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Conference report

Leadership and governance in higher education 2025: can Malaysian universities meet the challenge?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this report is to present the findings of a five-day course for AKEPT – the Malaysian Leadership Academy in the Ministry of Higher Education. The course was held from March 24-28th, 2014, for over 50 lecturers, professors, deputy deans and deans from Malaysian universities.

Design/methodology/approach – Senior lecturers and professors deliberated for the first three days on the futures of higher education in Malaysia. They presented their scenarios and recommendations to the deans. The deans used these findings to articulate their own preferred futures in the last two days. The future-oriented discussions were framed by the “six pillars” futures approach (Inayatullah, 2008; Inayatullah, 2015; Inayatullah and Milojevic, 2015).

Findings – The core of their recommendation consisted of a move by 2025 from the current fragmented university governance structure to a streamlined consortium model. Instead of the factory, a collection of linked longhouses or “rumah panjang” was offered as a way forward. This new model would have two immediate benefits: considerable cost savings and enhanced mobility for students and professors.

Research limitations/implications – This case study presents scenarios and strategies. Limitations include the willingness of the Ministry to act on these recommendations. However, as this course was part of a number of foresight processes in Malaysia, even if these particular recommendations do not realize, they are steps in creating an ecology of foresight and of possible university transformation.

Practical implications – This study links causal layered analysis, scenarios and visions to recommendations in the context of a multi-year foresight process.

Social implications – The study includes valuable discussions by leading Malaysian thinkers and administrators on the futures of the university.

Originality/value – This was one of the few workshop-oriented interventions used the anticipatory action learning “six pillars framework”. It is especially valuable as it is the third year of futures intervention in higher education. The study contrasts with traditional expert-based forecasting in Asia.

Keywords Scenarios, Higher education, Governance, University, Causal layered analysis, Futures triangle

Paper type General review

Can a Malaysian university structure transform by 2025 such that a new model of governance emerges where universities unite in a consortium, thus leading to considerable cost savings and ease of mobility for students and professors?

Can leadership be transformed from the current hammer and nail metaphor (management is the nail and leadership is the hammer) to the metaphor of the Swiss army knife where the right talent is found for the right job?

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Can universities move from the factory as their core organizing principal to the educational mall – a governance model of enhanced choice for students and thus possibility?

Given the decline in public perception of academics, is it possible to create incentives, indeed, to imagine a future where Malaysian professors become iconic, known for scholarship, contribution to the community and international stature?

Is it possible to transform the current leadership model such that university vice-chancellors are re-branded as university presidents with far greater budget responsibility and autonomy?

Along with the university, can the Ministry of Education become relevant, dramatically increasing its public engagement? Indeed, can students, academics and administrative staff work together to co-create the university of tomorrow?

1. Introduction

These and other questions posed above were debated at Akademi Kepimpinan Pengajian Tinggi (AKEPT) (Higher Education Leadership Academy, the Ministry of Higher Education) from March 24-28, 2014, by over 50 lecturers, professors, deputy deans and deans. Senior lecturers and professors deliberated for the first three days and the deans for the last two. Their futures-oriented discussions were framed by the “six pillars” futures approach (Inayatullah, 2008; Inayatullah, 2013). After their debates, the professors presented their findings to over 30 deans from ten different public and private universities. The core of their recommendation consisted of a move from the current fragmented university governance structure to a streamlined consortium model by 2025. Instead of the factory, a collection of linked longhouses or “rumah panjang” was offered as a way forward. This new model would have two immediate benefits: considerable cost savings and enhanced mobility for students and professors. Third, over the long run, by consolidating expertise, Malaysia could present a unified and highly competitive educational face to the rest of the world.

The context for this new future was:

- pedagogy that was focused on social justice;
- a model of teaching and learning that moved from the factory to the education mall; and
- talent that was nurtured by reducing policing interference and nonsensical red tape.

Rules or green tape that enhanced the true purpose of the university – national knowledge development, creating students who could create their own jobs (instead of just jobs) and developing a deep ethical culture for the country – were critical in creating this alternative future.

Deans warmed to their suggestions but offered that the first step toward the consortium model was smaller like-minded universities working together, moving forward. Jumping to the full consortium immediately would be difficult, as there would be natural resistance of academic enclaves and silos afraid of losing their power base. The longhouses had to be joined step by step, organically creating a new community of universities. Further, there was a need to be watchful that this did not lead to the problem of increased fragmentation and centralization. Fragmentation could occur as the current oversight from the Ministry could be lost and centralization could occur if the consortium, instead of spurring innovation, became a command-control center; a super factory, instead of an educational mall.

Having provided a useful critique of the professors, the deans began their own visioning and scenario process. Like the professors, they focused on the need to transform governance, for example, by rethinking the current dysfunctional relationship between vice-chancellors (VC) and the chairs of the board of directors. Also, they recommended increased transparency, greater engagement, full autonomy of universities, an immediate

focus on succession planning and a rethinking of the role of the vice-chancellor to that of the university president – greater autonomy but with greater requirement to gain funding.

Engagement for the deans was far more than asking students, academics and the public to fill out questionnaires. Rather, they imagined deep social engagement, moving from the future as given to the future as co-created. An approach could be to co-develop new publishing houses, articulating an innovative social entrepreneurship. Too long, Malaysians had been focused on getting a job. The purpose of higher education, they argued, is to create meaningful and ethical social and economic prosperity, that is to create jobs. For academics, this means moving from knowledge receivers of parroting of information to knowledge generators. To create this new type of professor, incentive structures needed to move away from mere publications to community service and overall public engagement with the big issues of the time. The criteria of becoming a VC also need to shift to that of a social and economic innovator, relevant to students, the public and industry.

However, the current model was not, they believed, generally getting the right person for the right job, at all levels of the Academy. To optimize talent, it is crucial to create a recruitment model that was reliable and rigorous and not influenced by external, often political, factors.

To achieve this transformation in governance and leadership, a number of concrete recommendations were made. These included:

- Review the selection process for university leaders particularly focusing on reducing the influence of political intervention.
- The roles and rules of governance must be clarified between VCs and chairperson of the board of directors. The board of directors must be given accountability toward bringing the university to the next level, create opportunities for university to excel, help secure funding and facilitate strategic foresight of universities. Micromanagement is completely unacceptable.
- A new governance model is recommended wherein the president is focused on funding and the branding of university, while the provost plays the role of the custodian of academics, research and students.
- The university needs to be given autonomy in decision-making and finances.

To create the culture shift, or mindshift transformation, a new metaphor is required. For the deans, this was moving from the current university system as depicted in the Malay proverb of “*Tikus membaiki labu*”, which literally means having no focus, no strategy and hence no beauty arising, to that of the gardener nurturing students, academics and society. The gardener was an apt metaphor as he or she requires broad and specific knowledge so as to care, prune and grow the new future.

The deans and the professors as well argued for these changes because the current trajectory was leading to a future where:

- the 3Rs were no longer relevant, indeed, becoming obsolete.
- academicians would be research leaders but not agents of changing, lacking vision.
- the current system would continue its trend toward bureaucratization and politicization.
- the best academics are likely to leave the university.
- public confidence would continue to decline; and
- young professors would still rise; they would do so without “soul” – focused only on “laddering” up pay scales and hierarchy.

Indeed, one participant noted on the first day: “the current trend to the future would not be pretty to the quality of higher education in Malaysia. Relative to other nations, Malaysia is likely to be left further and further behind”. Graduates would continue to lack in social skills

and not match the changing needs of the industry. Moreover, Malaysia would continue to move lower and lower in global university rankings with taxpayers continuously complaining about universities.

To arrest this trend, participants argued, “ Governance needs a change [indeed] a transformation in order to stay relevant to future needs and demands. Therefore, we should be ready to take risks to be different and to be challenged”.

1.1 Context and structure

The overall context for the foresight workshops is two-fold. First, Malaysia has recognized that it cannot continue to ape the West and rather it must innovate, creating new visions and new measurements of these visions. Second, Malaysia is not new to futures research, having used foresight methods and tools since the 1975 Malaysia 2001 conference (Azhari, 2012). More recently, the Universiti Sains Malaysia (in Penang) and Universiti Teknikal Malaysia (in Meleka) have conducted scenario-focused foresight workshops with the intent of articulating their strategic vision and developing foresight capacity among professors and students (Nasruddin *et al.*, 2012). These initiatives inspired AKEPT to take foresight to the national level.

The purpose of the pattern of five days, the professors presenting to their senior deans and then deans, through AKEPT, reports to vice-chancellors and the Ministry of Education, was to create an action learning iterative cycle, through which discussions could be focused, leading to immediate feedback and thus reflective learning. This process has completed three years.

In 2012, deans and deputy vice-chancellors debated issues of the nature of learning (blended, face-to-face, virtual and integrated) and the futures of student services (parental, buddy, knowledge navigator and student-led) (Inayatullah, 2012).

In 2013, participants focused on the nature of the professor, focusing on creating the *murabbi* – an academic who moved beyond teaching and research, to mental and spiritual concerns (Inayatullah and Milojevic, 2014). And the Ministry needed to simultaneously imagine more and more augmented reality, creating new virtual environments for students and encouraging professors to experiment in these new teaching and learning spaces. Thus, participants focused both on enhancing the spiritual and cultural dimensions of academics and augmented/virtual dimensions of pedagogy. Both were necessary, they argued.

The intent is not just to make recommendations to the Ministry of Higher Education but for individual scholars who too, pursue specific actionable steps – what they can change in their university – and for the gradual development of champions of innovation throughout the education sector. Thus, change can occur at multiple levels and at different points in the educational system.

1.2 Methodology

These recommendations and conclusions were derived through the “six pillars” foresight process. This process is a structured way to map the future, identify emerging issues and trends, discern the first and second order of these implications, deconstruct metaphors and narratives, create alternative futures, design a preferred future and articulate related strategies. Each pillar has a number of methods to elucidate alternative futures. Most relevant for this report are the following:

- the futures triangle;
- causal layered analysis; and
- scenario planning.

In the futures triangle, three aspects are critical. The pushes of the present – demographic shifts, new technologies, the weight of the past – often in the form of a traditional mindset and the compelling pull of the future. Through a strategic analysis of these three forces, a plausible future can be created.

Causal layered analysis seeks to unpack the future at four levels. This method and theory of knowledge seeks to deepen the future. It has four dimensions: first is the litany, or the day-to-day future, the data, the commonly accepted headlines of the way things are or should be. Solutions to problems at this level are usually short-term oriented. The second dimension is deeper, focused on the root – social, economic, political causes of the issue – the systemic. Solutions at this level tend to challenge traditional silos and be whole of government, multistakeholder-based. The third dimension is the culture or worldview. This is the big picture, the paradigm that informs what we think is real or not real, the cognitive lenses we use to understand and shape the world. Solutions at this level involve paradigm or worldview change. The fourth dimension is the myth or the metaphor – the narrative. Metaphors are often the vehicles of myths. Solutions at this level involve creating or finding a new organizational story.

The most effective organisational and institutional strategies are those that include all four levels:

1. new data to measure the new desired future;
2. systemic changes;
3. mindset change; and
4. new metaphors.

Moreover, in a proper causal layered analysis, the issue is examined from the perspective of multiple perspectives, with the strategic goal of articulating an integrated whole-of-worldview solution.

The scenario process involves identifying uncertainties and risks and developing alternative futures so that unknowns are named and strategized about differently in each future. While there are a number of scenario methods, in these workshops, two main methods were used. The first is the organizational where participants articulated “best case”, “worst case”, “business-as-usual” and “outlier” trajectories. The second is the assumptions method, where participants challenge the core assumptions of their current forecasts and then intuit alternative futures based on different assumptions. Both scenario methods use the CLA structure of litany, systemic, worldview and metaphor to describe the characteristics of the alternative scenarios. Based on these methods, strategies are developed.

2. Overall recommendations of the professors to the deans and the Ministry of Education

First, the Ministry needs to create a new governance structure: a consortium of universities, a University of Malaysia, if you will – a transformed “rumah panjang”. This model would reduce administrative and documentation tasks and optimize current talent and resources. Academics would be free to focus on research, teaching and community engagement. The first step in doing this would be to develop smart partnerships amongst consortium members. Of course, there were weights that would make this future difficult, including political interference, a divisive key performance-indicator system and lack of sharing among universities. But with a consortium as a goal, savings and talent optimization would certainly win over the weights, argued the professors.

Second, the university needs to move from the current rigid, subject-based, single disciplinary education as a factory model to the education mall. In this future, there would be more options for students and programs would be issues- and interest-based. This

would create trans-disciplinary learning and prepare students for the partnerships necessary for post-university success.

Third, the university must remain focused on social justice – distributive and procedural. While this type of university may be far off, a focus on integrity, ethics, accountability and competence was important as any other particular subject; indeed, social justice is the platform for all leadership and governance. While there are weights preventing this future – cronyism, greed, corruption – for Malaysia to become a learning society, there is no other choice. Thus, social justice becomes the cultural frame behind a new model of governance.

Fourth were recommendations related to talent and leadership. The current model suffocates the best and brightest; they are nails being hit into submission by the hammer of management. Rules are secretive and top-down. Independent selection panels with deep consultation and participation are required. Talent, for them, matters! They saw the future metaphor as a Swiss army knife - diverse solutions to varied problems.

These recommendations certainly dovetailed earlier years, where participants imagined the higher education system becoming far more open, flexible, student- and choice-driven with far less administrative demands. A unique difference was the recommendation to create a consortium or consortia of universities. While the second year professors imagined a cooperative of professors, governance changes were suggested this year.

3. Overall recommendations of the deans to the Ministry of Education

First, establish a peer-to-peer cooperative economy, with a focus on creating a new not-for-profit publishing community in digital and physical spaces. As traditional publishers disappear and digital publishing becomes dominant, there is space to create social entrepreneurship. This needs to be a priority for the Ministry, that is, to support and experiment in creating new peer-to-peer platforms and publications. This means, instead of receiving knowledge, the goal is to create and produce knowledge. And peer-to-peer economies develop best through co-production and through deep engagement – the goal is the path.

The second recommendation focused directly on the future university leader. For deans, this person has to have a long-term vision to create knowledge, have the ability to attract the top brains to the university and deeply engage with stakeholders^[1]. As universities become increasingly borderless, as virtuality becomes a norm, knowledge generation will become even more important as Malaysia moves into high value-added economic areas. If the university structure remains rigid, then incompetence and unmotivated academics will become the norm, and Malaysia will slide down the knowledge ladder or remain mired in the middle-income status.

The third recommendation further developed the role of the academic and imagined professors as icons of the community – internationally recognized, non-partisan and impacting society. For this future to occur, the nature of promotions had to move from the number of publications to social extension and innovation. The Ministry needs to not just allow a dual career (in industry, community and the academy) but incentivize it. Indeed, the key performance indicator of professors needed to include one major innovation/breakthrough in their lifetime. The selection of vice-chancellors as well therefore has to include community and industry recognition, not just academic strength.

The final recommendation was leadership focused. They imagined a future of high quality leadership through a rigorous and reliable selection system with no unknown influences from external sources. However, while the drivers of globalization, international competitiveness, were pushing toward such a future, the weights of limited resources, a low talent pool and high political intervention were arresting this future. To get to this new future, they imagined a logical process. First, there needed to be a reliable selection system. Second, political influence needed to be reduced. Third, succession planning at universities needed to be crafted. Fourth, talent management needed to become a priority. Fifth, excellence at the workplace needed to become a strategic focus. Sixth, university

leaders needed to be rebranded as presidents and provosts. And, finally, seventh, the university by 2025-2030 needed to become autonomous.

If Malaysia did not move toward this alternative future, then they anticipated confusion and contradictions between the need for transformation in leadership and governance and an outdated model that certainly made some sense 30 or so years ago, but was no longer relevant to the next ten years.

3. Conclusion

The meta-lesson for the futures of higher education was clear-cut. The current trajectory is financially, socially and intellectually unsustainable. Professors and deans all imagined an alternative future for education. To create a more flexible system – from the factory to the education mall, for example a new model of governance is required – the consortium – and equally significantly leadership must be incentivized and nurtured. And, universities need to become more and more autonomous with less and less political interference. Knowledge knows no boundaries. The ideal purpose of the state is to encourage innovative knowledge creation, moving academics from knowledge-siloed receivers to peer to peer iconic knowledge co-creators. Professors and deans at this meeting argued that for higher education to be sustainable and transformative, Malaysia must move toward this new model of education.

Note

1. Indeed, a recent survey shows that Malaysians wish their leaders to be visionary and to demonstrate deep engagement, www.themalaymailonline.com/money/article/survey-malaysian-workers-want-connected-communicative-leaders (accessed 9 April 2014).

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