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**THE TRANSFORMATION FROM ELITIST TO MASS  
HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA: PROBLEMS  
AND CHALLENGES**

Dr. Tan Yao Sua  
Dr. Santhiram R. Raman

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## ABSTRACT

### THE TRANSFORMATION FROM ELITIST TO MASS HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA: PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES<sup>1</sup>

*The surging demand for higher education in Malaysia has led to the transformation from elitist to mass higher education. Several factors have, in one way or another, resulted in this changing higher education landscape. These factors include the democratization of secondary education, the restructuring of the economy, reduced number of students going abroad as a consequence of the global recession of the mid-1980s and later the Asian financial crisis in 1997, and the emergence of a knowledge-based economy. The Malaysian government adopted a two-pronged approach through the expansion of public institutions of higher learning and the liberalization of private higher education to provide more access to higher education to meet the surging demand. However, the transformation from elitist to mass higher education in Malaysia has brought about a host of problems. One crucial problem is the maintenance of standards and quality alongside quantitative development. Another problem relates to the emergence of a dual system of higher education which is divided along ethnic lines. Intense competition for students that threatens the survival of some private institutions of higher learning is also a matter of great concern. Graduate unemployment that arises from the lack of proficiency in English and oversupply of graduates in certain areas is yet another problem that merits the government's attention.*

**KEYWORDS:** Higher education, education policy

Dr. Tan Yao Sua  
Senior Lecturer  
Centre for Policy Research and  
International Studies  
Universiti Sains Malaysia  
Penang  
[yaosua@usm.my](mailto:yaosua@usm.my)  
ISSN : 2180-0146

Dr. Santhiram R. Raman  
Associate Professor  
Sultan Hassanal Bolkih Institute of  
Education  
Universiti Brunei Darussalam  
Brunei Darussalam  
[santhira@shbie.ubd.edu.bn](mailto:santhira@shbie.ubd.edu.bn)

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, higher education is expanding at a phenomenal rate. This has drastically transformed the provision of higher education that used to be elitist in nature. The rise of mass higher education has now become a global phenomenon. Malaysia is no exception to this global phenomenon. In some parts of the world, for instance, in North America, much of Europe, and a number of East Asian countries, academic systems approach universal access, with close to half of the relevant age group attending some kind of post-secondary institutions (Altbach and Davis, 2001:439). One of the main issues pertaining to the rise of mass higher education is the issue of standards and quality. The question is: Will a wider access to higher education result in a compromise on standards and quality? This issue needs to be address if mass higher education is to bring about a positive impact on academic advancement.

Tapper and Palfreyman (2005:1-2) note that the decision-making about the provision of higher education and its expansion to meet demand for wider access has traditionally been a complex process involving a combination of forces that differs overtime within the same country. In the Malaysian case, the rise of mass higher education is also influenced by a combination of factors that have led to the surging demand for higher education. This paper elucidates some of the key factors. These factors include internal as well as external factors. The democratization of secondary education, the transformation of the Malaysian economy from an agro-based to an industrial-based economy and the recent emergence of a knowledge-based economy are three main internal factors that have led to the surging demand for higher education in Malaysia. The surging demand for higher education in Malaysia is also a consequence of external factors, in particularly the global recession of the mid-1980s and the Asian financial crisis in 1997 that have forced many prospective students to shelve their plans to study abroad.

The surging demand for higher education in Malaysia has been facilitated by “a parallel public private sector” expansion (Geiger, 1988). The role played by the private sector to provide wider access to higher education, which was once the domain of the public sector, has been instrumental in meeting the surging demand for higher education, as the public sector is unable to cope with such demand despite efforts to increase the number of public institutions of higher learning. This is made possible by new legislation that has allowed the private sector to become the provider of higher education. But private higher education is a highly competitive area. It often leads to the marketization of higher education. By marketization is meant the adoption of market principles and practices to run educational institutions (Mok and Tan, 2004:15). Cost-effectiveness is certainly one crucial aspect of marketization. The question arises as to whether private higher education in Malaysia could both maintain cost-effectiveness and academic excellence. Meanwhile, the proliferation of private institutions of higher learning that teach in English has resulted in a different system of higher education to the public institutions of higher learning that teach in Malay, the national language. This dual system of higher education not only has a profound impact on nation building but also on job opportunities.

It is against the above backdrop that this paper investigates the development of higher education in Malaysia in relation to its transformation from an elitist model to a mass model. While the rise of mass higher education is to meet the emergent needs of the country, it has, nevertheless, created other problems as well. This paper explores and illustrates some of these problems, which have affected the overall development of mass higher education in Malaysia.

## **2. SURGING DEMAND FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA**

Many factors have led to the surging demand for higher education in Malaysia. One of the key factors is the democratization of secondary education in the 1990s. For a long time, the Malaysian education system only catered to nine years of free basic primary education (for age cohort 6-12 years). Progress to secondary education was strictly screened through public examinations. Students who failed to achieve the required achievement grades were debarred from further education. But things changed in 1991. The government decided to extend the provision of basic education to nine years – an additional three years of lower secondary education (Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 for age cohort 13-15 years) (Lee, 2002:30). Students then sat for the *Sijil Rendah Pelajaran* (SRP) examination or Certificate of Lower Secondary examination where they were screened for upper secondary education (Secondary 4 and Secondary 5 for age cohort 16-17 years). The screening process used to be very stringent. But as from 1999, the government decided to loosen the screening process by replacing the SRP examination with the *Penilaian Menengah Rendah* (PMR) or Lower Secondary Assessment whereby students with minimum requirement, a pass in any one subject, were allowed to progress to Secondary 4 (Ng, 2000:1). Consequently, more students were able to progress to Secondary 4 and took the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) or Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE) (equivalent of O-Level) examination at the end of Secondary 5. SPM is the minimum qualification for students in Malaysia to further their studies at the higher education level. However, this qualification would only allow them to pursue courses at the certificate or diploma levels. Nonetheless, they can go through one year of foundation course to qualify for degree courses at the private higher institutions of learning. For SPM holders, there is another pathway to higher education. They can go through two years of pre-university studies (Lower Six and Upper Six) at government secondary schools and sit for the *Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia* (STPM) examination or Malaysian Higher School Certificate (equivalent of A-Level) examination at the end of the second year. Upon getting their STPM certificates, they can then pursue a degree course at the higher education level. Inevitably, the democratization of secondary education has significantly increased the number of secondary students eligible for higher education.

The surging demand for higher education in Malaysia is also influenced by the need for skilled and professional labor to facilitate the shift from an agro-based economy to an economy driven by industrialization. Foreign direct investments (FDIs) by

transnational corporations (TNCs) have provided the main impetus for industrialization in Malaysia. The World Bank Report released in 1993 cited Malaysia as the third largest recipient of FDIs among the top ten developing countries in 1991 (Ghosh, 1998:142). The early phases of industrialization in Malaysia were largely driven by labor-intensive industries. However, capital-intensive industries that required highly skilled and professional labor soon emerged. The pace of industrialization in Malaysia was accelerated during the tenure of Dr Mahathir Mohamed (1981-2003) as the Prime Minister. In 1991, he launched the Vision 2020 project. One of the main objectives of the project was to ensure that Malaysia achieve the status of a newly industrialized country by the year 2020. In order to produce the required skilled and professional industrial labor to achieve this objective, the government provided wider access to higher education.

Another factor that influenced the surging demand for higher education in Malaysia is the global recession of the mid-1980s. As a result of financial constraints, many parents were unable to send their children abroad. The situation was exacerbated by an imposition of full fees on overseas students in the United Kingdom and Australia – two popular overseas destinations for Malaysian students (Tan Ai Mei, 2002:8). This had led to a surging demand for higher education within the country. It is important to note here that as a consequence of the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP), many non-Malay students, especially Chinese students, were deprived of a chance to pursue higher education at the public institutions of higher learning. NEP was an affirmative action policy designed to address the socioeconomic backwardness of the Malay for a period of 20 years (1971-1990). NEP was launched in the aftermath of the 13 May 1969 racial riots. One of the principal reasons that sparked the racial riots was the Malays' discontent over the lack of socioeconomic mobility, which was a legacy of British colonial rule (Abdul Rahman Putra, 1969; Comber, 1986; Goh Cheng Teik, 1971). Under the aegis of NEP, an ethnic quota system of admission to public institutions of higher learning in favor of the Malays was imposed by the government. This ethnic quota system, based on a ration of 55:45, was imposed to help to advance the educational mobility of the Malays at the higher education level, which was previously dominated by the non-Malays, especially the Chinese. However, in actual practice, the in-take of Malay students into the public institutions of higher learning usually exceeded the stipulated 55 per cent target (Lee Hock Guan, 2007:136). As such, many Chinese students were forced to study abroad (Andressen, 1993). The global recession of the mid-1980s has deterred many Chinese parents from sending their children abroad. But with the phenomenal growth of local private higher education beginning in the 1980s, they were provided with an attractive alternative. Twinning programs offered by the private institutions of higher learning were particularly popular among students who clamored for overseas degrees. Under these programs, private institutions of higher learning collaborate with overseas universities in which part of a foreign university's programs are offered locally in Malaysia in a split-site model. The '1+2' and '2+1' twinning programs were well sought after by students. The demand for overseas degree offered through local private institutions of higher learning reached new heights when Malaysia was hit by financial crisis in 1997. With the devaluation of the Malaysian currency and the appreciation of foreign currencies, financial constraints to study abroad deepened. Capitalizing on this situation, local private institutions of higher education introduced various programs that could help students to cut cost in their pursuit for foreign degrees,

among which was the '3+0' program, which allowed foreign degrees to be obtained locally without going abroad. This program was well received by students and has since become an attractive feature of the private institutions of higher learning.

The emergence of a knowledge-economy during recent times has also led to surging demand for higher education. In 2002, the Malaysian government came out with a knowledge-based economy master plan to chart the strategic direction towards the knowledge-based economy (see Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 2002). The emphasis placed on knowledge-based economy is in many ways a response to the emergence of information and communications technology (ICT). The ICT Revolution is facilitating a move to knowledge-related activities as the main source of competitiveness and added value (Masuyama and Vandenbrink, 2003:5). As knowledge becomes the most critical factor of production in a knowledge-based economy, the onus is on the government to increase knowledge production. One of the characteristics of the knowledge-based economy outlined by the Malaysian knowledge-based economy master plan is a high tertiary education enrolment (Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 2002: iii). There was certainly an urgent need to create more tertiary education opportunities as the Labor Force Survey Report 1999 noted that only 15 per cent of workers in Malaysia had gone through tertiary education (Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 2002:xi).

## **3.THE GROWTH OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA**

### **3.1 THE DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION**

The first public university in Malaysia, the University of Malaya, was established in 1962. It was not until 1969 that another university, the University of Science Malaysia, was established. Three new universities were established in the 1970s: the National University of Malaysia (1970), the University of Agriculture (later renamed the University of Putra Malaysia) (1971) and the Technology University of Malaysia (1975). In the 1980s, the government established two more universities: the International Islamic University of Malaysia (1983) and the Northern University of Malaysia (1984). The small number of public universities could not meet the demand for higher education. For instance, less than half of the applicants who applied for undergraduate courses were accepted by these public universities.

Applicants and Intake into local universities, academic sessions 1981/82 – 1991/92  
(First Degree Only)

Year	Applicants	Intake	Accepted (%)
1981/82	16,698	5,847	35.0
1982/83	19,522	6,127	31.4
1983/84	28,858	6,890	23.9
1984/85	32,168	7,192	22.4
1985/86	32,209	8,213	25.5
1986/87	28,755	9,289	33.6
1988/89	24,155	8,599	35.6
1989/90	23,331	8,757	37.5
1991/92	25,730	10,668	41.5

Source: Yee and Lim Teck Ghee (1995:186).

In order to cope with the surging demand for higher education, the government intensified its effort to build more public institutions of higher learning in the 1990s. 6 new institutions of higher learning were established during this period: the University of Sarawak (1992), the University of Sabah (1994), the Sultan Idris Education University (upgraded from the Sultan Idris Teacher Training College) (1997), the MARA University of Technology (upgraded from the MARA Institute of Technology) (1999), the Islamic University College of Malaysia (1998) and the Terengganu University College (1999). In 2001, two more university colleges were established: the Tun Hussein Onn University College and the National Technical University College. Efforts to build more public universities and university colleges continued. By 2005, there were 11 public universities and 6 university colleges in Malaysia (Malaysia, 2006:244). In 2006, all the university colleges were upgraded to full-fledge university status. To date, there are 20 public universities in Malaysia (*Utusan Malaysia*, 30 August 2007). These universities are spread across every state in Malaysia (Malaysia is a Federation comprises 13 states).

Apart from academic-based public universities, the government also realized the need to promote the growth of polytechnics and community colleges, which are essentially skill-based institutions of higher learning, to meet the demand for more skill manpower in the labor market (Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 2002). The first polytechnic, the Ungku Omar Polytechnic, was established in 1969 (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2001). Up until 1980s, there were only 5 polytechnics. However, the number of polytechnics more than doubled in the 1990s with the establishment of 7 new polytechnics. There are currently 21 polytechnics in Malaysia (*Utusan Malaysia*, 30 August 2007). As for community college, it was a more recent creation. Up until 2000, community colleges were non-existent in Malaysia. By 2005, there were already 34 community colleges in Malaysia (Malaysia, 2006:244). Thus, within the five years from 2000, the government embarked on a strategy to establish community colleges. There are currently 37 community colleges in Malaysia (*Utusan Malaysia*, 30 August 2007).

### 3.2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a phenomenal growth of private higher education in Malaysia. Before this, there were not many private institutions of higher learning. Examples of more reputed private colleges then were the Goon Institute and CMYA college, which offered commercial studies and courses leading to semi-professional qualifications granted by overseas institutions like the City and Guilds of London and the London Chamber of Commerce (Lee, 1999a:1-2). The number of private institutions of higher learning more than doubled within a four-year period from 156 institutions in 1992 to 354 institutions in 1996 (Lee, 1999a:2). The development of private higher education was given a big boost in 1996. In that year, the government enacted several acts, which had a direct impact on the development of private higher education that used English as a medium of instruction. The first was the National Council on Higher Education Act, which reflected the government's intention to have in place a single governing body to oversee the provision of higher education by both public and private sectors. The second was the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act, which outlined the government's regulatory control over all the private institutions in the country. The third was the National Accreditation Board Act, which allowed the setting up of an accreditation board or *Lembaga Akreditasi Negara* (LAN) to formulate policies on the standards and quality control of courses of study and certificates, diplomas and degrees awarded by the private institutions of higher learning. At the same time, the government also amended the Education Act of 1961 to facilitate the establishment of private institutions of higher learning teaching in English. In 1997, the government enacted another act, i.e. the National Higher Education Fund Board Act, which allowed the setting up of a fund board to provide loans to needy students, especially those who pursued their tertiary education at the private institutions of higher learning (Lee, 1999a).

The above legislation had provided the impetus for the private sector to play a supplementary role as a provider of higher education in order to help the government to meet the surging demand for higher education in the country. Thus, there was a significant increase in the number of private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. The number of private institutions of higher learning has grown from 156 in 1992 to 706 in 2001 (Malaysia, 2001). However, as the private higher education sector is intensely competitive, many private institutions of higher learning, which lack competitive edge, had to close down. As of 2005, there were 11 private universities, 11 private university colleges, 5 foreign university offshore campuses and 532 private colleges (Malaysia, 2006:244). The number of students enrolled in the private institutions of higher learning had also increased markedly. In 1985, the total number of students enrolled in private institutions of higher learning was only in the region of 170,000. This number increased to about 230,000 in 1990, and by 2005, it had increased markedly to about 730,000 (Muhamad Jantan et al., 2006:19). In 2005, the private institutions of higher learning enrolled 113,105 new students. These numbers were comparable to that of the public institutions of higher learning, which stood at 123,184 ((Kementerian Pendidikan Tinggi Malaysia, 2006). Thus, as a consequence of policy intervention, the private higher education sector in Malaysia evolved from a marginalized position to a position whereby it has now become a parallel system to the public higher education sector.

One noteworthy development of private higher education in Malaysia is the establishment of offshore campuses of foreign universities. To date, five foreign universities have established offshore campuses in Malaysia, namely the University of Nottingham, Monash University, Curtin University, Swinburne University and DeMontfort University (Muhamad Jantan et al., 2006:19). These offshore campuses serve to enhance the credibility and academic credentials of private higher education in Malaysia. Another development of private higher education in Malaysia that merits attention is the role played by the ruling political parties as sponsors of some of the universities. The three main ethnic-based political parties in the ruling coalition government, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), had established private institutions of higher learning to cater to the educational needs of the communities whom they represented. The MCA, for instance, established the University of Tunku Abdul Rahman. The MIC established the TAFEE College and the Asian Institute of Medicine, Science and Technology (AIMST). The UMNO established the University of Tun Abdul Razak. Another political party, the Gerakan (the People's Movement Party), established the Wawasan Open University. While the Gerakan was initially established as a multiracial party, it had, over the years, evolved into a party that primarily served the interests of the Chinese community, especially in the Chinese dominated state of Penang. It is in the state of Penang that the Wawasan Open University is located. Undoubtedly, the establishment of these universities served to strengthen the political legitimacy of these ethnic-based parties.

While the rapid development of private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia is a response to the surging demand for higher education, it is also in tandem with the emergence of neo-liberal economic globalization and the global trend towards deregulation. As Currie (1998 cited in Lee, 2002:35) puts it, neo-liberal globalization calls for "the primacy of the market, privatization, and reduced role for the public sphere". Since the 1980s, the Malaysian government under Dr Mahathir Mohamed had embarked on the privatization of many public services (Jomo, 1995). Thus, the privatization of higher education in the 1990s was in line with the earlier policy of the government. On the other hand, Loh Kok Wah (2008:60) argues that the proliferation of private institutions of higher learning, which use English as the main medium of instruction in Malaysia, is the result of a series of policies leading towards cultural liberalization. Loh (2008:59-60) sees cultural liberalization as one of the offshoots of developmentalism that emerged in the midst of impressive economic growth in the 1990s. He notes that developmentalism has increasingly displaced ethnic political discourse and practice and has led to a more utilitarian stand on educational policy. Perhaps, this utilitarian stand could also be linked to the emergence of a new Malay middle class as a consequence of the implementation of the NEP (Abdul Rahman Embong, 2001). Most of the ruling UMNO political elites come from this new Malay middle class. Lee (1997:34) notes that these ruling political elites are now confident enough to liberalize some of the educational policies, including a wider use of English. The move by the government to allow the proliferation of private institutions of higher learning in order to provide wider access to higher education is also underpinned by political considerations. As previously mentioned, the implementation of an ethnic quota system of admission to public institutions of higher learning under the aegis of NEP has deprived many non-Malays of a place in public institutions of higher learning resulting in much discontent against the

government. The opposition political parties have consistently politicized this issue to the detriment of the ruling government. Thus, the wider access of higher education created by the private institutions of higher learning will certainly help to reduce the grievances of the non-Malays over the lack of higher education opportunities. Apart from the above reasons, the proliferation of private institutions of higher learning is also in line with the government's aspiration to make Malaysia the regional educational hub. This would not be possible if the government relies on public institutions of higher learning which teach in the national language. The language barrier will deter many foreign students from choosing Malaysia as a prospective destination to pursue higher education.

## **4. PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA**

### **4.1 STANDARDS AND QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

The quantitative development of institutions of higher learning in Malaysia has been impressive since the 1990s. However, quantitative development has to be accompanied by qualitative assurance. The question then is: How to maintain standards and quality of higher education while expanding higher education? The maintenance of standards and quality of higher education in Malaysia has been a major issue, especially among the private institutions of higher learning. This is because these institutions are in essence business entities. As business entities, the primary concern is profitability. The profitability of a private institution of higher learning relies largely on enrolment. The more students it could attract, the more profit it would be able to accrue. Thus, there is a tendency among the Malaysian private institutions of higher learning to compromise on standards and quality in order to attract more students.

Despite the establishment of LAN, there were cases where the standards and quality of graduates from the private institutions of higher learning had become an issue of great concern to the government. One case involved private medical colleges. As the medical course is extremely popular in Malaysia and given the fact that public institutions of higher learning could only provide limited places for the medical course due to the lack of capacity, only students who have obtained excellent results in public examinations are taken in. For the rest, they have to turn to the private medical colleges. It was reported that two private medical colleges were in hot water for producing housemen who were not up to the Health Ministry's standard. Alarming, the number of graduates produced by these medical colleges far outnumbered that produced by reputed public institutions of higher learning leading to the suspicion that they had compromised on standards and quality (*New Straits Times*, 19 January 2007).

Another problem that affects the standards and quality of graduates from the private institutions of higher learning is the lack of highly qualified academic staff. Out of the 8,928 academics in 2000, only 4 per cent had PhDs, 25.6 per cent had Master degrees, another 58.3 per cent had Bachelor degrees and 11.9 per cent did not even

have a first degree (Lee, 2004:55). The problem might be due to the reluctance of the providers of private institutions of learning to recruit academics with PhDs, as this will incur extra costs (Loh Kok Wah, 2005:6). Given such a poor pool of academics, it remains a matter of concern as to the standards and quality of students produced by the private institutions of higher learning. Also, academics in the private institutions of higher learning often teach more hours than those in the public institutions of higher learning and often teach courses in which they have very little training (Loh Kok Wah, 2005:6). More importantly, the lack of research and development activities in the private institutions of higher learning has greatly affected academic and faculty development (Muhamad Jantan et al., 2006:82). This is in stark contrast to the public institutions of higher learning where research and development is one of the core activities.

It is generally true that public institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, especially the older and more established public universities, tend to attract better students than the private institutions of higher learning. For most students, private institutions of higher learning have become their second choice. They will only opt for private institutions of higher learning if they fail to secure a place in their choice courses in the public institutions of higher learning. The entry requirements of private institutions of higher learning are generally lower than that of the public institutions of higher learning. However, increasing number of good SPM students are opting for the private institutions of higher learning because they do not want to go through two years of pre-university schooling. These students gain a year by going through one year of foundation course in the private institutions of higher learning before proceeding to a degree course. These students will certainly help to enhance the standards and quality of private institutions of higher learning. As an attempt to lure these students, some private institutions of higher learning even waive their fees for the first two years of their studies.

Although public institutions of higher learning are able to secure better quality students, due to the massification of higher education, the standard and quality of students in general have dropped considerably. As Khoo Boo Teik (2008:157-158) sees it, "It is true that, when compared to university-bound students up to the early 1970s, the present intakes, as a whole, are less capable – when evaluated in terms of their academic preparation, command of literary and numerate skills, aptitude for scholastic work, and class performance". Further complicating the matter is the government policy of using divergent entry qualifications, e.g. STPM and various university or college-administered matriculation programs as parallel selection criteria. Matriculation programs were established mainly for the Malays to ensure that there are enough qualified Malay students to fill up the number of places that have been reserved for them under the ethnic quota system implemented under the aegis of the NEP. Although the ethnic quota system was replaced by a merit-based system in 2002, the problem of securing a place in the public institutions of higher learning for non-Malay students, especially in critical areas such as engineering, pharmacy and medicine is still very difficult. Instead, the number of Malay students in public institutions of higher learning has continued to rise. Most of the Malays students are from the matriculations colleges. There was a general perception that the STPM examination is of a higher standard and better quality than the matriculation examination because students have to study an extra year as compared to the one-year matriculation program. Despite better academic performance, a large number of STPM applicants, most of them Chinese, have failed to obtain places in their

choice fields in the public institutions of higher learning whereas virtually every matriculation student is given a place in the university regardless of performance. Most of these Malay students are unable to compete with the STPM students. Their academic capability is found to be wanting (Isahak Haron, 2003). Some public institutions of higher learning have even lowered the passing grades in order to make up for the poor performances of the Malay students. However, it is wrong to say that there are no good Malay students in Malaysia. But the fact is that the government has over the years sponsored thousands of these students to study abroad, leaving the not so academically bright ones for the public institutions of higher learning (Khoo Boo Teik, 2008).

#### **4.2 A DUAL SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND ETHNIC DIVISIONS**

The rapid proliferation of private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia has created a dual system of higher education, which has an adverse impact on the process of nation building. There is a marked difference between the private and public institutions of higher learning in terms of medium of instruction. The former uses English as the main medium of instruction while the latter uses Malay as the main medium of instruction. Although the public institutions of higher learning have increasingly allowed more English to be used as a medium of instruction, the Malay language remains the official language and the language of wider communication. As language is the medium through which culture is transmitted (Burtonwood, 1986; Smolicz, 1981), the dual system of instruction will result in a different process of enculturation among the students and this would have an adverse affect on the process of nation building as the Malaysian educational policy aims at fostering a common process of enculturation through the use of a common language and a uniform school curriculum.

From another perspective, the dual system of instruction will also result in diglossia. Diglossia refers to a society that has divided up its domains into two distinct clusters, using linguistic differences, i.e. a high (H) status language and a low (L) status language, to demarcate the boundaries, and offering two clear identities to the members of the community (Spolsky, 1998). With diglossia, the H language is often associated with power and those who cannot master it are usually socially marginalized. In the case of the dual system of instruction in the Malaysian educational system, English as an international language is the H language while the Malay language, the local language, is the L language. The emergence of diglossia as a consequence of this dual system of instruction does not augur well for nation building. More importantly, it reminds us of the dualistic structure of the educational system during the colonial period, which has created so many socioeconomic problems resulting in intense ethnic animosity.

Furthermore, there is a clear ethnic divide between the private and public institutions of higher learning in Malaysia in terms of enrolment. More than 90 per cent of the students enrolled in the private institutions of higher learning are non-Malays (Lee, 1999b:81). This is in clear contrast to the public institutions of higher learning where enrolment is representative of the national demography (Lee Hwok Aun, 2006:215-216). There are several reasons contributing to the ethnic divide in the private institutions of higher learning. First, as mentioned previously, the implementation of preferential policy for admission into public institutions of higher learning favoring the Malay students had

resulted in many non-Malays students being unable to secure a place in their preferred courses in the public institutions of higher learning. These students had no other choice but to fall back on the private institutions of higher learning. Second, enrolment in the private institutions of higher learning incur high cost, which is about ten times that of the public institutions of higher learning (Chan Huan Chiang, 2004:13), and as such, only those who are rich, especially the Chinese, could afford to enroll their children into these institutions. Although loans are readily available from the National Higher Education Fund Board, the repayment of loans remains a burden that deters many to apply for such loans. Third, as the medium of instruction of the private institutions of higher learning is English, it becomes a barrier to Malays, especially those from rural areas who are weak in English.

The ethnic divide in the private institutions of higher learning is a cause of concern for the government. While the government has tried to bridge this ethnic divide by sponsoring Malay students to three private institutions of higher learning established by government corporations, namely the National Energy University, the Multimedia University and the Petronas Technology University (Lee, 1999b:81-82), this has not brought about a marked change in the overall ethnic composition. The problem of ethnic divide in the private institutions of higher learning has to be taken seriously by the government. The government needs to come out with more effective measures to alleviate this problem. The problem of ethnic divide in the private institutions of higher learning is compounded by the fact that it occurs within the dualistic system of instruction, which in itself is another problem that has to be attended to by the government.

#### **4.3 INTENSE COMPETITION AMONGST PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING**

The competition for students amongst the private institutions of higher learning has become intense as the number of private institutions of higher learning increased rapidly in the 1990s. Despite all this, the government has insisted that there is room for growth. Although the Secretary General of the Malaysian Association of Private Colleges (MAPCO) commented that there are too many institutions being allowed to set up (Ng, 2000, 28), the government has continued to allow the establishment of new private institutions of higher learning. As a result, some private institutions of higher learning are facing great difficulties in getting students. The former director of the Department of Private Education, Datuk Hassan Hashim, revealed that 200 private institutions of higher learning had been closed down in 2002 (Hassan Hashim, 2008:63). The closure of some private institutions of higher learning had put the students and staff in a limbo. Private institutions of higher learning that chose to continue with meager enrolment faced financial difficulties to offset the operating costs. It was reported in the press that in October 1999, an assistant registrar and 11 lecturers of the Adorna Institute of Technology in Jawi had lodged a police report against the institute for alleged non-payment of salaries totaling more than RM70,000 (Ng, 2000:30).

It is the bigger private institutions of learning affiliated to the MAPCO that have captured the major share of student enrolments. These institutions are in an entirely different league as compared to the smaller ones. Most of them have campuses that are well equipped and well staffed. Among the leading private institutions of higher learning affiliated to MAPCO are: the Asia Pacific University College of Information Technology, the Curtin University of Technology, the HELP University College, the International Medical University, the Inti College Malaysia, the KDU College, the Limkokwing University College of Creative Technology, the Monash University Malaysia, the Nilai International College, the Stamford College, the Sunway University College, the Swinburne University of Technology (Sarawak Campus), the Taylor's College, the University of Nottingham Malaysia and the University of Tun Abdul Razak (see Education Quarterly, 2006:136). Some of the university colleges affiliated to MAPCO like the Sunway University College and the Limkokwing University College have since being upgraded to full-fledged private universities. Limkokwing University even has the capacity to establish offshore campuses.

With increasing competition, private institutions of higher learning had resorted to marketing and advertisement strategies, some of them misleading, to outbid their competitors. One popular strategy is by shortening the time to obtain a degree. Another strategy is to offer "no sweat, bargain" programs whereby prospective applicants were given the impression that scholarships are there for the taking, or applicants could be accepted even if they had very poor qualifications. There were many cases whereby students lodged their reports against the private institutions of higher learning for not delivering on what was promised to them. On 19 December 1998, the Ministry of Education warned the private institutions of higher learning not to mislead students by making false claims (Ng, 2000:28-29).

#### **4.4 GRADUATE UNEMPLOYMENT**

The rise of mass higher education in Malaysia has led to the oversupply of graduates. As more fresh graduates are produced each year, it becomes increasingly difficult for these graduates to secure employment. In 1999, for instance, the number of fresh graduates seeking jobs had more than doubled (Ng, 2000:31). According to the figure given by the Human Resource Ministry, the number of unemployed graduates stood at 44,000. Most of them were Malay graduates who held degrees in Arts and Islamic Studies (Lee Kam Hing, 2004:102-103). The then Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamed attributed this problem to the poor grasp of English among the graduates though the types of degrees that they held were also an important factor. However, the lack of proficiency in English is undoubtedly the main stumbling block if one intends to seek employment in the private sector, which is the main provider of jobs in Malaysia. A report in the December 1991 issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* notes that in the private sector, the best jobs go to those who are fluent in English and these employees face less difficulties where promotions are concerned (Hafriza, 2006:22). In this regard, graduates of the private institutions of higher learning (most of them Chinese) tend to have the advantage over graduates of public institutions of higher learning (most of them Malays) as they have better proficiency in English. This disparity in job opportunities, which takes on ethnic lines, does not augur well for the process of nation building in

Malaysia. Another problem faced by Malay graduates seeking employment in the private sector is the employers' tendency to assume that Malay degree-holders are somewhat less talented than non-bumiputeras who have earned their degrees without favors from the government (Nelson, 2008:212).

Graduate unemployment has become a main concern for the government. Various measures were undertaken to alleviate this problem. In 1999, for instance, the Penang state government launched eGap graduate attachment program to help graduates who were facing difficulties securing jobs. This program aimed to match fresh graduates with prospective employers. Under this program, graduates worked on an attachment basis from six to twelve months in the manufacturing, trade and services sectors. Each graduate was paid an allowance of RM1,000 monthly (Ng, 2000:31).

In spite of the critical problem of graduate unemployment, efforts by the government to promote mass higher education continue unabated. It was reported that the government intends to double the number of students receiving higher education from 731,698 in 2005 to 1,330,000 by 2020 (*Nanyang Siang Pau*, 23 May 2008). This will further exacerbate the problem of graduate unemployment. The most worrying scenario is that future graduates will have to face the problem of certificate devaluation as a result of educational escalation whereby they have to settle for lowly paid jobs or even permanent unemployment. Thus, higher education could no longer guarantee lucrative income. However, this will not deter the expansion of higher education as more graduates will pursue post-graduate courses with the hope that with higher qualifications, their chances of being gainfully employed will be enhanced. All in all, this will lead to further educational escalation.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The Malaysian higher education has undergone massive expansion since the 1990s with the strong parallel development of public and private higher education. In 2005, there were 20 public universities, 21 polytechnics and 37 community colleges spread across the country serving as the providers of public higher education. On the other hand, there were 11 private universities, 11 private university colleges, 5 foreign university offshore campuses and 532 private colleges catering to the private higher education sector. The 300,000-strong student population in 1995 has grown to 550,000 in 2000 (Malaysia, 2001). In 2005, the total number of students stood at 731,698 (Malaysia, 2006:245). This transformation from elitist higher education to mass higher education in Malaysia was driven by a combination of internal and external factors. But this massive expansive of higher education has created a host of problems. These problems have to be addressed if mass higher education is to serve a more meaning and enduring purpose in terms of national development and nation building. The Malaysian government is concerned over the standards and quality of higher education. The recent transformation of LAN to Malaysian Quality Assurance (MQA) has clearly addressed this concern. MQA not only monitors the standards and quality of the private institutions of higher learning but also the public institutions of higher learning. The MQA has also come out with its own ranking of public institutions of higher learning. This will certainly spur more public institutions of higher learning to improve their standards and quality in order to increase their competitiveness.

In another move, the government has recently upgraded four public universities, namely the University of Malaya, the University of Science Malaysia, the National University of Malaysia and the Putra University of Malaysia, to the status of research universities. In contrast to other teaching universities, the research universities were provided with additional funds for research and development. It was reported that RM3.8 billion was allocated for this purpose (*New Sunday Times*, 9 September 2008). The government has also elevated the University of Science Malaysia to the status of an apex university with the aim to transform the university to a reputed global university. It appears that within the ambit of mass higher education, there was a concerted effort by the government to maintain elitist higher education among some public institutions of higher learning. This is certainly a wise move as mass higher education has generally resulted in declining standards and quality of higher education in Malaysia. This is akin to moving up the supply chain and creating top quality institutions of higher learning.

The most phenomenal growth of higher education in Malaysia is private higher education. It has often being argued that a central theme of privatization is the crucial role of competitive markets as the most effective means to improve quality and efficiency. But the manner in which some private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia have attempted to lure students by making false claims has deviated from the basic tenet of market competition. On the other hand, the closure of smaller private institutions of higher learning is certainly due to the lack of competitiveness. While market demand and competitive edge will decide the future of private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, there is also a need on the part of the government to monitor more closely the development of these institutions to maintain a desirable level

of academic standards and quality. In this regard, the MQA must play a more stringent role. Providers of private higher education must also be made aware of the need to improve the quality of academics as well as to increase research and development activities albeit all these will incur more operating costs. It is important that institutions of higher learning should not be solely run as business-like entities on a strictly cost-benefit basis. A certain amount of funding needs to be channeled to research and development activities in order to promote the much needed academic culture.

Meanwhile, there is a strong element of internationalization that underpins the rise of mass higher education in Malaysia. This is certainly a positive development, which will help to fulfill the government's aspiration to make Malaysia the regional educational hub. The number of foreign students has increased markedly both in the public and private institutions of higher learning. However, the private institutions of higher learning are in a better position to attract the foreign students as their medium of instruction is English. In 2005, for instance, the number of foreign students in private institutions of higher learning, which stood at 33,903, far outnumbered that of the public institutions of higher learning, which only managed to enroll 6,622 foreign students (Kementerian Pendidikan Tinggi Malaysia, 2006). A large majority of these foreign students come from Indonesia, China and the Middle East. Internationalization of higher education has become a global phenomenon. Many countries are attempting to attract more foreign students. Some countries in Asia and the Middle East are coming on strong. For instance, the ongoing construction of the Dubai International Academic City has attracted the interest of leading universities in the West to set up offshore campuses (see *Newsweek*, 18-25 August 2008). Given this development, Malaysia has to put in more efforts or risk losing out to other competitors. In this regard, more offshore campuses of foreign universities of some repute should be established in order to attract the foreign students. There must also be a concerted effort to improve the international ranking (for example, Times Higher Education Supplement ranking of the world's leading universities) of the public institutions of higher learning. This will help to enhance their credentials and reputation and thus become attractive destinations for foreign students, especially those from the West.

While there is certainly a concerted effort by the Malaysian government to meet the surging demand for higher education in order to spur the economic development of the country, the government has, nonetheless, overlooked the impact brought about by the establishment of private institutions of higher learning on the process of nation building. As Malaysia is a plural society comprises different ethnic groups, education has been used a main instrument to achieve national integration. One of the main features of Malaysia's educational policy is the imposition of common language, the Malay language, which is the national language, as the language of integration. However, the proliferation of private institutions of higher learning teaching in English has made the national language as a language of integration dysfunctional. Although students of the private institutions of higher learning are required to learn the national language as a subject as well as to learn Moral Education (for non-Malay students) and Malaysian Studies through the national language, it is obvious that the overall culture of the private institutions of higher learning is immersed in an English-speaking environment. Such a culture is in sharp contrast to the public institutions of higher learning, which are dominated by a Malay-speaking environment. The co-existence of two parallel systems

of higher education imbued with different social and cultural milieu would not serve the nation building purpose of the country. Alarming, this parallel system is also severely divided along ethnic lines.

The rapid proliferation of institutions of higher learning has led to “educational inflation” (to quote a term used by Dore, 1976) in Malaysia. A direct consequence of educational inflation is graduate unemployment. The problem of graduate unemployment is most serious among graduates of public institutions of higher learning, especially Malay graduates, who lack proficiency in English to meet the requirement of the private sector. Also, most of these graduates hold degrees that are not well sought after by the private sector. The only avenue for them is the public sector. In contrast to graduates of public institutions of higher learning, graduates of private institutions of higher learning have the competitive edge as they are more fluent in English. As most of the graduates of private institutions of higher learning are Chinese, this has created a situation whereby disparity in job opportunities has interwoven with ethnic overtones. This has an adverse impact as far as inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia are concerned. The problem of graduate unemployment is inevitable with the rise of mass higher education as more graduates are produced each year resulting in the intense competition for jobs. Invariably, most people tend to link the pursuit of higher education as a form of investment that will bring about a high rate of return to individuals who received extended study. However, in the era mass higher education, it is imperative that such a mindset has to change in order to sustain the long-term development of mass higher education. Higher education should also be regarded as a pursuit to fulfill personal development related to the quest for knowledge.

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