Mitigating Challenges in the Administration of Private Higher Educational Institutions in Malaysia

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Abstract

Education plays a crucial role in creating individuals who contribute positively to the development of a country. The private education sector in Malaysia, has proven to be a major source of revenue for the Malaysian government, and it is the government's aspiration to capture a large percentage of the higher education global market. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the challenges faced by academic leaders in managing private universities in Malaysia and to provide feasible recommendations to overcome them. The findings are expected to provide valuable information to the management of Malaysian private universities, policymakers, and regulatory agencies. The information gathered could provide enlightenment regarding the difficulties faced in order to design and implement further policies to elevate their operational method and ensure long-term survival. Valuable recommendations have been provided to ensure the institutions remain profitable and sustainable as the development of Malaysia's social and economic sector is dependent on its education sector.

Keywords: Private Higher Educational Institutions, higher education global market, long-term survival.

Introduction

Education is an essential component in the development of a country's economy. Sirata et al. (2019) claim that the ability to produce and utilise knowledge efficiently will determine the success of a society as knowledge is believed to be the main competitive tool for the expansion of businesses. Wells and Ingley (2019) define universities as a group of scholars, who work collectively and individually with the motive of benefitting the community by devoting resources to contribute to the advancement of culture and knowledge. Universities, therefore, play a crucial role as economic drivers which contribute to the development of a nation.

A combination of a paradigm shift in the country's economy, globalization, and technological revolution has resulted in the democratization of Malaysian private universities (Marimuthu, 2008). This has increased the local demand for higher education and decreased the number of students seeking overseas education, thus reducing the outflow of cash overseas. It is the Ministry of Higher Education's aspiration to turn the country into a center for education excellence; currently there are 20 public universities, 434 private institutions, 105 community colleges, and 36 polytechnics in Malaysia (Putra, 2022). As shown in Table 1, in 2022, the total

number of students enrolled in private institutes of higher education was 513,523, and out of this, 59, 906 were international students from 172 countries (Ministry of Higher Education 2022). The number of academic staff serving in these universities is 29,413.

Table 1: Number of Students' Intake, Enrolment and Output based on Gender by Status of Private HEIs 2021-2022 (Ministry of Education, 2022)

No.	Status of Private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)	Year	Enrolments	Completions
1	Private HEIs with University Status	2022	301,957	71,662
		2021	269,305	62.075
2	Private HEIs with University Status (Branch Campus of Foreign University)	2022	28,187	8,211
		2021	27,814	9,240
3	Private HEIs with University College Status	2022	49,797	11,483
		2021	73,338	22,567
4	Private HEIs with College Status	2022	133,582	40,265
		2021	147,123	38,356
	Total	2022	513,523	131,621
		2021	517,580	132,238

Source: Private Standard Division, Department of Higher Education (Data as of 31 December 2022)

These numbers prove that the education sector is a major source of revenue for the government. The largest contribution which is 59%, is from college and university education with a value of RM 10.4 billion (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020)

However, the private education industry in Malaysia has been experiencing unprecedented challenges due to immense competition and volatility. Nair and Bhandar (2022, p. 1201) report that "The main challenge faced by private universities is that the education business involves numerous stakeholders: students, parents, academicians, administrative staff, academic leaders, government, society, and shareholders. All these stakeholders have differing expectations and demands which sometimes contradict one another."

There are numerous internal and external forces that need to be dealt with due to the uncertain post-pandemic economy and evolving technological innovations. These factors have increased the complexity of leadership roles in private universities. Due to the need to create a promising environment for thoughtful innovation under time pressure with reduced resources, leadership and strategic planning in higher education prove to be much more intricate than leading corporations (Dornfeld et al., 2020).

Universities, which inevitably determine the mindset of future generations, need to be led by leaders who are fully aware of the challenges that are present and are equipped to deal with them with acute foresight. As emphasized in the Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2015-2025 (2015, p.5). "Preparing Malaysian youth to thrive in this complex and ever-changing future will require an equally fundamental transformation of how the higher education system and higher learning institutions currently operate". In this critical education environment, understanding the current state of affairs, navigating change with a sense of urgency, and adapting to technological advancement are crucial elements for educational management.

This research attempts to identify the challenges faced by leading Malaysian private universities and provide valuable recommendations to overcome the challenges with the objective of ensuring private universities remain sustainable and have stable financial success.

Overcoming Challenges

Securing Financial Stability

Malaysian private universities are facing challenges in securing financial stability. There have been numerous reports regarding the financial crisis being faced. The covid-19 outbreak resulted in a negative impact as revenue could not be generated from overseas students and any further economic shock can push private universities to bankruptcy (Tajudeen, 2023). The President of The National Association of Private Educational Institutions, Assoc Prof Elajsolan VM Mohan stated that 60 private higher learning institutions closed in 2020 due to financial issues (Azman, 2021). He claimed that the main reason was the reduction in student enrolment due to the pandemic. Slower visa approvals and students' concerns regarding the pandemic have been a hindrance to the most valuable revenue source. Thirty-thousand foreign students, which was 40% of the total enrolment, registered annually before the pandemic but the percentage has dropped to between 20% to 30%. There has also been a 20% drop in local student enrolment. Dr. Geoffrey Williams, a professor at Malaysia University of Science and Technology, stated that news about the sale of international franchise universities is a vital warning sign of deep-rooted problems within the industry.

Private universities constantly face the dilemma of whether to retain and maintain existing facilities or to upgrade as the need for up-to-date infrastructure is an ongoing factor (Jayabalan, 2021). A substantial amount of income is spent on maintenance and infrastructure and this puts insurmountable pressure on universities when the student enrolment does not match the projected numbers.

Babulal and Solhi (2020) blatantly blame incompetent top-level management, inexperienced vice-chancellors, and amateurish academic leaders for not having the foresight to deal with the problems faced. The authors claim that structural reform needs to be planned in order for poor performers to close down and pave the way for more stable universities to thrive.

These scenarios show that there is a need to identify the challenges faced by private universities and identify the reformation steps that need to be taken. Kwiek in Henard & Leprince-Ringuet stresses that reformation needs to be planned by considering the world economy's denationalisation, tertiary education's universalization, and research commoditization.

High Turnover of Academic Staff

The quality of service rendered is dependent on the employees' motivation, skills, and experience. Retaining talented, productive, and dedicated academic staff has proven to be an ongoing problem in private universities due to intensive competition. Anis et al. (2019) emphasise that the biggest challenge faced by private universities is managing academic staff. The existence of a high number of universities within the same vicinity has provided university

employees with a vast choice of employers. When the remuneration package does not match the pressure faced, academic staff members opt for the easiest way out, which is to switch jobs.

Students who observe frequent changes in academic staff tend to lose confidence in the manner in which universities are managed. The main aspect of students' expectations is consistency when it comes to the teaching and learning process. Managerial attention has to be paid in order to ensure employees are knowledgeable and able to earn the trust of employees (Hamid, & Nick, 2019).

When academic staff's job satisfaction is affected, it can result in reduced productivity, a high rate of absenteeism, and an inability to meet students' needs (Sinniah, 2019). Unlike other occupations, lecturing requires building a strong bond with students who are the main customers of private universities. The challenge here is that lecturers cannot be replaced as easily or as quickly as in other organizations.

Among the reasons cited by researchers for high turnover rates in private universities are poor remuneration, inability to cope with mundane administrative tasks, and difficulty in managing students (Manogharan, 2018). Lack of interest in contributing to marketing activities is also one of the reasons for staff choosing to leave an academic institution.

Leaders need to acknowledge the existence of this problem and handle academicians as treasured assets. It is essential to identify productive employees and render due recognition. Even though this is a known fact, academic staff's morale is often not considered to be a major factor in managing universities. Trachtenberg et al. (2018) claim that despite having scholars who conduct research on leadership, higher educational institutions ignore their researchers' advice regarding leadership skills.

Putting knowledge gained from Vroom's Expectancy Theory into practice can assist in reducing academicians' attrition rate. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation affect employees' competence and employees are motivated only when they have supportive leaders who have the expertise to make the best out of their strengths (Legault, 2016).

Student engagement methods

Student composition in the classroom is becoming more diversified; therefore, guidance needs to be provided to students from different backgrounds accordingly (Vollman, 2017). Husain et al. (2018) have proven through their research that the quality of teaching is the most important factor in the selection of private universities. Students place importance on the quality of teaching and learning when choosing a higher educational institution; therefore, quality is the determining factor that enables a university to withstand competition (Naidu, & Derani, 2016). The majority of the respondents in research conducted by Nair and Bhandar (2021) claim that academic leaders fail to place importance on teaching quality. This causes the lecturers in private universities not to have a clear indication of what the expected performance is. There is also a lack of training for lecturers after recruitment which creates an inability to reflect on their own teaching practices. Higher educational institutions have failed to make a conscious effort to reward good teaching practices, and this has inadvertently affected the students' learning experience (The Dearing Report in Chalmers, 2018).

Due to the competitive nature of the private education sector, universities need to acknowledge the academic and social skills needed by diversified students and cater

accordingly. Receiving truthful feedback that is delivered in a diplomatic and professional manner can encourage lecturers to reflect when selecting delivery methods (Paolini, 2015).

A forceful message must be delivered to the academic staff that there is a strong link between the quality of teaching and the level of student learning. Teaching excellence must be seen as the main component for lecturers to excel in their careers. For this vision to materialize, clear guiding principles should be endorsed by private universities to ensure there is a clear understanding among lecturers regarding what constitutes teaching excellence and the rewards that will be awarded for extraordinary performance.

Creating industrial partnerships

Industry-university collaboration is a clearly neglected area in Malaysian private universities. While numerous attempts have been made to ensure there is international collaboration to form partnerships with universities to boost research work, very little effort has been taken to create meaningful partnerships with industries. Sharma (2016) reports that the collaboration of universities with the business sector in the area of research and development remains underdeveloped; the practical application of research carried out in universities continues to be weak due to the lack of communication between the two parties.

The industry-university divide is a challenge that needs to be addressed in order to form partnerships that are beneficial not only for universities but also for industries and students. Most universities in emerging economies have failed to provide students with the skills required to be employed by top industries (Singh, 2019). Unless proper training is provided by the industry, it is difficult for average students to excel when they graduate and start their careers (Ahmed et al., 2022).

Lopez, and Fussenegger (2023) stress that an innovative ecosystem comprising educational institutions and industries leads to innovations that are superior; therefore, collaborations should be prioritised by both parties. The primary goal for private universities is generating and disseminating knowledge as well as creating theory. Industries on the other hand aim to apply knowledge and maximise the generation of profit. The industries can gain new insights from students' research, and avoid a shortage of labour supply. Students, similarly, can improve their networking skills, have more options for internship positions, and get better job opportunities upon graduation. Industry-university collaboration, without a doubt, enhances university students' learning experience and prepares them for the real world. Most of the content taught in the classroom is based on theory and may not be totally applicable or useful in their workplaces.

Universities should work hand-in-hand with industries to ensure the industries' needs are met by working on projects that will benefit the relevant industries and assist them in generating profit. Close observations of the knowledge required in the industry should be carried out by academicians and the curriculum should be developed to address the needs of the industry as including fundamental industrial practices is essential to develop students' skills. Ahmed et al. (2022) assert that motivating students to work on industry-identified problems and doing static validation of their project work will motivate the industry to collaborate to enjoy mutual benefits.

Universities, industries, and the government must work hand-in-hand to improve economic growth with the creation of innovative ideas. Most university students do not acquire the competencies required by the workforce, while lack of human resources, intellectual resources, and capital has been the reason for many industries to fail (Singh, 2019). These challenges can be overcome if there is an optimal relationship between universities and industries.

Meeting academic and business agendas

Scholars consider private education to be a business that provides personal benefits to people who are interested in being educated and the commoditization of higher education is perceived to be an avenue to form a lucrative domestic and foreign business, which could have numerous consequences (Omoola, 2023). In reality, the act of providing education goes beyond exchanging knowledge for a tuition fee as education has to contribute towards the development of a society.

The higher educational institutions in Malaysia have evolved from being mere providers to exporters of education which portrays the government's vision of turning the country into an educational hub in order to fulfill economic needs. The findings of research conducted by Hamid and Yip (2019) show that the quality of education offered by private universities in Malaysia is far below the quality of public universities, even though the fees for private education are much higher, and that private universities in other Asian countries like Indonesia have managed to provide much better quality.

The traditional role of providing education and carrying out research will not help in being sustainable and competing in the industry. There has been a global drive for new teaching practices in recent years. Private universities are expected to ensure students are equipped with managerial capabilities that will enable them to venture into the fields of innovation and entrepreneurship. This would empower them to contribute to the growth of the economy, and culture.

As postulated by Abdahi, et al. (2021) entrepreneurial leadership skills combined with intelligence are seen as primary qualities for leaders to manage universities successfully and ensure the universities serve their purpose of providing holistic education. University leaders, therefore, need to deter from operating using the traditional model. It is imperative to design and offer programmes that are in line with the needs of the Industrial Revolution 4.0. Technological advancement has to be optimised to support hybrid, online, and blended learning. In addition to that, leaders must have excellent networking skills. This would enable them to carry out benchmarking of successful international universities often to remain competitive and current. Opportunities and alternative solutions that enhance the business sustainability of the university must be seized aggressively as seen in successful universities that have withstood the challenges faced.

For the Malaysian government's aspirations with regard to the generation of quality graduates to materialise, the management of universities needs to be cautious about the entry requirements of students who are accepted into their universities. Tapsir (2019) stresses that the entry requirements of students are completely managed by private institutions despite the application of ACT 555 to ensure there is compliance. Quality of education in private

universities can only be maintained if there is strict compliance with existing requirements when accepting students. In spite of the pressure to thrive financially, the minimum entry requirements set by the government should be adhered to strictly. Private universities should, therefore, work with a sense of urgency to improve the services rendered in order to fulfill the needs of the students and the requirements of the government.

Emphasising the importance of research

The key findings of a report on innovation policies by the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) show that Malaysia's investment in tertiary education is much higher than that of other countries in the region and that the quantity of publications is increasing; however, the main concern is the lack of responsiveness to improving the quality of education in private universities and the inability to respond to the needs of the industry. It has also been stated in the report that the Malaysian government has not benefited from the huge investment in higher education research and development (Sharma, 2016). The gross lack of research in scientific areas impacts the Malaysian economy and society negatively.

It is evident that the relevance of research carried out in private universities needs to be strengthened. This proves to be a challenge for private universities which are already grappling with the issue of increasing student enrolment and fulfilling the basic teaching and learning mission. The pressure to overcome financial issues and generate income is a major distraction resulting in private universities' reduced focus on research activities.

Newly established private universities seemingly have taken steps to set up research centers with the goal of encouraging lecturers to participate in research projects; however, these centers are considered to be merely regulatory in nature, with very minor support rendered in facilitating research productivity (Thuraisingam et al., 2014). The requirement to conduct research and publish regularly without sufficient support and guidance puts pressure on lecturers as most consider the academic profession to be one that focuses on teaching-related activities.

Building a supportive environment for lecturers to conduct research and publish papers that are relevant to the needs of the industry is crucial for the success of private universities. Training should be provided to improve the quality of research papers. The management must allocate time for lecturers to solely focus on research work and they must be given achievable yearly targets (Nair, & Bhandar, 2021). Rewarding lecturers for quality publications can further motivate them to be dedicated and positively contribute to the research.

Mitigating Challenges Faced in the Administration of Private Universities

The challenges faced by universities must be mitigated by planning for a major reform to focus on the services rendered (Nair, & Bhandar, 2021). As claimed by Kwiek in Hernand and Leprince-Ringuet (2008) the reform in private universities must be conducted by considering the world economies' denationalisation, tertiary education's universalisation, societies' individualisation, and research work's commoditisation.

Academic leaders' calibre to encourage change and reform work culture is vital for the growth and development of private universities. As advocated by Rajan and Ganesan (2017), there is a need to choose the right management model based on the purpose, organization size, hierarchy, skills and competency levels, domain, leadership styles, competitors' progress, and organisational culture. Based on the challenges faced by private universities, Kotter's 8-Step Model, when utilized effectively, can assist in overcoming resistance to change within the organization and facilitate transformation (Dininni, 2017). The eight steps stipulated by Dr. John Kotter to lead change are creating urgency, forming a powerful coalition, creating a vision for change, communicating the vision, removing obstacles, creating short-term wins, building on the change, and anchoring the changes in corporate culture (Kotter, 2012). This model places an emphasis on the role of leaders as key change-makers and creates opportunities for leaders to create more leaders; the main idea is for leaders to prepare all stakeholders for changes (Calder, 2013).

Establish a Sense of Urgency

Leaders who are working on reforming the culture in private universities should work on convincing at least 75% of the management team that the recommended changes are beneficial. Kotter (2012, para.4) has observed that some leaders "do not identify the most important hazards and opportunities early enough, formulate creative strategic initiatives nimbly enough, and implement them fast enough". Bass as cited in Belias and Koustelios (2014) defined leaders as agents of change who have the ability to affect other people's acts. The main root causes of resistance to change have to be identified before starting the process. Leaders need to identify whether resistance to change is due to a lack of skills, personality clashes, lack of job security, or poor remuneration.

Resistance to change in management has to be handled in a formal manner with a sense of urgency to avoid the news getting to the employees through the grapevine. Once the need for change has been identified, leaders should avoid making announcements in a brash and undeliberate manner; instead, they need to come up with a clear strategy. A workable plan has to be devised by deciding who needs to convey the information, who needs to be informed, when the information has to be delivered, and how the news should be delivered.

New ideas should be reinforced frequently, especially by top hierarchy and the need for change can be communicated by analysing how competitors are catering to the needs of the main stakeholders in the education industry.

Build a Guiding Team

In order to build a guiding team, it is important to identify employees with the university who are ready to make necessary changes and face challenges. The team members must consist of people from different generations to assist in convincing all stakeholders. The selected leaders should have seniority and should have gained the respect of employees. The members

of this team should be resilient enough to withstand the pressure from investors who are interested in short-term gains by not adhering to the government's requirements and policies.

Kotter (2013) explains that leadership cannot be only provided by the people at the top as guidance is increasingly needed from more people to find new opportunities and take an organization into the future. Bringing employees together to analyse change initiatives will help in creating "accountability, mutual generosity, a judgment-free attitude, and increased pressure on reluctant employees to change" (Ferrazzi, 2014, para.7).

Resistance to change has to be expected when drastic changes are made within the university and there needs to be a clear strategy on how resistance is managed effectively. Leaders need to give clear reasons for the changes and explain how they will make positive changes possible. The employees need to have a clear understanding that everyone's work will become more manageable and productive. Leaders must also allocate time to speak to employees individually to show that each one is valued.

Efficient and dedicated leaders need to be selected in order to closely monitor the employees' reaction to changes and to deal with employees who resist change. The right philosophies need to be ingrained to create not only an efficient but also an empathetic team of leaders. By placing importance on efficient top-down and bottom-up communication channels, leaders can ensure employees feel they are consulted. Leaders should also be empowered to manage the resistors and practice strategies to win them over without allowing anyone to feel left out.

Create a Vision and Communicate It Clearly

A vision statement steers an organisation in the correct direction as it works towards a desired future. The university's vision must motivate stakeholders to provide support and to actively play a role in the change that is happening. According to Ryerson University (2011), an effective vision must be imaginable, desirable, feasible, focused, flexible, and communicable. The set vision must send a clear picture of what the future would be like, appeal to all stakeholders, consist of realistic goals, provide guidance during the decision-making process, be able to accept alternative responses and be able to explain the changing concept within five minutes.

By holding regular meetings after carrying out market surveys regarding changing students' needs, a vision can be created and communicated effectively. A dip in student enrolment should not be allowed to dampen or change the vision which gave rise to the need to change in the first place. Being able to influence, having a common goal, and working towards the vision are the three required elements of leadership; therefore, leaders need to place their priority on students' needs and work across internal boundaries to achieve their goals (Belias and Koustelios, 2014).

Resilience should be practiced when facing resistance encountered while trying to redirect educational institutions. As advised by Kotter (2012) both the network and hierarchy should be inseparable and there has to be a constant flow of information.

Remove Obstacles

Obstacles can be removed by addressing all concerns raised by the stakeholders of the institution. This must not only be done by having meetings that involve all leaders but also on a one-to-one basis. If the concerns are not handled promptly, more of them will subtly begin to support those who are against the recommended changes.

Resistance to offering new programmes to cater to the needs of the industry can be handled by creating a convincing business model after carrying out an analysis of market competitors. By doing this a clear image can be projected to stakeholders that changing employers' needs is a constant which needs to be dealt with a sense of urgency to stay ahead of competitors. A survey has to be conducted to analyse whether the new programmes are in demand. While doing this the focus also needs to be maintained on the university's existing niche programmes and there must be investments in doing research on how the programmes can be further improved. This will help stakeholders understand that the strategy will not totally involve diverting the attention of the marketing team to focus only on new programmes but treat them as supplementary programmes which will increase student intake. This will encourage the marketing team to think of out-the-box strategies to market new products and at the same time develop strategies to have a stronghold on the existing ones.

Ferrazzi (2014) advises that influential employees can be identified by observing and asking other workers for their opinions regarding informal leaders who exist in the group. These influential members will play an important role in monitoring the change in the thought patterns of others in the organisation. It is the manager's responsibility to listen to employees' personal goals and assist them in building the necessary skills so that their goals are aligned with the organisation's mission (Dobrygowski, 2018).

Create Short Term Wins

Short-term wins can be created by carrying out customer satisfaction surveys where stakeholders of private universities are invited to share their opinions regarding the changes in the services provided. The positive reviews then can be made known to all stakeholders. According to Tanner (2018), the three criteria which must be met by a short-term win are an unambiguous success, visible success throughout the organisation, and a clear relationship between change and success.

The credibility gained from the early wins will assist in changing negative perceptions regarding the implemented changes. The internal changes that are made must be impactful enough and closely followed up to raise the confidence level of employees. The goals that are set should be small be number and the progress must be closely monitored until the target is achieved. If this is not done, investors may believe that the change effort is only wishful thinking (Tanner, 2018). "Focus on one or two goals instead of all and make sure no new initiatives are added until one of those goals is achieved and celebrated" (Ryerson University, 2011).

Consolidating Improvements and Producing More Change

Momentum needs to be maintained by communicating clearly and frequently to enable shareholders and employees to accept changes. In order to do this, frequent meetings should be held to address the issues which arise. Leaders need to take the concerns of all stakeholders seriously and come up with solutions before implementing new ideas. Collecting feedback from employees regarding leadership and making necessary changes to handle problems can reduce the intensity of the problems. A close observation must be carried out of the areas in which changes have been made. The success level, as well as the profit margin, must be analysed.

Incorporating Changes into Organisational Culture

Incorporating changes into the culture will be achievable when the above steps are practised religiously and constantly. New leaders who are selected should be those who believe in the changes which have been made and they should be consistent in practicing the new approach.

Conclusion

Leadership roles in private universities are increasingly complex due to the current unprecedented challenges that are being faced. There is immense market volatility and stiff competition caused by the existence of a large number of universities within the same vicinity. Internal and external obstacles need to be dealt with aggressively with a sense of urgency. These factors have resulted in leading academic institutions more challenging than other corporate organisations.

Therefore, efficient and effective leadership is required for the adoption of strategic approaches in Malaysian private universities. Identifying challenges, prioritising challenges that can be mitigated, planning steps that need to be taken, and managing resistance to change are essential steps that need to be taken, if private universities intend to progress, and remain competitive in the education industry. Using a wide range of leadership styles to be change agents who propel universities to success will contribute to yielding positive results.

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