International students, academic publications and world university rankings: the impact of globalisation and responses of a Malaysian public university

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Abstract This paper examines the responses of a Malaysian public university, namely Universiti Sains Malaysia, to the impact of globalisation vis-à-vis three key issues: international students, academic publications and world university rankings. There are concerted efforts put in place by the university to recruit more international students. But a global branding is needed to offset factors that have worked against its recruitment of international students. In the area of academic publications, there has been an increased emphasis on publications in citation-indexed journals in line with the globalised context of academic publications. Concerted efforts have also been put in place to enhance the reputation of academic journals published by the university. It is in the area of world university rankings that the counter-globalisation stand of the university has been most thought provoking in that it has rejected this standard benchmark for academic excellence by proposing an alternative benchmark.

Introduction

This paper examines the impact of globalisation on three key issues affecting the development of higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide: international students, academic publications and world university rankings. The three issues are examined through a case study of a public university in Malaysia, a developing country that aspires to become an industrialised nation by the year 2020. The main purpose is to illustrate how this particular university has responded to the three issues to keep abreast of global

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development in the higher education sector, which has been driven by the accelerated pace of globalisation in recent times that stems from the massive influence of neo-liberal ideology and the advent of information and communications technology (ICT). Given that this development is guided by a global standard that has evolved out of intense global competition, it is to be expected that HEIs in developing countries are often at the receiving end of such a development due to their lack of global competitiveness and, thus, their responses tend to vary according to their strengths and weaknesses. As far as the particular university examined by this paper is concerned, it has adopted concerted measures to address the fist and second issues, namely international students and academic publications, but not the third issue, i.e. world university rankings. For some reason, it has rejected world university rankings as a global benchmark for academic excellence. Such a contrasting stand on the impact of globalisation merits our attention primarily because it complicates the role of the university in global higher education development, which is moving towards greater homogenisation as a result of the pervasive influence of globalisation.

International student mobility is the most visible aspect of internationalisation of higher education spurred by globalisation. This mobility has been intensified by the advent of ICT, which enables a far larger percentage of students to have international contacts and access to information to arrive at informed choices over their pursuance of a higher education abroad (Knight 2008). Western Europe and North America are the world regions of choice for these students (Hazelkorn 2011). It is indeed a daunting task for HEIs in developing countries to compete with HEIs in these two regions due to their weaker international repute and standings. But given the fact that international students have now become an important element in determining the relevance of HEIs within the global context, coupled with the strong financial gains as well as cross-border knowledge production and future transnational linkages derived from these students, HEIs in other regions are competing intensely to capture the remaining share of international student mobility. The result of this competition will depend on effective measures adopted by HEIs. Effective measures aside, localised factors could have favoured HEIs in a particular country over HEIs in other countries.

The importance of academic publications lies in the fact that 'publish or perish' has been a much cherished tradition of the academia across all disciplines and national contexts. The strengthening of this tradition has become more crucial following the emergence of the knowledge-based economy (KBE), which relies on knowledge production and dissemination. But with the accelerated pace of globalisation, academic publications no longer can be considered in isolation to the many global(ising) practices and systems that influence academic text production in powerful ways. Within these global(ising) practices and systems, English plays a central role as it is regarded as the language of science and academic research as well as knowledge production and dissemination (Lillis and Curry 2010). Such a central role for English is also being consolidated by the global spread of English as well as the immense influence of the United States-based Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) and the development of the impact factor which favour academic publications in English. Thus, academics in non-Anglophone countries are under mounting pressure to publish in English in order to gain global recognition for their academic work to the detriment of academic journals published in the local languages. Until and unless these journals are included in the ISI indexes, they will lose their relevance within the global context.

The most profound impact of globalisation on the development of higher education is perhaps the emergence of world university rankings since 2003. These rankings have spurred HEIs worldwide to adopt strategies to get into the elite league table of world-class

universities. The two primary world university rankings are the Shanghai Jiao Tong *Academic Ranking of World Universities* and the British-based *Times Higher Education Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings* (THE–QS). At the end of 2009, the THE–QS partnership split resulting in *QS World University Rankings* and *THE Thomson Reuters World University Rankings*. Despite differing methodologies in calculating university rankings, these rankings generally favour universities that use English as the main language of instruction and research, possess a large array of disciplines and programmes, and receive substantial research funds from governments or other sources (Altbach et al. 2010). Also, these universities are highly selective in their recruitment of students and faculty, and have accumulated comparative advantages over time. It is not surprising, then, that universities in developing countries are faced with the daunting task to make it into the elite league table of world-class universities. Although these rankings are highly contested, especially in methodological terms (Taylor 2010), they are generally taken seriously by the public, universities and government (Altbach et al. 2010). They seem destined to be a fixture on the global education scene for years to come. As they are refined and improved, they can and should play an important role in helping universities get better (Wildavsky 2010). Thus, 'love them or hate them, global university rankings have arrived, are here to stay, and are already exerting substantial influence on the long-term development of higher education across the world' (Downing 2012, p. 33). It goes without saying that the rejection of these rankings by any university will not augur well for their international repute and standings, and this will jeopardise their capacities to capitalise on the 'worldwide race for talent' (see Wildavsky 2010) and, hence, their status and positions as highly regarded centres for knowledge production and dissemination. Clearly, these rankings thrive on intense competition driven by the neo-liberal marketisation of higher education. However, there is an increased tendency for scholars to postulate other developmental pathways for higher education within the global context (see, for example, Margison et al. 2011).

This paper examines the responses of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) or the Science University of Malaysia to the impact of globalisation in relation to the above three key issues. It relies on primary data obtained from relevant authorities in the university as well as secondary data obtained from documented sources. As we shall see, the three issues are among several issues that have been given due attention by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in its efforts to transform the higher education landscape in Malaysia to meet emerging global challenges. USM is the second oldest public university in Malaysia. It was established in 1969 in the state of Penang. It initially offered solely science courses (and, hence, the name Science University) but later added other courses as part of its expansion programme. It is now a multidisciplinary university that is organised according to different schools. The development of USM was strengthened by its upgrading as a research university by MOHE in October 2006 together with three other public universities, namely Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). This upgrading exercise, which came with an injection of research funds, was in tandem with a global trend whereby research universities were established to support the emergence of the KBE (see Wildavsky 2010) and in the case of Malaysia, concerted efforts had already been put in place to facilitate the country's economic transition towards the KBE since the mid-1990s.

The establishment of research universities in Malaysia is guided by six objectives outlined by MOHE: first, to increase research and development as well as commercialisation activities; second, to increase the number of postgraduates and postdoctoral students; third, to increase the number of lecturers with doctorate degrees; fourth, to increase

the number of international students; fifth, to strengthen the centres of excellence; and sixth, to strengthen the rankings of the public universities (KPT 2012). Taken together, these objectives have the potential to spur rigorous knowledge production and dissemination within the Malaysian public higher education sector as a means to strengthen the nation's KBE. What is of particular interest to this paper is the first, fourth and sixth objectives. The first objective, i.e. to increase research and development as well as commercialisation activities, will help to spur academic publications, especially publications in high impact journals. This is because one of the requirements for academics who apply for research funds allocated under these activities is to publish their research outputs in citation-indexed journals. The fourth objective that guided the establishment of research universities in Malaysia, i.e. to increase the number of international students, is strongly underpinned by MOHE's aspirations to make Malaysia an international hub of educational excellence. The sixth objective that guided the establishment of research universities in Malaysia, i.e. to strengthen the rankings of public universities, is perhaps the most thought provoking given the declining standard of Malaysian public universities since the implementation of the New Economic Policy in the early 1970s (Mukherjee and Poh 2011; Sato 2007). However, MOHE has not given up hope that some Malaysian public universities, especially research universities, would emerge as world-class universities in due course. But the Malaysian public universities have generally performed badly in world university rankings. Only one public university, namely UM—the oldest university of the country, managed to perform near to the expectations of MOHE.

The foregoing discussion provides the international and Malaysian contextual perspectives for the undertaking of USM as a case study in relation to the three key issues examined by this paper. Such a case study will add perspective insights on how a particular university in a developing country is coping with the emerging demand of higher education development that stems from globalisation. The selection of USM as a case study will also have a significant impact on the third issue, i.e. world university rankings. It should be noted here that USM is the only public university in Malaysia being accorded the APEX (Accelerated Programmes for Excellence) status by MOHE on 3 September 2008. USM managed to outbid other public universities, including UM which had a better track record in world university rankings. It is hoped that with the APEX status that comes with the injection of extra funds, USM would emerge as a world-class university in due course, i.e. among the top 100 by 2013 and among the top 50 by 2020. But as we shall see, USM has, for some reason, taken a different pathway by rejecting world university rankings. Such a development is least expected by MOHE when it elevates the university as the APEX university of the country. It is obvious that USM has adopted a counter-globalisation stand as far as the issue of world university rankings is concerned.

International students

In line with the aspirations of MOHE to make Malaysia an international hub of educational excellence, HEIs in Malaysia have adopted a host of strategies to recruit international students. It should be noted here that international students enrolled in the public HEIs are largely postgraduate students. At the undergraduate level, public HEIs in Malaysia cater mainly to the local students. It is not possible for these HEIs to recruit international undergraduate students given the limited places as well as the surging local demand for higher education as a result of the democratisation of secondary education beginning in the early 1990s (Tan 2012). But international undergraduate students are found in large

numbers in the private HEIs. Although some private HEIs also offer postgraduate studies to international students, their capacity in this area is not comparable to the public HEIs.

Table 1 shows the number of international students enrolled in HEIs in Malaysia from 2001 to 2010. There was a significant surge in the number of international students from 2007 to 2008. Within this 2-year period, their numbers had increased markedly from 47,928 to 70,423 students. This significant surge in enrolment is undoubtedly a response on the part of the HEIs in Malaysia to the aspirations of MOHE to make Malaysia an international hub of educational excellence.

In the case of USM, the number of international postgraduate students has increased steadily since its upgrading as a research university in 2006 (see Table 2). From 2006 to 2011, the top five countries of origin of these students were Indonesia (mostly from Sumatra), Iran, Iraq, Jordan and Yemen (see Table 3). Indonesian students formed the largest group of international postgraduate students from 2006 to 2010. But in 2011, Iranian international postgraduate students began to outnumber the Indonesian students. It is clear that based on the 6-year period from 2006 to 2011, the bulk of USM's international postgraduate students came from neighbouring Indonesia and the Middle East countries.

Besides enrolment numbers, the distribution of international postgraduate students by the respective schools in USM is also important to ascertain the academic preferences of these students. Out of 26 schools in USM, 11 schools managed to enrol more than 100 students in 2011 as shown in Table 4. This table clearly indicates that as a multidisciplinary university, USM is able to cater to the varied academic interests of the international postgraduate students that range from the arts to the sciences. However, according to a top management official of Institute of Postgraduate Studies (IPS), this distribution of international postgraduate students does not tell much about the academic strengths of the respective schools. Instead, it is largely influenced by the attractiveness of the postgraduate programmes offered by the schools. Schools that offered postgraduate studies via coursework were generally able to outbid other schools in postgraduate recruitment (Interview 5 November 2012). The dearth of information on the IPS website pertaining to the academic strengths, such as research and publication records of the various schools in USM has certainly worked against the recruitment of international postgraduate students via academic excellence. Thus, schools that have better academic track records but do not offer postgraduate studies via coursework are generally ignored by the international postgraduate students. Consequently, these schools are deprived of the benefits of cross-border knowledge creation and production that could have enhanced their academic excellence within the global context.

Like other HEIs in Malaysia, USM has also put in place a host of measures to recruit international postgraduate students. Regular overseas promotional trips are conducted by the IPS for this purpose. Apart from these promotional trips, the IPS has also adopted the Student Ambassador Programme through which some international postgraduate students are appointed as liaison between the university and prospective students from their home countries. It is hoped that through positive recommendations by these 'ambassadors', the university will be able to recruit more international postgraduate students. Indeed, 'word of mouth' is a key factor in recruiting international students (Taylor 2010). However, it is the IPS website that provides the most important link between USM and prospective international postgraduate students. Course outlines are clearly stipulated on this website for the perusal of prospective students, though as previously mentioned, the website does not provide information regarding the academic strengths of the various schools. Besides course outlines, the IPS website has also listed three supporting measures for international postgraduate students. First, the International Student Office provides an extensive range of

Table 1 Number of international students in Malaysia, 2001–2010

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Total	18,242	27,872	30,397	31,674	46,006	44,390	47,928	70,423	80,750	86,923

Source KPT (2006, 2011)

Table 2 Number of international postgraduate students in USM, 2006–2011

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Total	1,236	1,417	1,582	1,805	1,986	2,365

Source IPS, USM

Table 3 Top five countries of origin by the number of international postgraduate students in USM, 2006–2011

Country	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	Total
Indonesia	286	302	308	363	392	420	2,071
Iran	104	164	227	292	370	538	1,695
Iraq	58	121	207	244	274	295	1,199
Jordan	145	151	137	130	130	134	827
Yemen	143	146	135	135	124	125	808

Source IPS, USM

Table 4 Schools in USM with more than 100 international postgraduate students, 2011

School	Number of international postgraduate students
School of Social Sciences	174
School of Pharmaceutical Sciences	172
School of Educational Studies	165
School of Housing, Building and Planning	158
School of Computer Sciences	145
School of Medical Sciences	133
School of Humanities	123
School of Management	118
School of Physics	114
School of Civil Engineering	105
School of Electrical and Electronic Engineering	104

Source IPS, USM

programmes and services to international postgraduate students. Second, financial assistance is offered to full time academically outstanding international postgraduate students in the form of fellowships. Third, English intensive courses are conducted for international postgraduate students—these courses are deemed necessary as the bulk of USM's international postgraduate students come from non-Anglophone countries.

Notwithstanding the above measures, cultural compatibility is a major intervening factor influencing the enrolment trend of international postgraduate students in USM. In the case of the Indonesian students, they come from a country which has long shared a similar cultural root with Malaysia. Cultural compatibility is most evident in the area of religion. Islam, the official religion of Malaysia, is the dominant religion in Indonesia. Thus, the observance of religious practices is not a problem to the Indonesian students while studying in USM, more so when there is a mosque in the university campus. Their religious practices are further facilitated by the role played by USM's Islamic Centre, which conducts Islamic activities to strengthen the Islamic faith of the Muslim students. Cultural compatibility is also evident in the area of language. The Indonesian language and the Malay language are rather similar as they are from the Austronesian (Malayo-Poly-nesian) group of languages. This similarity allows the Indonesian students to follow courses conducted in the local language without much difficulty. Meanwhile, cultural compatibility between Malaysia and the Middle East countries is only confined to the area of religion. Like the Indonesian students, the Middle East students, too, have no problem in observing their religious practices.

In addition, these international postgraduate students are attracted by the low tuition fees charged by the university. This is especially important as most of them are self-funded students. These students have decided to enrol with USM because they cannot afford to pay the high tuition fees charged by HEIs in the West and Europe. However, in 2011, USM had decided to impose a drastic threefold increase of tuition fees following reduced funding from the government. This increase was deemed inevitable as the previous low tuition fees were at a subsidised rate, costing the university about one-third of its operational budget. Undoubtedly, such a drastic hike in tuition fees will not augur well for the future recruitment of international postgraduate students. According to a top management official of IPS, the enrolment of international postgraduate students will be stagnant as a result of the drastic hike in tuition fees (Interview 5 November 2012).

As far as the Middle East students are concerned, the much feared question is: Will their numbers dwindle following the impressive development of higher educational hubs in the Middle East countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Baharin? It is fortunate that this impressive development (see Knight and Sirat 2011) has not posed a threat to USM in recruiting students from the Arab Peninsular primarily because most of the Middle East students who choose to enrol with USM are from the poorer countries. These students do not have the financial means to cope with the high tuition fees charged by HEIs hosted by these higher educational hubs.

From the foregoing, it is clear that USM relies heavily on non-academic factors in the recruitment of international postgraduate students. Unfortunately, other public universities in Malaysia are also relying on similar factors to recruit international postgraduate students, leading to intense outbidding for the same pool of students. In the case of USM, there is an extra intervening factor that has worked against its competitive edge, i.e. its peripheral location. It is not surprising, then, that it has lost out to UKM and UPM which are located within the vicinity of the national capital, Kuala Lumpur. Like USM, these two universities are also multidisciplinary universities that offer a range of courses that overlap with USM. Further complicating the problem is the recent drastic hike in tuition fees imposed by USM, making its tuition fees the second most expansive among the four research universities in the country. To offset these intervening factors, USM will have to improve its institutional reputation via the world university rankings exercise to broaden its base to capture a bigger share of international student mobility. Otherwise, it will have to continue playing second fiddle to universities located within the vicinity of the national

capital. The importance of institutional reputation in the recruitment of international students lies in the fact that there is now an increased awareness among these students relating to performance indicators of host universities. Tied to this awareness is the consumer movement in which the students as clients/customers are seen as shopping around for the best value for the money invested. It is within this context that indicators of quality (perceived or real) such as world university rankings have become important. For one thing, USM's APEX status will not help to improve its institutional reputation unless it is willing to abort its anti-world university rankings stand. This anti-world university rankings stand will be detailed in another section of this paper.

Academic publications

Since 2001, USM has put in place an incentive scheme to reward its academic staff who managed to publish in ISI-listed journals. This incentive scheme is in the form of the annual *Sanggar Sanjung* (Hall of Fame) Award. This award is conferred on those who have managed to publish in journals ranked in the top 20 per cent by impact factors in their respective fields. Despite a slow start, the *Sanggar Sanjung* Award began to bear fruit by the fifth year of its implementation (see Table 5). To further increase the number of publications in ISI-listed journals, the university introduced a smaller monetary reward incentive scheme, i.e. the Merit Award, in 2006, for academic staff who publish in ISI-listed journals not ranked in the top 20 per cent by impact factors. Since then, both incentive schemes have become a major driving force that spurs the number of publications in citation-indexed journals among USM academic staff. By 2010, the average number of publications in citation-indexed journals had exceeded one publication per academic staff (see Table 5).

Besides the above incentive schemes, the upgrading of USM to a research university in 2006 had also helped to improve the academic publication profiles of its academic staff. The requirement to publish research outputs in high impact journals for research grants awarded by the university and MOHE is yet another driving force that helps to spur publications in citation-indexed journals.

It is academic staff from the sciences who are the major contributors to publications in citation-indexed journals in USM as indicated by Table 6. Academic staff from the arts and social sciences are unable to match their strong achievements in this area. However, this should not be construed as a lack of research outputs by academics from the arts and social sciences but more because of disciplinary variation. Hicks (cf. Lillis and Curry 2010, p. 9), for instance, holds that natural scientists publish more of their work in journals than do social scientists who also write books, book chapters, reports and other genres. In the case of USM, this disciplinary variation in academic publications is clearly depicted in Table 7 as far as the publications of books and book chapters are concerned.

However, it should be noted here that the number of publications in citation-indexed journals by academic staff from the arts and social sciences in USM has also increased markedly especially in 2010 (see Table 6). This goes to show that there is an increased acceptance of the elevated status of citation-indexed journals as an indicator of scholarly performance as compared to other text types among these academic staff.

There is an emerging trend in academic publications in citation-indexed journals involving multiple authors (see Table 8). This emerging trend indicates the importance of collaborations, intra-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary, in academic publications. This could be due to the demanding nature of academic publications in international citation-

Table 5 Publications in citation-indexed journals by total number of USM academic staff, 2001–2010

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
No. of publications[a]	280	259	273	231	329	451	503	807	1,280	2,246
No. of academic staff[b]	1,114	1,410	1,272	1,325	1,345	1,404	1,447	1,539	1,675	1,668

Source [a] Institutional Development Division (IDD), USM

[b] Human Resource Department, USM

Table 6 Number of publications in citation-indexed journals by disciplines in USM, 2001–2010

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Sciences	275	252	263	230	324	445	492	771	1,195	2,020
Arts & Social Sciences	5	7	10	1	5	6	11	36	85	226

Source IDD, USM

Table 7 Number of publications of books and book chapters by disciplines in USM, 2001–2010

Book	Book	Chapter
Sciences	277	408
Arts & Social Sciences	396	986

Source IDD, USM

indexed journals in which academic collaborations are much needed to produce papers worthy of publication. However, the quest for more academic publications in international citation-indexed journals to enhance promotional opportunities of academic staff has also led to these collaborations.

Local academic journals are under immense pressure to stay relevant within the changing context of global academic publications. In the case of USM, there were, of late, concerted efforts to strengthen the regional and international standings of its academic journals. Currently, USM publishes 15 academic journals covering a host of disciplines most of which began as in-house journals. Some of these journals, especially the arts and social science journals, also published research work in the local language, i.e. the Malay language. Of the 15 journals, the most highly accredited journal is *Bulletin of the Malaysian Mathematical Society*, which came into prominence in 2007 when it was listed by ISI (USM 2011a). As for the other USM journals, they were unable to make any significant headway due to their inability to get into the ISI indexes. Sensing this predicament, the university, through its publication unit, the USM Press, adopted several measures to ensure that these journals were cited by Scopus as a move to enhance their reputation and with the hope that they would eventually get into the ISI indexes. All in all, the university is determined to ensure that its journals are able to cope with the global context of academic publications. But to get into the ISI indexes, some of the journals, especially the arts and social science journals that used to publish research work in the local language may have to reconsider their publication policy. There is thus a possibility that these journals may eventually adopt a fully English language policy at the expense of the development of the local language as a tool for knowledge production and dissemination. Even if this is not the case, the need to respond to the global context of academic

Table 8 Number of publications in international citation-indexed journals involving multiple authors, USM, 2001–2010

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Total	279	259	273	230	329	450	497	774	1,215	1,991

Source IDD, USM

publications may inevitably force many academics to write in English instead of the local language.

World university rankings

World university rankings have aroused public interest in Malaysia primarily because of the dismal performances of the country's leading universities in these elite league tables. Although the inherent biases of these rankings have often been blamed for the dismal performances, there is a general consensus that Malaysian universities are lagging behind in terms of global competitiveness. In 2005, when the country's top two universities (UM and USM) slipped by almost 100 places in the world university rankings published by THE Supplement, there were wide spread calls for a royal commission of inquiry to look into the matter (Salmi 2009). Such a drastic response is indicative of the growing concern over the lacklustre performance of the country's universities in world university rankings.

   MOHE's upgrading of four public universities to research universities in 2006 should be seen as an important policy intervention to improve world rankings of the Malaysian public university. As one of the research universities, USM has to live up to the expectations of MOHE, more so when it was accorded the APEX status in 2008 with a stipulated timeline to get into the elite league table of world-class universities. However, soon after the granting of the APEX status, there was a sudden change in the commitment of USM towards world university rankings by adopting an anti-world university rankings stand. This was best illustrated by the response of its vice chancellor, Tan Sri Dzuklifi Abdul Razak, on the poor performance of USM in the 2007 World University Rankings published by THE Supplement in 2008 in which it was placed at 307 (previously at 277). In an interview with *Berita Harian*, a mainstream Malay daily, on 7 September 2008, he was quoted to have said: 'I will question the THE ranking. What is so special about the ranking that we have to struggle, why is there no other ranking and why cannot Malaysia design its own ranking? And, the THE concept is sometimes viewed as a blind bigotry, one that is not fully understood by politicians who look at figures as the absolute evaluation of a university' (Abdul Razak 2011a, p. 445). In the same interview, he voiced his concern over the use of standard criteria by world university rankings to benchmark academic performance of the universities. His concern was based on his conviction that 'A university has its own personality, vision and uniqueness … Diversity is wealth, and the more unique is the composition of its diversity, the better it will be for the university. It is not a factory which produces a uniform lifeless being' (p. 268). But it was the tendency for changing the standard criteria from time to time that he considered world university rankings most contentious. In this regard, he feared that local universities might end up playing a catch-up game and 'like most catch-up games, by the time we are about to do so, the benchmark will move as the rules are changed by the game-setter. So, there is no end to this!' (Abdul Razak 2011b). He also criticised the world university rankings published by THE

Supplement for lacking in objectivity and transparency. This criticism was based on the personal confession by THE Supplement deputy director in a forum on Rankings and Accountability in Higher Education in Paris (Abdul Razak 2011b). His most vocal attack on the world university rankings was when he accused the QS rankings as a dubious exercise. Such a strong stand was taken in response to the decision by QS to list USM in the 2010 World University Rankings despite the fact that the university did not provide the required data or information following its notification to abstain from the rankings exercise. Such a strong stand was also fuelled by his discontent with the detection of data discrepancies between 'what is' and 'what was' reported in previous QS rankings exercises (Abdul Razak, 2010). His contention against world university rankings was also under-pinned by his strong conviction for collaboration rather than competition, especially competition on an unlevel playing field, as a means to develop higher education within the global context (Abdul Razak 2010, 2011a). Above all, he construed world university rankings as a Western construct imposed on local universities in the most biased manner. He went on to criticise the nature of such rankings as not only culturally insensitive but also political, if not hegemonic, and least of all academic (Abdul Razak 2010).

In place of 'world class', the standard benchmark for academic excellence, the USM vice chancellor has chosen to advocate 'world's first' as an alternative benchmark. Central to his rejection of world university rankings is his stand that an institution should dare to be different and move ahead by challenging the status quo. He is inspired by the Blue Ocean Strategy in pushing for this alternative benchmark. To him, this benchmark is easier to define and conceptualise as well as objectively verifiable and transparent. More importantly, it will make competition based on prescribed rules irrelevant. To put this alternative benchmark into practice, he launched the USM World's First Initiatives by listing several discoveries and innovations that he deemed fit to be hailed as 'world's first' (Abdul Razak 2011b). For instance, the Bukit Bunuh archeological discovery was hailed as 'world's first' because it was at this archeological site that the oldest hand axes embedded in suevite boulders (dated 1.8 million years ago) was discovered by USM's Centre for Global Archeological Research—this discovery led to the promulgation of the 'Out-of-Malaysia' theory, challenging the 'Out-of-Africa' theory in early human migration (USM 2011b).

It is clear that USM has rejected world university rankings as a standard benchmark for academic excellence. This has put its APEX status in jeopardy as far as the ultimate objective to make it to the elite league table of world-class universities is concerned. Nevertheless, the university is determined to chart a different trajectory by relying on sustainability as the main thrust of its own transformation plan. This is to be achieved through a two-pronged approach that will ensure that USM has the capacity to become a world renowned university for sustainability as well as a sustainability-led university. Its efforts to become a world renowned university for sustainability include ecological protection, conservation of resources and human development, and a framework for achieving sustainability on campus. Meanwhile, its efforts to become a sustainability-led university include a review of its activities in all areas including nurturing and learning, research and innovation, consultancy and services, postgraduate studies and students, and alumni. In fact, since 2001, the university has been actively promoting sustainable development within its campus through the 'Healthy Campus' Programme and 'The University in a Garden' Concept (Abdul Razak 2011b). Thus, its sustainability-driven transformation plan was a continuous effort from these earlier initiatives.

It is the strong conviction of USM to humanise higher education by upholding 'universal values, such as equity, availability, accessibility, affordability and appropriateness in the pursuit of quality' (USM 2011a, p. xv) that form the bedrock of its transformation plan.

This conviction is best illustrated by the idea of 'Humaniversity' mooted by its vice chancellor. Central to this idea is the deep concern for human values and the fundamental importance of human ethos in the provision of higher education that is deemed sustainable (USM 2010). This idea is intended to bring about a refocus on the *raison d'être* of university education from one that is increasingly emphasising income, employment and accumulation of wealth to loftier ones which envision education as the accumulation of knowledge and people as the wealth of the nation as well as the importance of safeguarding their well-being. This idea has also led to the adoption of key intangible performance indicators [in contrast to the tangible key performance indicators] to evaluate performances within a more humanistic framework (USM 2011a). Clearly, the idea of 'Humaniversity' is mooted as a counter-response to the increased tendency to treat higher education as a form of business for the market place—a tendency that has led to the commodification of higher education in line with neo-liberal ideology. This strong conviction to humanise higher education is also a key reason for the rejection of world university rankings by USM given the fact that rankings are not just an outcome or manifestation of global competition but are also driving the competition and accelerating the marketisation of higher education in the belief that free markets and competition are the best option for higher education development.

Conclusion

International students, academic publications and world university rankings are three key issues influencing the development of higher education within the contemporary context of globalisation. As compared to public universities in developed countries, public universities in developing countries generally lack the comparative advantages to capitalise on these issues and their responses to the issues certainly merit our attention. This paper illustrates the responses of USM, a public university in a developing country, to the above issues. It is a paradox that while the university has responded positively to the issues of international students and academic publications, it has rejected world university rankings by adopting a different benchmark for academic excellence, i.e. 'world's first'. Notwithstanding the strong reasons underpinning the rejection of world university rankings, such a mixed response does not augur well for the development of USM within the global context. It is generally accepted that globalisation has brought about the necessity for internationally recognisable shared benchmarks for worldwide HEIs academic performance, though agreements over these benchmarks may not be reached easily. Thus, USM will have to garner the popular support of the global community for its proposed benchmark. Otherwise, the benchmark will not bring about the desired global impact. It is indeed difficult to divert the homogenising process of globalisation that underpins global interconnectivity. As far as the development of global higher education is concerned, the 'denationalisation' (see Ball 2012, p. 4) of worldwide higher education systems has become inevitable to pave the way for the emergence of a world model of higher education. There is now a strong trend towards isomorphism within the global higher education sector, restricting the development of differentiated academic systems and culminating in unbridled competition among worldwide academic institutions in the pursuit of the same goals (Altbach et al. 2010). This 'enduring struggle' (see Anderson-Levitt 2003, p. 15) for the same goals has led to the survival of the fittest and this is where HEIs in developing countries are most vulnerable given their lack of global competitiveness. It is

not surprising, then, that some HEIs in the developing countries are strongly against such an emerging trend and this is best illustrated by the stand adopted by USM against world university rankings. Such a stand is further accentuated by the university's conviction for a more humanistic development of higher education within a sustainable framework as against the massive influence of marketisation within the global higher education sector.

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