CONTENTS

COMPARING HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN SELECTED ASIA PACIFIC COUNTRIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR MALAYSIA

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Introduction

With the continuing emphasis placed on higher education institutions in many countries to produce knowledge workers for the next generation, there has been a continuous demand to strengthen the provision and delivery of higher education systems. This has resulted in an extraordinary expansion and intensification of internet use - "between the end of 2000 and 2008, worldwide internet users increased from 361 million to 1,581 million" (Internetworldstats, 2009; cited in Marginson, 2010, p. 23). The expansion of higher education in most countries has been characterised by the trends of internationalisation (international/intercultural dimension into teaching, research and community service) and the growth of market-driven activities fuelled by increased demand for higher education worldwide. Today's interconnected global knowledge intensive economy in advancing dynamism for the advancement of science and technology has affected the manner in which universities view quality concerns in the higher education sector (Kaur, Sirat & Tierney, 2010).

It is also observed that many higher education systems globally operate within the backdrop of the following commonalities: massification of higher education systems, declining public funding, commercialisation of higher education activities and increasing competition among universities on national, regional and international levels (Kaur, Sirat & Tierney, 2010). With growing competition in the global higher education marketplace, there are clear signs that both developed and developing nations are looking at conceptual frameworks for comparative analysis of higher education systems in the region in streamlining and enabling more effective provision of quality higher education in serving global, national and local aims. In some cases, such comparisons encourage the possibility of collaboration and knowledge sharing in the domains of governance, administration, teaching and learning as well as research, innovation and commercialisation activities. Marginson (2010, p. 24) acknowledges the fact that today's rapidly growing knowledge economy has given rise to a "global culture of comparison in higher education and research". Its primary function is to provide information about research performance rankings and the secondary function

of the comparative data is normative (to create global standards and encourage homogeneity). Undoubtedly, such comparative and interrelated concerns often take into consideration each country's unique needs and histories in addressing access and equity concerns. The OECD (2008) states that in today's globalised contexts, knowledge-inflected innovation has become central to industry and economic competiveness. In a similar vein, Marginson (2010, p. 27) states that "basic research is seen as an increasingly important element in policy discussions of industry innovation".

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The need to engage in research that compares higher education systems of several Asia Pacific countries further establishes the significance of this academic field of study that examines higher education provision in one country (or a group of countries) by using data, insights and blueprints drawn and developed from the practices and contextual situations in other countries. Arguably, programmes and academic courses in different countries are not all that dissimilar around the globe and relevant studies are regularly published in scholarly journals such as *Comparative Education, International Review of Education, International Journal of Educational Development, Comparative Education Review* and *Current Issues in Comparative Education*. Many similar research projects are increasingly being conducted and supported by UNESCO and the national ministries of several countries.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study was to undertake a comparative study of four higher education systems (namely Malaysia, Australia, Thailand and Vietnam) by examining the similarities and differences of each system in the following aspects:
  i. overview of higher education
  ii. policy development
  iii. structure of higher education; and
  iv. internationalisation

These systems can benefit from a structured study that examines similarities and differences in each higher education system. For instance, education is Australia's third largest export sector (representing AU\$13.7 billion industry), just behind coal and iron ore. While Australia's successes in offering quality higher education and attracting large numbers of international students to its shores are well documented (as a major student-importing

country attracting six per cent of all international students globally), less is known about higher education systems in the region. Higher education systems in Southeast Asia have been generally under-studied within the global context. The rationale for studying the higher education systems of Thailand and Vietnam stems from the view that these countries are currently viewed as emerging contenders of higher education in Southeast Asia and they offer a rich array of histories and cultures within their multicultural dimension (languages spoken, religious groups, economic and political developments). In these diverse countries, each government sees universities "not merely as institutions of national and international prestige but crucially as springboards to economic development, in concert with key industries such as information technology, engineering and science" (Welch, 2010, p. 149).

Method

The study adopted the approach of commissioning papers (from invited authors/research team members in Malaysia, Australia, Thailand and Vietnam) as well as focused research project meetings with members of the research team that provided the following information on the selected higher education systems:

i. *An overview of the higher education system*
   Introduction of country's higher education system, information on the education, population, general demography of higher education, contextualisation of higher education (trace historical development), description of current (postcolonial) higher education system and flow and media roles.

ii. *Higher Education Policies and Reforms (policy development, structure of higher education and internationalisation)*
   Exploring paths of governance configurations, structure and mechanism of policies and reforms in the higher education system (provision, regulation and ownership of higher education institutions, access and equity concerns, quality assurance, funding/financing, privatisation, R&D, governance, teaching and learning, internationalisation activities, community engagement) to facilitate growth in the main domains of university functions such as teaching-learning, research, development and innovation, leadership and community engagement.

The research team held two workshops to hold discussions on identifying representatives from the selected Asia Pacific countries who presented overviews of their higher education systems. A project consultant helped to shape the methodological framework that was used in this study (incorporating chapter organisation and key questions that needed to be answered). The main aspects of the framework dealt with the following areas: overview of higher education in each country, policy development,
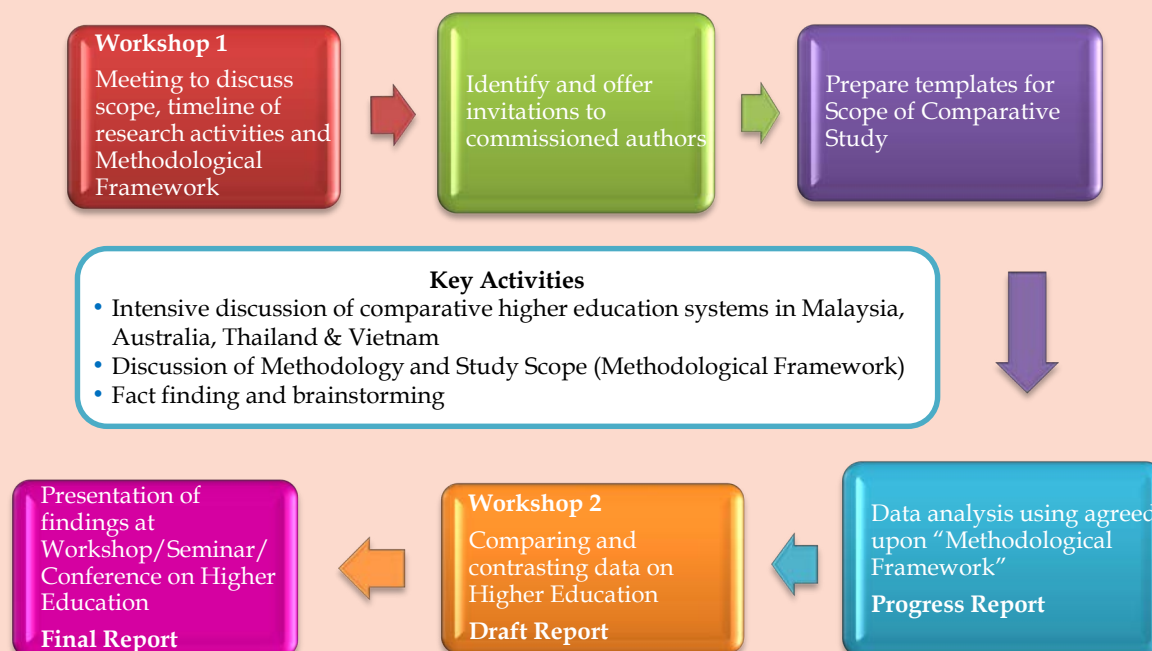
Figure 1: Methodological Approach of Study

structure of higher education and internationalisation. Figure 1 illustrates the methodological approach that was employed in this study.

Policy Implications for Malaysia

The findings of this comparative study indicate that Malaysia can learn from good models of practice of the selected countries. For instance, Malaysia can follow Australia in improving media coverage on higher education as there is a need to have mechanisms in place to educate the public on relevant events, issues and initiatives related to higher education. In a similar vein, more can be done to effectively develop a support system for the differently-abled individuals in the country's higher education institutions, as is the case with higher education systems in Australia and to some extent in Thailand. In policy terms, a specific higher education body can be assigned to prepare sufficient infrastructure and provide professional training to relevant personnel handling this group of individuals. Australia continues to improve its quality assurance mechanisms, which is what Malaysia too should do with regards to improving its delivery of curriculum while maintaining academic autonomy. Specific actions may include administrating evaluative research on Malaysian higher education quality assurance and setting up a MQA unit that can act on complaints swiftly.

Malaysia can follow Thailand's model of strengthening community engagement of universities by strategically aligning community needs with universities' research & development (R&D) activities, which is seen as largely lacking at present. Each university can be encouraged to have community engagement projects in specific

geographical locations and in its niche area (comparable to Thailand's "One University One Province" project). Such a move might necessitate reinforcing community needs in major research grants.

As is the case with a developed higher education system such as Australia, Malaysia too needs to take steps to synergise the structure of its education system (encompassing primary, secondary and tertiary education) in order to strengthen mechanisms to ensure the harmonious and complementary link of education systems across all levels.

While international student recruitment continues to be on the agenda for Australia and Malaysia, there is more that needs to be done to attract such students. This study's findings highlight the view that Malaysia needs to reconceptualise the term 'internationalisation' to include the local community's engagement with the university, as is the case with Thailand. Additionally, it should aim to increase the quality and number of academics and students who can compete internationally and who have an 'international' profile and 'global connectivity' and are yet at the same time locally connected and relevant. There is a need to also improve the climate and context of internationalisation with tangible and non-tangible outcomes; e.g., scale up the internationalisation of domestic student quality, especially in terms of employability and citizenship roles and provide motivation and incentives (including awards to institutions for excellence in internationalisation efforts). Additionally, in promoting internationalisation activities, Malaysia can further strengthen human capacity training in CLMV countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam) by leveraging on strengths in areas such as English language

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and Science and Technology. Additionally, more can be done to indigenise higher education national policy, curriculum and practice by building distinctive strengths in areas of demand and areas of distinctive strength in terms of courses and programmes (cross border models and delivery).

Conclusion

Malaysia needs to strengthen its provision of higher education based on the results of this comparative study of higher education systems in Australia, Thailand and Vietnam in terms of policy development, structure of higher education and internationalisation. In addition, there is a need to re-examine the definition, implementation and operationalisation of internationalisation in terms of its coherence with policy, especially the possible disconnection with the lived experience of students and the engagement of other stakeholders. Malaysia also needs to strengthen a systemic oversight on internationalisation as well as improve communication and coordination between the various stakeholders involved directly with the process of internationalisation.

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