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Equity in Malaysian Higher Education

Revisiting the Policies and Initiatives

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Introduction

Higher education has become an important economic and social agenda, as well as a means for development and progress among the developing countries. As the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2008) outlines, higher education contributes to social and economic development in four different ways: the formation of human capital, building of knowledge bases, dissemination and use of knowledge, and maintenance of knowledge. Increasingly, higher education is also widely recognised as a major driver of competitiveness and growth in a knowledge-driven economy, whereby government and policymakers see higher education institutions (HEIs), “not merely as institutions of national and international prestige but crucially as springboards to economic development, in concert with key industries such as information technology, engineering and science” (Welch 2010:149).

Yet, the structure, scope and importance placed on higher education have undergone significant changes over the past five decades. The purpose and roles undertaken by a university have also diversified extensively, not only to teach and conduct research, but increasingly also involve a wide range of activities relating to

arts, sports, consulting, business and enterprises (Bok 2003; Collini 2012; Wan, Morshidi and Dzulkifli, 2015).

Even the fundamental purpose of higher education as the centre of learning and teaching has undergone significant structural change. As Trow (1973) described, higher education has evolved from being elite to a mass, and subsequently, a universal system. The structural change is not only in terms of quantitative increment, but also the qualitative changes to the underlying purpose of higher education. On the one hand, the structural changes can be measured quantitatively by the percentage of student population among the age cohort (also known as gross enrolment ratio), whereby an elite system has between 1 and 15 per cent of students within the 17-22 age cohort; a mass system ranged between 15 and 50 per cent; and a universal system has more than 50 per cent of the cohort (Ibid). On the other hand, the structural changes can also be reflected in the purpose and scope of higher education. The purpose of higher education within the elite system is to educate a handful of students to assume leadership position in the society, while the mass system has greater technical and vocational elements. The universal system, on the contrary, is more accessible to the wider population that largely takes the form of lifelong education. Hence, in line with the structural evolution of higher education, Trow argues,

The changing structure of higher education needs to be complemented by higher education policies that must reflect the diversity of education, no longer an effort to educate a small segment of the population for leading positions, but something close to continuing education for the whole population for life in the twenty-first century

— Trow 2000:323

While widening access to higher education is a necessary condition for economic growth and social development, providing equal opportunity for all to have access to and benefit from higher education is an equally important condition for social justice and inclusive development. As outlined under the *Tenth Malaysia Plan* (2011-2015), Malaysia aims to “encapsulate the spirit of Malaysia to create a fair and socially just society...where all people, with no exception, have the rights, freedom and capacity to access service and resource to enhance their wellbeing, and where the most disadvantaged are given extra support to ensure success” (EPU 2010:140). Similarly, the first thrust of the *National Higher Education Strategic Plan* has outlined the focus of widening access and increasing equity concurrently (MOHE 2007) and the newly launched Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) stipulates equity as one of its five system aspirations (MOE 2015).

Equity is not a new concept but will continue to have a critical role in the future development of Malaysian higher education. Therefore, before we look into the future, it is important to examine the policies and initiatives taken over the last five decades to address equity in the higher education of this country. This chapter is structured

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policies and interventions is the lack of an overall national policy and direction to address equity as a whole. The policies and interventions that had been put in place over several decades have been largely 'piecemeal' and only sought to address one particular aspect of equity. Malaysia has never articulated equity in its higher education system in tackling the wider socio-economic contexts of the country as a whole.

Thus, the implication of not having an overall national policy on equity in higher education, and the mere focus on either ethnicity, economic or social dimensions, have led to a polarised higher education system. For instance, the ethnic quota and to some extent the two track pre-university admission systems have led to a dual system of public and private higher education in Malaysia and these dual systems continue to be polarised ethnically. A survey conducted with secondary school students underlined the perception whereby *Bumiputera* students have the aspiration to go to public universities and non-*Bumiputera* students to private universities (Aida Suraya *et al.* 2015). The fact that public and private higher education sectors continued to have ethnic connotations underlined a worrying trend that may threaten social cohesion and kills the competitiveness in a multi-ethnic country like Malaysia.

Furthermore, the lack of sustainability in terms of the PTPTN has also put the economic equity agenda at risk. Without a more holistic and sustainable policy to strengthen the student loan fund, many students from low- and middle-income groups may not have the economic capability to pursue higher education. Without a revamp of the loan fund, we are also putting the country's economy at risk with students graduating with a high level of debt before they earn their first paycheque.

In conclusion, while Malaysia has varying successes to address equity in terms of ethnic, economic and social, there is a greater need for the country to have a more integrated national policy in higher education to address equity. It is only with a holistic and integrated policy that the development of a fairer and more equitable Malaysian higher education system can be realised to support the aspiration of Malaysia to become a developed economy and a society that leaves no one behind.

Endnotes

¹ Council of Trust for the People

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