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HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN MALAYSIA: EXPLORING STRATEGIC TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN POLICY IMPLEMENTATION FOR NEW MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed at exploring and identifying the strategic trends and challenges that have emerged in higher education in Malaysia. A qualitative research approach was used to identify these trends and challenges using documentation and semi-structured interviews as the main data collection methods. The documents were books, newspaper articles, journals, and education blueprints. The interview samples were four education scholars who are leading figures from the Ministry of Education and public universities. To analyse the data, document examination and content analysis were carried out to identify emerging trends which involved several cycles of coding. These trends were found to be parallel to the changes in the Malaysian higher education system in an attempt to upgrade its quality and sustainability, and to keep abreast with the current waves of globalisation, internationalisation and societal change. They are part of processes adopted by the Malaysian Education Ministry in ensuring that the country is not left behind in providing quality tertiary education for the nation. The ramifications of these trends and their associated challenges were discussed within the Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint framework. The implications for improving the quality of higher education are also included.

Keywords: Strategic Trends, Higher Education, Educational Policy, Education System, Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysian education system has undergone many substantial changes over the decade in order to be at par with developed nations across the world. The latest achievement is where Malaysia is seen as one of the most popular education hubs for tertiary education in the Asia Pacific region (UNESCO, 2014). This development indicates the importance of having quality tertiary education system in Malaysia on a continuous basis. In ensuring this, consistent reviews of the trends and challenges pertaining to the higher education system in Malaysia are necessary and much needed. However, there seems to be a lack of in depth studies that investigate the possibilities and limitations of policy implementation pertaining to the current Malaysian higher education blueprints. Of concern among researchers are those implementations that might have been affected by political influences and controversies. As scholarly writings of recent happenings in the Malaysian political arena are dearth, news reports that cover public reactions are aptly considered in this paper. As such, this study was carried out to add in depth understanding of the current strategic trends and challenges in Malaysian Higher Education (MHE).

Previous literature on policy implementation in higher education has focused on four primary topics which are leadership performance (Ghasemy, Hussin, Megat Daud, & Md Nor, 2015), organizational behaviour (Adewale, Ghavifekr, & Megat Daud, 2018), education history (Hussin, 2014), and distance learning (Chiam, 2017). Other studies have focused on similar areas of higher education and are mainly quantitative in nature (e.g., scale development, module development and survey). Fewer studies have examined more recent trends and challenges in higher education policy implementation but their focus is mainly on leadership climate, curriculum development, and policy outcome. Another drawback of such empirical research in policy implementation is the lack of focus on the processes involved (McNulty, 2003). There is, therefore, a need to gain in depth understanding of the strategic trends and challenges of current times emerging from the implementations of the latest blueprints.

As Malaysia is a multicultural-developing country in Southeast Asia, it continuously strives to ensure that all national policies pertaining to upgrading the Malaysia Higher Education (MHE) system are effective and functional. As such, several education policies have been proposed and launched since the 1950s, the latest being the Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint for 2015 - 2025 (Ministry of Education, 2013).

This research examines various documents, circulars and education blueprints in an attempt to identify the strategic trends and challenges that have emerged in higher education in Malaysia. It then focuses on the latest Education Blueprint to explore possibilities and limitations of this newly launched education policy in Malaysia to address current issues and challenges in higher education. This is done by discussing scholars' and public reactions as well as their reflections on the policy and its implementation.

By examining these current documents and getting input from local education experts to substantiate and enrich the knowledge area, using qualitative approaches and involving public reactions in recent news reports, we can better understand the strategic trends and challenges that are contemporaneously happening in higher education. With this understanding, researchers and policy makers can better dissect the policies and implementations for refined practice in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Malaysia, education policies have unfolded over the years but their effectiveness and functionality raise some issues and challenges in higher education. The following paragraphs review the evolution of education policies, which contributes to the emergence of the current Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint (2015-2025). This review is important to highlight the need to explore the strategic trends in Malaysian higher education and their associated issues and challenges.



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Evolution of Education Policies

The National Education Philosophy (NEP) for Malaysia enshrines the country's vision of education as a means for all children's holistic development. On page three of the NEP, it is highlighted how Malaysian education is the development of citizens through ongoing and integrated efforts to ensure that the nation has beings which are balanced intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. The NEP states further how morality and a firm belief in God, together with knowledge and competence could nourish capable citizens whose achievements do not only stop at personal and familial well beings, but also to extend to societal and national needs (The Malaysian National Education Philosophy, 1988).

The MHE system has gone through episodes of restructuring in the pursuit of quality education. These episodes have been in accordance with Malaysia's aspirations to climb the global socioeconomic ladder. From an agricultural focus to contemporary economic pursuits, to knowledge informed global workforce, Malaysia higher education has developed and is continually being developed to suit the needs of the nation and region (Zain, Aspah, Mohmud, Abdullah, & Ebrahimi, 2017). For example, Kanji, Tambi, and Wallace (1999) conducted an exploratory research to compare quality practices at higher learning institutions in the United States of America and Malaysia based on the Total Quality Management (TQM) perspective. Based on their findings and conclusions, two possible issues were raised: the relevance of the TQM models for Malaysia's higher education and the possible contributions to Malaysian organisation performance and business excellence. They showed that education policies in the 1990s have adopted the American education model and they were business-oriented (Ahmad, 2012).

Since then, MHE policies have shifted their focus on human capital development in an era of ICT. Researches conducted by Grapragasem, Krishnan, and Mansor (2014) alongside Hong and Songan (2011) provided some insights in the implementation of these policies through their research. They discussed e-learning issues in the changing landscape of tertiary education from a number of different angles; the readiness of the nation for e-Learning, the role of university administrations, the motivations of the academics, and student attitudes and experiences. Based on the discussion, another research by Norazah, Mohamed Amin, and Zaidan (2011) raised two main questions which are: is e-learning just a trend in MHE, and how does it affect the quality and process of teaching and learning. The presence of these questions highlights the need for a more in depth study on policy implementation in MHE be conducted. Perhaps a qualitative study may shed some light into this matter.

Although there are issues and questions associated with education policies (Mohd Fuad Mohd Salleh, 2008), the number of introduced and launched policies continues to grow. Aligned with the National Education Blueprint (2013-2025) are two blueprints for higher education: the National Higher Education Plan (NHESP) and the National Higher Education Action Plan (NHEAP) 2007-2010 (Ministry of Education, 2013). There are four phases broken down into 2007-2010, 2011-2015, 2016-2020, and beyond 2020. While the first three focus on thrusts and strategies, the final phase focuses on more inspirational accomplishments based on the first three. The final two which apply to the current times refer to the strive for excellence, and glory and sustainability (beyond 2020).

The Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint (2015-2025)

The Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint objectives are not far removed from the National Education Philosophy (NEP) of 1988 and its revised version of 1996. The Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2015-2025 is a national plan which was the Ministry of Education's brainchild from various expert inputs such as UNESCO, OECD, ministries, academics, industries, local and international communities (Samokhvalova, 2017). There are three implementation waves to the blueprint and they are (a) to secure quick wins for the purpose of building momentum and laying a foundation (2015), (b) to accelerate system improvement (2016-2020), and (c) to move towards excellence with increased operational flexibility (Ministry of Education, 2013). In 2018, implementation



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fatigue has set in and this requires a serious relook at the implementation processes and gaps - hence this study focus - strategic trends and challenges.

The Higher Education Blueprint also highlights ten shifts of development needed by all Malaysian students to develop holistically along the aspirations of access, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency. The first four shifts are (a) holistic, entrepreneurial and balanced graduates, (b) talent excellence, (c) nation of lifelong learners and (d) quality TVET graduates. The key stakeholders' outcomes become the focus of these four shifts. They include students, academics, institutions, and communities. From these shifts, it is hoped that higher education institutions would be able to prepare graduates with transferrable skills, sound ethical judgements, and also grit so that they can meet the industry demands - an issue which the nation has been facing for some time (Ministry of Education, 2013). It is also possible to develop enterprising and entrepreneurial spirits among these graduates where opportunities are created by them instead of for them in the future professional world.

Another integral shift is lifelong learning for the nation wherein adult learners, flexible learning, and custom/tailored learning become the pathway to higher education. These shifts consider the preparation of each student with strong ethics and moral foundations to nurture well balanced individuals who are able to employ sound judgment and principles for the betterment of the new Malaysian nation. This third shift opens up education to more people of different levels and professions. Returning professionals are also encouraged to get higher education within these shifts. This is important as people need to upgrade their skills consistently and at par with the needs of the new age knowledge economy. The everchanging technological literacy means a need to adapt to new skills and training (OECD, 2017).

The next six shifts involve innovative tools, funds, e-learning, latest instructional delivery and internationalization of learning. With these ten shifts, graduates are expected to have quality education which is benchmarked against international standards, be morally and ethically developed, be employable, have access to better and flexible learning, enter and re-enter university at any stage of their life, receive funds support if required, and push the limits of their potential in the profession of their choice (Ministry of Education, 2013).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Indeed, there are many models for policy implementation in the literature (Ahmad, 2014). This research, however, is conceptualized based on one of the earliest models, that is, Van Meter and Van Horn's (1975) policy implementation model because it is the most influential model of policy implementation, which has been taken up by previous researchers (e.g., Hussin, 2014). As the model is one of the top-down models in policy implementation, it was found to be culturally relevant for use in the context of Malaysian higher education because Malaysia scored the highest on power-index dimension in social studies (Hofstede, 2011).

The framework encompasses interactions among several variables of policy implementation which are (a) the context, which involves political, sociocultural and organizational factors, (b) policy objectives and standards, and (c) the disposition of those experienced and involved in the policy making process and helped shape the process of policy implementation. This conceptual framework is diagrammatically represented in Figure 1.



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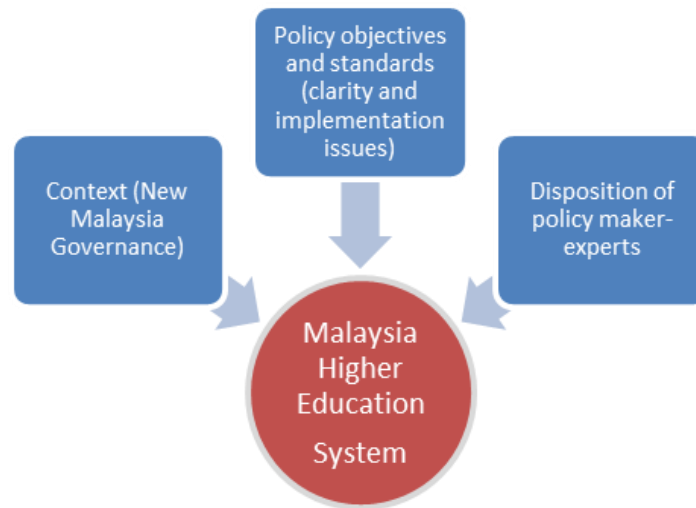


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study (source: Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975).

In this study, the focus is on the strategic trends and challenges in the policy implementation at Malaysian higher education level. The context is on the new Malaysia's governance which has merged its Ministries of Higher Education and Education into one Ministry of Education as well as its reinterpretations of currently implemented policies. These policies must have clear objectives and standards in order to be successfully implemented (Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). The last variable caters to expert voices who are experienced and involved in policy making as well as are practitioners (policymaker-experts) in higher education. This is crucial as policymakers are accountable as well in ensuring that policies are piloted and that policy managers understand fully the whole spectrum of the policies (Hussin, 2014). Thus, the need for Education Blueprint midterm reviews as suggested by the new Minister of Education when commenting that Malaysia will proceed with realizing the Blueprint (The Star, 2018).

By acknowledging the emerging issues in MHE policies from 1990s-2010, there is a need to further examine the formal documents and educational scholars alongside experts' views and reflections as a reference point before the transition into the next phase in the country's spearheading actions towards 2020 and beyond. Therefore, this research aimed to probe into MHE system in order to understand the current strategic trends and challenges within the system and to what extent the blueprint has addressed these trends and challenges. Specifically, the research questions are:

1. What are the strategic trends in the MHE system?
2. What are the issues and challenges in the implementation of education policies in MHE?
3. How does the latest Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint address the emerging trends and challenges in higher education?



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METHOD

Research Approach and Design

This research adopted a qualitative approach using a combination of narrative and historical research design. The sources of data are the pooled documentation of text types and the expert viewpoints. This design was chosen because it fit the research purpose that focused on highlighting the new strategic trends and their associated challenges.

Samples

This research used two sample sources: (a) text documents in the form of books, newspaper articles, journals, and blueprints; and (b) four scholars in the education field (i.e., two from the Ministry of Education and two professors from public universities). Select news articles were referred to detect public reactions and reflections pertaining to the education policies. Whereas, the scholars were selected based on their (a) expertise in education, specifically higher education (b) contribution to policymaking, specifically in the development of new educational policies, and (c) publication, especially those who had published widely locally or overseas. Table 1 and Table 2 summarise details of the two sample sets.

Table 1
Characteristics of the Documentation Sample

Sample	Types	Total Entries/No	Publication Year	
Text Documents	Books	4	2007, 2008, 2012, 2014	
	Journal Articles	15	2010 onwards	
	Education Policies	NEP		1988
		TN50		2017
		Education Blueprint Higher Education		2013
Blueprint DLP			2015	
			2017	
	Newspaper entries	NST/15 The Star/13	2010 onwards	

Table 2
Characteristics of the Expert Sample

Sample	Job Position	Gender	Age Group	Years of service
Experts/Scholars	1 Emeritus Professor	All male	80s	More than 30 years
	3 Professors		70s and 60s	



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Data Collection Methods

There were two methods employed for data collection. Documentation was a primary data collection technique. The sources of data were various documents, circulars, and education blueprints from the Ministries of Education and Higher Education, ranging from 1990 onwards. A document checklist was used to guide the documentation process. This research also used semi structured interviews with four selected education experts to enrich and substantiate the findings from the text data. An interview protocol was prepared to guide the interview process.

Procedure

The overall research procedure involved two phases. The first phase involved documentation process that has two steps:

1. Identification of suitable document pool – this process identified 26 documents from the 43 reviewed, based on the publication year, scope, relevance, and agencies. This also included four mainstream news articles which captured public reactions and reflections towards recent education policies.
2. Development of coding matrix - this matrix was used to filter and code the various documents. A three- cycle coding was carried out to attain the emerging themes.

The second phase was the interview study. There were three steps involved and these are:

1. Development of interview protocol – this involved creation of questions to substantiate the emerging themes from the content analyses.
2. Conducting interview – face to face interviews were carried out with each scholar separately ranging from 45 minutes – one and a half hour (i.e., average of an hour).
3. Transcription of interview – this involved preparing a verbatim transcript of each interview for data analysis.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness of a study is the ability of the researchers to ascertain credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability elements for the study. In this study, credibility was ensured when the reality of the respondents aka the academics was demonstrated through their perceived responses via interviews. A dense description was carried out for transferability purposes. Persistent focus on and thorough scrutiny of documents to determine specific aspects of policies and strategic trends for the study also added dependability and confirmability to this study. As data were multi-sourced, the study ensured that triangulation is employed. This process involved cross verification from documentation, interview, and public reactions and reflections (news articles).

Data Analysis

To analyse the text data from various documents and news reports, both document examination and content analysis were used using NVivo software. First, the raw data (pooled documents) were subjected to a close examination procedure in order to generate a shortlisted list based on its contents and relevance to the research objectives. The shortlisted documents were then analysed based on their contents.

Thematic analysis as outlined by Richards (2005) was used to analyse the four verbatim transcripts. This method is systematic, thorough, and grounded in the data. NVivo was used as a tool to store data, organise data, enable the researcher to assign labels or codes to the data during first-cycle coding using free nodes, refine and making connections between codes during second-cycle coding using tree nodes and child nodes, and facilitate searching through the data and locating specific text or words. The analysis involved several cycles of coding. The first cycle coding generated 105 initial codes. The second cycle coding generated 36 codes and the final cycle coding resulted in 10 categories. Based on these categories, the emerging themes were identified.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section describes the results and discussion for the study. Document examination, content and thematic analyses were conducted. The findings are presented based on the research questions:

Strategic Trends

Document examination and content analysis from documentation data revealed strategic trends in Malaysian higher education system. Figure 2 presents the emerging themes that we have identified. The themes are presented in chronological order to reflect the strategic trends in Malaysia higher education policies from 1990s – present time.

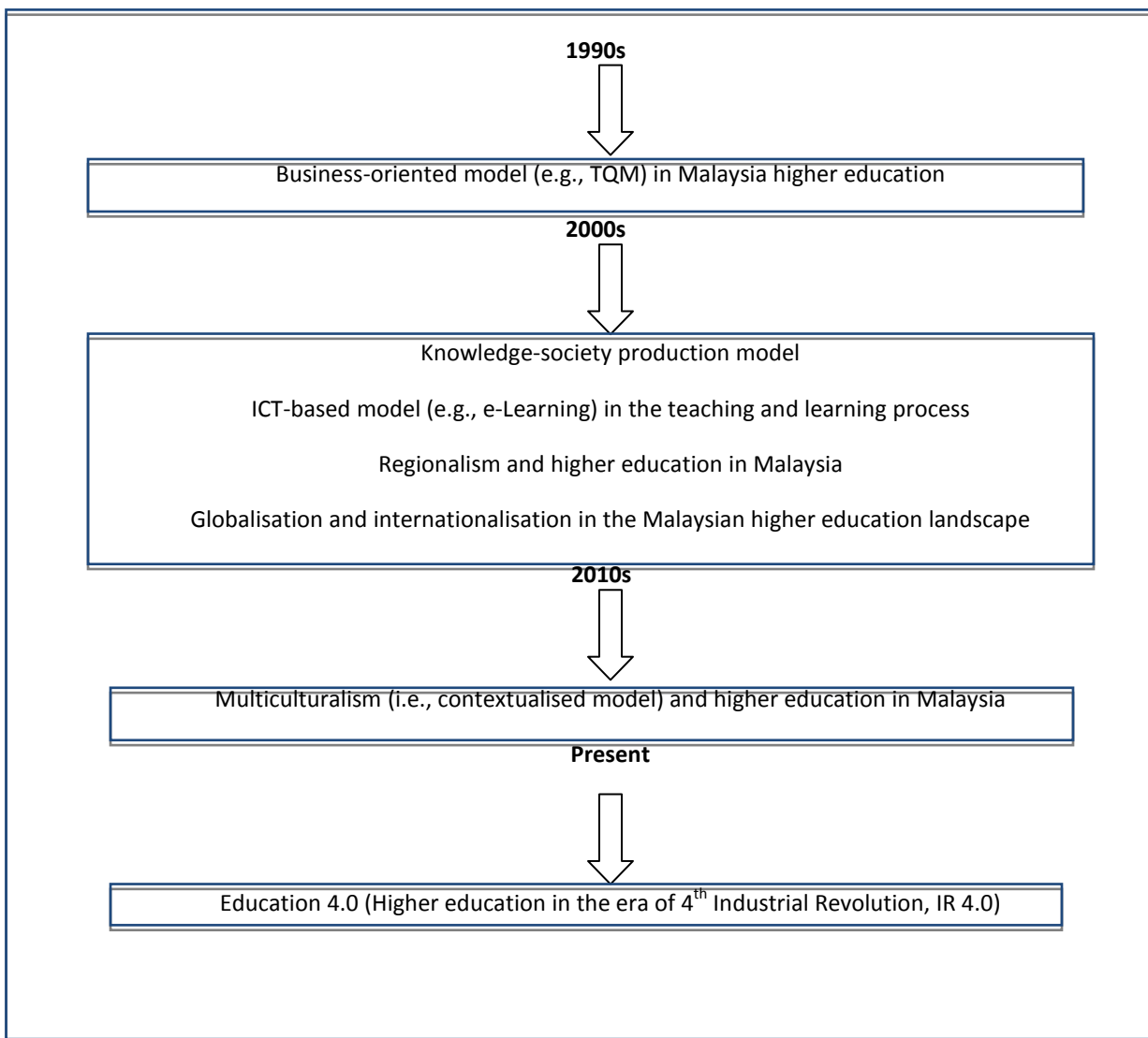


Figure 2. A summary of strategic trends in Malaysia higher education policies from 1990s to present.



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Based on Figure 2, it is clear that the strategic trends found in the 1990s were business-oriented and these highlight the issue of relevance for the new Malaysia. In the late 1990s, the Malaysian education policies emphasised quality practices in higher education institutions. One possible explanation for such finding is due to the fact that education, as a field of study, originates and grows in the American context. Thus, many developing countries including Malaysia, adopted the American education models in their education system. One of the widely used models in the American education system is based on the total quality management (TQM). This finding is consistent with the findings from Kanji et al.'s (1999) study. Perhaps, education was already viewed as a commodity in that era. Moving forward, empirical studies on 23 countries including Malaysia, showed how Quality Management and service quality are still crucially focused on to respond to the ever changing demands in higher education (Papanthymou & Darra, 2017).

In the 2000s, several strategic trends emerged in Malaysia's higher education. These trends focus on producing knowledge-society, integrating information and communications technology (ICT) in the teaching and learning process, competing with and meeting the regional and international standards, and embracing the waves of globalization. The emergence of these trends in Malaysia higher education system can be explained from the perspective of the country's need to strive for excellence in the regional and international arena via university ranking. However, this creates many issues and dilemmas to academic communities, especially in terms of graduate employability (Rahman & Koo, 2015), e-learning (Norazah et al., 2011), and career challenges (Arokiasamy, Ismail, Ahmad, & Othman, 2009; Chang, Sirat, & Abdul Razak, 2015) such as teaching-researching balance and "lack of funding, opportunities for sabbatical leave and pursuance of higher education as well as participation in conferences abroad" (Arokiasamy et al., 2009, p. 60). To respond to these issues, it seems that all parties - the government, the institutions, and various stakeholders - must work collaboratively to ensure knowledge workers production and e-learning adoption is a worthwhile effort. This collaborative network is necessary for enhancing teaching and learning in order to encourage the diffusion of good ICT practices in Malaysia's higher education (Grapragasem et al., 2014; Norazah et al., 2011).

Results also revealed multiculturalism as one of the strategic trends emerging from data analysis. In addition to the difficulties and challenges in striving for regionalism and internationalism in the MHE landscape, many local scholars started arguing for a focus on the core of the nation looking outwards and toward education models of regional or developed nations. These local scholars voiced out the pivotal role of adopting a focus on multiculturalism in education policies as well as in practices (Ibrahim, Muslim, & Buang, 2011; Malakolunthu & Rengasamy, 2012). This means that Malaysia must develop its education landscape based on multiculturalism, that is, "a process that is contextualised to a particular country and involves active management by the respective government" (Ibrahim et al., 2011, p.1003). If the education policies and practices in Malaysian higher education can address cultural diversity in Malaysia, the national mission of NEP that was launched in 1970 can become a pooled effort toward creating racial unity (Malakolunthu & Rengasamy, 2012).

The current strategic trend in the MHE, as shown in Figure 2, is Education 4.0. In 2018, Education 4.0 becomes a buzzword for any discussion on Malaysian higher education system and policy. Extended from Industrial Revolution 4.0 (IR 4.0), Education 4.0 for higher education underlines the gravity of creating ready talents which are flexible and morally developed to compete in a global marketplace where jobs may have to be created by themselves (Tapsir & Puteh, 2018).

This section has identified the strategic trends in the Malaysian higher education system. Next, the discussion focuses on presenting results on the issues and challenges emerging from policy implementation.

Emerging Issues and Challenges in Policy Implementation

Results from thematic analysis revealed a list of issues and challenges documented in the various sources. These issues and challenges were clustered into five main themes: producing learning, adopting the 21st Century



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curriculum, creating the global university, learning across lifespan and for all, and striving for world class rankings and research universities. Table 3 presents these themes and their emerging categories.

Table 3

Emerging Themes and Categories on the Issues and Challenges in Malaysia Higher Education

Themes	Categories
1. Producing learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Curriculum• Educators• Learners
2. Adopting the 21 st Century curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Global standard• Individualized learning
3. Creating the global university	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Franchised programmes• Opportunities for higher education
4. Learning across lifespan and for all	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mass oriented• Culturally heterogenous
5. Striving for world class rankings and research universities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Academic dilemma• Integrity• International standards• Quantity vs quality publication

Producing learning

Human capital is a function of education. This is the premise of higher education and is a prevailing issue that requires university leaders to continue to think, plan and offer suitable academic programmes with relevant curriculum capable of developing the full potential of the country's human resources; thus, equipping them to become useful and productive members of the Knowledge-based economy. For example, Professor A, who has been in the area of policymaking for more than 30 years, shared his views in the interview,

"Leaders are no longer talking to the makcik or pakcik kampung (village aunts or uncles) who were semi-literate as in the early days of independence. Leaders are now talking to the new makcik and pakcik who are university graduates, now in their 60s, who have experienced history and seen the world up close. And these are the people who have great track records of contributions and leadership in different professions and services. From them, relevant curriculum can be sourced and reinvented" (Interview 1, PA, lines 20-25).

The traditional and conventional purpose of higher education is to provide instruction. However, a new paradigm has emerged where the principal purpose of higher education is to produce learning (Asimiran & Hussin, 2012). Moving from an environment that "provides instruction" to one that "produces learning" requires not only a paradigm shift but doing it in a way that will provide an environment acceptable to students using effective pedagogies and utilising the most up-to-date technologies where appropriate. In other words, the challenge is to move from a teacher-centred curriculum to a learner-centred curriculum (Cheng, 2013).



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Strategies are required to engage students in this type of learning process. However, it is quite evident that in the Asian educational environment currently, the curriculum is still largely teacher-centred (Schweisfurth, 2011). Even though many academics have changed their mode of instruction and started applying a more collaborative-based instruction that promotes social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978; Daniels, 2001), many still regard themselves as “experts” and love being the main source of reference. Changing the mind-set of educators will thus take a significant amount of unlearning and relearning. This is one key contribution of this study.

An additional contribution is educators need to design and offer various learning activities to cater to the different learning styles of students (Embi, 2018). An interactive curriculum must be established; a holistic curriculum where pedagogies are effectively applied to inculcate a positive learning culture (Hussin, Alyahmadi, & Suriansyah, 2014). Simultaneously, it is imperative that a mechanism is developed to effectively assess the learning outcome both quantitatively and qualitatively. Typically, assessments in the form of tests have been largely based on recall and recognition with few applications and analysis type of questions. In today’s education scene, building learning communities has been found to be valuable and relevant, especially within the context of the digital age where many adults are already connected to computers and the Internet. Internet statistics have revealed that in 2013, over 2.7 billion people were using the Internet, which corresponds to 39% of the world’s population (International Telecommunication Union, 2013). Hence, networking amongst learners through online discussion forums for collaborative e-learning has become very common in more developed countries and is gaining popularity in the Malaysian higher education institutions.

Adopting the 21st Century Curriculum

In relation to producing new means of learning for the new century, there is also a shift from site bounded learning to a more localised and globalised learning, warranted to allow for better networking among academics and students of different states and countries. This also means moving from instructor-based learning to multiple sources of learning and from separated (individual) learning to networked learning. Unlimited education opportunities need to be available for young Malaysians as well as to those seeking to further their education at any point of their life. In the news article, the researcher mentioned,

“The younger generations, who are multilingual and information technology literate (as well as belong to some professional communities), communicate with their peers globally. Their aspirations and expectations are as universal as the expectations and aspirations of their peers in other societies. Learning too is individualized and autonomous for these generations” (NST, 1, 1/2016).

As such, we need to also look at how individualised learning can occur within the Malaysian higher education system. Individualised learning includes self-regulated learning and the availability of individualised programmes. Standard programmes where students are seen as absorbers of knowledge and followers of instructors as currently practised need to be adapted to consider unlimited and flexible opportunities for learning. This was iterated by one expert-policymaker in the interview:

“Malaysian students are diffusive and passive. Students like these always have the tidak apa attitude and way of looking at things. They are not gritty and rely a lot on what they believe is pre-destined to them. They like to remain silent...we need to change this. We need to provide customized programmes...” (Interview 1, PB, 12/08/2017).

Creating the Global University

For many countries, including Malaysia, opportunities for higher education were at one time limited. Today, the impact of globalisation on higher education has created ample opportunities for individuals to seek further



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education. In the new Malaysia, the number of available higher learning institutions in Malaysia is mushrooming, especially among private higher education institutions (PHEI).

In 2009, there were a total of 460 PHEIs recorded by the respective ministry but in 2010, the number of PHEIs reported by the MOE was 476 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). To date, there are 20 public universities, more than 476 private institutions of higher education, 32 polytechnics, and 81 community colleges in various states in Malaysia (Ministry of Education, 2014).

The experience of many countries has shown that globalisation and innovations in information and communications technology (ICT), in particular the Internet, have also opened up new opportunities for education providers. This is evident by the emergence of Open University in many countries including Open University in Malaysia, or better known as OUM in the local context. According to Tham (2013a, 2013b), the emergence of many other PHEIs in Malaysia, such as those with University status (e.g., Tun Abdul Razak University, Wawasan Open University, and Asia e-University), branches of PHEI with university status, PHEI with university status (branches from foreign universities such as University of Nottingham in Malaysia (UNIM), Monash University Malaysia (MUSM), and Newcastle University Medicine Malaysia (NUMed), PHEIs with college university status, and PHEIs without university status, contributes towards the various dimensions of internationalization of higher education in the country.

Universities are establishing campuses overseas or establishing their presence online to reach out to students in other countries. Many universities in the developed countries now have enrolled students from all over the world. It is now a borderless world with less geographical boundaries where learning activities are no longer confined to within the four walls of the classroom and the “teacher or instructor” can come from different places.

It is possible that franchised programmes or branch campuses that duplicate each other will be the mode of some of the more enterprising universities. This in essence is not unlike the “McDonaldisation” (Ritzer, 1996) of universities that has been referred to from time to time as reference to the “assurance that products and services will be the same over time and in all locales...” and that the “routinization of services remains exemplars of extreme standardization” (p.10) are done to ensure quantifiable consistency in education. In the years to come, it is possible to witness the massification of education that will produce quality global graduates who can fit into the working environment of most, if not all, countries.

As this massification of education takes place, Professor C alerts the need to ensure that education aims must be met in a culturally informed way as well as maintain the push for creation of an innovative and progressive new Malaysia.

“The students should be not only consumers of technological tools but also creators of tools...We also need to think about the owner of policy in education when education is massified and how cross border policies need to be materialized” (Interview 2, PC, 20/01/2018).

Globalisation, as highlighted by Lemoine, Jenkins and Richardson (2017) is a multifaceted process with economic, social, political, and cultural implications for higher education. It “poses new challenges at a time when nation-states are no longer the sole providers of higher education and the academic community no longer holds the monopoly on decision-making in education” (UNESCO, 2004, p. 6). According to the UNESCO paper, this will allow the emergence of cross-border higher education provision and this may seriously affect the country’s capacity to regulate higher education within a national public policy perspective. While globalisation may lead us to a borderless, transnational, trans-border and cross-border education, in the national context, it is important to be aware of other related issues, particularly relating to quality assurance of these education providers.



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Learning Across Lifespan and For All

Higher education in Malaysia used to be for the privileged few – the elites and the high academic achievers. Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2009) said that, “universities in the 19th and 20th centuries were autonomous elite institutions based on a homogenous culture and values of scholarship, dedicated to long term, academic education and research, and supported by governments or charity institutions on behalf of the public good. “Higher education in the 21st century are mass-oriented, culturally heterogeneous, and supported by a wide array of public and private sources” (p. 6). Therefore, Professor B, in an interview, urged both public and private institutions to work together in “an open discussion on scholarships of education” for benefit of the public (Interview 2, PB, 03/019/2017). There is also now greater access to higher education, thus making the democratisation of higher education a reality. Learners in the 21st century are fortunate as the digital age comes with opportunities to leverage on ICT and access multiple resources.

Striving for World Class Rankings and Research Universities

There has been growing tension among higher education institutions in the country to improve their rankings and compete among other world class academic institutions in the world. According to Altbach et al. (2009), “international rankings favour universities that use English as the main language of instruction and research, have a large array of disciplines and programs and substantial research funds from government or other sources. These rankings have methodological problems but they are widely used and influential, and show no signs of disappearing” (p. 5). They further state how the wealth of a nation and a university play a key role in determining the quality and ranking of an academic institution. This therefore means developing countries such as Malaysia, whose main language is not English, are at a disadvantage. Although the three missions of a modern university are teaching, researching and public service (all important at different levels), many public universities in Malaysia have become research universities, focusing more on research and publications and less on teaching. This is because research universities are at the pinnacle of the academic system in the 21st century and are directly involved in the global knowledge network. Research universities are expensive since they have to sustain and offer facilities for research such as laboratories, libraries and information and technology infrastructure which are maintained to the highest international standards. A public reaction, which reinforces this, is shared below,

“The ministry is always supportive of endeavours that make Malaysian higher education great and believes in the synergy that exists among higher education institutions, which helps foster a dynamic and innovative ecosystem” (The Star Online, 17/10/2017).

To have research prowess and reputation for excellence, the Malaysian research universities have been coaxing and pushing their academics to “perform” better and better, and although these may result in increase in publications, research ventures, and the number of foreign academics and students – best for ranking purposes, they may also produce significant dilemmas among academics and university administrators. A news article, which presented this dilemma, is as below,

“According to some local academics, the pressure to publish research papers – an important facet of the KPI in public universities – is creating an unhealthy intellectual culture” (The Star, 26/09/2010)

This phenomenon creates an imbalance in intellectual discourse, leading to potential jeopardizing of integrity, a much needed asset in the community of higher learning scholars. Professor PR, a renowned scholar in engineering shared similar concerns,

“There are many papers with names of ‘free riders’ who just want to fulfil the quota and promotion purpose. As a result, the university may produce unqualified professors/associates” (Interview 2, PR, 15/07/2017).



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The cutting corners phenomenon is believed to be clearly happening in many universities – the down side of university ranking. Hence there is a need to carefully tread the ranking path by nurturing a culture of academic integrity and respect for intellectual property, while acknowledging the importance of soaring at par with Ivy league universities.

Foretelling the Future of Malaysia's Higher Education

From the discussion so far, it is evident that the Blueprint has aimed at addressing the trends and challenges which have emerged in the country over the last decade. The concerns over quality in the 1990s, ICT use in the 2000s, internationalization in the 2010s and multiculturalism and identity in 2012 and transformational education in 2017 (see Figure 1) have been studied and analysed carefully against the current challenges of improving the nation's education system rankings. The Blueprint is also aligned with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Preschool to Post-Secondary Education), ensuring a smooth transition between levels of education.

It is evident from shifts one and two (holistic entrepreneurial and balanced graduates, and higher learning talent excellence) that the issue of learning based on recall and recognition permeating the nation's assessment system over the past decades is addressed as standards are raised and higher order thinking questions, which require analysis and synthesis skills, are encouraged and crucial to passing examinations of the future. Holistic learner needs are also an important focus of the education system as cited in the Blueprint. This means the quality of students entering higher learning institutions as well as their ability to think and compete will potentially improve. At higher learning institutions, continuous refining work can progress. Nonetheless, it is important for higher learning institutions to create thinking individuals and assist those with different and special needs.

As learning becomes more individualized with self-paced learning at schools, shift ten (transformed higher education delivery) also focuses on a transformed and more flexible learning at higher learning institutions. Such learning provides flexibility for learners to acquire knowledge and skills and such individualized opportunities will encourage more Malaysians or other nationalities to enter Malaysian higher learning institutions to develop themselves. It can potentially improve the number of students who could otherwise enrol in other learning institutions or miss out on opportunities to further their studies. This more flexible outlook on higher education in Malaysia could also increase the number of international students in the country. This highlights global prominence, as stated in shift eight. With more encouragement on internationalisation, higher learning education in Malaysia can improve their prominence globally. This is currently evident wherein the access to higher education in Malaysia is better and an influx of foreign students entering Malaysian higher education institutions has been substantial (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Shift nine (globalized online learning) seems to be addressing the concern over the provision of a borderless environment for learning through ICT use. As university infrastructure is expected to improve and expand across the country, access to information and knowledge is also moving beyond the borders of the classroom; therefore, learning does not take place only through the educator but also through peers, and physical, historical and cultural tools (Daniels, 2001) available within an online environment. If this is in place, students at higher learning institutions will have no problems adopting the concept of a global university as they would have been able to adopt the concept of a global school from young.

Additionally, students should be able to critically think and close the theory-practice nexus in various settings, as an innovation ecosystem (shift seven) is enhanced to focus on students' development and creativity. If this ecosystem is sustained, students can reach their full potentials in crucial subjects such as Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and English Language as well as value-laden subjects such as Ethics, Culture and Religious Knowledge.



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If these ten shifts are well implemented and operationalized at higher learning institutions, it can be expected that the rankings of education systems will improve. The aim of getting at least two universities in the top 100 in the world is already 50% achieved when University of Malaya was ranked 87th in the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University rankings for 2018 (QS World Ranking, 2018).

As discussed earlier, international rankings favour universities that use English as the main language of instruction and research, have a large array of disciplines and programmes, and substantial research funds from government or other sources. If Malaysians, as a nation, improved their English language proficiency, the standard of English language proficiency would no doubt be raised. Academicians and higher learning students will be able to effectively use this medium of communication for instruction and research. They also need to adopt academic integrity of the highest standard to be able to perform better as worthy academicians for higher learning. If they progressed well with other scientific competencies as well, knowledge and human capital will substantially progress in alignment with other developments, delivering substantial funds to sustain the country's vision. However, on another note, realising that there are methodological problems related to the current ranking systems (Altbach et al., 2009), it might also be potentially useful to develop another way of benchmarking the national higher learning institutions against those from across the region and beyond international borders.

Last but not least are financial sustainability (shift five) and empowered governance (shift six). According to Ahmad (2013), a renowned Malaysian education expert, empowerment requires self-education on the part of leaders as well as those under their wings. With empowerment should come enablement, wherein those who have been socialized through normative education and are used to directives will have to rethink their positions in relation to the latest education plan. Leaders need to strategize to assist this transformative change where thinking is allowed so that empowerment can take place as required. Currently, the nation has not seen such a horizontal engagement in practices at all levels of education and administration (Haron, 2013). Nordin (2013) also echoes the same concern as he expresses how higher learning institutions are inclined toward control and directives requiring excessive paperwork instead of professional enhancement and empowerment as envisioned in the Blueprint. Hence, there is a need to carefully analyse the social psychological bearings of leaders and governance to gauge whether they are ready for such empowerment in higher learning institutions. The government has invested substantially in higher education as compared to those from around the region and with the expenditure increase along with the economic crisis, subsidising higher education has been rather costly (Ministry of Education, 2013). There is a need for higher education institutions to move from being too dependent on the government and one way of doing this is to increase the number of students from across ASEAN region. To ensure this, the quality of higher education in Malaysia has to be recognised in the world.

Deni, Zainal, and Malakolunthu (2014) proposed a holistic approach in the deliverance of quality higher education. The approach encompasses three key areas: (a) "smart partnerships"; (b) "improvement in teaching and learning"; and (c) "installation of quality assurance systems" (Deni et al., 2014, p. 658). Some of the suggested strategies from their approach are summarised in Table 4.



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Table 4
Selected Initiatives to Improve Teaching for Malaysian Higher Education

Levels	Measures/Strategies	Target Outcomes
National	1. Making/Implementing the National Higher Education Strategic Plans 2007-2020	Improve education quality at higher learning institutions
	2. Forming Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MWA) to audit and accredit university programs	Improve university programs and program management
	3. Obtaining International Organization for Standardization (ISO) certification	Enhance quality and guarantee standardization in total quality management.
Faculty	4. Participating in Basic Teaching Methodology Course (BTMC)	Improve the instructional practice of university teachers
	5. Developing staff development modules based on teachers' needs and beliefs	Maximize the impact on teaching
	6. Forming collaborative learning communities such as the formation of communities of practice (CoP) within many foreign universities	Improve the quality of university teachers' teaching

(Source: Deni et al., 2014)

Although the various initiatives have been argued to produce positive impacts to empower university educators, the implementation of such efforts, especially the formation of CoPs, in higher education in Malaysia also poses various challenges to overcome. Perhaps more research studies are needed to investigate the possibilities and limitations in forming suitable CoPs for the Malaysian context.

In relation to empowerment, institutions are given autonomy to decide on their achievements, management, budget allocation, and curriculum implementation as stated in shift six. This empowerment although applauded, comes with another concern. This is because with decentralization of power, the quality and standard of education may be slowly eradicated. Haron (2013) argues for a yardstick to compare achievements of students across the nation without a set standard. Thus, targets should be set as a mechanism to measure students' ability. Haron (2013) further cites State examinations in the United States and other developed countries which perform as a yardstick for both academics and students to structure the students' development and learning. This concern highlights the need to gauge how university students are performing. One assessment instrument developed recently is the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).



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The assessment looks at skills that students in all fields should acquire (the Generic Skills) and skills specific to each discipline (with a focus on engineering and economics). With set targets, Malaysian students will be able to meet the required standards from lower education levels to higher education levels.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

There are some implications generated from the research. These are discussed below.

Theoretical Implications

These findings have some theoretical implications on the framework used for evaluating the strategic trends and challenges in higher education. As the study focuses on three variables: context, policy objectives and standards, and the disposition of policy maker-experts, findings suggest for refined elements that may potentially be absorbed in the current practice of policy reviews - that a democratic forum is held to provide a platform for a healthy debate reflecting a democratic process (Hussin, 2014), leading to a holistic review of the policies. Interestingly, this coincides with what the new Minister of Education has done almost immediately after his appointment in April 2018. He has started an online feedback initiative gather suggestions from the public on ways to improve and better develop the Malaysian Education system (The Borneo Post, 2018). Such a democratic process, we believe, can potentially lead to further structured research for empirical-based decision making and reviews.

Practical Implications

Findings from this research highlight some alarming economic implications for the practice in higher education. For example, there is an outlandish concern among global trend analysts that the current global economic crisis arising from a general slowdown could produce an adverse effect on the developing and least developed countries in terms of investment in education (UNESCO, 2009). There would be significant constraints on the budgets of research universities as governments would be unable to fund research thus affecting the production of knowledge capital and delivering education to the larger population of the country. Higher learning institutions may be pressured to increase tuition fees for students, thus resulting in a decline in enrolment among those constrained by the tuition hike. As funds become less available, the nation could indulge in cost-cutting practices at higher learning institutions resulting in deteriorating quality of education. It is also possible to witness more part-time faculty members hired and an increase in class size. The institutions might not hire more qualified academics and might want to put on hold projects under construction, and limit support for ICT use as well as the purchase of resources such as computers, books and journals. On the other side is the quality of students entering higher learning institutions which may affect the quality of higher learning human capital. The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 2007 showed that up to 18% and 20% of Malaysian students do not have basic skills in Mathematics and Science, despite the slight increase of 7% and 5% from the results of 2003 ranking. These students were deemed limited in their mastery of basic concepts in Mathematics and Science. Fortunately, the 2011 and 2015 reports show an encouraging increase in the results with higher scores in both subjects (Daus, & Braeken, 2018). However, Malaysia is still lagging behind its neighbouring country, Singapore, in many aspects of achievements in the two subjects.

Education and Training Implications

Another implication can be seen from the social aspect for higher education. Objectively, Malaysian students' performance has shown improvements over the past decades. However, the improvements must be seen as relative to the performance of others from participating countries. This is because other education systems are better and faster in supporting their student performance, and these systems have also been able to sustain the



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momentum of support through various ways. As a result, there is a widening gap between their student performance and the Malaysians.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings in 2009 were also of concern as data revealed that performance of the 15 years old Malaysian students were as if they have had only about three years or even less than that of being in school as compared to 15-year old Singaporeans, South Koreans, and those from Hong Kong and Shanghai. The students will eventually be fed into the higher learning systems (locally or abroad) and if these students are not sufficiently prepared for a competitive learning environment at higher education level, it would be difficult for them to compete globally against their counterparts from other countries. Newer strategies need to be in place to address these challenges, particularly for education and training practice improvements.

Another concern was the gap and boundaries created through racial disharmony as well as the increased number of stress-related mental health issues faced by the youth as of late (Ahmad et al., 2015). The year 2018 shows the new government taking its stand in Malaysia, in the revisiting and refinement of its policy through the cultivation of the three cultures of love, happiness and mutual respect. In addition, there is the focus on bridging the gaps between races which are all core ideas applauded by the general public (Arumugam, 2018). How these important puzzle pieces fit for the re-education and re-training of human resources need to be carefully thought out and strategized for the new Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

This research paper has discussed the trends in higher education within the last decade, the emerging issues and challenges from the implementations of various educational policies, as well as from the growth in international standards of education systems worldwide. It has also detailed the latest Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint (2015-2025), its five aspirations (access, quality, equity, unity, and efficiency), and ten shifts for transformation of the Malaysian education system. The paper ends by synthesizing the trends and issues with the Blueprint and foretelling the future for Malaysia's Higher Education systems.

Malaysia needs concerted efforts by many individual groups to ensure that the Blueprint is operationalized successfully at all levels. A plan is merely a plan until it is executed. Malaysians must realize that an academic revolution has taken place in education in the past half century requiring transformations unprecedented in scope and diversity. Malaysia is convinced of the centrality of education and the need for strong, vibrant learning institutions to support the country's knowledge economy as well as to provide the knowledge necessary for social mobility and economic progress essential to societies across the globe.

It is hoped that these efforts will materialize what the Malaysian NEP (1988) aspires – new Malaysians who are not only intelligent and competent, but also with high morality to ensure that responsibilities for the nation are carried out in the best of standards and in the most sustainable way.

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