014). However, from the early 20th century, a system of higher education in Malaysia began to match the pace and evolution of political developments in Malaya and its neighbors (Moris et al., 2010). This system was essentially a transplanted British affair (Selvaratnam, 1985). Malaya's 'traditional system' had been gradually replaced by a structure that mimed British interests beginning in 1874 (Moris et al., 2010); albeit, no official policy on education existed during the British occupation (Grapragasem et al., 2014). World War II stimulated a general awareness of political concerns that birthed an imperative movement towards better education for the sake of the people and the future of their nation (Moris et al., 2010).

"To bring forward the natives of the country as much as possible" was a general policy stated by British colonials in the Federated Malay States (Moris et al., 2010). However, policy implementations completely contradicted what was promised. British colonials simply provided an education for the colonised nation that served to avoid reprisals and promote British interests (Malakolunthu and Rengasamy, 2012). Hence, only a small number of carefully selected students were accepted to study at British Schools in a limited number of townships. These were especially groomed to defer to British interests while decelerating the development of English Education in Malaya (Moris et al., 2010).

English education mainly focused serving as the *lingua franca* for immigrants from India, Arab nations, China, Japan and other countries. In addition, it served as the communication medium for government employees and private trading firms (Malakolunthu and Rengasamy, 2012; Moris et al., 2010), as well as for local intelligent who explored science and knowledge. Beginning in the 1920s, the colonial government founded a university system for higher education in three stages. These stages involved the establishment of technical and high schools, followed by a network of colleges related to science and arts, and lastly by a university chartered to award degrees in arts and science (Moris et al., 2010).

Prior to independence, Malaysia's higher education system was divided into two streams, English and Malay. To prolong their political domination, British colonials introduced higher education only in the English medium in 1905 with the Establishment of the King Edward VII College of Medicine, followed by the Raffles College in 1928 (Selvaratnam, 1985). Higher education in the Malay language

began in 1901 with the Malacca Training College, and in 1913 with the Matang Training College, followed by SITC in 1922 (Moris et al., 2010).

October 1925 saw the opening of technical school in Kuala Lumpur that marked a return to related technical education after an earlier technical school had closed (1914) (Moris et al., 2010). In 1926, a school of commerce was established in Kuala Lumpur followed by an agricultural school established in May of 1931 at Serdang, Selangor (Moris et al., 2010). At that time, British colonials had no inclination to further develop either technical or engineering schools. Their interests largely lay in the development of schools of commerce and agriculture. British intentions mostly emphasized the development of skilled workers for the agricultural sector (Singh et al., 2010). Hence, most Malays were expected return to paddy fields or become fishermen after the completion of their primary education (Moris et al., 2010). Moreover, for Chinese immigrants to Malaya, their children were educated based on traditional Chinese approaches consisting of teachers, books and syllabi brought from China (Malakolunthu and Rengasamy, 2012; Moris et al., 2010).

As a result of support from the Carr-Saunders Commission, the University of Malaya (UM) was officially established in Singapore on 18 October 1949 by merging the King Edward VII College of Medicine with Raffles College.

2.2 Education during the Japanese Occupation

Japanese occupation brought compelling impacts on the flow of Malaysia's educational system. This began in 1941 and ended in 1945; the brief period of Japanese occupation (Ibrahim et al., 2011). Education particularly focused on encouraging love and loyalty for the Japanese emperor (Grapragasem et al., 2014). Thus, to strengthen their power Japan virtually 'Japanized' Malaysian education. The Japanese language was taught, especially to teachers and Malay youths, and also used for administration. Moreover, a group of young men were sent to Japan for further studies (Moris et al., 2010). Changes in the school system required the singing of Japan's national anthem and showing respect for the Japanese flag in honour of Japan's emperor. In addition, they banned both the Chinese language and Chinese schools.

3.0 HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN MALAYSIA AFTER INDEPENDENCE (1957 – 1990)

3.1 First Phase: 1957–1970

The term 'higher education' is characterized by the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act (1996:13), which states, "*the direction or preparing of a course of study prompting the honor of an endorsement, certificate or degree upon the successful fulfillment thereof.*" Generally, higher education refers to a university, a university college, a university branch, a college or polytechnic and community colleges. Moreover, it includes both public and private institutions (MoE, 2006).

The colonial period and early independence years comprise the first stage (pre-1970s) of Malaysia's development of advanced education. This phase focused on essential and auxiliary training (Ahmat, 1980, Sirat, 2010) to create skilled and knowledgeable authorities to increase the agricultural sector. The University of Malaya was the first university established up to achieve this objective. Nevertheless, most students were of Chinese and Indian ethnicity due to strict admission qualifications. Hence, results established an elite class (Ahmat, 1980, Sirat, 2010, Lee, 2004b). In 1962, the Higher Education Review Committee was instituted to create and support advances in education (Ahmat, 1980, Sato, 2005). This Committee determined a need for proficiently qualified professionals in science, medicine, dentistry, engineering, accounting, statistics and other technical and managerial fields (Ahmat, 1980). As an aftereffect, new universities were developed in the 1970s to offer programs in scientific and technical disciplines (Sato, 2005).

Numerous reports, training acts and statutes of instruction were also presented, including the Barnes Report, the Fenn Wu Report, The Education Ordinance, the Razak Report, and the Education Acts of 1961 and 1996. The Malaysian Instruction Framework further developed national education according to decisive standards and principles in light of the cited reports, training acts and laws. They anticipated that

national solidarity would result through guidelines for racial reconciliation, especially between Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnicities. The framework next permitted access to training for each Malaysian with a guarantee of an 'open door' to accomplish all-inclusive training. For instance, they advanced free instruction with obligatory training for all until the age of 15, and they programmed further advancement based on evaluations at primary one in grade school until primary three, at which point optional schooling was made available. Moreover, an all-encompassing methodology was developed with learning aids to obtain beneficial aptitudes. The target of this training was to develop and display every student's potential.

Islamic and moral studies for Muslim and non-Muslim students are mentioned in the Rahman Talib Report. The advance of higher education in Malaysia became even more vital as Malaysia entered the global venue as an independent nation. Based on UNESCO's directives, universities were to instruct exceptionally qualified graduates with a view to address all issues and segments of human expertise: granting opportunities for higher and deeply rooted learning; to progress, create and disperse information; to comprehend, decipher, advance and spread national and worldwide notable societies; to secure and upgrade societal qualities; and to add to the advancement and change of learning and training at all levels.

3.2 Second Phase: 1970–1990

This phase marked the industrially based momentum of Malaysia's higher education efforts (Ahmat, 1980, Sato, 2005). In 1985, Selvaratnam opined that this stage marked a mutable movement as a result of the terrible ethnic crisis in 1969. The larger portion of all extant capital was under the control of Chinese businesses (60%) vs. 4% held by *Bumiputras* (Malays) who also comprised the majority of poor families (74%) (Selvaratnam, 1985, Ahmat, 1980).

This inequity mirrored training and education where *Bumiputras* and Indians were basically confined to essential instruction with exceptionally restricted openings for English training; while the Chinese had greater entry opportunities at post-essential levels (Selvaratnam, 1985, Ahmat, 1980). Hence, an "*ethnic monetary unevenness and absence of normal solidarity*" had arisen (Ahmed and Choon Boey Lim, 2008). As indicated by Lee (2004a), training and education were critical elements in the achievement of national solidarity and a more equitable social balance as well as more widely distributed financial developments. To eradicate poverty and destitution, Malaysia needed a better-prepared and better-gifted workforce to expand its efficiency and raise the incomes of all Malaysians (Ahmat, 1980). With this in mind, higher education became the major means for creating and delivering this better-prepared and talented workforce. More particularly, advanced education was seen as a huge vehicle to enhance the financial prospects for distraught *Bumiputras* who had thus far lagged behind other ethnic groups (Selvaratnam, 1985, Sirat, 2010, Lee, 2004b).

The State enacted an "*ethnic standard confirmation approach whereby admission to general higher learning establishments will be founded on ethnicity*" (Lee, 2004b); ostensibly, to restructure society based on training. Under this approach, the affirmative proportion became 55:45 for Bumiputra to non-Bumiputra for admission to higher study programs (Lee, 2004b, Sato, 2005, Marimuthu, 2008, Neville, 1998). By supplanting the scholastic legitimacy approach of the First Phase, the State, through its Ministry of Education, assumed an interventionist role to control the advanced educational framework to achieve a more equitable and favorable system of national motivation (Lee, 2004a). This strategy became a "positive separation approach for *Bumiputras*" (Lee, 2004b).

This same phase additionally saw a democratization of higher education as the State expanded the quantity of public higher education institutes to increase student numbers in higher education (Mohamedbhai, 2002). Four more colleges were built from 1969 to 1972 for the sciences, arts, agriculture and engineering (Ahmat, 1980, Lee, 2004b). These included Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM); Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM); Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM); and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). Two more universities were built during the 1980s: the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in 1983 with practical experience in Islamic-based HR instructional classes; and the Northern University of Malaysia (UUM) in 1984, which devoted significant efforts to administrative sciences and business and data innovation courses (Lee, 2004b, Sato, 2005). These achievements obviously increased

Malaysian student enrolments, which expanded from 11,364 in 1970 to 38,125 students by 1980 and 69,700 by 1985 (PNM, 1981).

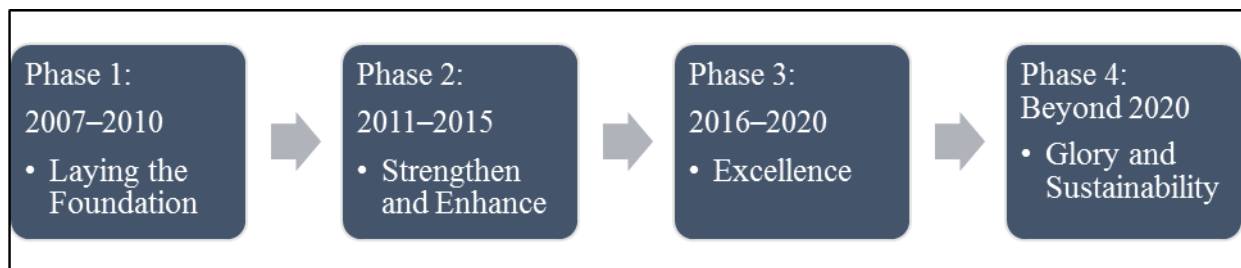
4.0 HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA TO PRESENT DAY (1990–2015)

The previous section provided an overview of Malaysia’s higher educational system from Independence until 1990. This section focuses on the period from 1990 until present. The proposal for the Transformation of Higher Education began when the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) formed a committee to integrate relevant elements of the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP) with recommendations from the Halatuju Report.

The Malaysian government, under the jurisdiction of MOHE, is responsible for developing better higher education ecosystems for Public and Private Higher Education, Polytechnic institutions and Community Colleges. Established on 27 March 2007, MOHE’s vision is to make Malaysia a hub of Excellence in Higher Education by 2020. MOHE has ten objectives of which one is to produce competent graduates that meet the needs of national and international employers. MOHE intended to achieve a 75% employment rate for students in their respective fields within six months of graduation, and for which blueprints were published.

The initial blueprint proposed the National Higher Education Plan (NHEAP) for 2007 to 2010 (KPTM, 2007). This constitutes the first series of short-term action plans for each phase of higher education transformation. Phase 1 placed the foundation for implementing the basics necessary to complete long-term plans. The next blueprint was NHESP 2011–2015 (KPTM, 2007), comprising the following four phases (Grapragasem et al., 2014).

Figure 1: Phases of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan.



4.1 Phase 1: Laying the Foundation (2007–2010)

The first NHEP blueprint (2007–2010) represented initiatives to assist all higher educational institutions in the production of a human capital cohort with first-class attitudes. The plan had five pillars that acted as the foundation for future developments. These were governance, leadership, academic environment, teaching and learning, and research and development (R&D).

The pillar of ‘governance’ refers to public universities where clear definitions for the parameters of responsibility apply to a university’s Board of Directors, Vice-Chancellors and Senate. With regard to university management reform, the government implemented a legal framework for the transfer of administrative powers to universities that delegates increased avenues for self-governance. Under these guidelines, public universities were held more accountable for their actions regarding the achievement of strategic objectives in line with the ministry. These latter included becoming more competitive, retaining the best academics, and significant contributions towards research.

To achieve the transformation envisioned by the government, there was need to identify and define leadership roles for higher educational institutions. Hence, the second pillar, leadership. To successfully establish and manage this pillar, identification and definition of leadership roles at higher education institutions (HEI’s) can better-enable the emergence of outstanding educational leaders while entrusting key roles to Chancellors and institutionalizing key leadership processes for selection, development, evaluation, and the renewal and development of succession planning that pipelines comparable talent.

Academia is the third pillar that every HEI must create to support an environment that engenders a culture of excellence that will attract the most qualified staff. This can enrich the local academia milieu and allow increased collaboration with corporations and international institutions. Such collaboration allows for positive impacts on staff development for both private and public institutions that deepen both core expertise and a culture of exchange while, at the same time, better sustain improved leadership skills. There must also be opportunities opened for career advancement and recognition of achievements.

The fourth pillar, teaching and learning, introduces holistic programs that produce confident students who are better balanced and more discerning. Numerous types of experiences should also enrich their perspectives. The academic staff is expected to lead in their respective fields and focus on innovative modes of curriculum delivery. Institutions must develop a dynamic and relevant pedagogy and curriculum. Academics are expected to participate in enrichment programs while demonstrating professionalism and competence in their teaching ability. Multilingualism in curricula and the use of English in teaching and learning continues to be encouraged. The Malaysian Qualifications Framework was set as a benchmark for the facilitation of quality control in higher education.

Research and Development was the final pillar of Phase 1. Efforts were intensified to increase the number of researchers, scientists and engineers (RSE) at a ratio of 50 RSEs per 10,000 in the workforce (Grapragasem et al., 2014). Passion and dedication for research were to be inculcated along with increased collaboration and funding to enhance all aspects of R&D output. For example, this effort focused on the commercialization of at least 5% of R&D efforts while producing five world-renowned R&D centers of excellence with a view to create internationally-acclaimed research universities.

4.2 Phase 2: Strengthening and Enhancement (2011–2015)

Phase 2 of NHESP was designed as a result of discussions and negotiations between all members of the Critical Agenda Plan's (CAP) project team to ensure the agenda's success. This Action Plan was closely linked to achievements for each CAP implemented in Phase 1, as well as to overall key objectives of the "National Higher Education Strategic Plan Beyond 2020". CAP criteria included APEX University, MyBrain15, academic performance audit, lifelong learning, and graduate training scheme.

In Phase 2, the Minister of Education highlighted a focus on strengthening efforts with the following goals: to produce human capital; enrich creativity and innovation; maximize the ecosystem of higher education; take advantage of globalization; and transform the leadership of leading institutions of higher learning. Here we appreciate that Phase 2 fixed its targets on central levels assigned to each institution. This differs from Phase 1 wherein an institution's aims were solely based on expected capabilities.

Regarding efforts to produce human capital, the plan emphasized strengthening the 5C's related to the development of student talent previously launched by the ministry. These 5C's comprise: Critical thinking and problem solving; effective Communication skills: Collaboration and team building; Creativity and innovation; and Cultural literacy. The development of human capital also focuses on enhancing intellectual Capital.

Research, development and innovation aimed at increasing knowledge, discovery and commercialization of new products were Phase 2 priorities. Steps taken to boost R&D and innovation included encouraging a pioneer mindset among researchers; encouraging innovative research in line with national requirements; translating findings into products or platforms for commercialization; and the enrichment of the country's knowledge repository.

Overall, based on plans introduced in Phases 1 and 2, the current system of higher education in Malaysia has begun to focus on four distinct areas; globalization, teaching and learning, governance, and a knowledge-based society. Generally, the purpose of NHESP's comprehensive design is to intensify higher education consolidation as an international and regional hub of academic and educational excellence.

4.3 Phase 3 and 4

Figure 1 shows four phases of the Strategic Plan. The first two—Foundation (2007–2010), Strengthen and Enhance (2011–2015)]—are currently underway. Phases 3 and 4 (Excellence; Sustainability and Glory) have yet to be implemented, as no blueprints were introduced to approve their applications. However, the ministry of education has since established a brand new blueprint. Details are discussed in Section 4.

5.0 HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN MALAYSIA – FUTURE

Future development of Malaysia’s Higher Education System is discussed in this section. The most recent Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint (MHEB 2015-2025) began with a review of the previous year’s blueprint and was announced in April 2015 when officially launched by Malaysia’s Prime Minister, YAB Dato’ Sri Mohd Najib Tun Haji Abdul Razak. In addition, the PM identified the themes for this plan as the “Three B’s”: Bakat (Talent), Benchmarking via Global Standards, and Balance.

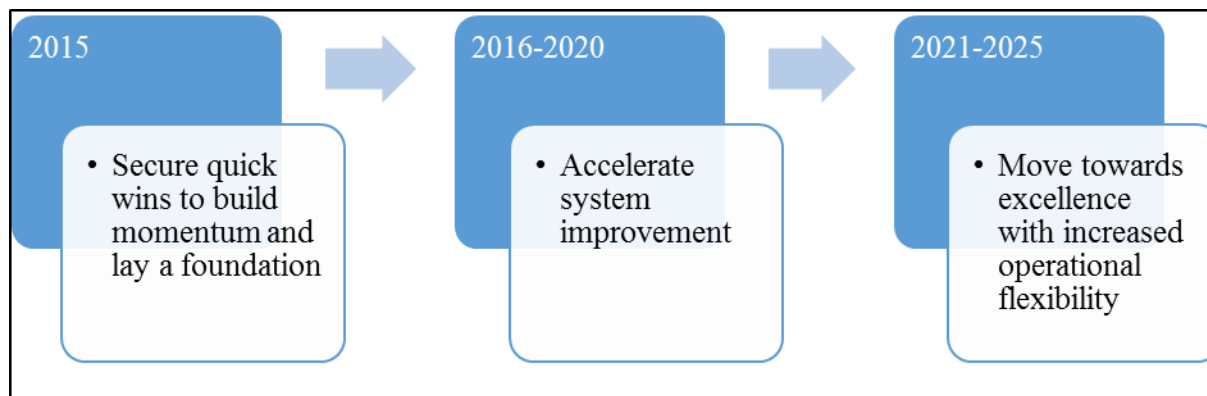
The development of MHEB 2015–2025 resulted from a combination of input from Malaysian and international education experts; including UNESCO, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), university administrators, university Board members, the academic community, unions and associations, Ministry staff, industry bodies and employers, relevant agencies, parents, students, and members of the public. It comprises a national plan to achieve the status of a developed country by 2020, and further represents the outcome of a concerted effort by the government to promote higher education (Laird 2015).

The Education Ministry’s Secretary General, Dato’ Seri Ir Dr. Zaini Ujang, remarked:

This blueprint is crucial to outline what is new in higher education. We didn’t want to use what we planned back in 2006 because much time has passed since then. There have been a lot of new developments and so we need to update our strategies. [For example] Now, many people learn through mobile devices. Students already have this ‘machine’ - their hand phones. So, we have to leverage it.”

Generally, major goals for Malaysia’s higher education system is to rank among the world’s leading educational systems and enable Malaysia to compete in the global economy. To achieve these targets in the allotted time while evading implementation fatigue, the revized roadmap identifies three waves of activity to ensure system capacity, capability and readiness. These are outlined as follows:

Figure 2. Three implementation waves of MHEB 2015-2025.



The waves mentioned build on a base of five aspirations: access, quality, equity, unity and efficiency. These are defined as follows:

1. **Access:** Improve tertiary enrolment rates from 3 to 53%, and higher education enrolment from 48 to 70% – by opening spaces for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) via private institutions and online learning;
2. **Quality:** Increase the current graduate employability rate (75%) to > 80% by 2025;
3. **Equity:** Ensure that all Malaysians have an opportunity to fulfil their potential regardless of background;

4. **Unity:** Ensure that enrolment in HLIs reflects a mixture of Malaysia’s ethnicities and thereby aim to provide students with shared values, experiences and common aspirations;
5. **Efficiency:** Placement in the top 25 of 50 countries ranked by *Universitas 21* (U21) in terms of research, enrolment, and employability.

In addition, ten policy shifts were introduced to implement the system and achieve student aspirations. These are recognised as the ‘heart of the blueprint’ and represent both challenges and opportunities for the entire sector. These shifts were divided into two foci considered key areas by ‘stakeholders’ to better enable the higher education system. Stakeholders include students in academic and TVET pathways; the academic community; and all Malaysians participating in lifelong learning. Enablers that cover critical components include funding, governance, innovation, internationalization, online learning, and delivery.

Figure 3. Ten Shifts in MHEB 2015–2025.

Outcome	Enabler
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates •Talented Excellence •A Nation of Lifelong Learners •Quality TVET Graduates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Financial Sustainability •Empowered Governance •Innovative Ecosystem •Global Prominence •Globalised Online Learning •Transformed HE Delivery

6.0 CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The evolution of Malaysia’s education system since independence shows remarkable changes and rapid transformations as the nation strove to achieve better educational standards and systems. The early system’s purpose was to merely to help people cope with daily life. However, as time went on, people believed education would also lead to better lifestyles. Post-Independence education policies reflected contributions from the Barnes Report, the Fenn Wu Report, the Education Ordinance, the Razak Report, and the Education Acts of 1961 and 1996. In the early 21st century, Malaysia introduced new national education policies for higher education with the Higher Education Blueprint; the first of which was the National Higher Education Plan (NHEAP) for 2007–2010; soon followed by the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP 2011–2014) and the Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint (2015–2025).

Beginning in 2004, we saw trends towards internationalising Malaysia’s higher education system to meet demands made by the new era of globalization. This restructuring of education policy provided foreign stakeholders with opportunities to conduct twinning programs with local colleges and universities, and to open international branch campuses in Malaysia (Grapragasem et al., 2014). These measures were congruent with the government’s desires and efforts to establish Malaysia as a regional hub for higher education and as the main choice for international students and intellectuals by 2020 (MoHE, 2007). The IGI Global homepage refers to an education hub as a designated region that aims to enhance a nation’s competitiveness by providing high-quality education for both international and domestic students.

Another item on the Critical Agenda Projects (CAP’s) 2007-2010 reconstruction of higher education focuses on the employability of Malaysian graduates. This important topic has been discussed among parliamentarians and the public from the early days of development. Employability concerns the industrial marketability of graduates as viable employees who can adapt, maintain and fulfill job requirements (MoHE, 2012). This concern remains a matter kept under keen observation.

Although higher education keeps globalizing it’s reach, the percentage of Malaysia’s unemployed graduates also shows rising increments. This trend is recognised by the latest Malaysia higher education blueprint where ‘improving the quality of graduates’ is marked as one of five aspirations; and

predominately considered due to an imbalanced production of graduates over the years. For example, HRM Asia (2012) reported nearly 150,000 graduates from Malaysian universities. However most failed to find employment. This was supported by Ji in 2013, who noted that although Malaysia had a very low unemployment rate (3.3% or 434,000 of a 13 million-strong labor force), as of December 2012, graduate unemployment remained high (Grapragasem et al., 2014). Hence, the government took precautions to solve the problem by implementing graduate internship programmes, and by enabling industry to take a lead in curriculum design and delivery via partnerships to strengthen industrial training for students and enhance student learning experiences. These efforts are intended to improve the overall quality of graduates and institutional systems.

The Ministry of Higher Education's MHEB 2015-2025 blueprint outlines 10 shifts that will enhance higher education excellence. The first design is to produce holistic, entrepreneurial and balanced graduates who can better navigate and shape their futures independently. It is also hoped that the program will decrease the number of unemployed graduates by training them to be job creators rather than job seekers. Nonetheless, the present higher education system is not the only cause of the 'employability problem', as the government had already taken many precautionary steps to the contrary.

7.0 CONCLUSION

Malaysia's higher education system is on track to achieve desired goals of producing competitive graduates in the global market place. Nevertheless, Malaysia remains in need of students and graduates who acquire skills in independent thinking and problem solving to lead the nation towards achieving its Vision 2020. Higher education is crucial in the production of citizens who are educable for life and responsible enough to contribute to social harmony and improved living standards. Nonetheless, we must continue to emphasize ethics and high individual moral standards to soundly achieve our national aspirations.

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