

Challenges Facing Malaysian Higher Education

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Malaysian tertiary education is a microcosm of the trends and challenges facing all of postsecondary education throughout the world. Privatization is increasing in the public sector. New providers have entered the Malaysian tertiary market. International rankings are a preoccupation of the government and research universities. The cost of education concerns parents, students, and the government. Whether the Ministry of Higher Education should continue to “steer from a distance” the nation's public postsecondary institutions or develop a more decentralized plan is being debated. How to stop the brain drain of talented Malaysian faculty, capitalize on the brain gain, serve the rising number of students who desire a postsecondary education, and provide jobs for an increasingly educated citizenry are issues being debated actively in the press and on the streets.

GROWTH

Public universities in Malaysia are generally populated by traditionally aged student bodies, with about 10 percent of 18-to-24-year-olds attending postsecondary education, whereas the newer private and for-profit institutions have a slightly more adult population. Student participation in postsecondary education has increased over the last 20 years. In 1990, for example, roughly 100,000 students attended public institutions, and last year the number had more than tripled. The total number of students attending postsecondary education is over 700,000; approximately 47 percent of the attendees go to public institutions, and another 46 percent go to nonpublic universities; the remainder study abroad.

Malaysia had six public institutions in 1985, and there are now 20 universities. The ministry has designated four of these institutions as research universities. A concern continues to be voiced about the lack of any universities in the top 100 rankings, with the rankings serving as a proxy for quality. The ministry wants one or two of the research institutions to become “apex” universities, ranking among the world's great research universities. The government's aim is to have at least one of those institutions ranked in the top 100 by 2010.

In addition to public universities, the public postsecondary

education sector also includes polytechnics and community colleges. Malaysia currently has 24 public polytechnics and 37 public community colleges located in all 13 states, with the exception of the Federal Territory. Polytechnics offer certificate and diploma courses and graduated over 85,000 students last year. Community college students are also increasing. One thousand students graduated in 2001 compared to more than 11,000 students in 2006. The ultimate aim of the government is to establish a community college in all 222 parliamentary constituencies. Recently, the government has mandated these colleges to prepare unemployed university graduates for the workplace.

PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION

Although public universities have increased in size and number, the most significant growth has been in private universities that either have started in Malaysia or have been imported from abroad. In 1985 only 15,000 students attended a private institution, whereas today over 250,000 students attend a nonpublic university. In the early 1990s Malaysia had approximately 150 private institutions, and last year there were over 500 nonpublic tertiary institutions. The use of the word “nonpublic” is purposeful insofar as the delineation of what counts

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as “private” and/or “for-profit” is not entirely clear. Monash University, for example, is a public institution in Australia that has a campus in Malaysia. Some political parties in Malaysia also have helped start universities. Multiple other providers offer courses and degrees, so what one means by a “private” institution is in flux. Nevertheless, nonpublic institutions account for slightly less than 50 percent of the total student population. The result is that close to 750,000 students are now participating in some form of postsecondary education.

RACE, ETHNICITY, AND AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Slightly over 52 percent of Malaysians are Malay; according to the state constitution all Malay are Muslim. An additional 26 percent are Chinese (majority are Buddhists), 11 percent are indigenous, and 8 percent are Indian and Hindu. A 1971 law sought to reverse Chinese economic and social predominance and instead promoted a form of affirmative action for a majority of the population—ethnic Malays and other indigenous groups. The result has been a significant increase in the percentage of Malays who attend public universities, with a decrease of ethnic Chinese and Indians who attend. Prior to the implementation of the law, for example, Malay students accounted for less than one-third of the student population,

but by 1985 they were close to two-thirds of all university students. Conversely, the Chinese had been about 56 percent of the student population in 1966, and 20 years later their numbers had shrunk to 29 percent. One by-product of the 1971 law is that non-Malay Malaysians (Chinese and Indians) have started their own private universities, and they account for the largest percentage of students in all private institutions. Since the late 1990s, however, a meritocracy system for entry to public universities has been implemented.

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FUNDING

The government is increasingly desirous of the public universities finding income from other sources than simply the ministry. The corporatization of state-controlled universities since 1987 allowed public universities to find alternative sources of income. Although the ministry still accounts for over 80 percent of all operational funds, the public universities are functioning in ways akin to other tertiary institutions throughout the world. The universities are trying to increase their economic development and research capacities. As with what has occurred in Australia, one fiscal bonanza is international postgraduate students. These students pay full fees. The result is that Malaysia currently has students from over 150 countries and the intent is to increase their representation. The assumption is that a relatively stable and safe Muslim nation has the potential to attract many Muslim students from the Mideast and elsewhere. Further, the language of instruction in many classes is English, which makes the country's postsecondary institutions attractive to English speakers. China is also seen as a country with a great number of students who might be attracted to their Southeast Asian neighbor.

CENTRALIZATION VS. DECENTRALIZATION

The control of public institutions has been in the hands of the ministry throughout the country's history. Over the last decade there has been an increased call for greater institutional autonomy, and the current prime minister has agreed that the universities should have a bit more power. It remains to be seen how much power a vice chancellor and the faculty have and how free they are to set the direction for an institution. The government is in a bit of turmoil right now, having lost its two-thirds majority for the first time in its history. The result is that postsecondary educational reform is not a top priority for the government.

Public universities also continue to increase the number of faculty with a doctorate; no institution has less than 50 percent of the professoriate with a terminal degree. Most of the faculty have received their doctorate from the United Kingdom, Australia, or the United States. There is an increase in the desire for more academic or individual autonomy, a greater say in the governance of the institution, and an increased role for research.

CONCLUSION

As with the rest of the world, education is seen as a key vehicle to increase the wealth of individuals and the economic well-being of society. Even though employment for college graduates is often difficult, the assumption is that a high school certificate will no longer be sufficient for gainful employment. The result is that a great deal of ferment is occurring in the country with regard to the nature, focus, control, and size of Malaysian higher education. In this light, Malaysia is a dynamic example for trying to understand the changes that are taking place worldwide within and across segments of the higher education system. ■

Efforts to Reconstruct Afghan Higher Education

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In 2003 higher education in Afghanistan was made up of 18 universities, with 34,000 students in a country of about 27 million people. Half of the institutions merited the title "university," the rest were just places of postsecondary training. However, the number of highly qualified academic instructors had already grown exceptionally. Returnees from the West, Iran, and Pakistan and graduates from the former Soviet Union challenged the resident faculty who had survived the regimes since 1976, when the 30-year war began.

Today, 20 public universities are registered, 9 private institutions are seeking accreditation, while one (the American University of Afghanistan) has been functional since 2006. There are about 100,000 students enrolled, many more women have been admitted, and from the outside the system seems to be surviving. At a closer look, however, this system is at a critical crossroad.