

Expanding the State Role in Malaysian Higher Education

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A brief literature review on the relationships between higher education and the state shows that the state can play different roles—as provider, protector, regulator, or adviser—in different contexts and at different points in time. As provider, the state allocates resources to institutions of higher education and provides funds for scholarships and student aid, research, and capital expenditures. As protector, the state takes on the function of consumer advocacy by improving access to higher education, formulating policies to promote social equality, and by monitoring the quality of academic programs. As regulator, the state ensures oversight of new and emerging institutions through institutional accreditation and program licensing. The state steers by structuring the market for higher education services to produce outcomes consistent with government priorities. Most governments are interested in influencing the behavior of institutions of higher learning to achieve certain objectives such as efficiency, distribution, or furthering social and cultural objectives. Like many other countries, the Malaysian government maintains tight control over the expansion of higher education.

The Malaysian Context

The state has expanded its role from being a provider and protector to include regulating and steering functions. Until the 1980s, the Malaysian government was the main provider of higher education. The government provides complete funding to all public institutions of higher learning through budget allocations as well as lump-sum funding for development and capital expenditures. As consumer advocate, the government kept tuition fees low by heavily subsidizing all public institutions. Furthermore, the government offers scholarships and loans to low-income students. To promote social equity, the government has also implemented an ethnic quota system for student admissions to ensure that the ethnic composition of the student body in public institutions reflects that in the general population. This admission policy is aimed at promoting social mobility through higher education, especially for the Malays who are recognized as the disadvantaged group in the country.

Student enrollments at the tertiary level have risen dramatically in the past decade. In 2000, the participation rate of students in higher education stands at 19.6 percent or an estimated total enrollment of 450,000. About 30 percent of the development budget of the Ministry of Education is spent on higher

education. The ministry faced with tight budgetary constraints in meeting the ever-increasing demand for higher education. The state has to relinquish its role as the main provider of higher education by encouraging public institutions to seek revenue elsewhere and by pressing the private sector to set up independent higher education institutions.

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In 1998, five public universities were given greater institutional autonomy to generate revenue through research contracts, consulting, business ventures with industry, and other forms of investment. The increase in institutional autonomy encompasses financial management, competitive remuneration of academic staff, and adopting strategies to increase efficiency and improve quality. To cover part of their operating costs, some of these universities have increased tuition fees at the graduate level.

An Expanded State Role

Private higher education has expanded tremendously in the last two decades. The state plays a strong regulatory role vis-à-vis private higher education. In 1996, the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act was passed, which defines the government's regulatory control powers over all private education institutions in the country. Approval must be obtained from the Ministry of Education to establish a private institution or introduce new programs. In 1997, the National Accreditation Board was created to formulate policies on standards and quality control as well as accrediting the certificates, diplomas, and degrees awarded by private institutions.

The state has attempted to give higher education a Malaysian identity. All private institutions must conduct their courses in the national language. To teach a course in English they must obtain permission from the minister of education. In addition, all institutions must offer required courses in Malaysian studies, Islamic studies (for Muslim students), and moral education (for non-Muslim students). These courses are aimed at transmitting cultural heritage and national identity to the students, including foreign students who are also required to take courses on the national language.

In 1996, the government established the National Council on Higher Education, whose main function is to plan, formulate, and determine national policies and strategies and oversee both the public and private sectors, so as to ensure

better coordination of the country's higher education system. The government would like the private sector to complement and supplement the efforts of the public sector and has sought to steer the private sector toward providing more vocational and technical education.

Thus, there has been a gradual shift from state control toward state supervision in the relationship between the Malaysian government and higher education. In the state control model, the Ministry of Education regulates access conditions, the curriculum, degree requirements, examination systems, the appointment and remuneration of staff, the selection and admissions of students, and other administrative matters. Conversely, in the

state supervisory model universities are responsible for their own management and generation of their own revenues. In this model, the state oversees the higher education system in terms of assuring quality and maintaining a certain level of accountability. With the corporatization and privatization of higher education in Malaysia, the shift is from central state control to market-based policies, which will increase the range of choices for students and address the needs of an increasingly complex social order. However, the Malaysian state will still maintain a central steering role to ensure equity of access, consumer advocacy, and national identity, which are broader social and cultural goals that transcend the market. ■

Recent Developments in French Universities

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French universities have long been known for their weak governance capacity. Research by Erhard Friedberg and Christine Musselin on this topic (*Enquête d'universités*, 1989) and their comparative work on French and German universities clearly confirmed this characteristic. They show that French university administrators tend to behave as *primus inter pares* rather than as active promoters of collective projects. In most cases, university bodies came to “nondecisions,” not making any decisions at all, rubber-stamping choices made by individual faculty members, leaving the final decision to the ministry, or simply implementing the criteria set by the Parisian central administration. Thus, individual autonomy was considerable while institutional autonomy was limited; moreover the latter was considered somewhat illegitimate. In the view of these two authors, the weak governance of French universities allowed the Ministry of Education to play an interventionist role that also maintained the weakness at the institutional level.

Fifteen years later, the authors of this article have done a new study on French university governance, funded by the Agency for the Modernization of the Universities—created in 1997 as part of the French Association of University Presidents. Based on 250 in-depth interviews at four universities, the study shows that French universities experienced a number of important changes within the last decade and have strengthened their governance.

Institutional Policy and Planning

The current study found a rise in the development and the implementation of institutional policies at the university level. While the changes are not large in scale, more and more

universities are reexamining the curriculum in order to develop courses in specific areas or to give priorities to certain job-oriented programs. Institutional policies are also focusing on research—to better coordinate research activities, promote interdisciplinary projects, and to search for nongovernment funding. But the more surprising finding of our study concerned management issues. Attempts were made to develop institutionwide reporting and monitoring procedures. The goal was the harmonization and normalization of previously diverse practices to create institutional shared norms and ways of acting. This change in management allowed the production of data at the university level. These data are more readily accepted and recognized than data produced by the ministry and are useful as a basis for deciding such things as the redistribution of nonacademic staff positions or new budget allocation procedures.

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University Bodies

A striking development has occurred in the effectiveness of university bodies. The 1984 law on higher education provided French universities with three elected bodies: one for pedagogical issues, one for scientific issues, and above these two the university council, which dealt with all other issues and especially the budget. The council has the power to limit the actions of the university president. As stated earlier, university bodies were previously known for their preference for “nondecisions” and were described as places for debates and confrontations. This is no longer true. Decisions are now