

Higher Education Reforms in Malaysia and the National Higher Education Plan, 2020: Implications for Graduate Education in the Field of Higher Education

MORSHIDI Sirat

morshidi@usm.my; morshidi2000@yahoo.com

(National Higher Education Research Institute, Universiti Sains Malaysia,
Penang, Malaysia)

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to unpack the changes in Malaysia's higher education policy since 1996. The National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020, which was launched in 2007, took stock of all these changes with a view to planning ahead. Strategic directions were laid out in order to enhance Malaysia's human capital and position as a centre for excellence in higher education. The impacts of reforms and strategic statements on the management and policies on graduate education, with particular reference to developing capacity in the field of higher education, will be examined. In the final analysis, the paper will address the important issue of whether higher education reforms and the strategic directions will, in the medium terms, resolve Malaysia's quest for human capital development in the area of higher education. What are the specific institutional responses to this quest for human capital development in the higher education sector in the context of Malaysia's transition to a knowledge-based economy? The paper concludes that while higher education institutions in Malaysia are providing adequate opportunities for the training of teaching professionals, human capital formation in the higher education sector has been found to be rather limited. There is an irony here. Reforms in higher education has resulted in massification and liberalisation of higher education, but Malaysia does not have enough qualified people to conduct effective teaching and learning at the tertiary sector for lack of postgraduate students pursuing research and postgraduate work in the area of higher education.

Keywords: graduate education, human capital, strategic plan, higher education, Malaysia

Introduction

The Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006-2010, has identified human capital development as a key thrust towards achieving the national mission, which is Malaysia as a developed nation by 2020. In this respect, Malaysia is interpreting human capital development from a holistic framework, "encompassing the acquisition of knowledge and skills or intellectual capital including science and technology (S&T) and entrepreneurial capabilities as well as the internalisation of progressive attitudes, values and ethics through education, training and lifelong learning" (Malaysia 2006, 237). In this connection, of the eight human capital policy development thrusts, three have direct implications for higher education institutions and the development of post-graduate education in Malaysia. The three relevant thrusts are (1) undertaking comprehensive improvement of the education and training delivery system, (2) creating universities of international standing and ensuring that tertiary institutions meet the needs of employers, and (3) nurturing an innovative society with strong S&T capabilities and the ability to acquire and apply knowledge. Subsequently, the Ministry of Higher Education has launched two important documents - the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020, and the National Higher Education Action Plan 2007-2010 - which outlined the ministry's commitment to human capital development and the programmes and activities to be pursued in order to bring higher education system and institutions in line with national aspirations and global trend. In this regard, it is imperative that higher education institutions, in particular faculties/schools that offer training for the higher education sector take cognizance of the fact that higher education institutions in Malaysia are in dire need of trained human capital in the area of higher education, in particular with regard to the governance/management of higher education institutions, curriculum

development, teaching and learning. Arguably, the role of tertiary institutions in the preparation of primary and secondary school teachers is well documented (World Bank 2006).

Higher Education Reforms and the Growth of Higher Education Institutions

Education reforms, namely the Education Act 1996, Private Higher Educational Act 1996, National Council on Higher Education Act 1996, National Accreditation Board Act 1996 and Universities and University Colleges (Amendment) Act 1996, were considered as very timely for higher education was seen as vital to Malaysia's economic growth and an important component in turning Malaysia into a regional education hub (Morshidi 2006a). These higher education reforms provide the necessary regulatory framework for the liberalisation and privatization of higher education on a larger scale to meet the social and economic needs of the country (Morshidi 2006). This is particularly so when viewed in terms of Malaysia's human capital development objectives. Admittedly, the role and contribution of higher education is pivotal in Malaysia's transition to a knowledge-based economy (World Bank 2006).

Liberalisation and massification of higher education are the two important consequences of higher education reforms, with the delivery and provision of higher education in Malaysia experiencing significant changes in terms of numbers and diversity (mode), particularly in the private sector (see for instance Lee 2004; Morshidi 2004). In the public sector, more institutions of higher education were established, a direct consequence of the increasing demand for places and for skilled human resources. The capacity of all the 20 public institutions of higher education increased substantially and in addition, the Government has also established community colleges, polytechnics and teacher training colleges to meet the demands for semi-skilled and skilled workers. More dramatic is the increase in the number of private institutions of higher education, including transnational providers (Morshidi 2006).

With a dramatic surge in the number of both public and private higher education institutions since reform in 1996, there is an urgent need to staff faculties with qualified lecturers, both in terms of specialisation and pedagogy. This situation is very critical among private higher education institutions (Jantan, Chan, Shanon and Sibly 2006) While there is a need to recruit teaching staff with qualifications in science and technology and other specialised fields, it soon dawn on higher education institutions that they are in dire need of lectures who are not only trained in their specialised fields but must also be able to conduct teaching and learning activities effectively. In addition, both public and private higher education institutions need to be staffed by high and middle level managers who are trained in areas relevant to the governance and management of universities. Evidently, with liberalisation and massification of higher education as a result of reform in higher education, there was a sharp increase in the demand for qualified teaching staff that is able to conduct teaching and learning activities at the university level. In addition, with many private colleges being upgraded to university or university college status, their governance, management structure and staffing need to reflect such status.

Arguably, the liberalisation and massification of higher education and a more recent development with respect to the reclassification of universities in Malaysia as research universities, comprehensive universities, and specialised universities have led to an emphasis on postgraduate education. This has resulted in some public universities, in particular those aspiring for research university status demonstrating a noticeable increase in their intake of postgraduate students beginning 2004. By definition, research universities must have a sizeable pool of postgraduate students as a proportion of total university enrolment.

Postgraduate Enrolment and Output, 2002-2007

As of 2008, there are 20 public universities, 21 polytechnics, 37 community colleges, 36 private universities and university colleges of some reputation and four branches of international universities in Malaysia. In addition, there are no less than 400 private colleges catering for both local and international markets. Student enrolment in the public higher education has increased significantly from 60,000 in 1990 to 382,997 in 2007 (Ministry of Higher Education 2008).

In terms of postgraduate education, while the total enrolment has increased steadily since 2002 (Fig. 1), between 2002 and 2004, the contribution of the public higher education institutions to total enrolment is evident. It is noteworthy that between 2002 and 2007, the contribution of the private sector to total postgraduate enrolment has never exceeded the 7,350 student mark. At its peak in 2006, the total enrolment at the private higher education institutions was only 15.8 percent. In 2007, enrolment in the private sector was only 11.6 percent. In fact, most noteworthy is the fact that the trend in enrolment in the public and private sector has never been in tandem. In view of the larger share of the public sector in Malaysia's total enrolment figure, the trend in the public sector has an influencing effect on the national enrolment figure.

With respect to total output, the contribution of the public sector is again very evident. The downturn in total output of postgraduate follows closely the performance of the public sector (Fig. 2). The output of the private sector has never surpassed the 1,700 mark. At its peak in 2006, the private sector's contribution to total postgraduate output was only 18.1 percent. Again, the performance of the public and private sectors has never been in tandem, the exception being year 2005, whereby both sectors have increased their postgraduate output compared to the previous year.

Arguably, postgraduate education is the domain of the public sector, in particular the four research universities of Universiti Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and Universiti Putra Malaysia.

But what is more telling is the fact that while postgraduate enrolment in the public higher education institutions has been increasing quite dramatically, the output (Fig. 2) has been rather erratic; peaking in 2003 (9,062 graduates) and 2007 (9,201 graduates). In Malaysia, there is a correlation between postgraduate enrolment with the performance of the national economy: when the economy is not doing well (with a slightly above average unemployment rate among graduates) postgraduate enrolment tend to be on the rise. However, recently there were some positive and encouraging signals in so far as postgraduate enrolment is concerned. With the four premier universities in Malaysia selected as research universities in the Malaysian higher education system, more resources for research were allocated to these institutions. Subsequently, these institutions were able to offer attractive fellowships and other grants for postgraduate education. Prior to this, the government does not provide financial resources for the running of postgraduate education. Federal allocation was meant only for the running of undergraduate education and training. For the private sector, even without funding from the federal government, the output trend is noticeably very consistent, but the total number is small in comparison with the total output from the public sector.

While the latest development in terms of funding and financial incentives for postgraduate education were very encouraging, enrolment in the faculty of education and in areas related to higher education are way below expectation.

Providing for Postgraduate Education in the Area of Higher Education

Almost all of the public universities in Malaysia offer wide-ranging programmes on education at both the masters and doctoral levels. Masters' degree courses are generally offered via research, coursework, and mixed-mode. The doctoral programme in education is also offered via research mode, coursework and mixed mode, with some universities offering non-research based doctoral programme as doctor of education or D.Ed.

A master's degree by coursework mode and a Ph.D by coursework or D.Ed. would normally involve a split of 70-80 percent of coursework (attending classes and final examination) and 20 percent individual research component. A master's degree by mixed mode has a split of 30-50 percent coursework and 50-70 percent research component.

One university, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), is the only public university dedicated fully to the training of teachers. The Ministry of Education offers courses in education through its teachers' training institutes throughout the country but these cater primarily for non-tertiary education. The Open University Malaysia (OUM) offers programmes in education through distance education and it caters primarily for working adults, the majority of whom are teachers. Recently the Asian e-university was established and it offers education programmes aimed at the Asian market.

The increase in the number of postgraduate students in education in the major public universities in Malaysia are fed primarily through the masters by coursework or mixed mode. Figures 3 to 9 clearly indicate the important contribution of the master's degree by coursework and mixed mode to the total number of postgraduates in the education programmes in these public universities. The increase in postgraduate student numbers in the master's degree by coursework programme at three universities namely Universiti Malaysia (UM) (Fig. 3), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) (Fig. 4) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) (Fig. 5) were very steep indeed as soon as the criteria for research universities category were known late 2005. Interestingly, another aspiring research university at that time—Universiti Putra Malaysia—recorded a high postgraduate student numbers (537) following the master's degree by coursework (Fig. 6) only to see a general downward trend after 2004. However, even with this downward trend the number of postgraduate students in the masters in education (by coursework mode) between 2005 and 2007 were noticeably higher than the other three aspiring research universities. In the case of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), the decline in the number of postgraduate students in the master's degree by coursework was being compensated by an increase in the number of doctoral students following the mixed mode programme. The number of postgraduate students in the education faculty at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) was rather small and this could be due to the historical development of this university (Fig. 7); UiTM was established as an institution which train professionals at the diploma and undergraduate levels. As expected, the number of postgraduates pursuing education at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) - the only public university in Malaysia dedicated fully to training professional teachers - was way above the other public universities (Fig. 8). At Open University Malaysia (OUM), the number of postgraduates pursuing masters in education degree via mixed mode peaked at 410 in 2006 from 0 in 2004 and 188 in 2005 (Fig. 9). After 2007, the downward trend in terms of number of postgraduate students is noticeable. This downward trend, however, is compensated somewhat by the increase in the number of students pursuing masters' degree via coursework. The attractiveness of OUM is that programmes are offered through distance education.

Based on the statistics provided by the respondent universities which offer postgraduate education programmes in the area of education, it appears that in terms of human capital formation they are churning graduates in education. But, are they producing graduates in the area of higher education which are badly needed by both public and private higher education institutions as a result of the reform in 1996 and the subsequent policy commitments as laid out in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020?

From Table 1, it appears that the four research universities are heavily focussed on almost similar areas in education such as counselling and psychology, counselling and guidance, educational administration, and curriculum and pedagogy. Concentrations of postgraduate students in these areas are very evident, however, in some universities the number of new intake has been dwindling in recent years. Notably, all universities are focussing on the training of teachers and specialist teachers for the primary and secondary schools. All public universities, except for USM, have reported that they did not have master's degree or doctoral programmes that give specific emphasis to curriculum development or management/governance aspect of universities. Even at USM, higher education is not an important focus for postgraduate teaching or even concentration of postgraduate students. It is merely that some postgraduate students have decided to research on topics that have bearing on higher education, in particular private higher education sector since 2006.

Thus, it appears that Malaysian public universities offer wide-ranging courses catering for the need of the primary and secondary education with very few opportunities for training and research in the area of higher education such as curriculum development, assessments, governance and management of universities, and career counselling and guidance. Notably, therefore, while the numbers of higher education institutions and enrolled students have increased, there has no significant improvement in human capital that would address the specific needs of higher education institutions in Malaysia. In other words, human capital geared for the knowledge economy has not been expanding in tandem with the number of higher education institutions.

Conclusion

This paper examined the consequences of higher education reforms in Malaysia and the subsequent strategic policy directions on the diversity and numbers of higher education institutions. It was argued that while the numbers of postgraduate programmes offered by faculties of education in some premier public universities in the Malaysian higher education system have increased since 2002, courses or programmes

geared to the needs of universities have not been very encouraging. With more public and private universities being established and with the objective of turning Malaysia as a regional education hub well in places, public universities should offer more opportunities to train professionals that would upgrade the quality of teaching and learning, and the governance of universities. This need is very urgent in so far as the private higher education institutions are concerned. These institutions could not afford to train their academic and administrative staff overseas; their next best option is to collaborate with Malaysian public universities in upgrading the skills and knowledge of their faculties and administrators. While the faculties have sufficient knowledge with respect to content, this may not be the case with respect to pedagogy. Similarly, while the administrators may have been trained in administration, their training may be specific to business organisations and not higher education institutions.

References

- Jantan, M., Chan, H. C., Shanon, S. and Sibly, S. (editors) (2006). *Enhancing Quality of Faculty in Private Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia*. Higher Education Research Monograph Series, Monograph 9/2006, IPPTN, Penang. (Series Editor: Morshidi Sirat)
- Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia (2007). *Pelan Strategik Pengajian Tinggi Negara Melangkaui Tahun 2020* (National Higher Education Strategic Plan towards 2020). Putrajaya: Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia.
- Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia (2007). *Pelan Tindakan Pengajian Tinggi Negara 2007-2010* (National Higher Education Action Plan 2007-2010). Putrajaya: Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia.
- Lee, M. N. N. (2004). *Restructuring Higher Education in Malaysia*. Monograph Series No. 4/2004. School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang.
- Malaysia (2006). *Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006-2010*. Putrajaya: Economic Planning Unit.
- Morshidi, S. (2004). Government and Non-government Partnerships in Education in Malaysia, A Regional Symposium on Government and Non-Government Participation in Education, 13-15 July, The World Bank Group and CfBT, Equatorial Hotel, Kuala Lumpur.
- Morshidi, S. (2006a). Malaysia. In: UNESCO/APEID and SEAMEO-RIHED, *Higher Education in South-East Asia*, page 101-136. UNESCO-APEID, Bangkok.
- Morshidi, S. (2006b). Transnational Higher Education in Malaysia: Balancing Costs and Benefits Through Regulations, *RIHE International Publication Series 10*, March, Hiroshima University, Japan
- World Bank (2006). *Malaysia and the knowledge economy: building a world-class education system*. New York: World Bank.

Table 1: Area of Focus/Concentration of Postgraduate Students in Malaysia's Selected Faculty of Education

University	Area of Focus/Concentration of Students					
	Master's Degree			Doctoral Degree		
	Research	Coursework	Mixed	Research	Coursework	Mixed
UM	unspecified	Counselling & psychology; Early childhood; Educational management, administration & development; Curriculum, pedagogy, educational technology & evaluation	Counselling & psychology; Educational management, administration & development; Curriculum, pedagogy, educational technology & evaluation; Language & religious; Science & technology	unspecified	-	Counselling & psychology; Educational management, administration & development; Curriculum, pedagogy, educational technology & evaluation
USM	Not evident	Counselling & psychology; Educational management, administration & development; Curriculum, pedagogy, educational technology & evaluation; Language & Religious		Counselling & psychology; Educational management, administration & development; Curriculum, pedagogy, educational technology & evaluation; Language & religious; Science & technology	Curriculum, pedagogy, educational technology & evaluation	
UKM	Not evident	Teaching of English as a second language (TESL); Curriculum and pedagogy; Guidance and counselling; Science education	Not evident	Guidance and counselling Educational management; Educational psychology		
UPM		Educational administration; Educational psychology; Teaching of English as a second language; Guidance and counselling; Human resource development	Teaching of English as a second language; Sports science; Guidance and counselling; Human resource development			Extension education; Guidance and counselling; Teaching of English as a second language; Training management; Educational administration

Figure 1: Total Postgraduate Enrolment of Malaysian Higher Education Institutions, 2002-2007



Source: Ministry of Higher Education (April 2008)

Figure 2: Total Postgraduate Output of Malaysian Higher Education Institutions, 2002-2007



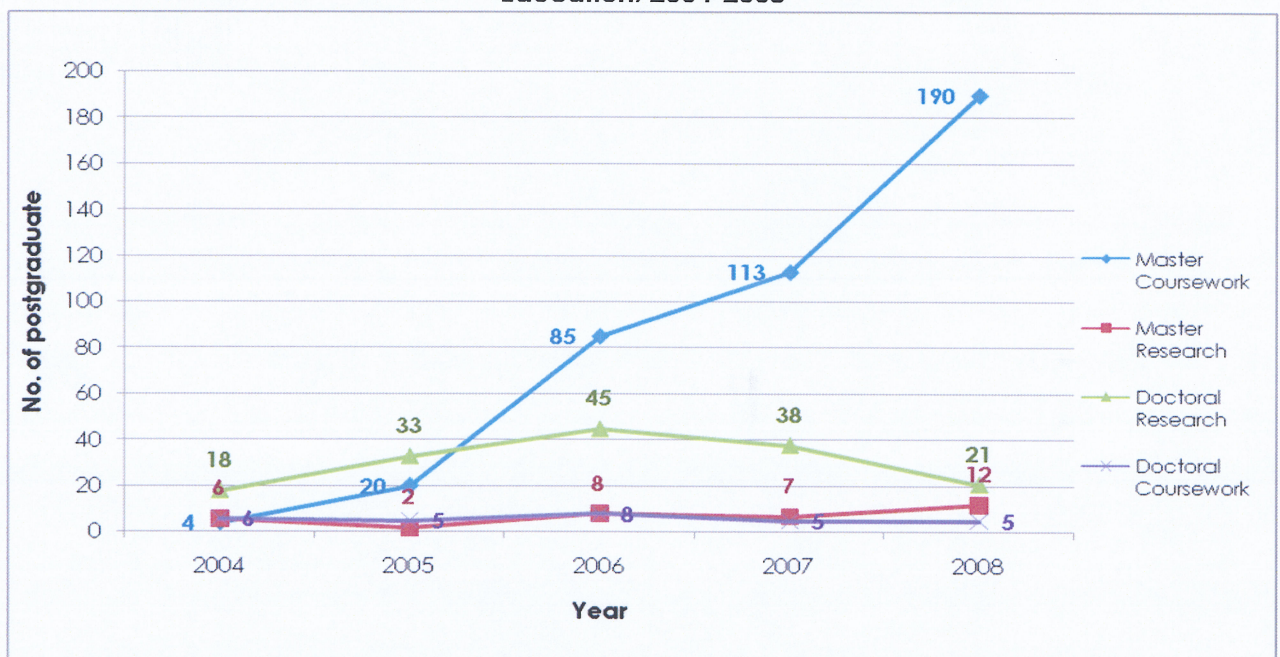
Source: Ministry of Higher Education (April 2008)

Figure 3: Universiti Malaya: Postgraduate Students by Programmes in Education, 2004-2008



Source: Author, based on data provided by Universiti Malaya.

Figure 4: Universiti Sains Malaysia: Postgraduate Students by Programmes in Education, 2004-2008



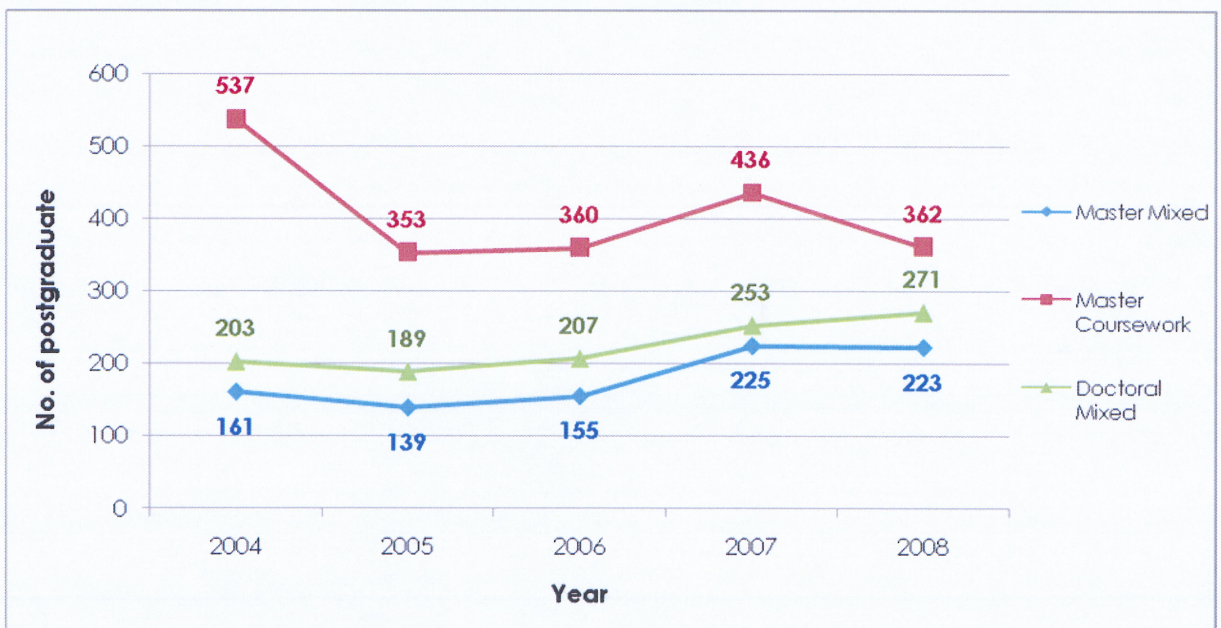
Source: Author, based on data provided by Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Figure 5: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia: Postgraduate Students by Programmes in Education, 2004-2008



Source: Author, based on data provided by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Figure 6: Universiti Putra Malaysia: Postgraduate Students by Programmes in Education, 2004-2008



Source: Author, based on data provided by Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Figure 7: Universiti Teknologi MARA: Postgraduate Students by Programmes in Education, 2004-2008



Source: Author, based on data provided by Universiti Teknologi MARA.

Figure 8: Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris: Postgraduate Students by Programmes in Education, 2004-2007



Source: Author, based on data provided by Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris.

Figure 9: Open University Malaysia: Postgraduate Students by Programmes in Education, 2003-2008



Source: Author, based on data provided by Open University Malaysia.