

**Issues on Accessibility and Equity in the Malaysian Higher Education:
The Roles of Distance Education – An Overview**

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia can be considered successful in providing increased access to higher education because since achieving its independence in 1957, the number of students in higher education increased to about 0.74 million in 2005 with the increase in the number of universities and higher learning institutions. This figure only represents 24% of the country's population for the age group of 17 – 23, despite the 40% target projected for 2020. Other major concerns in Malaysia are to improve accessibility to higher education, and to ensure equity so that those belonging to the under-privileged or living in rural areas are not deprived of higher education. Without sacrificing quality, expanding the student intake capacity and providing financial support are some of the steps that have been taken thus far to balance accessibility and equity in higher education. This paper reviews the present position of the accessibility and equity in the Malaysian higher education, as well as, examines the possible role of Distance Learning to further improve flexibility in higher education.

Keywords: *Higher education, accessibility, equity, Distance Learning*

Introduction

Ever since Malaysia achieved independence in 1957, providing access to higher education to the masses and ensuring equity in the higher education system have been major national concerns. In absolute term, Malaysia has succeeded to a great extent in providing increased access as the number of students in higher education has increased from about 0.74 million in 2005. However, the last figure represents only 24% of the country's population in the relevant age group of 17 – 23 and obviously a great deal remain to be done to achieve 40% in 2010 and developed in 2020 (Ninth Malaysia Plan Report, 2006, pg. 256).

In relation to this issue, various steps have been taken by the government to protect the interests of those sections of society that have been denied their equality in the past. These are women, backward classes and the inhabitants of (educationally areas. The efforts of the past five decades have reduced disparities but the overall picture is far from satisfactory. This paper aims at reviewing the present position of the accessibility and equity in the Malaysian higher education as well as examining the possible role of distance education in alleviating these problems.

Accessibility to Higher Education

During the second half of the twentieth century, higher education acquired an egalitarian character with the process of 'massification' being especially intense in the developing countries and particularly in Malaysia. Worldwide, there has been nearly a seven-fold expansion in the number of students i.e. from 13 million in 1960 to 82 millions in 1995 and 85 millions at the turn of the century (H.P. Dikshit, 2002, pg. 53).

In Malaysia, the expansion has been more spectacular. In the fifty years since independence, the number of universities has grown from of 1 to 39, of colleges from 4 to 600 and students from 1,000 to 0.74 million. The growth in terms of the number of higher learning institutions from 1956 to 2005 is detailed out in Table 1. Whilst the number of universities has increased tremendously in the initial period (1956 – 2000), the growth in the number has been gradual but slow in the subsequent years.

Table 1: Tertiary education institutions, 1956 - 2005

Institutions/Year	1956	2000	2005
University	1	15	22
University College	0	0	17
Polytechnic	0	11	30
Community College	0	0	34
Branch Campus	0	3	5
College	3	632	532
Total	4	662	630

(Source: Ninth Malaysia Plan Report : 2006, pg. 244)

The number of students increased from 0.57 million in 2000 to 0.74 million in 2005 as shown in Table 2. At the post graduate level, enrolment for masters and philosophical doctorate (PhD) programmes accounted for 12.5% of enrolment at all degree levels. Furthermore the number of students enrolled in science and technical-related programmes increased from 229,014 in 2000 to 291,546 in 2005. At the post graduate level, enrolment in science and technical-related programmes increased from 12,602 to 18,910.

Table 2: Students enrolment in tertiary education, 2000 - 2010

Level of study / Year	2000	2005
Certificate	105,570	132,880
Diploma	208,454	230,381
First Degree	230,726	322,917
Masters	26,181	38,638
PhD	3,490	6,882
Total	574,421	731,698

(Source: Ninth Malaysia Plan Report : 2006, pg. 245)

In terms of tertiary education, Malaysia’s tertiary enrolment of 2,771 per 100,000 populations (i.e. 0.74 million students of 26.7 million population) compared favourably with India (613), Latin America (1,638), Middle East and North Africa (1,465) and still low in comparison with the United States (5,339). The World Bank’s document of 1994 (H.P. Dikshit, 2002, pg. 53) pointed out:

“... the development of higher education is correlated with economic development: enrolment ratio in higher education average 51% in the countries that belong to the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) compared with 21% in middle-income countries and 6% in low-income countries.”

The overall enrolment ratio of 24% indicates that there is a need to further promote higher education in Malaysia so that and we cannot afford to relax in our efforts in this direction the enrolment ratio to at least 40% by 2010 can be achieved; a figure comparable to that obtained in middle-income countries. Greater attention has to be directed towards professional education for it is essential for national development and growth of indigenous technologies.

Equity in Malaysian Higher Education

In a democratic society, access to higher education must be necessarily linked to equity. In keeping with this expectation the Malaysian government (in 1970) has reviewed the education policy which emphasises on the need to remove disparities and equalise educational opportunities, particularly for those section of societies whose equality was denied in the past. The categories identified for special consideration by the government are the educationally backwarded sections as well as educationally backwarded areas (Tham, 1983, pg. 130). Reservations are provided in educational institutions, and admission-criteria related for students from most of the categories.

In addition, financial support is provided by the government in the forms of scholarships *freeships* and grants. Reservations are also operative in respect of teaching and non-teaching positions in Malaysian universities. However the access to private professional colleges, where the fees charged are beyond the reach of students from low and middle income group as the reservations and financial are still low as the reservation and financial support by the government are mainly for public institutions.

Thus, in Malaysia the thrust of the educational policy has been on ‘growth with equity’ though there may be shortfalls in actual implementation. The efforts made during the last five decades have reduced disparities but the overall picture is not satisfactory, particularly:

- i. The percentage of female students from educationally backwarded sections (Bumiputra or indigenous people) has steadily increased since independence. In the case of general higher education; it has risen from 2.6% in 1957 to 55% in 2000 (Norhayati, 2005, pg 101). Most of them are in art stream (65%) and only 35% in science or professional fields. However, the growth of women’s education appeared to be largely within upper and middle classes of reserved segment of population.
- ii. In accordance with demographic pattern, the percentage of students belonging to the society that were denied equality should be more than 60% (equal to percentage of the society population). Yet these categories have remained under– represented in higher education throughout the last five decades. The percentage of students of reserved category in higher education has increased from 20% in 1967 to 35% in 2004 (Norhayati, 2005, pg. 100). Most of them concentrated on non-professional subjects or art stream. This can be seen through the achievement in various professional categories in 1999, i.e. accountants (18.9%), architects (28.9%), doctors (36.7%), dentists (34.8%), engineers (26.5%), lawyers (41%), surveyors (47.4%) and veterinarians (26.7%) ((Norhayati, 2005, pg. 102).

It is necessary to ensure that much larger number of young people especially those belonging the under–privileged classes or living in rural area, get the benefits of higher education. Otherwise there is a lurking danger of an increased socio-economic stratification with the gap between *the ‘haves’* and *‘have nots’* widening further. In order to promise equity, it may be necessary to substitute the words ‘merit’ by ‘minimum merit’, while dealing with application from the extremely underprivileged. The Malaysian government has anticipated that the participation of underprivileged in tertiary education will be further increased through the expansion in capacity and introduction of new courses or programmes at the educational institutions mainly at UiTM. The enrolment at UiTM for instance, was expected to increase from 32,480 students in 1995 to 52,500 students in the year 2000, with the major focus in science and technical-related areas. UiTM will also intensify the implementation of twinning programmes with local and foreign institutions of higher learning to offer degree level courses. The post-graduate programme at UiTM will give more emphasis on professional development and skills besides academic achievement (Seventh Malaysia Plan Report: 1996, pg 331).

The immediate requirements as mentioned above are to raise the enrolment ratio, looking at the financial constraints, to which the higher education is subject access can be promoted to only a limited extent, through the establishment of new educational institutions in the formal stream of higher education. Distance education, however offer hopes and its possible role is discussed later.

Balancing accessibility and equity with quality

Much has been made of the fact that ‘*massification*’ of higher education has been a lowering of the quality of higher education in an average institution. There is no doubt that there is a great variation in terms of standard of education provided by different institutions in higher education system. Malaysia provides a typical example where

institutions of undoubted merit i.e. public higher institutions co-exist with other private institutions that can be classified as mediocre.

With quality being regarded as a major requisite in the knowledge era, emphasis is being placed on the need to balance access and equity with quality. In an ideal society excellence is best promoted by policies that select society's most creative and motivated members for advanced education. But selection based on prior achievement will only reinforce a history of discrimination and underachievement. Equally, programmes to increase quality will prove unsustainable if they are to undermine the standards of excellence in which higher education is based on.

The solution to this dilemma is; 'combine to tolerance at the point of entrance with rigour at the point of exit'. Proactive efforts to attract promising members of the disadvantaged groups must be coupled with well-designed, consistently delivered remedial support.

The strategy outlined is not new and many of its attributes have been put into practice in Malaysia, over five decades. Thus, as mentioned above, there is reservation of seats in academic institutions for members of the disadvantaged groups, in which the minimum eligibility requirement is minimized with fee-waivers and other supports granted. There are, in at least a few places, remedial classes and additional coaching programmes. Initially, the lack of success in spite of these provisions, what is required is careful planning, judicious utilisation of scarce resources and commitment to the cause with dedicated personnel providing the motivation and thrust. There has to be a campaign to highlight this benefit from higher education, careful search for talents and its nurturing after admission to different programmes. It has to be ensured that the dropout rate falls to the minimum. In addition, remedial classes and additional tutoring should be introduced in every institution on a mandatory basis.

To improve the quality of private university, the government of Malaysia has made a reformation in higher education system in 1995 by amending the University and Universities' Colleges Act (1971). The reformation has emphasised institutional restructuring and formulation of regulatory measures to enable greater private sector participation. The formation also puts in place the mechanism for improving coordination and ensuring the quality of education offered by private sector. The objective of these amendments is to give guidance to all higher institutions on the direction and objectives of general policy. The government will ensure these institutions maintain the high quality and continue to be accessible to the disadvantaged groups (Seventh Malaysia Plan Report, 1996, pg. 333).

The roles of distance learning in Malaysian education

In the recent years, distance education that has been long regarded as the 'poor cousin' of the conventional formal education, has gained acceptance and emerged as a possible alternative to the formal variety. It offers an alternative to those who are unable to secure admission to any academic institution in the formal stream and second opportunity to those who have missed education earlier. The flexibility it offers in terms of choice of programmes and the period over which these can be pursued, make it attractive to those who are employed and cannot attend regular classes. Hence flexible distance education has been prescribed as a possible answer to the problems of accessibility and equity in higher education.

Distance education in Malaysia was first provided by *Universiti Sains Malaysia* (USM) in 1971, followed by *Universiti Teknologi MARA* (UiTM) formerly known as *Institut Teknologi MARA* (ITM) in 1990. Both USM and UiTM have done great studies in programme development, course material development and students' support system over the years. Since 1994 many other universities have embarked on the provision of distance learning programmes, and notable among them are *Universiti Putra Malaysia* (UPM) and *Universiti Tun Abdul Razak* (UNITAR). Recent providers of distance education in Malaysia are *Universiti Terbuka Malaysia*, *Universiti Utara Malaysia* (UUM) and *International Islamic Universiti, Malaysia* (IIUM).

This mode of study has been promoted in the 70's largely to meet the rapidly increased demand for higher education in years immediately following independence. In other words, it has been set up to provide a flexible and 'pen form of education' in which the quality of education could be ensured through an optimum use of technology.

Today, distance education has been firmly established and about 10% of registered students in Malaysian higher education i.e. about 70,000 students belong to the distance education stream. Almost 50% of its student enrolment come from UiTM, the biggest university in Malaysia (Sepuluh Tahun Perancangan Strategik UiTM, 2001, pg. 90).

The growth of distance learning has been encouraging since 1990's as the Malaysian government has taken very positive steps and promotion for the expansion of the programme especially during the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996 – 2000) that states;

During the Plan period, the distance learning programme which is already in place on modest scale in UiTM, USM and UKM will be further expanded and will also be implemented in other universities. The main objective is to provide more opportunities for those in the 19 – 24 age group and those who are currently employed to pursue tertiary level courses, particularly at the degree level. The programme will also include short courses aimed at upgrading knowledge and skills of workforce, particularly those at the management and supervisory levels. The programme will be better structured, more organised and carried out on a larger scale through closer cooperation between universities and private sector. New areas of study, particularly in science, technology and management will be introduced. Efforts will be taken to strengthen the programme and the implementing mechanisms to enable it to be launched expeditiously. In implementing the programme institutions of higher learning will coordinate efforts share resources and facilities, and take advantage of the communication technology infrastructure that will be in place. In this regard, existing education and training institutions nationwide will be selected and utilised on distance learning centre (Seventh Malaysia Plan Report, 1996, pg. 331).

The programmes offered through distance stream are no longer confined to the arts, social sciences and commerce. Advances in communication technology have now made it possible to offer programmes in management, science, engineering and agriculture through the distance mode. Realising the future needs for human resource development and promise of worldwide web and internet, some universities have started offering computer and IT education on-line. What is more significant is that even formal institutions (e.g. UNITAR and Universiti Terbuka Malaysia have already entered the 'virtual class mode'. It is expected that by the end of the first decade of the new century, virtual classes will be a common practice.

The former Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad has visualised distance learning as being the most promising medium through which high education could be made available to disadvantaged groups, and to those living in rural areas (Seventh Malaysia Plan Report, 1996, pg. 331). However, 30 years down the line, it is clear that things have not yet worked as anticipated. In the year 2000 the students profile at higher institutions indicated there were 55% female students against 45% male students and 35% students came from under-privileged groups (Norhayati, 2005, pg.100). This scenario and other facts given in the earlier section on accessibility and equity point to the urgent need for reappraisal of the strategies adopted. Looking back, one perceives that the programmes offered by higher institution, in the first decade of its establishment/existence, were those adopted from the formal stream (Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Communication and Bachelor of Sciences) and professional courses in the newly developing area (e.g. management and computer science). This was, possibly, dictated by immediate need of meeting the requirement of the employment and other professional skills that facilitate continuous professional development. The stated objectives of meeting the needs of those living in the rural areas and providing opportunities for higher education to the disadvantaged sector did not show improvement.

The necessity of generating funds and making distance education self-supporting may have also been a contributing factor in decision making. It is only UiTM that has made conscious efforts to develop diploma and certificate programmes for those residing in rural areas, and for people belonging to the lower income group. In order to encourage increased access of students from the disadvantaged group, the universities should;

- i. increase the number of study centres in rural areas,
- ii. design programmes that would suit the needs of learners from the disadvantaged groups, and
- iii. undertake promotional programmes to create greater awareness about distance learning programmes and offerings.

Recently, UiTM has devised new measures to improve the access of these groups. Besides the existing 13 state branch campuses, UiTM has also opened another 12 city campuses in every state throughout the country to

increase the enrolment of the students. Furthermore, UiTM is working on the establishment of UiTM state universities in every state with administrative autonomy.

The administration of distance education has been strengthened by introducing a more systematic teaching method i.e. by providing higher quality of manual and using a more advanced information technology (ICT). The number of distance learning students were 11,013 in 2000 and expected to increase to 33,000 in 2010 (Seventh Malaysia Plan Report, 1996, pg.91 & 92). With the planned expansion of intake and enrolment in local public and private institutions, less number of Malaysian students will be sent abroad to pursue courses except post graduate levels in the fields of science and technology, medicine and applied arts. In order to produce appropriate and adequate supply of professionals particularly in high-technology industrial and service sectors, public institutions of higher learning should introduce new courses and review the existing programmes, in line with current and future requirements.

Such above planning and implementation is expected to provide newer option to greater percentage of people from marginalised and disadvantaged group, and those in educationally backwarded or under-developed regions to join the mainstream. The open-universities and distance education institutions also need to share some time and evolve strategies for effective social interventions; a major requirement is that the learning materials need to be relevant to the background of the rural or disadvantaged learners containing situational example with which he or she can relate. Such programmes development will ensure that distance learning/education will receive greater acceptance.

Conclusion

With the universal acceptance of the fact that higher education is a crucial factor in national development, it is necessary for the developing countries like Malaysia to ensure easier and greater access of higher education to its young people, and especially to those belonging to the disadvantaged section of society. A broadening and deepening of higher education base is crucial for social, economic and human development. A major responsibility should be the creation of an environment that discourages discrimination and promotes equality. These are requisites to ensure the accessibility and equity in higher education can reach all people in all countries particularly in Malaysia..

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