

## **The Roles of Private Higher Educational Institutions in Promoting Formal Lifelong Education in Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

One manifestation of globalisation is that countries are more integrated socially, politically, economically and technologically. The pressures of new knowledge and skills are challenging traditional higher education system. Higher education sector in Malaysia is compelled to cater for another important target community, the non-school leavers or working adults. Complex business nature requires competent workers. Formal higher education is a precursor to the creation of knowledge workers. The scope of lifelong learning seems to be easier to describe than to define. This paper examines the concept of lifelong learning notion, particularly the formal lifelong learning, and development of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs). Finally this articles maps out the reasons PHEIs are better at delivering formal lifelong education.

**Keywords:** Lifelong Learning, Private Higher Education Institutions, Formal Education.

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Advancements in both information and communication over the last decades undeniably have been the major drivers for globalisation. Although many writers define globalisation differently, it has been generally accepted as a qualitatively different process in which there is a functional integration of internationally dispersed activities. One manifestation of globalisation is that countries are more integrated socially, politically, economically and technologically. The pressures of new knowledge and skills are in fact challenging traditional higher education system. Many countries, including Malaysia have undertaken education system reforms to be more relevant. Higher education sector in Malaysia is compelled to cater for another important target community, the working adults, who have been traditionally neglected by the public higher educational institutions.

Complex business nature requires competent workers and workers must be equipped with cutting edge skills and knowledge in order to survive. Formal higher education is a precursor to the creation of knowledge workers. Recognising this, the government first undertook democratisation of secondary education in late 1980s followed by the liberalisation of higher education in the mid 1990s. This has change the higher education system which was elitist in nature to the one characterised by 'massification' and universal secondary education. Other contributing factors leading to the momentous education reforms in 1996 are due to the increasing demand for higher education which in line with the robust economic growth experienced in late 1980s until mid 1990s, government budgetary constraints and to curb currency outflow. This is evident with the passing of various acts in 1996.

In 1990, the participation rate of upper secondary among the 15+-16+ population cohort was only 49.14% but rose significantly to 72.45% in 2004. This phenomenal growth was due to democratisation of secondary education undertaken by the government with the introduction of Penilaian Menengah Rendah or PMR (Lower Secondary Assessment). Previously the Malaysian education system only catered for nine years of basic education but this was lengthened to 11 years in 1991 (Lee, 1999). As a result, more students were able to acquire upper secondary education. This, in turn creates a large pool of qualified students to enter university. Thus liberalisation of higher education in 1990s was much anticipated in line with the democratisation of secondary education implemented much earlier.

Private higher education institutions (PHEI) were given greater roles and allowed to confer degrees for the first time in order to meet the growing demand for higher education. Unfortunately there is one important group which consists of those who did not have a chance to gain admission in public universities and did not have money to continue higher education in PHEI. Although current upper secondary

enrolment is about 70%, university enrolment rate in public universities is only about 6-8%.

With overall higher education participation rate of 36% (2007) in both private and public higher educational institutions, it is a clear indicator that a largely qualified pool of potential students are denied places due to many factors such as money constraints or preference to work. Traditionally public universities are known to be targeting fresh school leavers and deploying 'pull strategies' where students are expected to go to them to get education.

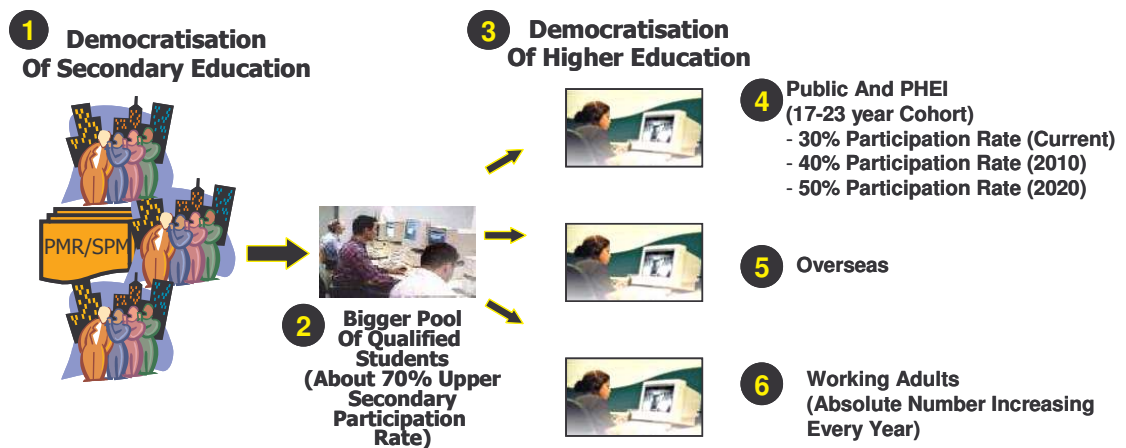


Figure 1 Democratization of Secondary and Higher Education

Only recently public universities are making efforts to reach out to working adults. This phenomenon can be attributed to two important developments. Firstly it is in tandem with the government's call to promote lifelong learning. Secondly, corporatisation of public universities has driven universities to find new sources of income due to budgetary constraints and these institutions are beginning to offer traditional programmes to non-traditional students (working adults) but at a premium fee. However many are not able to provide enough flexibility which is needed by working adults. Normally these working adults require flexibility of having classes in the evening, the sudden change in time scheduling and longer study duration.

In contrast, PHEI are more flexible, understand this group better and have been known to be good at deploying 'push strategies' to bring education to them instead.

Historically PHEI have been catering for this group for decades. From the humble beginning of preparing workers with relevant skills such as typing skills and shorthand in the 1970s, PHEI continue to be very adaptive to new business demands such as the promotion of Masters of Business Administration (MBA) and the introduction of certified information and communication technology (ICT) programmes. The PHEI are also highly scattered in Malaysia and have the ability to bring education to working adults who face mobility problems. Unlike public universities, PHEI are set up close to their target market and number of private institutions is greater than public institutions. (See Table 1).

**Table 1 – Number of Higher Education Institutions (as of June 2007)**

<b>Types of Institutions</b>	<b>Number</b>
Public University	20
Polytechnic	21
Community College	37
Private University and University College	36
Private College	485
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>599</b>

Source: Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia

This paper aims to explore the concept of lifelong learning and development of Malaysian private higher educational institutions (HEIs) in promoting lifelong learning. While numerous studies have been carried out to examine background and private HEIs development in Malaysia (Sohail, Jegatheesan and Nor Azlin, 2002; Maimunah and Arokiasamy, 2007), however, none of them has focused on the development of private HEIs in promoting lifelong learning. This study aims to fill in this knowledge gap by focusing on the concepts of lifelong learning and the roles of PHEIs in promoting lifelong learning, in Malaysia.

The methodology of this study is using literature of past research conducted on the background and development and its relation to private HEIs. The article is organized into several sections. First, it starts with an overview of the private IHLs in Malaysia. It is then followed the concept of lifelong learning and then paper have briefly concludes the reasons of PHEIs in promoting lifelong learning.

### **Formal Lifelong Education Concept**

In this section we present the concepts of lifelong learning, lifelong education and formal education. According to Coombs, Prosser, and Ahmed (1973), learning occurs in three types of opportunities; formal institutional settings, non-formal settings, and informal or self-directed learning.

The notion of lifelong learning has moved further that focuses on employability and economic concerns to a broader definition that includes all forms of learning from pre-school and post retirement. Thus, lifelong learning is defined by the Commission of the European Communities (EC, 2000), as “all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social and employment related perspectives”. Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 1996) defines lifelong learning as “all purposeful learning activity from the cradle to the grave, that aims to improve knowledge and competencies for all individuals who wish to participate in learning activities”.

Given this important role, lifelong learning beyond day-to-day requirements is essential to the lifelong education to become a reality it is critical that people have ability to learn how to learn, something which cannot be taken for granted from the schooling adults may have received in the past. Based on this, learning and education are not synonymous as pointed by Lee (2002). Lifelong education implies the provision of conditions that will facilitate learning (Parkyn, 1973). Lifelong education implies the deliberate provision of educational and environments for people at any phase of their lives and this can come in the form of formal and non-formal educational opportunities. Perhaps, lifelong learning is a more comprehensive concept which includes informal, unintentional, and incidental learning.

However, our focus on formal lifelong education covers only the vast array of formal settings that provide learning opportunities for adults (Merriam and Brockett, 1997). The concept of formal lifelong education must be applied in the broadest possible sense. Thus, a shift of mentality would be necessary in the formal lifelong education practice which there had been a traditional focus on formal education

provided by public universities. PHEI provide more courses that are relevant with current job needs and employer expectation. Thus, PHEI play a vital role in promoting knowledge and skills to working adults and have been instrumental in making their knowledge acknowledged. 'Credentialism' is the new game rule to enhance our workforce.

### **Development of Private Higher Education and the Shifting Roles of PHEI**

Discussion on the development of private higher education will be followed by the discussion of the major roles of PHEI. This section identifies the evolving and shifting major roles of PHEI as: the providers of pre-university programmes in the 1970s, the providers of twinning, external degree and professional programmes in the 1980s, the providers of 3+0 programmes and local degrees in the late 1990s and change agents for "democratisation" and internationalisation of Malaysian higher education in 2000s.

The implementation of New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970 further influenced the development of PHEI. Two aspects NEP related to higher education are the introduction of the racial quota system as the basis for entry into public institutions of higher learning and also the restrictions of PHEI to confer degrees. These moves were deemed necessary in order to increase the Bumiputra participation in the higher education scene. As a result, many non-Bumiputra (non- natives) had been compelled to seek higher education overseas. In the 1970s and early 1980s, there was a great exodus of Malaysian students studying overseas. PHEI took this opportunity to provide pre-university courses for those who wanted to study overseas. However for those who could not afford to study overseas, PHEI offered various courses to prepare the students for their working life. Escalating rise in overseas tuition fees has limited the access to higher education to only the rich (Lee, 1999). Thus, PHEI played an important role of providing alternative avenues for those who preferred to pursue higher education locally or as a second chance for those who failed to gain admissions into local public universities (MOE, 2001).

As a consequence, there was a huge currency outflow in the past and not surprisingly Malaysia was still ranked favourably among the top sending countries to Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries (OECD) outside the OECD area at third position, with 32,709 students in 2001 and eleventh position worldwide (OECD, 2003). Until today Malaysia is still ranked third important provider of international higher education students in Australia. Malaysia recorded 14,748 students in 1999 (9,545 onshore and 5,213 offshore), 17,840 students in 2000 (9,866

onshore and 7,974 offshore) and 17,678 students in 2001 (9,467 onshore and 8,211 offshore) (Nelson, 2003).

In contrast, for those who failed to gain entry into local universities and could not afford to study overseas, there were a few options available to them to get degrees locally. They could opt for external degree programmes such as the University of London law degree or professional programmes such as Malaysian Institute of Certified Public Accountants (MICPA), Association of Chartered Certified Accountants in UK (ACCA), Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA) and Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators in UK (ICSA) and others (Lee, 1999). Due to this, students might choose these programmes as a chance rather than as a choice. PHEI also facilitated “brain drain” among Malaysian students who were frustrated with the higher education policy then.

First signs of liberalisation of higher education in Malaysia were felt in the mid 1980s with the emergence of off-shore twinning programmes offered by foreign universities in PHEI and programmes validated by foreign professional bodies. However, their roles were still confined to providing alternative avenues for those who preferred to pursue higher education locally or as a “second chance” for those who failed to gain admission into local public universities. Critics like Jomo et al (1997) argued that although government expenditure for education has always remained relatively high, education policy has long been preoccupied with achieving interethnic parity in educational attainment, even at the expense of limiting overall educational development. They also concurred that liberalisation of education policy since mid 1980s has not served to resolve human resource shortages due to the tendency of PHEI to offer relatively low cost offerings leading to educational credentials associated with high remuneration especially in law and accountancy. Furthermore PHEI as agents to foreign institutions in the past acted to reinforce private credentialing monopoly at unnecessarily higher cost to Malaysian students.

Moreover, immediately after the passing of these acts, the government requested major utility companies to set up private universities. Following this in 1996, Telekom Malaysia Berhad established Universiti Telekom which was later renamed Multimedia University in 1999. Later Tenaga Nasional established Universiti Tenaga Nasional, and Petronas established Universiti Teknologi Petronas. The economic downturn in 1997 further hastened both the liberalisation and growth of private higher education (Ong and Nordin, 2003). A total of 26 colleges were granted the approval to conduct 3+0 degree programmes in collaboration with selected foreign universities (Tan, 2002) to help to reduce the flow of foreign exchange due to overseas study by Malaysians. Twinning programmes especially 3+0 programmes offered jointly with the foreign partners have unquestionably elevated the status of private institutions. These

programmes have become the jewel of the crown in private institutions. Parents wish to enrol their children in courses not only recognised by government but also internationally and where the medium of instruction is English. It is not surprising also to learn that non-English speaking foreign students choose the private higher education institutions to further their studies. Besides that they also want qualifications that enable them to continue their studies. 3+0 programmes have made private institutions equal partners in providing excellent quality of tertiary education. Prior to this, private institutions were seen as agents for foreign universities and professional bodies and mainly catering for students who could not get a place in public universities or those who wanted to study overseas. Many do not realise that this arrangement is only valid for five year and subject to review by the ministry.

Critics however are quick to highlight that most of these 3+0 foreign partners are from the lower categories especially newly upgraded universities in UK and Australia. In addition, the government also invited reputable UK and Australian universities to establish branch campuses in Malaysia in 1998. Structural changes in the private higher education also include the corporate ownership of institutions and the public listing of some PHEI in the KL Stock Exchange (Education Guide, 2003).

The impact of higher education liberalisation is very immense. It is well received and greeted with enthusiasm by all races, particularly the non-Bumiputra, signifying the government's intention to provide higher education to the mass irrespective of race. This has successfully removed a hot issue among the non-Bumiputra since the implementation of New Economic Policy in 1970. At present, there are over 500 various PHEI offering myriad of programmes.

The sudden and unanticipated change in the private higher educational landscape inevitably is either a blessing in disguise or a curse to PHEI. Undeniably today, the status of private higher education has been elevated and accepted as on par with the public tertiary education, if not better. The roles of PHEI have become weighty given their leading roles in both the "democratisation" and internationalisation of Malaysian higher education. In tandem with the government's plan to increase the higher education participation rate among the 17-23 age cohorts to 40 percent by 2010, the PHEI play a significant role in the "democratisation" of higher education in Malaysia. This is characterised by the sudden increase in the number of both student enrolments and the setting up of new institutions.

There is a dual form of "democratisation" or "massification" being traditional students leaving compulsory education to attend universities and those already working going back to university (Bayenet, Feola and Tavernier, 2000). Private higher education sector brings higher education from the provenance of the rich or selected few to the masses. PHEI contributions cannot be undermined because currently there



are about 50 percent students in the higher education are enrolled in the PHEI (Ong and Nordin, 2002).

Another key impact of higher educational liberalisation is the internationalisation of higher education, characterised by the increased cross border academic collaboration and the growing influx of foreign academics and students into Malaysia. According to Lee (1999), the first wave of internationalisation of higher education occurred in 1970s and early 1980s where there was a great influx of Malaysian students studying overseas, especially among the non-Bumiputra for they could not gain admission in the local universities. In the 1980s the PHEI forged linkages with foreign institutions of higher learning and professional bodies to offer twinning and professional courses. These collaborations intensified internationalisation of Malaysian higher education. On the supply side, many universities in Australia and UK took this opportunity to acquire additional sources of income due to budget cuts and to offer innovative programmes which promote the mobility of students and scholars in the international setting (Lee, 1999). Nobody can deny that internationalisation of Malaysian higher education is good for the country.

### **Conclusion and Implication for Practice**

Based on the discussion, Table 2 have maps out the reasons of the various reasons private HEIs can deliver formal lifelong education in a more efficient and effective manner. Therefore the roles of private HEIs in promoting lifelong learning are undeniable and very significance.

**Table 2 – Reasons Why PHEI Are Better At Delivering Formal Lifelong Education**

<i>Reasons</i>	<i>Description</i>
1. Lower Entry Qualifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- PHEI generally accept workers who are academically weak</li><li>- Providing a second chance</li><li>- Vocationally oriented</li></ul>
2. Diversity Of Programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Many programmes to choose from</li></ul>

3. Availability Of Specialised Programmes	- Offering programmes not available in public universities
4. Ability To Learn And Earn	- PHEI are very keen to offer part time courses - Time schedule is flexible
5. Flexibility Of Study Duration	- Workers can opt for longer study duration
6. Flexibility Of Study Paths Leading To Degree	- Workers can choose to study degree directly or through certificate, diploma and higher diploma at their own pace
7. English Medium	- Proficiency in English is essential
8. Location Factor	- PHEI are widely distributed in all important towns and cities in Malaysia
9. Internationally Recognised Programmes	- Workers who gain internationally recognised programmes can have upward mobility in their organisations - Opportunities to work in other countries - Readily accepted by multinational companies around the world
10. Blurring Distinction Between Training and Education	- Many programmes offered are considered as both training and formal education

This review clearly indicates that concept of lifelong learning and development of private higher education institutions in Malaysia. Studies have come to a conclusion that there is a strong connection between lifelong learning and establishment of PHEI. Current development in PHEI have encourages provision for formal lifelong in Malaysia. We can conclude that private HEI had tremendously paved the way for formal lifelong learning.

The study provides insights into concept of lifelong learning, background and development of the private HEIs in promoting lifelong learning in Malaysia. These

insights could be applied in the context of PHEI. This paper has also highlighted the reasons PHEI have delivered the best in promoting lifelong learning due to the characteristics of PHEI that are very suitable in the dissemination of skills and knowledge of working adults generally and towards the creation of knowledge workers which is the precursor to the creation of k-economy.

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