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Offshore distance education: a Malaysian perspective

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Introduction

Malaysia spends about 20% of its GNP on education. Between 1981 and 1985 this amounted to about US$2.25 billion in real dollar terms. Of this US$1.1 billion was incurred by the country's seven universities. However, all of this expenditure provides university education to only about 15-20 per cent of those wanting it. Consequently many Malaysians have gone abroad to acquire the tertiary education that they failed to receive at home. In 1985 it was estimated by various authorities that about US$1.2 billion annually (almost the same amount of money as that being spent within Malaysia over five years) was sent abroad for the educational support of Malaysians. About fifty per cent of this came from public sources and the rest from private purses. Even though this is a major drain on Malaysia's capital, many in the country consider it to be at a tolerable level. However, recent philosophical changes in the thinking of our traditional providers of higher education has brought home the frightening realisation by both the government and the people of Malaysia that they could no longer depend on the generosity of past colonial masters and present trading and/or Commonwealth partners to support their higher education needs or costs. Yet given the present economic trends, there does not exist any possibility of seeing adequate emplacement of post-secondary educational facilities in Malaysia. Malaysians have to prepare themselves to pay the full cost 'plus' for their educational needs.

It is in this kind of climate that in the last two years many educational institutes from overseas universities began sending recruitment missions regularly to Malaysian shores to secure a portion of the educational trade.

Educational setting in Malaysia

The evolution and history of the Malaysian educational system is closely tied to the social history of the country. Wong and Gwee[1] have written an excellent review in their book *Perspectives: The Development of Education in Malaysia and Singapore*, and more recently Ahmat[2] analysed the development of universities in Malaysia from a socio-political context. The present conduct of education in the country is governed by the Education Act of 1961 with subsequent modifications since then to suit the changing needs of Malaysian society. This Act encompasses the school sector and, as envisaged by it, by 1985 free education was made available to children up to the lower secondary school level. Higher educational activities are governed by the University and University Colleges Act of 1972. This Act did not envisage provisions for higher educational opportunities for all. It was meant to be selectively available.

The nation's educational system can be stratified into four categories. They are:

1. Pre-school education

Children in the 4 to 6-year age group receive pre-school education. There are about 5,657 pre-school establishments and they cater for nearly 279,000 children. Almost 80% of these schools are run by government agencies, not necessarily by the Ministry of Education. The rest are run by private business concerns. There is a general feeling that this sector of the country's educational system needs careful enquiry as there seems to be a wide variation between the 'better' and the 'poorer' run schools. Curriculum, supervision, control and training in this sector is seen as an immediate necessity by policy makers and the general public if the country is to benefit from this activity.

2. Primary education

Primary education lasts six years. Children enter school between six and seven and graduate into the lower secondary school at eleven or twelve. In 1985, 2.2 million children were enrolled in the nation's primary schools most of which are state-run. It was also estimated in that year that almost 98.3% of the children who had entered Standard 1 in 1980 completed Standard 6, indicating that at least at the primary school level attrition is almost negligible. Five years ago the primary school curriculum was revised to place emphasis on the 'three Rs' and simple manipulative skills to make this sector of education more meaningful to the children at large.

3. Secondary education

The transition rate from primary to secondary schools in 1985 was about 88.2%. Almost a million children were registered in the lower secondary schools (age 12 to 14) and another 310,000 were registered in the upper secondary schools (age 15 to 17) making a total of 1.3 million secondary school children in the country.

Transition from the lower secondary to the upper secondary schools is through a public examination called the **Lower Certificate of Education** examination. In 1985, it was estimated that nearly 70% of the lower secondary population moved into the upper secondary programme. About 190,000 students sat for their school final examination (**Malaysia Certificate of Education**) in that year. For almost all but the top 30%, this will be the end of their academic training. The upper thirty per cent enter pre-university (matriculation) programmes which leads to the Malaysian **High School Certificate**. If successful, these students can move on to the local universities and teacher training schools, pursue tertiary education offshore, or follow career, technical and vocational studies locally.

4. Technical and vocational studies

There are nine government operated technical schools in the country with a total enrolment of 6,700 students in 1985. These are children who have gone through the primary schools and have opted for a technical career. They are taught certain academic subjects such as the natural sciences. However, their training thrust is towards subjects such as surveying, engineering workshop practice, building construction, commerce and technical drawing. Besides these, there are also 40 vocational secondary schools with a total enrolment of 13,700. These schools conduct trade courses of various kinds.

5. Teacher education

In 1985, 9,100 teachers were under training in the country's 24 teacher training colleges. Teacher trainees in these colleges are secondary school (MCE or HSC) graduates who undergo a two or three year programme for certification before being deployed in primary and lower secondary schools. Teachers in upper secondary schools are expected to have a degree and would normally undergo a four year programme in the universities. The Fifth Malaysia Plan clearly indicates that there is a shortage of trained teachers at all three school levels.

6. Tertiary education

Malaysia has a family of seven universities, one of which has its antecedents before independence and the other six after. In fact the seventh university is just a year old while the others are about 15 years old. Four of the universities are multi-campus in nature and, between the seven of them, they had an enrolment in excess of 70,000 students in 1985. However, not all students enrolled read for degrees or post-graduate courses. The figure also includes students pursuing diploma (36.1%) and certificate (9.8%) courses. Besides these, about 5,280 students were also following matriculation programmes in the universities. In 1986, about 8,600 students were freshly enrolled into the universities out of about 50,000 applicants (see Table 1). This shortfall in opportunities is not new and has been the most important factor in the movement of Malaysian students overseas. In 1985, it was estimated rather conservatively that about 60,000 Malaysians were studying overseas in degree and diploma courses. Another 3,000 seemed to have gone abroad in 1986 (see Table 2).

Clearly, therefore, while Malaysia by and large has been able to meet her educational needs in primary, secondary and even teacher education, the supply in terms of university education has fallen woefully short of the demand. Partly to meet this demand and partly also to attempt innovative delivery of higher education, the government through the Universiti Sains Malaysia has been conducting an off-campus programme not too dissimilar to many such ventures in Australia. Much has been written about that programme already.[3] Over the last fourteen years close to 2,000 individuals have graduated with honours and another 2,000 are currently enrolled (see Table 3). Mainly through this programme, distance education and the way it operates have become familiar to at least those Malaysians aspiring towards tertiary qualifications while pursuing other activities.

Table 1: Enrolment Numbers in Malaysian Universities for 1984-1985

University	Full-time	Part-time	Total
University of Agriculture	7,192	—	7,192
Int. Islamic University	287	—	287
University of Malaya	9,147	—	9,147
National University	8,446	—	8,446
Northern University	330	—	330
University of Science	5,187	1,121	6,308
University of Technology	6,595	—	6,595
Total	37,184	1,121	38,305

Source of Data: Sharom Ahmat 'University Education in Malaysia', in *Commonwealth Universities Yearbook*, Association of Commonwealth Universities, London, 1986.

Table 2: Malaysian student enrolment in selected Commonwealth countries (1978-1984)

No. Country	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984*
1. United Kingdom	15,470	16,323	15,980	14,500	12,530	13,293	14,000
2. Australia	6,016	4,878	5,383	6,064	5,769	6,337	7,212
3. India	3,231	5,583	6,000	6,000	6,300	6,853	7,020
4. New Zealand	2,258	1,837	1,885	1,527	1,263	1,510	2,000
5. Canada	998	3,232	4,750	7,846	8,294	8,849	9,100
6. Singapore	868	834	834	834	1,323	1,439	1,000
7. Hong Kong	95	109	109	14	19	32	32
8. Bangladesh	55	71	71	71	72	51	40
9. Sri Lanka	10	10	28	14	28	14	20
10. Brunei	2	—	—	—	—	1,707	1,707
11. Nigeria	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
TOTAL	29,004	32,877	35,040	36,870	35,598	40,085	42,131

Note: *Estimated data for the year 1984.
Source: Higher Education Division (HED), Ministry of Education, Malaysia.

Table 3: Flow of student numbers from application to graduation in the off-campus programme

Year	Number applied	Number offered	Number accepted	Cumulative enrolments	Number graduated
1971	450	89 (18.9%)	89	86	—
1972	529	148 (30%)	131	217	—
1973	1,152	190 (16.5%)	181	380	—
1974	941	213 (22.6%)	192	540	—
1975	1,440	250 (16.5%)	238	667	—
1976	2,064	280 (13.6%)	232	765	55
1977	2,164	274 (12.7%)	206	813	104
1978	3,855	239 (8.65%)	207	742	144
1979	2,412	225 (9.3%)	210	707	127
1980	2,212	242 (10.9%)	238	757	131
1981	3,317	246 (7.4%)	219	742	126
1982	2,623	378 (14.4%)	353	937	123
1983	4,563	483 (10.6%)	438	1,102	92
1984	5,036	515 (10.2%)	452	1,109	141
1985	5,397	762 (14.1%)	713	1,272	139
Total	33,643	4,534 (13.5%)	4,099	10,836	1,189

The educational trade

In a situation where local demand for a service or goods is hardly met by local supply, opportunities open up for others. In terms of tertiary education, such a situation exists in Malaysia today. It is expected that even by 1990, less than three out of every 100 school-going Malaysians can aspire to get into a public institution of higher learning. To satisfy this demand, a whole new industry has sprung up — initiated either by local or expatriate institutions.

In the year 1986, no less than 79 recruitment missions of schools, colleges and universities came to Malaysia. These were mainly from Britain, Australia and the United States of America. In addition to these, there are about 45 legally established student placement centres and perhaps just as many illegal ones doing year-round recruitment. There was also one major educational fair. In 1987, even with the recession, there does not seem to be any abatement of this pressure. If anything, the number of missions have increased, and already two major educational trade fairs have happened this year.

Up to 1986, there were more than 580 local and private educational establishments offering a diversity of post-secondary education. Most of them deliver career, technical or vocational education. About six of them,[4] all in the Kuala Lumpur region, provide "university" level courses. Another six (unpublicised) also provide similar services but for a selective group. These are run by a government-funded agency that works in association with a selected group of North American universities. All of them offer — in one form or another — a split degree (face to face classroom type of tuition) programme. Since then, two more institutions have entered the field. These offer a classroom-based and external mode of education for tertiary qualifications, thereby breaching what has traditionally been a University of London monopoly. The value of this local industry has been estimated to exceed about $500 million annually.[5]

At no time in the short history of the country has there been so much educational vending as Malaysians are witnessing today.

"At no time in the short history of the country has there been so much educational vending as Malaysians are witnessing today."

Some perceptions

1. The changing attitude

In the multi-ethnic polyglot society that is Malaysia, one value is commonly held highly by all the races: **education**. It is seen as central to the maintenance of economic, cultural and religious rights. Therefore, Malaysian society is prepared to pay a high price for the acquisition of education. Gradually, education is also being viewed as an investment. With the many educational trade shows and missions, Malaysians are also becoming erudite shoppers for educational opportunities. More and more parents and potential students want to know what they will get for their money — regardless of whether the education is going to be obtained in the classroom or through self-instruction. In this respect, the reverence with which education has been held is gradually eroding.

2. Aspirations and affordability

Without doubt, every one of the 200,000-odd students doing the 'O' levels or the 50,000 doing the 'A' levels aspire to enter university. The first preference is to settle for a local university, failing which other options are explored. However, these options can only be exercised if they are within the range of one's income. Table 4 gives a breakdown of the income levels of Malaysians. Obviously the level of fees currently being levied for both internal or external degrees by off-shore educational providers is far beyond the ability of most Malaysians.

During the days when millions of dollars were spent on paying for higher education, almost half came from the public purse and it paid for a lot more as well. From 1987, the Government of Malaysia has decided not to be as generous as before. That this has happened at about the same time as fee increases overseas simply means that fewer students can actually consider studying overseas. Therefore, while one can see an increase in the number of those aspiring to obtain a degree, one can also see a reduction in the number of those who can afford it. In this context, external degrees do become an attractive proposition provided such methods have a strong local interpersonal presence as part of the delivery mechanism, and are seen as providing substantial cost savings.

3. Status and expectations

The recognition of qualifications is an important criterion for consideration when purchasing higher education. The status of CAE and other college degrees vis-a-vis acceptance by the Government of Malaysia for employment in the public

Table 4: Peninsular Malaysia: Household income by ethnic group, 1979 and 1984
(In M$ per month)

Ethnic group	Constant 1970 prices			Current prices		
	1979	1984	Average annual growth rate, 1980-84 (%)	1979	1984	Average annual growth rate, 1984-84 (%)
Bumiputera						
mean	296	384	5.3	492	852	11.6
median	197	262	5.9	237	581	19.6
Chinese						
mean	565	678	3.7	938	1,502	9.8
median	373	462	4.4	620	1,024	10.6
Indian						
mean	455	494	1.7	756	1,094	7.7
median	314	347	2.0	521	770	8.1
All ethnic groups						
mean	417	494	3.4	693	1,095	9.6
median	263	326	4.4	493	723	8.0
Urban						
mean	587	695	3.4	975	1,541	9.6
median	361	463	5.1	600	1,027	11.3
Rural						
mean	331	372	2.4	550	824	8.4
median	222	269	3.9	369	596	10.1

Sources: Department of Statistics, *Labour Force/Household Income Survey 1980* and *Household Income Survey, 1984.*

sector is very much a desired factor. When the Government does not recognise the qualification, many naive citizens tend to conclude (mistakenly) that a shoddy or worthless commodity is being dumped by the providers onto their laps. This kind of belief gets reinforced further when the quality of instruction or material is poor.

"Certain sectors of the government would like to see higher education privatised — others see this as contrary to the nation's social engineering policies."

4. Government

Education is a major political issue in Malaysia. The law in terms of the establishment of universities locally is very clear (University & University College Act, 1972). There has to be a Royal Charter. However, in recent years, the philosophy of privatisation has been expounded very hard as a national ideology. Certain sectors of the government would like to see higher education privatised — others see this as contrary to the nation's social engineering policies. In this climate of confusion, the vaguely framed Education Act of 1961 is not much help for higher education because it is silent on the matter. It does not cover tertiary education either on or off-campus. However, an emergency regulation promulgated in 1969 specifically states that all those providing any form of higher education can only do so with the express permission of the Minister for Education. This Act covers the delivery of external courses as well. While the nation is no longer under any security threat, the 1969 emergency is still in force and, therefore, the Act exists. Many new and old providers of external studies operate in this grey area. Civil servants responsible for enforcing the educational act think that such operations are illegal, and such external providers are liable for prosecution. However, they (the civil servants) have a natural hesitancy in enforcing an Emergency Act eighteen years after its promulgation. This dilemma/difficulty is not expected to exist for long. The Educational Act of 1961 is being amended and measures will be introduced to regulate private higher education whether it is delivered locally in classrooms or from abroad.

Table 5: Population size and age structure 1980-1990 in Malaysia

	1980		1985		1990		Average annual growth rate (%)	
							1981-	1986-
Age group	'000	%	'000	%	'000	%	1985	1990
Peninsular Malaysia	11,473.0	100.0	12,968.8	100.0	14,605.2	100.0	2.5	2.4
0-14	4,484.0	39.1	4,835.1	37.3	5,263.2	36.0	1.5	1.7
15-24	2,436.9	21.1	2,726.3	21.0	2,891.0	19.8	2.2	1.2
25-39	2,301.2	20.1	2,789.2	21.5	3,333.7	22.8	3.8	3.6
40-54	1,310.0	11.4	1,535.3	11.8	1,833.3	12.6	3.2	3.5
55-64	515.7	4.5	605.6	4.7	721.3	4.9	3.2	3.5
65 +	425.2	3.7	477.3	3.7	562.7	3.9	2.3	3.5
Sabah	1,055.1	100.0	1,279.5	100.0	1,517.4	100.0	3.9	3.4
0-14	471.0	44.6	575.1	44.9	667.2	44.0	4.0	3.0
15-24	228.5	21.7	244.8	19.1	287.6	19.0	1.4	3.2
25-39	201.0	19.1	268.5	21.0	324.0	21.4	5.8	3.8
40-54	101.7	9.6	123.5	9.7	152.0	10.0	3.9	4.2
55-64	34.1	3.2	41.9	3.3	52.7	3.5	4.1	4.6
65 +	18.8	1.8	25.7	2.0	33.7	2.1	6.3	5.4
Sarawak	1,351.1	100.0	1,542.8	100.0	1,754.6	100.0	2.7	2.6
0-14	587.5	43.5	636.3	41.2	683.5	39.0	1.6	1.4
15-24	266.2	19.7	319.5	20.7	372.5	21.0	3.7	3.1
25-39	246.9	18.3	299.2	19.4	360.8	20.6	3.8	3.7
40-54	142.2	10.5	164.0	10.6	195.1	11.1	2.9	3.5
55-64	61.2	4.5	69.0	4.5	77.6	4.4	2.4	2.3
65 +	47.1	3.5	54.8	3.6	65.1	3.7	3.0	3.4
Malaysia	13,879.2	100.0	15,791.1	100.0	17,877.2	100.0	2.6	2.5
0-14	5,542.5	43.5	6,046.5	38.3	6,613.9	37.0	1.7	1.8
15-24	2,931.6	19.7	3,290.6	20.9	3,551.2	19.8	2.3	1.5
25-39	2,749.1	18.3	3,356.9	21.3	4,018.6	22.5	4.0	3.6
40-54	1,553.9	10.5	1,822.8	11.5	2,180.4	12.5	3.2	3.6
55-64	611.0	4.5	716.5	4.5	851.6	4.8	3.2	3.5
65 +	491.1	3.5	557.8	3.5	661.5	3.7	2.5	3.4

5. Predictions

A number of predictions can be made as to the direction in which higher educational trade activities may move over the next ten years. However, given the dynamic nature of the Malaysian nation, what probabilities one can give to these predictions will very much depend on which rumour one subscribes to.

- It is likely that the Government will encourage the establishment of private colleges. However, these will be stringently regulated so as to make them conform to national ideologies (both political and social).
- It is unlikely that the Government will attempt to establish its own new universities. However, the capacities of the present seven may be expected to increase from the present ceiling of 10,000 each. Given the fact that the country's population is young and productive, one can assume an increase in demand rather than a decrease (Table 5). Seventy-eight per cent of the population is under 39 and roughly three-quarters of them are in the fertile age group.
- Need for external and part-time studies can be expected to increase as the backlog of those who 'missed out' in the first instance keeps building up and as individuals move to jobs straight out of school and then pick up further education. Opportunities will be there for providers of locally relevant programmes.
- Language of instruction is going to be a major problem to contend with as the use of Bahasa Malaysia increases and that of English decreases.
- The attractiveness of external studies can only be taken advantage of if pricing levels are appropriate. If prices remain high as they are today — then it is very likely to be unpopular.
- External studies will become even more unattractive if its status as a recognised form of education is not firmly established in the Malaysian mind or government.

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Offshore education: a Hong Kong perspective

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Introduction

Australian educational institutions are increasingly offering their external courses overseas. Some are already represented in Hong Kong, and it seems that others plan to join in. This article provides some background information about Hong Kong students and gives advice on how Australian institutions can best meet their needs.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong is a small territory of some 1000 square kilometres, which is due to be handed over, just a little nervously, to the People's Republic of China by the British Government in 1997. Nearly all of its population of over five and a half million people is Chinese, with the remaining 2% comprising an international community. The two official languages are English and Chinese. Most Chinese in Hong Kong speak Cantonese, while Chinese texts are written in Putonghua (Mandarin) style.

The natural resources of Hong Kong are very limited. Its prosperity is very much dependent on its position as a financial and tourist centre, and as an exporter of manufactured goods. The people of Hong Kong have been particularly successful in constantly adapting to change — this ability has led to Hong Kong having a high standard of living, perhaps second only to Japan in the Asian region.

Chinese families are traditionally both extended and close. Respect is due to all family members, especially elders, with filial piety being the great virtue. The 'face' concept still prevails; this expresses the great value the Chinese place on allowing others to escape the humiliation implicit in not knowing, failing to understand, having been mistaken, or being inferior to others. The traditional family has an emphasis on a literary and moralistic education, stressing the spiritual needs of man and the cultivation of certain character traits. Contact with Western materialism has, however, modified such strict discipline, so that economic success and achievement is now the dominant motivating force for the people of Hong Kong.

The urge to acquire wealth that permeates Hong Kong would probably be regarded as extreme elsewhere. In Hong Kong, your worth is largely measured by your material success, and so hard work is a great virtue. People work long hours, often with two or more jobs, and there is little time or room for pursuits or activities of an unprofitable nature.

Hong Kong students

1. Circumstances

Most people in Hong Kong live in high-rise flats. Accommodation is expensive, and available living space is severely restricted. It is not unusual to have a family of eight persons, representing three generations, living in a flat with a floor area of 400 square feet. The implications of this overcrowding on people's ability to study at home are obvious. Nevertheless, great emphasis is placed on education.

The obsession of Japanese parents with the education of their children is legendary. The situation in Hong Kong is little different. Parents use what might be considered extreme measures to ensure their offspring's academic success.

Success in examinations is foremost. As well as parental pressure on students, teachers are judged professionally in terms of their students' results. Parents of young children tutor them while they are not at school, and those with means hire tutors to ensure high marks. Doing well in examinations is seen as a way for children to lead a better life than their parents. The result of this philosophy and practice is an inflexible education system that is exam-oriented to a high degree and which succeeds only in relation to fairly crude criteria. All of this is understandable in Hong Kong's competitive environment and in an education system where the ratio of suitably qualified applicants to available places in post-secondary education is greater than ten to one.

2. Attitudes

Hong Kong students display almost unquestioning acceptance of the knowledge of the teacher or lecturer. This may be explained in terms of an extension or transfer of the Confucian ethic of filial piety. Coupled with this is an emphasis on strictness of discipline and proper behaviour, rather than on the expression of opinion, independence, self-mastery, creativity and all-round personal development. Further, there is a seeming lack of investigatory zeal, in that what the lecturer says must be true, so that there is no need to find anything further that might contradict what has been taught. Indeed, if a contradiction can be found, this could be construed to lead to a 'loss of face' on the lecturer's part.

One of the few times that a lecturer's judgement may be called into question is over marks or grades awarded. Western students are likely to accept grades virtually unequivocally, whereas Hong Kong students tend to want to check their answers with the model, and will sometimes argue over the lecturer's interpretation of an answer.

The firm base of familism and filial piety leads groups of Hong Kong students to react differently from their Western counterparts. There is also emphasis on group identity, as in general Chinese achievement motivation is rooted more firmly in the collectivist than the individualistic orientation. The result of this is that some well-tried educational practices used elsewhere (seminars based on confrontation, debate and other argumentative techniques) are not likely to work, because group pressure is on unity rather than division. Added to this is the 'loss of face' or embarrassment implicit in losing an argument. Also, the aggression required for certain techniques, notably some forms of role play, is notoriously absent from the Chinese makeup.

Implications

The above information has implications for Australian institutions wishing to offer their courses in Hong Kong. The information is, naturally, incomplete. A further consideration, not discussed here, is the problem of Hong Kong students studying in a second language.

There are also other factors which influence whether and how courses can be offered:

- the nature and needs of Hong Kong students,
- the 'educational marketplace' of Hong Kong, and
- the attitude and policies of the Hong Kong Government.

The first issue has been partly addressed already in this article. The other two also need closer examination.

1. The Hong Kong Educational Marketplace

The educational marketplace in Hong Kong is thriving and robust. Those with