

Massification of Higher Education in Malaysia: Managing Institutional Equity and Diversity

Muhammad Muftahu^{1*}, Devisakti Annmali², Hu Xiaoling³

^{1 2 3}National Higher Education Research Institute (IPPTN), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM),
No. 10, Persiaran Bukit Jambul, 11900 Bayan Lepas, Penang, Malaysia

muftahu@usm.my

devisakti@usm.my

huxiaoling@student.usm.my

*Corresponding author

<https://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v19i2.22234>

Received: 2 August 2021

Accepted: 1 April 2023

Date Published Online: 30 April 2023

Published: 30 April 2023

Abstract: In the last few decades, the world has witnessed a rapid increase in the number of students in higher education institutions, leading to the massification of higher education. This paper investigates how the massification of higher education has affected institutional diversity and equity in Malaysia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with top management and mid-level managerial staff in one of the top research universities in Malaysia. The findings showed that the massification of higher education in Malaysia has implications for students' equity and diversity. The analysis illustrates that this higher education institution in Malaysia has taken steps to keep up with massification, but barriers still exist that hinder students in terms of access to higher education. Although there was diversity among the students in the institution, access to higher education for underprivileged students' needs special attention due to the inequality of their position in society. This study contributes to meaningful ways of looking at the massification of higher education in relation to diversity and equity from an institutional perspective.

Keywords: Massification, higher education, Malaysia, diversity, equity

1. Introduction

Higher education is one of the main drivers that contribute to the social and economic development of nations. Developing countries have recognised the importance of improving higher education to meet the demands and requirements of today's global labour market. According to Chan (2016), many higher education institutions have gone through major transformations such as reinventing curriculums and improving pedagogies and assessment policies to ensure that their students are equipped with the knowledge, skills and competencies they need in order to contribute to the global economy (Kassim, et al. 2020; Muftahu, & Jamil (2021).

The massification of higher education has brought significant opportunities for many people. The expansion of higher education paves the way for more flexibility for students in pursuing their studies at institutions, and the massification of higher education also helps in addressing issues with regard to increasing demand (Chan & Lin, 2015).

Globalisation has brought benefits as well as challenges to higher education systems. It has pushed higher education systems and institutions to take the initiative in making improvements to contribute to

social and economic progress. For example, in Malaysia the government is continuously creating initiatives to address the needs of the higher education sector through progressive policies and practices. The quality of higher education in Malaysia has improved because of the implementation of progressive regulations (Shariffuddin et al., 2017) that have helped students in gaining skills and knowledge.

This study explores important factors related to the massification of higher education in Malaysia. By examining the implications of higher education massification on equity and diversity, this research examines the challenges and also the opportunities that come with the implementation of policy and practices related to the massification of higher education at the institutional level. We find that the massification of Malaysian higher education is important in determining how the country's higher education system can be improved to meet the needs and demands of the growing global labour market.

Higher Education in Malaysia

Higher education in Malaysia began in 1959 with the establishment of an autonomous campus of the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, with 322 students (Khuo, 2005). By 1962, when the autonomous campus became the University of Malaya, 1,341 students were enrolled (Abdu l1971). The University of Malaya was the only higher education institution in Malaysia until 1969, and by that time there were 6,672 students enrolled. From a single university in 1969, higher education in Malaysia has witnessed a gradual expansion of public universities as well as a rapid mushrooming of private higher education institutions following the enactment of the Private Higher Educational Institutional Act 1996 (Act 555). Currently there are 20 public universities, 36 public polytechnics, 99 public community colleges, 48 private universities, 10 international branch campuses, 33 private university colleges and 345 private colleges.

In terms of enrolment, the gross enrolment ratio for tertiary education (GERTE) in Malaysia in 1980 was only 4 percent (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2020). GERTE is defined as encompassing formal post-secondary education that includes higher education, TVET and skills training. Malaysia's GERTE in 1995 was 11 percent, but it jumped to 22 percent in 1998 following the legalisation of private higher education institutions in 1996. By the turn of the millennium, the Malaysian higher education system had entered a massification phase where GERTE surpassed 30 percent. Malaysia achieved GERTE of 45 percent in 2018 with more than 1.3 million students enrolled. In 2019 a total of 567,625 students were enrolled in public universities, 96,362 in polytechnics, 26,118 in community colleges, 328,978 in private universities, 88,530 in university colleges, 187,733 in colleges and 28,103 in international branch campuses (MOE, 2020).

2. Literature Review

2.1 An Overview of the Massification of Higher Education

The massification of higher education is related to the large-scale enrolment of students into a national education system (Trow, 2006). It emphasises the roles of higher education in transforming skills and preparing students to undertake different technical and economic elite roles (Trow, 2006). However, challenges in the massification of higher education can relate to the over-issuance of diploma qualifications and the stagnation of job opportunities, leading to the downgrading of education and unemployment among graduates (Noui, 2020). This has not stopped students from seeking to enter higher education, because the massification of higher education has also brought benefits in terms of changing the institutional landscape and students' enrollment profiles. For example, there have been increasing numbers of female students, and also a more diversified mix in terms of the social and geographic origins of students in higher education (Noui, 2020). These new trends in higher education are direct effects of massification, and in turn they create a path for the burgeoning numbers of public and private higher education institutions.

The massification of higher education is one of many strategies that governments in developing countries deem necessary and effective in improving their higher education (Chan & Lin, 2015). Massification is seen as an initiative to keep in pace with the intense global competition and pressure within the international higher education system. However, the significant demands and pressure on

higher education in developing a nation's human resources to compete at the global level means that the massification of higher education is challenging, particularly in terms of budgets (Dunrong, 2015).

There are four models for the massification of higher education in relation to financing, namely the American Model, the Western European Model, the Southeast Asian Model and the Latin American Model. Malaysia has adopted two of these, the Southeast Asian and Latin American Models, focussing on the country's private sector to expand higher education by receiving funding from tuition fees and social fund-raising (Boon, 2014).

2.2 Equity in higher education

In many countries there are people who are unable to pursue higher education, especially from disadvantaged and marginalised groups in society. Equal access to higher education has become one of the main focuses in the reformation of higher education systems and frameworks. However, as highlighted by Ilie and Rose (2016), equal access to higher education is difficult to achieve, considering the financial and economic constraints that hinder people from enrolling in higher education institutions. The recent expansions and reformation of higher education in some countries have tried to overcome barriers hindering low income and disadvantaged classes from accessing institutions. Governments and international bodies such as UNESCO have proposed a number of frameworks and designs for measures and interventions to increase the accessibility of higher education to all people with a focus on disadvantaged and marginalised groups.

Also, in developing countries including Malaysia, unequal access to higher education remains one of the major challenges in the country (Muhammad, 2022). However, this issue is being addressed through the government's efforts, and also via collaboration with international agencies with an interest in higher education.

2.3 Diversity in Higher Education

Diversity refers to specific characteristics of higher education institutions in terms of their size, legal foundations, sector of control (state or private sector), disciplinary programmes, degree level, services, procedural differences in teaching or research, climate and values, and differences in the student body including age, sex and ethnic origins (Birnbaum, 1983). It can be related to reputational diversity, differences in status or prestige, and may also include the mission, social purposes or roles of institutions. Diversity is not a new concept in the context of higher education, and it intertwines closely with culture (Guo & Jamal, 2007).

Achieving diversity can be challenging for higher education institutions. It raises issues of the responsibility of higher learning institutions to meet the expectations and needs of diverse students from different races, cultures and religions and with different beliefs, attitudes, and socioeconomic status, which may all affect teaching and learning approaches. However, a healthy approach to diversity allows all students, irrespective of their different backgrounds, to receive equal benefits from institutions. It also creates an increase in learning opportunities for students, thereby subsequently increasing their competitiveness. In Asian countries, governments have been focussing on boosting economic growth through higher education since it brings income (Buenestado-Fernandez et al., 2019), and increased diversity brings more students from ethnic minorities in society, particularly from disadvantaged and marginalised groups.

3. Methodology

The methodological background to this study constitutes the massification of higher education in Malaysia in relation to the equality, equity and diversity of institutional development, and the research framework falls within the critical and interpretive perspective (Ball, 1990; Bowe, 1992; Gala, 2001; Tronya, 1994a, 1994b; Ozga, 1987). This approach was chosen to allow a critical and holistic view of the situation related to the issue of the massification of higher education.

As a social science study, the research adopted a qualitative case-study approach, which allows researchers to engage in an in-depth enquiry and investigation of social situations, events or interactions (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2004; Mullen, 2005), including how people understand values and

alignments (Merriam, 1998; Silverman, 2004). Case studies may fall into three categories, namely description, explanation, and evaluation; here the descriptive case study is the most suitable approach, since it is suitable for depicting and portraying a phenomenon, usually employing thick descriptions. In contrast, explanation case studies elucidate phenomena by looking for patterns within a case or across cases, while evaluative case studies seek to make judgements about phenomenon. Neither of those approaches are applicable here.

3.1 Interviews

Interviews are face-to-face, interpersonal question and answer sessions facilitated and controlled by the interviewer (Occoro, 2000). The interview session is usually conducted through oral means, wherein questions are asked directly by the interviewer and answers are offered verbally by the interviewee. Researchers are acknowledged as active participants in the research process, rather than as passive observers or scribes (Hertz, 1996). The interviewer may record responses in writing, audiotape them on a recorder or both, depending on the researcher's disposition at the time of the interview (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). Interviews are usually conducted once, although there is often the possibility that a second round of interviews may be conducted depending on the richness and quality of the first round.

The interview questions in this study were formulated from a review of the literature and the data collected from different studies. The reliability of the instrument was established based on selected literature to ensure the degree of consistency in collecting data based on the themes emerging from the study. The interview questions were sent to experts for input and suggestions for the improvement of the instruments and data collection procedure.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were selected from Malaysian higher education institutions. Although there is no standard sample size for qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), a minimum of five samples was deemed adequate to support data collection (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) due to the huge amounts of data and the complex technicalities that are involved in qualitative research.

Considering the nature of the research, the participants were selected through purposive sampling, a common method that brings together research participants who share the same criteria and fulfill the requirements for a particular research situation and questions (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research enhances the ability of the researcher to make comprehensive selections of appropriate participants whose intellectual disposition and proximity to the site of the research topic will be best suited to give analytical responses to the interview questions (Cresswell, 2003). The selected participants in this study were recruited at the discretion of the higher education institution, involving top and mid-management level staff at the university.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

The study employed interviews as the method of primary data collection, and secondary data was also collected from the review of materials related to the policy and implementation of the massification of higher education in Malaysia. All the interviews were conducted in English, and the fieldwork took place from January to March 2021 in the chosen universities. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

In this study, as well as the primary data, secondary data was collected from selected documents on the policy, implementation procedures and other aspects related to the massification of higher education in Malaysia. Another major method for data analysis was thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns that emerge as themes from the data organisation and description (Boyatzzi, 1998) during the analysis of the documents.

4. Findings

From the data analysed, four themes were generated related to the focus of this paper. Theme 1 relates to the massification of higher education for inclusivity, Theme 2 concerns equity of access to higher education, Theme 3 relates to diversity in higher education, and Theme 4 relates to barriers to access to higher education.

7.1 Theme 1: Massification of higher education for inclusivity

Policy related to the massification of higher education in Malaysia has been put in place for a number of reasons. According to Maringe and Sing (2014) the massification of higher education is here to stay, and the data from this study suggests that there are merits to this statement given that student enrolment continues to grow. According to one of the participants, the reason for massification is inclusivity. There have been changes in the profile of students enrolling in higher education, and therefore massification should be about providing access to higher education for all. In this analysis, higher education institutions need to be more open to enrolment of students from different backgrounds:

I think it's about inclusivity. We have to acknowledge that the profile of our students will change and we need to provide opportunities for everybody to gain access to higher education. That's the reason why lifelong learning is an agenda, so more people will benefit and also to make sure universities are not bordered ... borders. Have to open up to have everyone to have access to knowledge. (I/01)

I think personally ... Malaysia, since even from independence day education has become an important part of the agenda ... the country agenda. ... all citizens become more literate, get better education. I think the government has put efforts into ensuring the quality, people in the country get better education ... increase their employability ... opportunity to gain a better life. This is one of the main points why Malaysia's government would like to expand more in providing more education. (I/05)

One of the participants claimed that massification will contribute towards the development of higher education in Malaysia in the future:

I don't think so. Not yet. It is more about the future ... in the past there is a division between education, for that is ... life-long learners and education for normal people after post high school. It's just beginning. We have not ... but not yet out. (I/01)

Another participant stated that the massification of higher education will provide more job opportunities for local students and even for international lecturers. The massification of higher education will help to fulfil the demands of students in Malaysia:

It opens the job opportunities ... not only international students but also for international lecturers. Education is a business and we have high demand, and we don't have enough higher education to accept all these students. It's income generation. (I/04)

7.2 Theme 2: Equity of access to higher education

Technological advancement

Access to higher education can support up-skilling and re-skilling of the human resources in the country, as demanded by the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The current global trends are technology-oriented and need special up-to-date knowledge and skills to stay relevant to industrial and economic demands, as suggested by one of the participants:

With the disruption of the fourth industrial revolution and so on, I think people need to re-tool and re-skill. Therefore, they need to have access to higher education. We as a university must allow them to have access. (I/01)

Advocate of knowledge

Academics in higher education institutions are seen as a source of knowledge. The massification of higher education will enrich the sharing of this knowledge through equal access, and access should be easy for everyone. This means that society must be able to gain access to higher education, so that people can improve their knowledge with flexibility and at their own convenience. As stated by one of the participants, if access is made difficult, it may be perceived that the university is not doing enough for society as an agent of change:

After 2020 we know that we can perform in a certain ways, but we are not actually addressing it. We need the numbers. But also in terms of our academics ... the ways in which we distribute knowledge. The term they used in one of the articles is, "We should be advocates of knowledge," in the sense that we don't advocate us. If we see ourselves as the ... we are the source of ... we have all the knowledge. Obviously access should be given. Access should not be at our convenience, but at ours and the users' convenience. This is another thing we need to look at. That's why we should ask ourselves, what is our offering, and in what form do we offer our process? We have the process ... they need to come here for our convenience. Then we are not doing enough to change society. (I/02)

Intervention according to special needs

Intervention for easy access to higher education institutions should be reflected in the delivery of teaching and learning programmes – for example, using local languages like Malay to cater for the needs of students who may not be proficient in English. A participant suggested that although their university has a very ambitious mission as a 'Research University', this should not hinder it in providing what is need to support students in learning:

They need degrees, but also some kind of intervention. We have to use Malay in that sense ... we know that English will be an issue ... or use the local language ... their own dialect ... Orang Asli dialect. Even though we are a research university, some people might not like it. Why do we want to do all that? We know that English will be used, but local dialect – our country needs this. We have to be really open. We need to work for their convenience. Some might ask, we are a research university, so why do we need that? We have to work on that. I'm keen to oversee it. Just because we have micro credentials doesn't mean we have overcome it. The course structure should bring income to us and shouldn't hinder people from accessing it. If we can do this, then we can clearly tell that we are and advocate of knowledge, why we set up as a research university, we can claim that. We are not to be stopped by our status as a research university. (I/02)

Policies for access to higher education

The Malaysian government has created many policies and initiatives to support the massification of higher education. One example is by subsidising study fees to create opportunities and support students to enter higher education from foundation programmes to postgraduate level. A participant noted that the status of their university meant that it had been given more autonomy to manage its own intake of students, which indirectly allowed it to be creative in providing access to the university according to its own policies:

For the public sector, of course they are subsidised by the government. The government is trying to give opportunities to Malaysian to further study, from the foundation to higher level ... postgraduate level. That's why under the Ministries there are lots of policies. But our focus, of course, is under public universities. We follow whatever policy is given by the government. We are sometimes trying to come up with our own policy, especially when we get special status. Then the Ministry rewarded us and wanted this university to handle our own intake. We are the one and only in Malaysia. (I/04)

Fee discounts

At university level some strategies may be applied to bring in students from different groups, including disadvantaged or less privileged groups. One of these strategies involves giving discount on university fees:

School fees, yes ... we can give them a discount ... entry is a bit difficult as we don't want to have double standards and we want them to be able to come in. So ... what we do is we encourage programmes for less competitive nature kinds of student ... like professional bodies. We encourage, have lower intake requirements. They have the history of aiming for the best. When we achieve status we want the best that can come in. We have changed that. It's not fair, as we, our vision as the best is to empower the bottom billion. When we don't allow – and that's the point. We gradually changed it over the years. Basically, we reduced the entry requirement so we can open the net bigger. We can select. We can have a quota system. That's a better strategy ... yes. Strategy ... yes ... we have been employing it for the past 3 to 4 years. (I/01)

One of the interviewees stressed that discounts are given for tuition fees for special students from a sporting background, for senior citizens and for people from particular cultural backgrounds:

No, discounts ... at the moment we have tuition fee discounts for sports background ... senior citizens and cultural background ... for the artists. Culture focus on people from the arts background for the School of Arts. (I/04)

Don't see much difference. The majority are Malay, Chinese and Indian. Same figures or percentages based on nationality. No huge gap. (I/05)

Minority or less privileged groups

The indigenous people, known as *Orang Asli*, are considered as a minority. Their enrolment in higher education has only seen a slight increase, but that must change. More effort needs to be made to bring this group of students into higher education. One of the participant's responses illustrates this:

They are still considered a minority. Maybe a slight increase, but not that apparent. We still need to work harder to bring them in. (I/01)

7.3 Theme 3: Diversity in higher education

Student Profile

There has been an increase in terms of the diversity of students enrolled in universities compared to before. For example, in the past there were distance education programmes for adult learners with work experience, but now the profile of students in the university has changed to involve more younger students. The fourth industrial revolution has brought advancements in technology which attract the younger generation to access higher education:

We used to feel that only life-long learners ... distance education ... we used to feel that people of senior age, after they have worked they feel that they need to come back to study. That used to be the norm. But now in general now the student profile is getting younger, and there is a definitely a change. (I/01)

Students coming fresh from high school into undergraduate programmes, especially from the indigenous community or *Orang Asli*, are not that apparent. These people are still seen as a minority, and there has not been a significant increase in their enrolment into higher education. Higher education institutions need to put more effort towards bringing this group of students into undergraduate programmes:

The demands of industry are high, requiring more manpower and at the same time more research grants from the government. This university gives additional opportunities to students from diverse backgrounds, including students with STPM and matriculation backgrounds alongside students from other academic backgrounds:

Even the demands of industry are high ... then research and grants are provided by government. Then ... so the word is changing ... the diversity of this university is to give opportunities to Malaysian students who are from STPM and matriculation, to get experience from the rest of the students who have different academic backgrounds. (I/04)

Intake Channels

To increase diversity among students, this university introduced various special intake channels. There is an international intake for international students, and Class 1 intake for local students. In addition, there are alternative channels for senior citizens and students from different cultural or sporting backgrounds, as well as an offshore programme. These initiatives have introduced more diversity among the students enrolling into the university:

In this university we have special intakes. Rather than UPU intake ... we also have an international intake, Class 1 ... introduced last year ... Class 1 is the latest one. The students pay the full fees in their first year, but they study as normal with the other students. Not subsidised by the government. The difference is that they pay the full fees. We also have alternative channels for senior citizens, different cultural backgrounds, sports backgrounds. We also have an offshore programme. A second channel for those with work experience with minimum academic requirements. We introduced these to get more diversity in terms of the admission of students. (I/04)

Diversity is being improved at this university campus, but the majority of international students are from particular geographical areas only. The university still does not have significant numbers of international students from the rest of the world. Most of them come to the university to study for a short period in international student exchange programmes. Most of the existing international students are from Middle Eastern and African countries; meanwhile, local students consist of a diverse mix from most of the main races in Malaysia, including the *Orang Asli*:

Yes ... depending on where the student comes from? Diversity is there ... we can see so many students from different backgrounds on the campus. But we can see the majority is from certain areas only. We want a more diverse combination, all countries available, but of course not all international students want to pursue full time studies in Malaysia, but rather come on a short-term basis, like some on exchange programmes. We still have these, but we can't get hold of full-time students or Bachelor's degrees or Master's programmes, not as many as from Middle Eastern, African countries like what we have now. If we narrow down the area for the local students, we have all races in this university. In this university, for example, we have Malay, Chinese, Indian and all native races, as compared to other university that focus more on Bumiputera races. Diversity is there in this university. (I/05)

Various academic backgrounds

The university has introduced diversity among the students by opening their enrolment to undergraduate students from different academic backgrounds. Since this university has full autonomy, they are able to increase diversity by this method. The diversity policy in this university is still in place, and other universities have started to follow this university's footsteps:

Starting from 2009, we introduced diversity ... we opened to all academic backgrounds at further degree programme level. They argue that, JPT/KPT argue, but we fight that because we have the autonomy. In 2009 we were the only university to introduce diversity. Lots of academic backgrounds, equivalent to STPM and matriculation. Before 2009, everything, intake was under centralised UPU. For undergraduates. After 2009 we gained autonomy, we introduced diversity.

At that time we received lots of applications. Rather than STPM and matriculation we receive various academic backgrounds. Until now, we still remain our policy in this university until now.... and we can see some universities are following us, actually. (I/04)

7.4 Theme 4: Barriers to access to higher education

Quota

Quotas form one of the barriers to students getting access to higher education. Some programmes require labs or studio space, which impose limitations on student intake:

Yes, of course we can, based on quotas given by the school on the spot. I like to emphasise we can accept applications at any time and any level, but the barrier is there due to quotas. How many students per programme that the school can accept. Some programmes require a studio base or a lab base, so they can take students with limitations. (I/05)

Even though there has been an increase in enrolment numbers, only limited numbers of students can enter higher education. The Ministry has set a limitation or quota in terms of student intake. Students from various academic background may enrol, but with limitations:

The number of applications increased, but we have limited seats limited quota. The policy set up by the Ministry is to have 10% intake. We can take various academic backgrounds, but limited to 10% intake. (I/04)

Even though there are different intakes, this does not affect the quota for student intake. It does not affect the quota provided by the Ministry for public mainstream students. If any individual schools are able to take in more students, they may do so:

Depends on the capacity of the schools. If schools can take more, then they can. (I/04)

Entry Requirements

Entry requirements are a barrier for students getting access to higher education. This includes English language ability, CGPA and interviews. Students' applications need to demonstrate that they have the required academic background and also meet the minimum requirements:

Basically, it varies. So many barriers to get more requirements like English, CGPA, even interviews for programmes, so many. Fair enough, the main thing that we look into is that their academic background meets minimum requirements, we have no issues with accepting their applications, for example on programmes which can accept them directly without interview. (I/05)

Entry requirements into any programme are already set by the university. If any school or centre removes the basic entry requirements, such as English, this can cause trouble for the university. This is because students from all kind of background will apply:

To be frank, there are programmes that do not require English when students register – for example, one of the institutes does not use English as requirement, and students from all sorts of academic background want to join the institute. It started when the School of Arts also removed English requirements, and all kinds of background came. This is what happens when we remove English as a requirement. Of course, schools wants better and higher quality students to produce theses. If they don't understand English, how can they communicate with students? We need to produce theses in English or Malay, and not their native language. (I/05)

Availability of lecturers

Research-mode programmes require supervisors. Students need to work under a supervisor to complete their thesis. Even if students meet all the entry requirements, they will not offered a place if

a suitable supervisor is not available. If they are offered a place, it would only be a waste of their time and money:

Other than that is in terms of research mode, based on the availability of supervisors. Even though a student meets all the requirements, we can't offer a place if a supervisor is not available. Fair enough, how we can offer a place when someone can't supervise them? This would jeopardise their time and fees. Not fair for students. (I/05)

8. Discussions and Conclusions

As we examine the extent of the expansion and massification of higher education in Malaysia, four key themes have emerged. These are: Theme 1, the massification of higher education for inclusivity; Theme 2, equity of access to higher education; Theme 3, diversity in higher education; and Theme 4, barriers against access to higher education.

The study has shown that policies related to the massification of higher education have had a huge impact in improving access for students. Although all public universities have received autonomous status, which includes the ability to select students according to their own criteria, nonetheless the numbers of students continue to be capped by quotas set by the Ministry. Furthermore, despite the fact that student numbers are continuing to increase, the intake of students from different academic backgrounds is still limited by quotas. Therefore, quotas of student numbers can be seen as a hindrance to students getting access to higher education. Finding access pathways for students from disadvantaged socio-economic groups is considered crucial for promoting equitable access to opportunities for higher education, since social group disparities in accessing different disciplines have far-reaching implications for the achievement of inter-generational equity.

Entry requirements to programmes can also be a barrier to students in getting access to higher education. For example, minimum entry requirements almost exclusively centre on academic performance in examinations. Another hindrance is the barriers faced by research students due to the unavailability of suitable supervisors for their postgraduate studies.

The findings from the study also show that higher education is moving towards achieving diversity. The findings suggest that the profile of student enrolment has changed over the years. The advancement of technology has brought more diversity in term of the student profile. The demands of industry for more diverse human resources with up-to-date knowledge and skills increase the demands on student enrolment into higher education. However, minority groups including the Orang Asli need to be given priority. Diversity among the student body is created through different intake channels that provide learning opportunities for people with different academic and work experience. In order to offer opportunities to disadvantaged groups, discounts may be given in their course fees. This opens up opportunities for more diverse groups of students in universities, since fee support is vital to assist and support underprivileged students to complete their studies. The results also suggest that student access into higher education may be further expanded by the advancement of technology. Using new technology, students can access courses from anywhere (Devisakti, & Muftahu 2022a; Devisakti, & Muftahu 2022b). Higher education institutions must be advocates for the knowledge that they provide to students. Students from different groups and backgrounds must not experience difficulty in gaining knowledge, and higher education must be prepared to provide for them; they must be able to obtain knowledge at their own convenience. There is a need for intervention here, to allow higher education institutions to bring in more students. Academics and higher education institutions need to be open to making access for students easier; this is even more important because of the current disruption to teaching and learning resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic in different parts of the world (Muhammad, 2020; Mathew, & Chung, 2020; Sim, et al (2021).

Finally, every student must have equal access to opportunities to enrol into higher education. As noted by Tawney (1964, p. 102–103), “equality of opportunity depends not simply on the removal of disabilities but also creation of abilities”. We argue that all the stakeholders in higher education must be aware of the growing student diversity and the academic challenges faced by this diverse student community. Disadvantaged students need more support during their academic journey in order to traverse the widening gap between their entry and exit points. With the point of entry being ‘relaxed’ due to reservation policies and the relaxation of admission criteria, achieving the indicators of academic

success at the point of exit may require significant additional academic support for disadvantaged students.

In conclusion, as higher education institutions continue to expand access by admitting more students than ever before, it is imperative for institutions not to lose sight of the increasing diversity of the student body, and to put in place institutional structures and processes to ensure and promote equity, diversity and inclusivity. It is equally important for institutions to ensure that as access is being expanded, this does not compromise quality and excellence in providing a transformative educational experience for all students. Achieving this balancing act in the era of massification is of critical importance in ensuring that expansion translates into equitable access for students from all walks of life, while also upholding standards of quality and excellence.

9. Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) (304/CIPPTN/6315429).

10. References

- Abdul Majid, I. (1971). *Report of the Committee Appointed by the National Operations Council to Study Campus Life of Students of the University of Malaya*. Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Cetak Kerajaan.
- Bai, L. M. 2006. "Graduate Unemployment: Dilemmas and Challenges in China's Move to Mass Higher Education." *The China Quarterly* 185: 128–144.
- Ball, S, J. (1990). *Politics and policy making in education*. London, Routledge
- Birnbaum, R. (1983). *Maintaining diversity in higher education*. Jossey-Bass, Inc., 433 California St., San Francisco, CA 94104.
- Boon, T. L. (2014). *Institutional Factors that Contribute to Educational Quality at a Private Higher Education in Malaysia*. PhD Thesis, University of Malaya.
- Bowe, R. (1992). *Reforming Education And Changing Schools: Case Studies In Policy Sociology* Author: Richard Bowe, Publisher: RoutledgePag
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Buenestado-Fernández, M., Álvarez-Castillo, J. L., González-González, H., Espino-Díaz, L. (2019). Evaluating the institutionalisation of diversity outreach in top universities worldwide. *PLoS ONE* 14(7): e0219525. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0219525>
- Chan, R. (2016). Understanding the purpose of higher education: An analysis of the economic and social benefits for completing a college degree. *J. of Educ. Policy, Planning and Admin.*, 6(40), 1-40.
- Chan, S. J. & Lin, L. W. (2015). Massification of Higher Education in Taiwan: Shifting Pressure from Admission to Employment. *Higher Educ. Policy*, 28, 17-33.
- Clancy, P. and Goastellec, G. (2007) Exploring Access and Equity in Higher Education: Policy and Performance in a Comparative Perspective. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 61(2): 136– 154.
- Clancy, P., Eggins, H., Goastellec, G., Guri-Rosenblit, S., Nguyen P. N. & Yizengaw, T. (2007). *Comparative Perspectives on Access and Equity*. An internal paper, Fulbright New Century Scholars Program.
- Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publicationz
- Devisakti, A., & Muftahu, M. (2022a). Digitalization in higher education: does personal innovativeness matter in digital learning?. *Interactive Technology and Smart Education*, (ahead-of-print).

- Devisakti, A., & Muftahu, M. (2022b). Does online assessments support of students in higher education? The moderating role of IT experience. *The International Journal of Information and Learning Technology*, (ahead-of-print).
- Dunrong, B. 2015. *Shifting Demographics in Higher Education in Asia*. Retrieved from <https://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ihe/article/download/7957/7108>.
- Emerson, R. M., & Fretz, R. I. Shaw.LL (1995). *Writing ethnographic field notes*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press
- Gale Group, (2001). *Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 2nd ed. Gale Group.
- Gall, J. P., Gall, M. D., & Borg, W. R. (2005). *Applying educational research: A practical guide*. Boston: Pearson Education
- Guo, S. & Jamal, Z. (2007). Nurturing cultural diversity in higher education: A critical review of selected models. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 37(3), 27-49.
- Guri-Rosenblit, S./Sebkova, H./Teichler, U. (2007): Massification and Diversity of Higher Education Systems: Interplay of Complex Dimensions. In: Higher Education Policy. 20. 373-389.
- Hertz, R. (1996). Introduction: Ethics, reflexivity and voice. *Qualitative Sociology*.
- Huisman, J. (1995), Differentiation, Diversity and Dependency in Higher Education, Utrecht, Lemma.
- Ilie, S. & Rose, P. (2016). Is equal access to higher education in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa achievable by 2030? *Higher Education*, n.p.
- Juhn, C. H., D. I. I. Kim, and F. Vella. 2005. "The Expansion of College Education in the United States: Is There Evidence of Declining Cohort Quality?" *Economic Inquiry* 43 (2): 303–315.
- Khoo, K. K. (2005). *One hundred years: The University of Malaya*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press.
- Kassim, M. A., Damio, S. M., & Omar, A. R. (2020). Embedding gig economy in Malaysia higher education: The case of Universiti Teknologi MARA. *Asian Journal of University Education*, 16(2), 226-234.
- Kivinen, O. and R. Rinne (1996), "The Problem of Diversification in Higher Education: Countertendencies Between Divergence and Convergence in the Finnish Higher Education System Since the 1950s", *The Mockers and the Mocked: Comparative Perspectives on Differentiation, Covergence and Diversity in Higher Education*, V.L. Meek, L. Goedegebuure, O. Kivinen and R. Rinne (eds.), Oxford, Pergamon.
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Margarete Sandelowski, (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing & Health*. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X\(200008\)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G](https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X(200008)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G)
- Maringe, F., & Sing, N. (2014). Teaching large classes in an increasingly internationalising higher education environment: Pedagogical, quality and equity issues. *Higher Education*, 67(6), 761-782.
- Mathew, V. N., & Chung, E. (2020). University Students' Perspectives on Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Implementation Amidst COVID-19. *Asian Journal of University Education*, 16(4), 152-160.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2004). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2nd ed.). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Meek, V.L., L. Goedegebuure, O. Kivinen and R. Rinne (eds.) (1996). *The Mockers and the Mocked: Comparative Perspectives on Differentiation, Covergence and Diversity in Higher Education*. Oxford, Pergamon.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education. Revised and Expanded from " Case Study Research in Education."*. Jossey-Bass Publishers, 350 Sansome St, San Francisco, CA 94104.
- Ministry of Education (2020). *Higher Education Statistics 2019*. Putrajaya: Ministry of Education Malaysia.
- Muftahu, M., & Jamil, H. (2021). Sustainable knowledge flow and innovation in higher education: the implementation of change management in universities. *International Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development*, 15(2), 159-168.

- Muhammad M. (2020). Higher education and covid-19 pandemic: Matters arising and the challenges of sustaining academic programs in developing African universities. *International Journal of Educational Research Review*, 5(4), 417-423.
- Muhammad Muftahu, (2022). *Massification of Higher Education in Nigeria: Policy intention and the realities of the implementation* (pp-92-114) in Sirat, M., Azman, N., & Selvanathan, M. (Eds.). (2022). Higher Education: From Region to Nation for the Community. Penerbit USM.
- Mullen, C. A. (2005). *Fire & ice: Igniting and channelling passion in new qualitative researchers*. Peter Lang Publishing
- Noui, R. (2020). Higher Education Between Massification and Quality. *Higher Educ. Evaluation and Dev.*, 14(2), 93-103. doi 0.1108/HEED-04-2020-0008
- Okoro R. U (2003). Research Methods in Educational Studies. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*. ISSN 2219-1933 (Print).
- Ozga, J. (1987). *Studying education policy through the lives of the policy-makers: An attempt to close the macro-micro gap*. Changing policies, changing teachers: New directions for schooling.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). Two decades of developments in qualitative inquiry: A personal, experiential perspective. *Qualitative social work*, 1(3), 261-283.
- Pozzebon, M. (2004). Conducting and Evaluating Critical Interpretive Research: Examining Criteria as a Key Component in Building a Research Tradition. In: Kaplan, B., Truex, D. P., Wastell, D., Wood-Harper, A. T., & DeGross, J. I. (eds) *Information Systems Research. IFIP International Federation for Information Processing*, vol 143. Boston, MA: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-8095-6_16
- Schofer, E. & Meyer, J. (2005). The Worldwide Expansion of Higher Education in the Twentieth Century, *American Sociological Review*, 70, 898-920.
- Shariffuddin, S. A., Razali, J., Ghani, M. A., & Shaaidi, W. R. W. (2017). Transformation of Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia: A Review. *Journal of Global Business and Social Entrepreneurship*, 1(2), 126-136.
- Sim, S. P. L., Sim, H. P. K., & Quah, C. S. (2021). Online learning: A post COVID-19 alternative pedagogy for university students. *Asian Journal of University Education*, 16(4), 137-151.
- Silverman, D. (2004). *Doing qualitative research* (2nd ed): Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Stadtman, V.A. (1980), Academic Adaptions. Higher Education Prepares for the 1980s
- Strauss, A. Corbin (1998). Basics of Qualitative Research. *Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Tawney, R. H. (1964). *The radical tradition: twelve essays on politics, education, and literature*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Teichler, U. (2008): Diversification? Trends and explanations of the shape and size of higher education. In: Higher Education. Vol. 56. 349-379.
- Tronya, B. (1994b). Critical social research and education policy. *British Journal of Educational studies*, 42(1),
- Trow, M. (2000). From mass higher education to universal access: The American advantage. Research and Occasional Paper Series. UC Berkeley, Center for Studies in Higher Education
- Trow, M. (2006). Reflections on the transition from elite to mass to universal access: Forms and phases of higher education in modern society since WWII. In J. J. F. Forest & P. G. Altbach (Eds.), (pp. 243–280). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Troyna, B. (1994a) 'Reforms, Research and Being Reflexive about Being Reflective' In D. Halpin and B. Troyna (Eds) *Researching Education Policy: Ethical*
- UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2020). *Education: Gross Enrolment Ratio by Level of Education*. Accessed January 9, 2022, at <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>
- Widiputera, F., De Witte, K., Groot, W., & van den Brink, H. M. (2017). The attractiveness of programmes in higher education: An empirical approach. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 7(2), 153–172. doi:10.1080/21568235.2016.1275976
- Wu, C. C. 2011. "High Graduate Unemployment Rate and Taiwanese Undergraduate Education." *International Journal of Educational Development*, 31 (3): 303– 310.