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New Economic Model and Universiti Sains Malaysia’s APEX Strategy

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The engagement of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) with globalisation in its role as the pre-eminent higher educational institution in Malaysia has entailed a radical rethink in respect of how USM engages the competitive higher educational market place. While the USM strategy could be viewed in part as a recognition of some of the inevitabilities of contemporary global higher educational competition it also entails a strong critique of neo-liberalism and the ‘cultural imperialism’ that is at the root of neo-liberal globalisation. USM’s strategy is predicated on several critical assumptions/insights.

Firstly, that there is no necessary universal model of success in higher education. Secondly, that understanding how to differentiate and engage as yet untapped markets can be the path to higher educational excellence as well as a way of engaging ethical commitment. Thirdly, that engaging competitive advantage in higher education entails understanding globalisation and market opportunities as heterogeneous and diverse and not homogenous. Engaging with a differentiated and heterogeneous market in higher education can be achieved through building diverse networks and diverse alliances with a range of institutions and organisations ranging from global civil society, through to the private sector. Finally, indigenous Malaysian values and cultural norms must be included

and respected in higher educational reform.

The possibilities of engaging and building networks and strategic alliances with industry, and civil society based on strong and long term social and institutional interactions of trust and reciprocity is part of USM’s reformulation of competitive engagement. For example, establishing the Centre for Innovation and Consultancy (PIP), the Industrial Liaison Unit (UPI) at the Engineering Campus, USAINS Holding Sdn. Bhd, the Corporate Development Division, Centre for Medical Innovations and Technology Development (MITD), Engineering Innovation and Technology Development (EITD), and the Research Creativity and Management Office (RCMO) are critical efforts in forging connections to industry. Institutional links to civil society have been formed in part through the establishment of the Regional Centre of Expertise (RCE) by USM which has forged links with civil society. Examples of projects underway include, establishing the Right Livelihood College within Centre of Policy Research and International Studies (CENPRIS), USM. USM’s effort at forging diverse networks and research alliances is an attempt to realise a type of ‘complementarity of competition and collaboration’ argued for by Charas Suwanwela (Suwanwela, 2007).

Market Advantage and the Complexities of Difference and Homogeneity

How then can USM engage competitive advantage, within its complex social, economic and cultural framework? Competitive advantage for USM relies on more 'strategic interaction' and collaborative modes of engagement with partners in civil society and industry. This collaborative and strategically focused model of focusing on and building on the advantages USM enjoys in the higher educational marketplace (evidenced through the blue ocean metaphor) is based upon a rigorous assessment of the limitations and opportunities that USM possesses. USM's APEX strategy engages a new direction that is both transformative yet also adequate and responsive to the cultural and socio-economic framework within which it operates (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Hall & Gingerich, 2004). This approach is in keeping with the underlying thrust of the New Economic Model which also recognises that draws 'on a number of strengths and unique advantages' that Malaysia has must be the basis of moving forward (New Economic Advisory Council, 2010: 8). Likewise with USM, moving forward must be based on the strengths it possesses. For example, the New Economic Model recognises that:

"Malaysia is a model of cultural, ethnic and biological diversity. Malaysia's rich and unique cultural heritage – and even its colonial history – are assets for forging relationships with many countries, especially in the high growth economies of China, India, the Middle East and Indonesia. Furthermore, Malaysia's diverse language networks help to support the development of tourism and industry links in those same markets. Malaysia's rich biodiversity can be harnessed to generate economic benefits from tourism, recreation, pharmaceutical applications and nutritional products." (New Economic Advisory Council, 2010: 8-9)

USM through its location in Penang with its rich intersection of cultures, heritage and its specific focus on scientific areas such as bio-diversity houses significant nationally recognised research intuitions such as the Malaysian Institute of Pharmaceuticals and Neutraceuticals as well as the National Poison Centre, and the Institute for Research in Molecular Medicine. These are among the many institutional research institutes which address the specific strengths that USM possesses as well as meshing closely with broader national aims as evidenced in the New Economic Model (USM, 2008a). In its commitment to innovation and strategically thought through research USM's approach builds on its strengths through networking and cluster based alliances.

For example, the Institute for Research in Molecular Medicine is an excellent example of USM's desire to move toward building a 'cluster based multidisciplinary research institute [s]' (USM, 2008a: 65). This provides a rich example of the type of approach to multidisciplinary and trans-disciplinary research that is strategically focused. The framing of research directions which engage and build strategic alliances, clusters and relationships with diverse industry, and civil

society partners can help solidify advantages by focusing on research strengths that are recognised as part of a broader national agenda. According to USM's strategic plan, 'USM is strategising itself to be more autonomous, accountable, and will provide incentives for partnership and business, the right mix of skills for the labour market and the community.' (USM, 2008b: v)

Strategic coordination and the building of collaborative forms of research are strategies that address USM's strengths. USM aims to rethink how to compete and leverage from its strengths and 'unique advantages' (New Economic Advisory Council, 2010: 8). USM can strive towards competitive leverage in a market strategy that is attuned to building networks of trust and reciprocal alliances aimed at engaging the issues that are the central focus of Malaysia's New Economic Model. The cultural, economic and network variables that frame USM's approach to competition forge a particular path to competitive advantage that draws on its strengths. The collaborative and strategically networked way USM seeks to engage the problems of competition and engagement with excellence in higher education is the hallmark of 'thinking outside the box' and a significant contribution to new economic and social thinking which is so necessary for Malaysian higher education and Malaysia's economic development.

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