

MALAYSIA

QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

1. Introduction

This paper provides an over view of Malaysia's experience in the development of quality assurance in higher education over the last decade and the introduction of the Malaysian Qualifications Framework which will underpin the quality assurance system in the near future.

The impact of economic recession in the mid-nineties, globalization and information explosion have vast consequences on the educational policies and social-economic developments in many developing countries including Malaysia. Major focus was given to education and training as it is deemed to be essential to the survival of the nation in an increasingly competitive world market. External and internal forces led to high demand for access to higher education and training and increase in national budget for higher education of (approximately 25%) reflects the government' concern.

The establishment of higher educational institutions (HEIs) and training, public and private, with new education policies and strategies created met the access and other demands. To ensure healthy growth and competitiveness of HEIs, a number of legislation were passed in 1996 amongst others to provide increase flexibility and efficiency in the public institutions (corporatisation), regulate establishment of private providers, to establish a quality assurance agency, a national higher education council a policy maker and a national funding council. These laws provided the platform establishment new providers, improved management of public universities and a quality assurance regime. It also brought new challenges which amongst others, is the quality issues in private establishment and the cross border education in a national setting.

A new Higher Education Ministry was set up in early 2004 and the country is poised to make significant changes in higher education with the establishment of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency and a Malaysian Qualifications Framework later this year strengthened and enhance higher education system.

2. Higher Education in Malaysia

Prior to 2004, the overall responsibility for primary and higher education lies in the Ministry of Education. The election in early 2004 lead to the establishment of the Higher Education Ministry with responsibility over the crucial development of higher education. The institutions under the ministry are the public and private higher educational institutions; the technical education (polytechnics and the community colleges) with the National Higher Education Council as the main policy makers.

Table 1 Number of Higher Education Institutions

Public Universities & university colleges	17 (+3)
Private Universities & university colleges	22
Foreign Branch campus	4
Private colleges	532
Polytechnics	20
Community colleges	34

All most all the public universities are governed by the Universities and Universities Colleges Act 1971 and technical education is provided by the Education Act 1996 and funded by the government. The private higher education institutions (PHEIs) are not funded or maintained by the government generally although they have been given some tax incentives. Student loans are available from the National Higher Education Funding Council and other sponsors. The private higher education sector is complementing the public higher institutions in providing educational opportunities to the masses and is recognized as essential to nation growth. Approximately 50% of the student's enrollment is in the private higher education sector. The programmers offered ranges from certificate to doctoral in a wide range of disciplines.

The Private Higher Educational Institutions Act of 1996 regulated the establishment of the full fledge universities, university colleges and the non-degree granting institutions. All programmes to be conducted by the PHEIs must be approved by the Minister and the approval must be based on recommendation by the National Accreditation Board (LAN). These programmes are evaluated and checked at the approval stage followed with accreditation or assessment of Minimum Standards (standard compliance) as required by the Act and regular monitoring.

Non-degree granting PHEIs are allowed to conduct degree programmers only in collaboration with local and foreign universities, diploma and certificate programmes, professional courses and short courses. It is generally noted that PHEIs is market-driven, customer focused, flexible and affordable education delivered in conventional or a mix mode approach. Medium of instruction in many of the institutions is English. The proliferation of PHEIs within the last five years reflected a successful market for higher education for international education and is perceived to be a profitable industry. It is within this sector that cross border education has flourished.

Cross border education has created challenges to national policies, regulations and quality issues. There are commercial presence of institutions with the presence of foreign branch campuses, foreign degrees and other qualifications, professionals and student mobility, distance and net providers of education and they have provided both positive and negative impact.

3. Quality Assurance Development

Prior to 1996, the concerned with the higher educational programmes relates to matters such as approval of new programmes, funding, and recognition of qualifications for employment and licensing of professionals by the professional bodies. Realisation for the need for a quality assurance body was due to global, regional and local forces which led to the establishment of LAN. The quality regime began with the establishment of the Lembaga Akreditasi Negara (National Accreditation Board) in July 1997 for the purpose of ensuring quality of education provided by the PHEIs.

In 2002 the government decided that public universities must also be subjected to quality assurance and ordered the establishment the Quality Assurance Division (QAD) within the Ministry of Education (now referred to as Ministry of Higher Education).

There was also increased concerned on quality of graduates of professional courses by professional bodies as a consequence many new programmes and impact of international developments in various professions.

4. Lembaga Akreditasi Negara (LAN)-Private Higher Educational Institutions

The Lembaga Akreditasi Negara (LAN) was established under the Lembaga Akreditasi Act 1996 with the mandate to formulate policies on standards and criteria for quality assurance, accreditation of programmes and advises and makes recommendations to the Minister for approval of programmes for the private education only. Its objectives are to ensure provision of education in the PHIEs is of high quality able to meet international standards and contribute to economic growth and individual's personal development.

a. Governance structure of LAN

A statutory body with a governing board consisting of 10 member of various academic, professional and industry background with a chairperson who is also the CEO. The board meets monthly to decide on policy, administrative and academic papers such as approvals and accreditation of programmes.

The annual budget averages at RM 14.5 million is provided by the government and it partly supports evaluation cost to the PHEIs. The organization is supported by 155 staff. Assessment of programmes is by a large pool of trained external auditors selected from the higher educational institutions, industry and professional bodies.

b. Quality Assessment

General policies on higher education are governed by the Ministry and the National Higher Education Council. Basic standards and quality criteria were developed based on international and national best practices in consultation with stakeholders. Program discipline standards are being developed together with the QAD and professional bodies. Various guidelines on general standards and

criteria, post graduate, and distance learning, procedures and preparation for submission and codes of practices were developed, reviewed and made available through LAN's website and publications.

Accreditation is not made mandatory but may be imposed by other agencies. The standards for accreditation of programmes are prescribed within 5 critical areas for assessment and it includes general prescription of type of programme, its objectives & outcomes; Quality of curriculum and assessments; Academic and support staff; Facilities and resources and Quality Management Systems. The evaluation is both quantitative and qualitative.

A programme which fails to meet minimum standards or the compulsory accreditation will be recommended for revocation approval which requires necessary actions must be taken to address the welfare of students and the institution will be monitored by Ministry and LAN to ensure corrective actions are taken.

LAN publishes list of approved programmes and accredited programmes for immediate updates on the website and biannually prints copies for public consumption.

5. Quality Assurance Division –Public Universities

The Quality Assurance Division for public universities was established to set up quality audit system which is institutional and programme-based for the public universities. Its mission is to promote public confidence of the provision and standards of award is being safeguarded and enhanced. They conduct academic reviews of programme performance outcomes, quality of learning opportunities and institutional capacity and management of standards. The reviews are based on nationally agreed guidelines, criteria and procedures and such reports are made available.

They have been very involved in developing Code of Practice for Quality Assurance, programme standards of many disciplines, post graduate standards, procedures, and provide reports of benchmarking outcomes, good practices, training and a National Qualifications Framework.

6. Professional Programmes

An important step taken in ensuring quality of professional programmes is the establishment a number of joint technical accreditation committees. The membership consists of members of the professional bodies, practitioners, academicians, a public service representative and a representative from the quality assurance body. The task of joint committees includes setting standards for programmes accreditation, training and selection of assessors, makes recommendation for approvals and jointly decides on accreditation of local and foreign programmes. This arrangement is effective in ensuring quality of professional courses, deals with recognition issues reduces cost, duplication and wastage of manpower whilst maintaining standards of professional programmes.

8. Impact of Transnational Providers, Quality Issues and other Challenges.

Malaysia has unilaterally open its doors to foreign programmes and commercial presence of institutions and benefited from such arrangements for a long time. Major international providers are universities from UK and Australia from offering a full degree programme or undertake to accept student under a twinning agreement, an articulation agreement for advanced standing or credit transfers. It is found that the transnational education has succeeded to assist in nurturing private education, increased access and affordable education for students whilst a wide options from across the world. In addition to this quality assurance system has been put in place by the government. All courses approved and conducted by the PHEIs are subjected to quality audit by LAN and the regulations by the Ministry. There are generally clear evidence of capacity building and quality improvement in the delivery of other programmes.

The private sector and their cross-borders partners provided wide access to higher education, reduce outflow of revenue and build local competency. It also raises negative impact. The negative impact of the transnational providers in some cases are provision of poor quality programmes, insufficient commitment and monitoring of the delivery by partner institutions, different quality standards, indifference or general ignorance to national criteria, local needs and policies, issues comparability of quality of education, faculty staff, lack of clear information, cultural differences and had issues relating to recognition of qualification. Other new challenges faced by authorities come with the technology mediated provision of higher education, fraudulent qualifications and practices, diploma and accreditation mills.

Within the higher education sector, other challenges includes ensuring that the students get good education, equality of access, funding, strengthening internationalization initiatives and dealing effectively with issues of recognition, consolidation the quality assurance system and the higher education structures with the establishment of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency.

Besides internal changes in the higher education and quality assurance system, Malaysia has been actively participating at regional and international QA associations such as INQAAHE and the APQN. Bilateral collaborations are the other options.

9. Malaysian Qualification Agency

The Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) was developed by the Quality Assurance Division and LAN in 2002 and approved in January 2005 by the National Higher Education Council. It also recommended that a suitable legal body be established to take charge and implement the MQF. In cognizance of the issues and challenges in higher education and the role it has to play in nation building, the Cabinet has, on 21 December 2005, made a major decision to establish Malaysia Qualification Agency (MQA) to be responsible for quality assurance in higher education and to implement the MQF.

It will consolidate the QA systems by the merger of LAN, QAD and quality assurance unit of the Polytechnics and Community Colleges to form a new agency the MQA. To enable this to happen all relevant laws are being revised and it has led to the drafting of the MQA bill. In the new bill, all effort is taken ensure that there will be increase transparency, speed, objectivity and fairness in the new system. The drafting of the bill is done with much vigor and very extensive consultation over the last three months with many stakeholders and it will culminate with a national consultative forum to be held on the 19th June before being tabled in Parliament this year.

The MQA will be responsible for quality assurance of institutions and programmes based on agreed criteria and standards in set in the MQF and establishing a National Reference Centre for recognition and information of qualifications. Collaboration with relevant stakeholders on a regular basis for the development and review of standards is provided for in the Bill. Within the proposed Bill, transnational and cross border education will be promoted and for the local higher educational institutions for self-regulation and accountability for institutional effectiveness.

10. Malaysian Qualifications Framework

The Malaysia Qualifications Framework classifies and develops qualifications based on agreed learning outcomes and credits. It links qualifications in learning pathways which will allow flexible individual progression and promote life long learning along with developing mechanisms for accreditation of prior learning. The MQF and its Credit System has been benchmarked with international standards and best practices.

With the MQF, it is intended to enhance clarity and consistency of qualification values and nomenclature, facilitate equivalency and recognition, guides curriculum development, increase academic autonomy, reduces fraudulent practices and most important improves local and foreign confidence, of Malaysian qualifications and educational structure.

(appendix A –Qualification Levels and Pathways)

11. Conclusion

The immediate challenge is the setting the scene for the implementation and this involves extensive training, involvement and commitment of all stakeholders, internal and external parties as the MQF is set to create to transform the Malaysian higher education system for the 21st Century.

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