

# **International Collaboration Involving Malaysian Institutions of Higher Education: Prospects and Challenges**

**By**

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## ***ABSTRACT***

*MALAYSIAN higher education institutions, are poised to deliver world-class tertiary education in the country as they benchmark against reputable international institutions in terms of the design of academic programmes. International collaborations have facilitated benchmarking of other core elements of any institutions, such as the quality of students' achievements and research output, and given a boost to the image of the local institutions. Knowing where they stand in global standards for these elements helps Malaysian public and private institutions of higher education refine the strategies and adopt a more effective tactics to deliver World Class Higher Education in Malaysia. The Malaysian Education Ministry's Higher Education Department through its 10-Year Strategic Plan (2001-2010) is targeting a higher education system that will produce quality graduates able to meet the human resource needs of the nation. Towards this end, internationalisation, producing high quality graduates and world-standard R&D activities are among the three strategies identified. The zeal of many institutions of higher education is evidenced in the number of collaborations established with institutions of higher education and research organisations from abroad. This paper describes the development in international collaborations between Malaysian institutions of higher education with its foreign counterparts. The prospect and challenges of these collaborations are also discussed in this paper.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In 1970 there were only 8633, 4780, and 455 students registered in Malaysian universities, colleges and polytechnics respectively. Over the next 20 years the number of higher education students increased exponentially. The number of students studying in public universities increased from 26,420 in 1980, to 58,286 in 1990, and 211,584 in year 2000.

In the late 70s and throughout the 80s the number of candidates seeking places far exceeded the number of places made available in the public institutions of higher education. Due to this limitation, many Malaysian families send their children abroad to pursue their higher education. Back in 1988, about 60,000 Malaysians were studying abroad and these represent about the same number of Malaysian studying in the public institutions of higher learning. The large number of Malaysian studying abroad was also aided by the fact that their host countries charge minimal for

tuition fee. In essence the students were enjoying subsidised education since they only contributed partly for the cost of their education

The cost of education abroad increases drastically in late 1980's especially when most host countries especially the United Kingdom and Australia introduced higher fees for foreign students as a cost recovery measure. This measures later lead towards full cost recovery from the students. The drastic increase in cost coupled with the economic downturn in late 1980 caused the Malaysian government to review its policy of sponsoring student studies abroad. The government also introduces fiscal measures that encourage families to pay for their children's education locally.

To facilitate the creation of more places of study, the government liberalises the provision of education at post secondary level. It encourages private venture into education, recognise initiatives by these new colleges to collaborate and twin with foreign institutions of higher education in order to make available the institutions of higher education academic programmes in Malaysia. Some agencies of the Government also engage in such collaboration.

This phase in the development of Malaysian higher education saw the rapid increase in the number of places made available to Malaysian. The foreign programmes were seen attractive replacement to that of the public universities due to the perceptions by Malaysian public on the higher quality of such programmes. Moreover the programmes were also valued since English was used as the medium of instruction. In fact the policy shift made by the government lead to the establishment of private education as an alternative to public education system

The initial policy shift does not completely eliminate the need for overseas training. This is because as part of their study students undergoing their higher education under the collaboration are still required to spend part of their training abroad. More over the constrained imposed by the Education Act 1961 limit the private institutions of higher education to only provide education at the diploma level or part of the degree programme (such as the "2+1" programme) under the collaborative arrangement. No private universities can be established in Malaysia and none of the private institutes of higher education were allowed to conduct the full degree programme of their partner institutions. In other word the solutions provided by the policy shifts was partial.

The first policy change by Malaysian Government is to accommodate the changing demand for higher education. This caused the Malaysian Government to further review its education policy that leads to the introduction of four new acts and the amendment of another two acts. The new and amended acts pave way for the establishment of private universities that operates under the quality supervision of the newly established National Accreditation Board.

While the new private universities were establishing themselves, the economic downturn of 1997 struck further hardship on students that were studying abroad. In response to this the Malaysian Government decided to allow the private colleges to conduct the full degree programmes of their partner institutions locally that is the "3+0" programmes. A total of 26 colleges were approved to conduct a total of 87 degree programmes of their partner institutions from United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. To further expand the capacity for higher education locally, the

government invited other parties to establish private universities inclusive of inviting reputable foreign universities to set up campuses in Malaysia (Tan, 2002)

As a result of the development in the past decade especially through international collaboration, the capacity of private higher education sector increases drastically. The range of programmes available and their quality also increase substantially. Malaysians now have many options for higher education ranging from the internal diploma awarded by the private colleges itself, the twinning academic programmes, the “3+0” programmes and the academic programmes in private universities or in public institutions of higher learning on-top of studying overseas. The significant role played by the private sector is reflected in the total number of students studying in private institutions of higher education. As of 2004, there are about 300,000 students in each of the private higher education system as well as in public universities. Currently there are more than 600 private colleges, 8 conventional private universities, one “virtual universities and four branch campuses of foreign universities.

## **COLLABORATIONS INVOLVING PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

In its 10 Year Strategic Plan, (2001-2010), The Higher Education Department, Ministry of Education, has set the mission to realize a higher education system that produce quality graduates meeting the human resource need of the nation. Three of the strategies identified for this mission are internationalisation, producing high quality graduates and conducting R&D activities that are of world standard.

Malaysian public universities are working hard to implement these strategies and hence execute the mission set for them as a whole. This is evidenced in the number of research awards secured and collaboration established with institutions of higher education and research organisations from abroad.

A survey of 11 public universities that includes the established one being USM, UKM, UTM, UNIMAS, UMS, UiTM and the newer one being UPSI, KUiTTHO, KUTKM, KUIM and KUKUM were recently done. Based on the feedback from the department responsible for International Relations in these universities, 82 MOU/MOA facilitating collaborations with institutions from abroad were **signed** during the period 2000 up to October 2003. Out of these, 12 % were signed in 2000, 25% in 2001 and 39% in 2002. Until October 2003, 20 new MOU/MOA were signed. This suggests that these universities are venturing out, in-line with the mission of Higher Education Department, working together with reputable institutions abroad in synergistic relationship beneficial to all. Twenty-seven percents of the partner institutions are in Europe, 5 % in North America, 12 % in Australia and New Zealand. Interestingly 54 % of the partner institutions are in Asia while only 2% are from other regions.

Looking at the scope of activities covered by the relationship, 53% of the collaboration covers a specific area of activity while 47 % covers more than one activity. Out of the 53% for specific activity, 21% percent are for Research and Development activities, 15% for Academic and Staff

Development, 13% for Staff and Student Exchange Programme and 4% are for Post Graduate Studies.

Sixty percent of these collaborations involve specific discipline while 40% involve more than one discipline. Out of the 60% involving specific discipline, 16% involve Science, 16% involve Humanities, 14% involve Engineering and Architectures, 11% involve Social Sciences inclusive of Business and 3 % involve Medicine.

The partners includes among others Ecole Centrale De Nantes and University de la Rochele from France, Aachen University of Applied Science and Gerhard Meccator University from Germany, University of Oxford and Coventry University from United Kingdom, Motorola Inc, University of Boston and University of South Florida from United States, RMIT and University of Sydney from Australia. The partners from Asia include Beijing Foreign Studies University, China, Oita University, Japan, Kangnung National University, Korea, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia and University of Brunei and The First State Medical Institute of Uzbekistan.

It is clear that public universities are working closely with institutions through out the world in various areas of activity covering various disciplines. This collaborations would certainly helps make Malaysian public universities known abroad and enable it to attract academic staff and students from abroad. It also facilitates the enhancement of research activities by the universities and ultimately help created a world-class learning environment in IPTA. Students would directly benefit from these collaborations especially from the exchange programme and from their participation in research activities involving institutions from abroad.

These collaborations certainly facilitate benchmarking of core elements of any IPTA, such as design of academic programme, quality of student's achievement and research output, with reputable institutions through out the world. Knowing where they stand in the global standard for these elements helps Malaysian public universities and their coordinating body to refine the strategies and adopt a more effective tactics to deliver World Class Higher education in Malaysia.

## **COLLABORATIONS INVOLVING PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

Attracting student into private institutions of higher education is a very challenging task. This is because the private institutions are at a disadvantage to the public institutions. Students studying in public institutions pay only about 10% of the cost to educate them while those in the private institutions pay full cost. Without grant or subsidy from the government, the private institutions are fully exposed to the market environment. The challenges faced in managing these institutions are further compounded by the rapid changes in the higher education market place. The fluctuation in the Malaysian economy, the expansion of public facilities by the government and the establishment of more private universities and branch campuses of foreign universities further enhance the dynamics in the higher education market place, especially for the smaller institutions.

Institutions are resorting to aggressive marketing to ensure they get the student numbers required. Their continued existence depends on their ability to attract sufficient candidates. This is certainly not easy. Ridzuan et al, 2002 has shown that the performances of private institutions are strongly affected by the type of academic programmes that they conduct. Private universities have been found to be expanding at a fast rate at the cost of other private institutions. It has also been found that the 3+0 colleges have an advantage over the normal colleges. The marketing efforts of selected Malaysian private institutions of higher education, especially its linkages with foreign universities were reported by Ridzuan et. al, 2002.

Twenty-three private institutions of higher education (PIHE) were chosen in that study. These institutions comprises of 6 private universities, 8 private colleges that conduct 3+0 programmes and 9 normal private colleges.

The frequencies that these institutions advertised themselves in 6 newspapers between 1<sup>st</sup> February to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2001 were studied. The time period was chosen since it was the period when marketing efforts by institutions of higher learning are most intensive. The time period covers immediately before the release of SPM examination (Equivalent to O-Level) result and the start of new academic year for most of the institutions. The newspaper chosen were New Straits Time, Star, Berita Harian, Utusan Melayu, Nanyang Siang Pau and Namban.

The advertisements were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analysis involves determining the frequencies the institutions advertise themselves. The qualitative analysis involves analysing the content of each advertisement. The information contained in the advertisements was characterised into 6 categories. These categories are the Study Environment, Programme of Studies, Tuition Fees, Academic Quality and Reputation. The breakdown of these categories is given in Table 1.

**Table 1** Categories used to characterised information contained in an institution's advertisement

<b>1. Study Environment</b>	<b>2. Programme of Studies</b>
a. Own Campus	a. Link with Overseas Institutions
b. Good Facilities	b. Focus on Specific Programme
c. Quality Student Life	c. Accredited Programme
d. Strategic Location	d. Quick to Graduate
e. E-Learning Environment	e. Programmes Variety
	f. Flexible Learning Method
<b>3. Tuition Fees</b>	<b>4. Academic Quality</b>
a. Save Money	a. Highly Qualified Teaching Staff
b. Scholarship/Loan Provided	b. Job Relevant
<b>5. Reputation</b>	
a. Established on its own right	
b. Partnership with foreign universities	

Table 1 and Table 2 summarised the data pertaining to the characteristics of the advertisements and the financial performances of the institutions. The contributions by the respective group of institutions are also given in the Table 1. There were 834 advertisements by the institutions found in the 6 papers between 1<sup>st</sup> February and 30<sup>th</sup> June 2002. Out of these 445 advertisements highlighted the existence of linkages of academic programmes and 555 advertisements highlighted close relationship and affiliation between the institutions with foreign universities. The advertisements by the 3+0 colleges (AG2) made up 49.16% of the total advertisement followed by that of the normal colleges (AG1). Most of the advertisement that highlighted linkages and affiliation with foreign universities are also that of the 3+0 colleges. The private universities (AG3) tend to advertise the least and tend not to highlight their links and affiliation with foreign universities.

**Table 1** The accumulated value of selected variable and the % contribution by the various groups of institutions

<b>Group</b>	<b>Tot. Ad (Number)</b>	<b>Ad. Prog. Link</b>	<b>Ad. Affiliation</b>
<b>Total</b>	834	445	555
<b>AG1</b>	39.69%	30.79%	35.68%
<b>AG2</b>	49.16%	65.84%	56.40%
<b>AG3</b>	11.15%	3.37%	7.93%

The results presented in Table 1 indicated that both categories of colleges tend to highlight their linkages and affiliation with foreign universities. Moreover the 3+0 colleges capitalise more on these ties. The efforts by the 3+0 colleges yielded better financial gain than that of the normal colleges.

**Table 2** Mean value of selected variables for institutions in each group

<b>Variables</b>	<b>AG1</b>	<b>AG2</b>	<b>AG3</b>
<i>Num. of Advertisement</i>	24	51	16
<i>Advert. Programme Link</i>	5	37	3
<i>Advert. Affiliation</i>	18	39	7

This finding can be interpreted as indicating that the private universities and the colleges are offering two differentiated services. The sale of service offered by the private universities, that is its own degree programmes does not require extensive advertising. The linkages with foreign universities featured prominently in the advertisements of private institutions of higher education. The 3+0 colleges were observed to capitalise on these links more extensively than the normal colleges. As a result the 3+0 colleges were able to perform best in comparison to the normal colleges and the private universities. This indicates that the links with foreign universities serve as a major attraction for the colleges.

## PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

The international collaboration involving public institutions of higher learning is like to focus on enhancing quality education provided and research activities conducted by these institutions of higher education. This would involve staff and student exchanges and joint or collaborative research. It is also likely that the Malaysian institutions would tend to collaborate with equivalent international partners, especially that from Asia, so that the two institutions could add value to each other. At the same time Malaysian public institutions of higher education will continue to seek the support of reputable professors from universities in develop countries to serve as external examiners for the institutions academic programmes.

The international collaboration involving private higher education institutions is likely to continue to evolve inline with the changes in the higher education environment of the country. Starting as the originator of the academic programme, the international collaborator then play the role of the accrediting body for Malaysian private institutions especially for the "2+1", "1+2" "3+0" programmes. Some of the international collaborators were then given the opportunity to establish branch campuses in Malaysia through collaboration with local partners. This has been anticipated by some of the international collaborator to the extent that the interested institution from abroad would position itself for the relevant changes that may take place (Mazarrol and Hosie, 1996)

The evolution in the model of international collaborations involving private institutions of higher education would likely to converge to that of the public institutions of higher education. This is because the private universities and branch campus of foreign universities are playing a major role in the provision of higher education by the private sector. It is likely that the nature of international collaborations involving Malaysian institutions of higher education would focus on activities in the areas of staff exchanges, student exchanges, collaborative researches and joint development of academic programme. The emphasis for the international collaborator to be the source of academic programme will be lesser. More emphasis will be given in activities that will bring mutual academic benefits to the parties involved.

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