Universities at the crossroads: industry or society driven?

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Higher education is viewed as part of the national agenda in transforming Malaysia into a high-income nation. This has resulted in a sky-rocketing number of graduates in Malaysia's recent history. Industry relies on higher education as the source of skilled employees, and it is important for industry to attract and retain talented employees in their effort to remain competitive in the market. This article presents an overview of the higher education system in Malaysia that has in the recent years jumped onto the 'industry-driven' wagon. The impacts of both industry-driven and society-driven systems are discussed. The article concludes with practical recommendations for higher education institutions in Malaysia to encourage a balanced higher education policy and strategy that can blend industry-driven and society-driven approaches as a joint-agenda for institutions of higher learning.

Introduction: An overview of higher education system

This section presents an overview of the higher education system in Malaysia. According to the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2012a), the higher education system is envisioned as making Malaysia a centre of higher education excellence by 2020. The Ministry's mission is to build a higher education environment that is conducive to the development of a superior centre of knowledge and to generate competent and innovative individuals of noble character to serve the needs of the nation and world. One of the Ministry's objectives is to produce competent graduates to fulfil national and international manpower needs, with 75 per cent of the graduates employed in their relevant fields within six months of their graduation.

The higher education system in Malaysia is classified into public institutions (government funded) and private institutions (privately funded). Public institutions consist of public universities, polytechnics, community colleges and teacher training institutes while the private institutions include private universities, private university colleges, foreign branch campus universities and private colleges. The Malaysian education system encompasses education beginning from pre-school to university. Pre-tertiary education (pre-school to secondary education) is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education while tertiary or higher education is the responsibility of the separate Ministry of Higher Education.

According to Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2012b), the expansion of Malaysian higher education has seen an increasing number of public and private institutions. To illustrate further, public institutions have grown

in number from seven in the 1990s to 20 in 2007 while a total of 471 private colleges and universities have been established during the same period. As such, student enrolment has sky-rocketed over the years. The expansion of the higher education industry has attracted serious attention and discussion from researchers on the surplus of graduates relative to the demands of the labour market (Ismail, 2011; Rodzalan & Saat, 2013).

Graduate employability in Malaysia

Department of Statistics Malaysia (2010) defines the labour force as those aged 15 to 64 years (in completed years at last birthday) during the reference week, who were either employed or unemployed. Employment refers to all person who: (1) worked at least one hour for pay, profit or family gain at any time during the reference week; (2) did not work during the reference week because of illness, injury, disability, bad weather, leave, labour dispute and social or religious reason but had a job, farm, enterprise or other family enterprise to return to; (3) were on temporary lay-off with pay who would definitely be called back to work.

In contrast, the unemployed are classified into the actively unemployed – all persons who did not work during the reference week but were available for work and actively looking for work during the reference week, and inactively unemployed who (1) did not look for work because they believed no work was available or they were not qualified, (2) would have looked for work if they had not been temporarily ill or had it not been for bad weather, (3) were waiting for answers to job applications; and (4) looked for work prior to the reference week.

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2011), the period 2000 to 2010 saw an increase in the number of graduates (degree and diploma holders only) entering the labour market in all years except 2007. The number of graduates that entered the labour market in 2000 was only 1,039,000 persons as compared with 2,096,000 persons in 2010. A similar trend can be observed for employed graduates who increased in number from 1,006,400 persons to 2,030,600 persons in the same period. However, the number of unemployed graduates also showed an increase from 2000 to 2010, from 32,800 persons to 65,500 persons. Interestingly, in 2010, the majority of unemployed graduates were in social sciences, business and law (39.4 per cent), followed by engineering, manufacturing and construction (21.7 per cent) while science, mathematics and computing recorded an unemployment rate of 17.9 per cent. The remaining fields of study with recorded unemployment rates are health and welfare (6.4 per cent), art and humanities (6.3 per cent), education (3.7 per cent), services (3.0 per cent), agriculture, forestry, fishing and veterinary (1.4 per cent) and general programmes (0.4 per cent).

Employability among graduates is interpreted as the ability of graduates to be employed in their relevant fields within six months of the date of their graduation. The employability of graduates has become a performance indicator in the eyes of the general public to evaluate the capability of higher education institutions to produce graduates who are marketable and readily demanded by industry and the labour market. As a result, institutions have become overly obsessed with employability statistics and offering industry-driven courses to promote colleges and universities.

The use of a graduate employability ratio has becoming popular among institutions in promoting and marketing their tertiary education services. Graduate employability is highlighted in media such as brochures, student handbooks and newspapers, followed by information about the courses offered, campus facilities, financial assistance available and contact information. The idea is to sell places in colleges and universities by making promises that graduates have a higher chance of employment upon graduating from an industry-driven education institution.

An industry-driven higher education system

An industry-driven higher education system is very much the model followed by Malaysian higher education institutions, which aim to offer highly specialised courses to undergraduates. The course syllabus and course contents have often been influenced by direct input from industry. Practical and laboratory sessions are emphasised, while industrial attachment has become a compulsory module in many degree programmes. The purpose of an industry-driven higher education system is to prepare undergraduates within a field of study and equip them with the knowledge and skills required by the respective industries. An industry-driven higher education system aims to enhance the employability of undergraduates so they are able to secure their first job within the first six months from graduation, in line with the objective of the Ministry of Higher Education.

In an industry-driven education system, institutions offer industry-driven courses by designing syllabus and course works to meet specific industry demands. For instance, one public university offers a bachelor of manu-

facturing engineering that allows students to specialise in a range of majors, namely manufacturing process, manufacturing design, robotics and automation, manufacturing management and engineering materials. A potential drawback of undergoing highly specialised courses is that graduates are knowledgeable only in their specific field of study, and largely unfamiliar with other spectrums of knowledge and society.

Industry-driven institutions often make industrial attachment a compulsory subject in students' course structure. Industrial attachment is important as it enhances training skills by developing the manual skills associated with scientific and technological operations. In this way, students become practically competent in their future routine tasks. Also, industrial attachment contributes to training institutions by establishing and strengthening partnerships between industrial and higher education institutions for technical development, particularly in the area of product innovation, product design and construction. Industrial attachment also gives a training institution an opportunity to reveal skill gaps and improve the quality of future training for industrial relevancy.

Such education programmes are attractive to students and parents as it seems to guarantee employment upon completion of study while usually requiring fewer years of study. It gets more people into the system (employment) quickly; everyone is happy (students, parents, government) and things seem to be working well, at least in the short term.

However, higher education institutions that practice industry-driven higher education might neglect the importance of, and need for, a well-balanced spectrum that integrates career, family and life, and produce graduates who are 'good factory people' rather than 'good society members'. Graduates should not be educated only to chase financially stability, but should be able to manage relationships with peers, family and friends. Graduates need to be trained to contribute to communities by being involved in their societies. In short, the industry-driven philosophy of education can be too focused on building 'factory-ordered-graduates', who generally lack interest in community and society.

A society-driven higher education system

A society-driven higher education system aims to build a well-balanced person. It is not only to equip graduates with required technical skills for the labour market, but is also to develop graduates with good personal characteristics, attitudes, habits and social graces that make one into a good employee in the workplace and a good citizen in the community. A society-driven higher education system emphasises a well-balanced spectrum comprising personal life, career and role in society. Several institutions in the world practice a society-driven philosophy and are successful in churning out holistic individuals.

University of Wollongong, Australia

There are many success stories from around the world, some of which are noted here. The University of Wollongong practices a balanced approach in delivering quality higher education services by emphasising both society-driven and industry-driven philosophies (University of Wollongong, 2012). Wollongong set its long term objectives for 2013 and beyond, and these include offering high quality programmes relevant to the evolving needs of students and the community. The teaching and learning processes aim to develop students into graduates who are equipped to learn, engage and lead in society. The University of Wollongong believes that through society-driven philosophy, it is able to enhance social engagement among its graduates, as well as their workplace skills. Graduates must also have the capability to undertake meaningful roles in managing the challenges of social, environmental and workplace change. The five qualities Wollongong graduates should have include being informed and independent learners, problem solvers, effective communicators and being responsible people. The fifth graduate quality to be 'responsible' is described as creating graduates who 'Understand how decisions can affect others and make ethically informed choices. Appreciate and respect diversity. Act with integrity as part of local, national, global and professional communities' (University of Wollongong Strategic Plan, 2011, p.9).

Istanbul Bilgi University, Turkey

Another success story of a society-driven institution is Turkey's Istanbul Bilgi University (IBU). This university is known for its society-driven philosophy in higher education. Its educational philosophy is to produce intellectual, open-minded, creative individuals who will be able to face any challenges in the future (Atakan & Eker, 2007). One significant aspect of its educational philosophy is the use of the word 'individual' rather than 'students'. The founding premise of IBU is that the ultimate goal of the advancement of knowledge is the happiness and well-being of the individual and the society.

With the increasing awareness of ethics in the workplace, employers are looking for individuals who are

honest, accountable and possess high integrity. Institutions are offering courses in business ethics and corporate social responsibility hoping graduates, the corporate leaders of the future will be able to uphold ethics that ensure the well-being of the society at large (Angelidis & Ibrahim, 2002).

As a society-driven institution, IBU integrates business ethics and corporate social responsibility courses into the course structure as electives (Atakan & Eker, 2007). Besides offering and teaching business ethics and corporate social responsibility courses to its students, IBU intends to develop its students' individual and collective sense of social responsibility by serving the local communities, and encourage them to practice what they have learned in lectures and participate in the humanitarian initiatives organised by the university. To note a few, some of the humanitarian initiatives are the provision of education to the residents of the local communities, for the betterment of the communities' overall well-being.

Currently, IBU has numerous projects that contribute to the educational development of the lower income, disadvantaged residents of its local communities (Atakan & Eker, 2007). These projects provide precious opportunities for its students to participate and contribute to the betterment of local residents. Some of the projects offered by IBU to the adults are evening courses in English, accounting, basic computer skills and marketing principles. Also, IBU continuously improves the facilities of three local primary schools, and offers undergraduate scholarships to local young people.

There are numerous benefits for IBU students who are active in such social responsibility projects. Through their participation in such social responsibility projects, it hopes to strengthen students' ability to face real-life problems, enhance cooperation and teamwork for the accomplishment of a project, and hands-on applications complementary to their studies. Furthermore, it is expected that the students will gain a better understanding of the concept of social responsibility, have a greater sense of appreciation for the rights and roles of citizenship in contributing to unfortunate individuals in local communities. Moreover, these initiatives provide the opportunity for people from divergent cultural backgrounds and different socioeconomic levels to become integrated, working together for the betterment and well-being of the local communities.

United International College, Hong Kong

United International College in Hong Kong offers what is termed as Whole Person Education (United International College, 2012). It is a different way of looking at tertiary education, whereby individuals are trained to participate in university life that includes experiential development, sports culture, environmental awareness, emotional intelligence and adversity management. Social work, humanitarianism and volunteerism are emphasised throughout the student's stay in the college. Learning emotional intelligence via activity-based learning is instrumental in crafting individuals who are aware of themselves and their surroundings; individuals who are mature in managing their emotions. Their output is students who are highly society-driven, all-rounded, and sensitive to the economic and social changes in their immediate and larger society.

In order to equip graduates with required soft skills and interpersonal skills, institutions are taking measures by integrating soft skills and interpersonal skills into diploma and degree programmes, either in curriculum or co-curriculum. In curriculum, assignment presentations are made compulsory as part of the coursework to train communication skills and improve students' self-confidence in public speaking. Question and answer sessions following the presentation are believed to be a good technique to enhance one's ability to think critically and offer systematic solutions to problems. On the other hand, leadership, teamwork and collaborative work are best practiced in co-curriculum activities where a group of individuals with different personalities and attitudes work together to achieve a common objective.

A society-driven higher education system aids the development of individuals' soft skills and interpersonal skills, an important indicator of job performance in addition to job-related skills. Soft skills and interpersonal skills are becoming increasingly important as more economies are moving towards being service-oriented. A service-oriented economy requires good communication skills, relationship-building, leadership, teamwork and collaboration. In the modern economy, employers are looking for individuals who are agile and open to criticism, equipped with positive attitudes and able to keep stress under control. Graduates are expected to have conflict resolution and problem-solving skills in managing disputes and potential grievances in the workplace. Organisations are looking for individuals who are able to work in culturally diversified workforces, individuals who celebrate and thrive in diversity. Employees should be able to deliver results despite working in teams of individuals with different values, beliefs and lifestyles.

Looking Forward: Society-Driven or Industry-Driven?

Higher education institutions are compelled to implement a balanced education policy and strategy that blends industry-driven and society-driven approaches as a joint agenda for higher education, to develop a labour force that is not only skilled and knowledgeable, but also produces graduates who are of good character, with good attitudes and social graces.

In his book *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (1998), Daniel Goleman writes about the phenomenon of rising intelligence quotients (IQs) and declining emotional intelligence (EI). He narrates the rise of IQ among children in America in the last three decades with rising IQ and declining EI. Although the intelligence score is rising, more people seem to lack emotional competence. Goleman's colleagues who carried out similar assessment in other nations conclude that the decline of emotional intelligence is worldwide. The consequence includes a rising number of young people subject to despair, alienation, drug abuse, violence, depression, eating disorder, unwanted and teenage pregnancy, dropping out of school and suicide case.

Education and education systems have to evolve if institutions are serious about building a sustainable society. Institutions have to bring back the focus on individuals and society in the higher education system. It is never just about churning out workers for industry, but crafting individuals to meet the demands of society. Industry should be regarded as the subset of society, not vice versa.

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