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UiTM AS A WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITY: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Vision 2020 as articulated by the government aims to make Malaysia a fully developed nation by 2020. A critical part of the strategy towards realizing this objective includes the creation of a highly skilled workforce. Amongst the traits possessed by the workforce of the industrialized nations include knowledge, creativity, innovativeness and mobility, besides their readiness to face the challenges posed by the twin threats of, globalization and the knowledge economy. UiTM, in its capacity as the largest public, university in Malaysia, has an important role to play towards achieving the objectives, of Vision 2020. Therefore, the mission of UiTM to become a world-class university is in tandem with the objectives of Vision 2020. This paper therefore briefly outlines some of the prospects and challenges likely to be encountered on the journey towards attaining the status of a world-class university.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

According to Altbach (2004), excellence in research underpins the idea of a world-class university. This of course refers to cutting edge/front line research that pushes back the frontiers of knowledge. To make outstanding research a reality, top-quality professors are necessary. To retain the best minds, appropriate salaries and other benefits are absolutely essential.

In South Korea, as reported by Hyunsook Yu (2001) the project "Brain Korea 21", launched in 1999, was a strategic seven year plan to develop tertiary education and carry out reforms in the education sector. Among the recommendations of this Korean project was the upgrading of several existing universities as "world-class research universities".

In Malaysia, the blueprint for the setting up of research universities was first, proposed by the Education Ministry through the National Higher Education Strategic Plan issued in 2000.

Why is this 'issue' of a world-class research university so important? According to Niland (2000), these are the most exciting, stimulating and challenging times for universities worldwide since there is increasing competition among the developed countries to attract both the best research scholars and research funding universally. As a result, research-intensive universities are riding the crest of rising, support in the developed world. Since Malaysia aspires to join the ranks of the

developed countries by 2020, it should also focus on building up some core research universities as part of its intellectual capital mobilization in order to achieve the objectives of Vision 2020.

This therefore begs the question: 'What are the defining characteristics of a world-class research university?'

2.0 IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS OF RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES

The modern university is often a large, complex organization with multiple stakeholders, increasingly involved in a world of global competition yet, at home, the subject of much probing and public scrutiny. In comparison with the complexity of universities, other organizations in society, be they merchant banks, construction companies or even airlines often seem to be single-celled, amoeba-like structures. Therefore for universities, world-class standing is built on reputation, perception, and last but not least outstanding performance in many areas.

According to Niland (2000), Samsuri and Mohamed (2001) and Altbach (2004), among others, the most important characteristics of a world-class research university include a combination of some or all of the following features:

2.1 Operating Structure

Most of the leading universities in the developed countries have an operating structure, which practices the delegation of powers and responsibilities. Research Groups and/or Centres of Excellence in these countries function solely to advance research by mobilizing their workforce to ensure the successful completion of research projects. The staff of these Centres of Excellence are given the minimum possible teaching load. The management of these in-house centres of excellence is responsible to monitor the progress of the research projects as well as to see that they operate within their pre-determined budget limits.

2.2 Quality of Faculty

A world-class university will be widely recognized as an eminent institution, as a place where top staff will wish to congregate. Given the chance, staff from other universities will migrate to the world-class university, and top faculty attract top students. The process is auto-catalytic. This means such a university will almost certainly be a research-intensive university. It must also teach well. But first and foremost it is a place where people will want to spend time for the experience, and to associate with the fame and respect that go with this. Absolutely fundamental to building such a climate is the quality of the staff, especially the academic faculty members.

2.3 Students

A large pool of post-graduate students must support a research university. Ideally, the ratio of post-grads to under-grads should exceed 40%, and further more than 60% of the post-grads should be involved in research based programs either at Masters or at PhD level. As a result, the role of both the Graduate School and IRDC is important in leading the research effort. In order to ensure that the research output takes a global flavour, it is recommended that at least 30% of the total post-graduate student intake consist of foreign or international students.

2.4 Research Staff

A research university must have enough qualified and trained staff. Aside from post-graduate students, there must also be other support staff such as full-time researchers, research assistants and research officers. The research teams must be headed by experts from among the ranks of the academic staff of the university including the post-doctoral students. Students involved in research that leads to practical outcomes gain much from the experience. It is largely through their research performance, and how this is carried through to excite and inform the learning process for all members of the university, which will build reputational capital the most.

2.5 Equitable Distribution of Staff Work Load

There must be an equitable distribution of the workload between teaching at undergraduate level and active research involvement. Staff need to be given ample time to ensure that both their own personal self-development and their activities in guiding research students can be carried out effectively. In order for this to be achieved, it is recommended that the ratio of students and academic staff be in the range of 8:1.

2.6 Dissemination of Knowledge and Research Output

Research activity encompasses fundamental research, experimental/ developmental research as well as applied research. It is at research universities where the frontiers of knowledge are explored, learnt, expanded and finally applied for the benefit of mankind. To ensure that all these research efforts are recognized there have to be concerted efforts to disseminate and propagate this research output. This recognition can be measured, for example, by the number of citations and publications in internationally refereed journals, the number of patents, or in exceptional cases, the number of Nobel laureates produced. It is also important that the output from applied research such as prototypes are commercialized in order to generate funds for both the researchers and the university.

2.7 Research Culture

A research university should give top priority to research activities. A program of continuous and systematic research will help to directly create a unique research oriented work culture in the organization. This culture will become the "trade-mark" for all the university staff generally and more particularly for their research staff. To achieve this status the support of all staff including the top management of the university is absolutely vital.

2.8 Physical Facilities and Infrastructure

Basic physical facilities and infrastructure, which underpin research activities, are vital. These include seminar/discussion rooms, research laboratories, common user/service labs (for fabrication) and business venture labs. These basic facilities will help to motivate researchers.

2.9 Funds and Research Grants

Strong financial support from various sources will enhance the capacity of funds and grants for research. Grants can be used widely to sponsor the research projects of post-graduate students, to purchase the necessary equipment as well as pay the emoluments of all the research staff.

3.0 CHALLENGES

In order to achieve the status of a world-class research university, a teaching university must undergo comprehensive changes involving all the staff, all activities undertaken as well as its management and organization. This will be a challenging journey for the whole campus community and has far reaching implications especially in terms of curriculum, financial management, staff recruitment, student intake, physical infrastructure facilities, equipment as well as other facilities like hostels/ student accommodation and so on. In order to achieve its goal, the university must be ready to face up to some of the following challenges.

3.1 Need to share its vision and mission

This change from an ordinary university to a world-class university involves the participation of the entire campus community. The process will be easier if the vision and mission are shared by all. For this purpose, a series of informative workshops and joint planning sessions have to be conducted systematically.

3.2 Need for a Paradigm Shift and Change in Work Culture

All major changes in organisations require a paradigm shift among the participants and a different work culture. Again, a series of workshops on motivation

and paradigm shifts have to be undertaken to ensure that the whole campus population is ready to play their individual roles towards achieving the goals of the university.

3.3 Projections of Student Intake and Student-Staff Ratio

Most research universities tend to have smaller undergraduate populations and the majority of the students tend to be post-graduates since it is the latter group that will be mainly involved in the research efforts. In this regard, the university must decide on its ideal maximum student strength over the long haul. This is important so that the academic staff have ample time for research activities. Besides, the ratio of undergrads to academic staff must be maintained on the lower side, ideally about 8:1. This can be achieved through various strategies such as the recruitment of new staff, expatriate staff, contract staff, post-doctoral fellows and so on.

3.4 The Virtual Challenge

Many in the "traditional" bricks-and-mortar universities view the "virtual university" phenomenon with some degree of anxiety because it throws the "knowledge economy" open to all comers. Knowledge is now bought and sold as a commodity. In this knowledge economy, research institutes, think tanks and consulting firms are all new competitors to the traditional universities. These universities already have virtual features with information technology networks, distance delivery, internet and e-mail access, websites and computerized research facilities. Even for a traditional university, methods of communication, administrative processes, managing campus facilities and the actual process of research, teaching and learning can all be made virtual to some extent. The challenge is to arrive at the right balance between the physical and the virtual presence.

4.0 THE NEW INTERNATIONALISM

Universities have long looked beyond national borders for the best-qualified staff and the latest knowledge. But now the reach, the diversity and the intensity of international engagement are taking us to a new level which universities aspiring to world-class recognition must heed. This new internationalism will entail:

- The greatly increased international movement of students in both international enrolment and study abroad programs.
- The training of educators to work effectively in a multi-cultural framework.
- Employment contracts for new academic staff requiring offshore as well as onshore deployment as the need arises.
- The marketing of education services on an international scale, and university budgets becoming more and more locked into this.

- Joint degrees and double badging of testamurs between like-minded institutions.
- The adaptation of the teaching/learning framework to an international context.
- Graduates regularly taking their university qualifications beyond national borders, as professional labour markets become truly internationalised.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia has enunciated and articulated its aspirations of turning Malaysia into an education hub as well as a centre of educational excellence in the region in numerous fora both domestically as well as internationally. UiTM's aspirations to position itsel f as a world-class university is in tandem with the vision and mission of the Ministry of Higher Education. In line with this objective, it appears that UiTM is now well positioned to achieve its goal of becoming a world-class university within the current decade. The physical infrastructure is already in place; what is required now is a renewed commitment on the part of its entire staff to make this vision a reality. If careful attention is paid to some of the challenges highlighted above there is no reason why we cannot make the leap of faith towards becoming a world-class university as envisaged by the top management of UiTM.

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