

THE CHANGING ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION: LEARNING TO DEAL WITH WICKED PROBLEMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA***Jeevanithya Krishnan**

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Abstract

Considering the fact that the world is undergoing huge transformation due to various factors, the education system has also taken a paradigm shift to accommodate the higher demands of society. Higher education system particularly is experimenting with new initiatives on the current education system to produce future graduates who are ready to face the challenges in the current era. Collaboration with members locally and internationally are explored to change the current nature of our curriculum system in creating a new meaning for education. The change in the education system creates a different approach on teaching pedagogies, the role of academic institution staff including administration, stakeholders, and lecturers, and also in the structure of an academic organization. The role of trans academic interface managers play a significant role in providing a deeper insight of the current realities based from the perspectives from other disciplines. Through their collaboration with academic members, they can work together to incorporate the current education system with the current expectations of the society as well as facing the challenges from the society and designing possible solutions to overcome them.

Keywords: Higher education, Collaboration, Teaching pedagogy, Academic staff, Stakeholders, Curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions have a great responsibility to prepare the graduates for their work life. Higher education is a stepping stone for the students to finally pursue the education of their own choice, to fulfil their life ambitions. Higher education gives them the opportunity to view the world from a broader perspective as they get to know people with different cultural, economic, and geographical backgrounds. This is where they prepare themselves academically as well as mentally through the interaction with people from all walks of life. Due to this huge responsibility, educators are facing a lot of pressures from the community of different groups, complex and interlocking which challenges them to design the art of education fulfilling the increasing demands of the society. Students themselves, being a Z generation, have different expectations regarding their learning experience. They prefer their lesson to be engaging and motivating with the blend of technology into education. Parents, on the other hand, have their own demands from universities to mold their children with appropriate employability skills and knowledge. In recent times graduates employability has become one of the central issues that drive the mission of higher education institutions (Small *et al.*, 2018). This trend is also recognized by Malaysian higher education, where they took prevention of it by implementing internship programmes for undergraduates during their final year of study. A few changes were made to the curriculum design via partnerships with the industry to strengthen graduates' employability skills and improve the overall quality of education. The statement by Rudolph (1990) mentioned how war and declining enrolments has forced American universities to redefine their education system. Malaysia faced the same challenge in 1969 during the post-election riot based in Kuala Lumpur which is known as the May 13 incident.

The May 13 incident revealed that there is a socio-economic imbalance among the racial groups in Malaysia. As one immediate measure a charter of principles called Rukun Negara was introduced in Malay. As espoused by Watson (1980), the Rukun Negara aimed to present the ideas of an ideal Malaysian regardless of all racial origin who (1) believes in God, (2) loyal to the king and country, (3) upholds the constitution, (4) abides by the rule of law, and (5) professes upright behaviour and morality (Suseela and Nagappan, 2012). Rukun negara was made a mandatory study for students in all schools and educational institutions. Transiting from 1990 to 2022, the world has revolved through many aspects. The biggest challenge that the world is facing right now, is the integration of online, hybrid, synchronous, asynchronous learning into the current education system considering the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the midst of multiple learning strategies, it is very crucial to provide a quality education for the student for the current digital work era. Incorporating collaboration with different members of the society can be done to inaugurate a radical approach towards higher education. Academic staff will have the opportunity to get a better insight of what the current education should be, based on the feedback from the collaborative partners from different disciplines. Collaboration in teaching and learning will also help all higher education to work and learn together and face the similar challenges from the changing world. Research findings from Abelha, Fernandes, Mesquita, Seabra, and Ferreira-Oliveira (2020) reveals that encouraging networking enables the students to interact with employers and real experiences in the labour market, supporting students in their personal development by encouraging international mobility and critical thinking in their learning. One cannot deny the power of engagement as a way to approach our core functions of scholarship, teaching, and learning. Community engagement can tap into tacit knowledge from individuals or society groups that reside in the community; providing a broader perspective to frame questions, explore options, and

develop and apply solutions to challenges in both community and beyond. Community engagement allows the exchange of knowledge between higher institutions and the private and public sectors in the context of partnership to enhance scholarship, research, curriculum, teaching and learning. This concept can be elaborated to the other groups of stakeholders who are parents. Community and family engagement in education, if understood as an empowering and formative experience, enables people to gain knowledge, awareness and democratic experience, as well as self-confidence, self-reliance, pride and autonomy. They can take actions in the resolution of problems. It also enables them to share in the responsibility and accountability over the outcome of a process – in this case, an excellent and equitable education for all children. Mathew, 2006 stated that community engagement follows the same path of decision-making and solution-finding, but the task is achieved through interactions between the institution and community members. Through parental collaboration we can create inclusive and cross generation learning, where students learning is supported by educators as well as their own community or family members. Through this practice students, educators, and parents can work together to solve the problems that arise in the constantly changing community.

Education in today's World: Engaged Learning

Cronon (1998) described an educated individual as someone who can write their thoughts clearly, read, observe, understand, and interpret knowledge clearly from their surroundings. They do have some issues in communicating with anyone, and are able to listen and pay attention to the ideas of others. They are able to analyse and resolve puzzles of complicated situations to reach an appropriate solution. They appreciate lifelong learning, and they are always open to perspectives from all round the world including different people, culture, and language. They appreciate individual diversity and they are willing to learn together as a community as well as rising together as a community for the betterment of the world. Most importantly they are able to connect with the community to gain wisdom and live in the world in creative ways. Professor Ramaley (2005) described that the way an individual interacts with others as by what they know determines the credibility of an educated person. Kim Stafford (2003) describes education as gathering dispersed facts from fragmented sources and connecting them all together which gives a sense of pleasure and discovery. In other words, education is learning from observation of the surrounding world through engagement with community and society. However, the definition of an educated person in the 21st century context is, a person who can read, write, and interpret knowledge from various sources of information. With the huge exposure to technology and technology related sources, such as social media, YouTube, Google, and many more, interpretation of knowledge should be done in a careful way considering all the pros, cons, and validity of the facts. An educated person should be able to distinguish between the right and wrong, in gathering information from external sources as well as sharing knowledge through online resources. Freedom of expressing thoughts in the 21st century has become easy with numerous online platforms to connect with people. As an educated person, one must take responsibility to give productive, unbiased information that is solely beneficial for the community's growth. Every educated person shares the

responsibility of shaping up the community for making the world a better place to live. Apart from possessing ample knowledge, an educated person in the 21st century must be an IT literate to fit into the current digital era. They must be someone who can adapt to the changes in the society including the rise of digital technologies. With everything going online post pandemic, IT literacy is very crucial in everyday life. Moreover, an educated person in the current era must keep updated about the current happening in the country and around the world considering the uncertainty and consistent change due to the rise of Covid-19. Educated people are the backbone of society; they must be able to share information and work together as a community to produce a productive and safe living and working environment. Engagement with community and society is a core of educated people to gain insights, perspective, and information from people from all groups of society. This allows the educated groups to identify the problems in the society and work as a whole to reach a possible solution contributing to the well-being of the society. Connecting people from different parts of the world has been easily executed with the merge of technology and social media. Global interaction has been made possible, where the exchange of culture and diversities between human beings from all around the world promotes learning through engagements not limited to within society but also outside the community circle. This leads to increasing life-long learning and career opportunities. An educated person in the current era should be able to grab the opportunities to gain wisdom to emerge as a successful person both in career and life.

The basic objective of the Malaysian education system is to ensure that all Malaysian students, from all levels of education, are equipped with the knowledge and skills required to be successful in life. To be in line with purpose of creating educated individuals, the government came up with a national education philosophy in 1996 which stated that:

Education in Malaysia is an ongoing effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in a devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving high levels of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large. (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2013–2025)

Dealing with Wicked Problems

What is a wicked problem? According to Rittel and Webber (1973), wicked problems are problems that are constantly changing one after another even before the solutions are found. There is no definite solution to solve wicked problems, as they take different forms each time with different changes. Wicked problems can be tangled up with each other, and finding solutions is a great task, as one solution will create a problem on its own leading to another. Eventually all the wicked problems remained unsolved due to its changing and subjective nature leading to larger and complex problems. Camillius (2008), argued that wicked problems arise when organizations have to face consistent unpredictable challenges. The nature of

challenges which is confusing, never ending, and no light of solutions make them wicked. Disagreement among stakeholders is also one source of wicked problems. This scenario is highly applicable in the current state of Malaysian education system. Since the emergence of Covid-19 pandemic, the Malaysian education system has faced many twists and turns due to the unpredictable changes of regulations in the education system with consistently changing Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). During the reopening of the schools in March 2021, the government has faced lots of rejection from the parents considering the health and safety of their children. Subsequently, all schools were forced to be closed due to the rise of cases in school involving teachers and students. The closure and reopening of schools and professional organizations took turn one after another between March to September 2021. The schools and higher education institutions were reopened in October 2021, requesting the students to come back to campus and with the availability of hybrid learning as well. Hybrid learning was implemented to accommodate the need of medically affected students (due to Covid-19 and close contacts with the affected patients) and also to respect the students' and parents' choice of learning from home considering individual health and safety. However, when education institutions were planning to fully reopen for face-to-face learning in January, the organization again faced lots of denial from students and parents. One government university in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia received a petition signed by all students requesting to maintain online learning over face-to-face classes. Eventually their demands were executed. The economic stakeholders on the other hand are concerned about the declining profits from the organization due to the closure of profit-making premises such as hostel, cafe, parking, etc due to the lack of student and staff occupancy in the campus. These contrasting challenges between two groups of the community are one example of a wicked problem that emerged during the post pandemic period in Malaysia.

Building the Capacity to Manage Wicked Problems

Wicked problems arise from different stakeholders consisting of different issues and aspects. The nature of the wicked problems keeps changing with every effort to solve it, making them tangled and difficult to unravel. Due to the various and contrasting demands from stakeholders and other groups of the community, the mission, vision, and purpose of higher institutions are constantly questioned, leading to consistent change in the education system. There were also criticisms from external stakeholders regarding the cost of education, the value of a college degree, low graduation rates, and different success rates across social and economic groups. The demographic and cultural shifts are further complicated by the emergence of technology in education. In the current 21st century era, wicked problems may arise from different sources ranging from democratization to sustainable development, climate change, clean water, health issues, energy source, to peace, and conflict. To manage these emerging issues from various sources, it is important that educators engage their students and faculty members in finding the solutions for these wicked problems. They must also be willing to work with boundary spanners and be open to constructive feedback from the different perspectives of community members or stakeholders from other disciplines. This will motivate the current students to be the future leaders who are

knowledgeable, intellectual and have a great sense of social and civic responsibility. The future leaders with these qualities will know exactly how to react to the challenges faced from the community with an open and rational mind. To produce a quality number of graduates who will be the future leaders, educational institutions have gone through transformations since the day it was formed. Each educational institution provides different areas of studies handled by different departments or disciplines. This is to provide the opportunity to the students to study the field of their choice, specialising in different disciplines that contribute in various ways towards the society. The graduates from different disciplines can collaborate and work together to solve challenges from wicked problems in the society. Universities have a great responsibility to produce graduates with good employability skills. Despite providing quality education to students, universities should also equip the students with essential employability skills in order to become a productive employer who can create a positive and collaborative working environment in the future. Good employability skilled graduates, in future will be able to work together as a community to address wicked problems in society and find possible solutions by exchanging suggestions from different perspective. Moreover, the graduates can also work as an alumnus and continue to serve their universities by collaborating with the student and lecturers in their teaching and learning process. They can provide the future graduates an insight on how the working world be, as well exposing the student to industrial experiences. In this way students can relate their knowledge with their prospective career and will have a sense of purpose for what they are studying. Billet, S (2015) mentioned that the initiative to reinforcing employability through entrepreneurship courses and extracurricular activities allow higher education institutions to develop an institutional narrative based on employability. These are initiatives that intend to adequately prepare the graduates for their professional practice, which is directed towards an environment of uncertainty and constant change [Gazier, B. (2017)].

A competitive university in the 20th century is recognized by the range of disciplines offered for study, research funding from stakeholders, and publications that continued from the sponsored work. The universities' competency is measured by how well their scholarly work serves the community. In the 21st century however, although the universities still maintain the initial practice, the credibility measure of an educational institution has taken a different form. Higher educational institutions in the 21st century focus on the collaboration with other universities, sectors of society, local communities, and even other countries to create a learning that exposes the students nationally and globally on the current trends and societal issues around the world. Universities in the current era also have the responsibility to address and accommodate the needs of diverse students. Beginning in 2004, Malaysia's higher education system has been internationalised to meet demands made by the new era of globalization. The restructuring of Malaysian education policy provided foreign stakeholders with opportunities to conduct twinning programmes with local colleges and universities, as well as opening international branch campuses in Malaysia (Grapragasem *et al.*, 2014). The introduction of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEI) Act in 1996 has opened the way for foreign universities to establish branch campuses in

Malaysia such as Monash University, Curtin University, and Swinburne University of Technology from Australia, University of Nottingham and Newcastle From the United Kingdom. Apart from that, collaboration in credit transfer, external degrees, distance learning, joint programmes, and e-learning programmes were also made with the selected foreign universities (Ismail *et al.*, 2014) in support of the government's motive of making Malaysia a distinguished regional educational hub. Additionally, public universities have executed globalization in forms of research collaboration, staff exchange programmes, and various networking partnerships (Tham and Kam, 2008). Technology implemented teaching and learning has been a major focus in 21st century higher education. Academic staff has been working together to continuously innovate teaching and learning methodologies with the integration of technology to accommodate the needs of students from Z generations. From my personal experience as a lecturer, educators have been attending numerous trainings and seminars regarding the practice of integrating technology into education. The implementation of technology-based learning in forms of blended learning, flipped learning, synchronous, and asynchronous learning has been given much attention during the past years. Various research findings have proved that technology assisted learning has been efficient in enhancing student learning experience in terms of student motivation and engagement with fellow learners and educators.

The Role of Boundary Spanners

An organization's capacity, mission, and culture is determined by the work of each member of the campus community. Boyer (1990) in his published landmark text, argued that it is evident that shifting priorities within the academy and beyond has led lecturers to give much importance to scholarship works. The reward system becomes more restrictive with the expansion of American education. The means to be a scholar has taken a new definition in the complex process of making sense of the world. In the 20th century, the same issues are still evident but scholarship work has been extended to other groups as well apart from academics. Members of the broader community have involved themselves as scholars to address issues in the society at large. University as an organization consists of employees of different classifications. There will be young talents who are willing to learn from their superiors. There are experienced seniors who are equipped with knowledge and plenty of practical experiences due to their years of service, willing to help their younger colleagues. There are some younger colleagues who are full of enthusiasm but lacking in confidence, and not forgetting a few who prefer their own ways of doing things. Due to the possibility of being potential boundary spanners, these individuals must work within themselves to be a competitive scholar who can share their work with the community. They must be clear on the content and purpose of their study, and the implications of their work towards society. Institutions must be able to adapt to the current changes of the world, and work together to produce graduates that fit into the current environment. An institution staff, as a scholar, should be able to identify their roles as a contributor to the development of engagement-based education based on their own expertise and connections in order to link the world of education to the broader community. Being a scholar playing a boundary-spanning role, they must prepare themselves to wisely handle the diversions and oppositions from the other organizations. Boomgaarden (2008) has advised

boundary-spanners to adjust themselves with external parties by using their influence and power nicely to facilitate a new pattern of interaction to gain support from others who are sharing the same goals. In Malaysia, local universities are categorised into research universities, comprehensive universities, and focused universities (Rozita *et al.*, 2012). The research universities are mainly focused on scholarship activities with the collaboration among external community members to address issues within the educational organization, as well as outside the organization and interrelate education with current trends of community and country. Selection of a research university is based on a few criteria namely, the quantity and quality of researchers and research outcomes, the quantity and quality of postgraduates, innovation, networking, and collaboration, the professional service and reward system, and support services. The main intention of introducing the concept of research university in Malaysia is to increase the number of research publications, number of postdoctoral appointments and postgraduates, and enhancement in university-industry partnership. Doctorate requirements among lecturers has been imposed as a milestone to increase the quality of research based academic staff in local universities. This has also been practiced by private universities as well to compete with local universities in globalizing Malaysian education in line with the government's aspirations to make Malaysia as an "education hub" especially in the region of South East Asia. In accomplishing Malaysia's objective to be an education hub in the region, three assessments have been designed by MQA to upgrade Malaysian universities ranking among the countries in the world. The assessments are: Rating System for Malaysia Higher Education Institutions (SETARA), the Malaysia Quality Evaluation System for Private Colleges (MyQUEST), and the Malaysia Research Assessment Instrument (MyRA). Malaysian Universities are also encouraged to participate in QS World University Ranking to be recognized as world class universities (Grapragasem *et al.*, 2014).

Creating a Culture of Engagement in the Academy

Engaged scholarship, teaching, and learning involves collaboration with participants who bring fresh knowledge and perspective from their own professional experiences and cultural knowledge. Their responsibility is to help universities to create new partnerships to create a new way of learning together and achieve a shared purpose. These people bring together the universities, other boundary-spanners, and society members to create integrative and collaborative opportunities to address current complex problems. A productive engagement will provide access to innovative and relevant educational programs and partnerships, as well as resources to invest in a collaboration that address social, economic, and environmental issues. An engaged culture will create scholarship works that gather the issues from the environment as well as providing implications for the well-being of the environment. An engaged community appreciates the diverse perspectives from various expertise of all fields, and recognizes engagement-based scholarship and learning. The effectiveness of an engaged culture is determined by the nature and purposes of the collaboration and scholar work that bring different disciplinary perspectives into solving issues in a larger context. It also depends on a university, on how it achieves its educational mission through its curriculum design and delivery. The infrastructure, faculty members and staff,

and the boundary spanners play an important role in maintaining a good engagement.

Conclusion

The current trends in Malaysian higher education are based on four factors which are (1) Globalization, (2) Teaching and Learning, (3) Governance, and (4) Knowledge-based Society. In line with the current trends, Malaysian Education Blueprint, MBE (2015-2025) has outlined ten shifts to create a globalized education considering the factors of employability and quality assurance. The first four focus on outcomes for key stakeholders in the higher education systems, including students in academic and TVET pathways, the academic community, as well as Malaysians participating in lifelong learning. The other six focus on enablers for the higher education ecosystem, covering critical components such as funding, governance, innovation, internationalization, online learning, and delivery. To achieve the country's goal to provide quality graduates with a good education system, stakeholders of the education field must come together through collaboration to address the rise of wicked problems in the education field.

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