

Transformation of university colleges to full-pledged universities: A proposed conceptual framework for Malaysian higher learning institutions



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ABSTRACT

Transformation of higher education is inevitable and is persistently occurring around the globe. One of the prominent outcomes is the changes of higher education institutions. In Malaysia, among the major changes observed is the conversion of college universities to full-pledged universities. Therefore, this study reviews the requirements involved in transforming university colleges to universities, the key strategies implemented and the impacts it has on the academics. Three impacts of the transformation on the academics are identified namely the impacts on their identity, career and academic activities. Finally, this paper proposes a conceptual framework in investigating the issues and challenges related to transforming Malaysian's university colleges to full-pledged universities.

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1. Introduction

Globalization, internationalization, massification, higher education quality standardization, financing higher education, growth of private higher education sector, academic profession development, ICT application in higher education and expansion of academic research are the driving forces behind the transformation of higher education (Altbach et al., 2009). This transformation is inevitable and is taking the world by the storm. The transformation involves a multilayer reformation process via national policies set by the government to achieve the aims of tertiary education provision (Bleiklie and Kogan, 2006).

One of the prominent impacts of the transformation is the change of educational institutions (Kezar and Eckel, 2002). The changes of higher education institution (HEI) can be observed in the functions exerted by the HEIs, the management of the HEIs and the restructuring of the HEIs (Gumport, 2000). These falls back to the status of the HEIs and the direction which the HEIs plan to evolve and continue to be sustainable. The inability of the HEIs to transform and respond effectively to the industry and society needs make them irrelevant and perishable (Abdullah and Rahman, 2011).

In Malaysia, higher education has undergone a paradigm shift in improving its standard since the legislation of Education Act 1996. The Act becomes the foundation for the growth of Malaysian public and private HEIs. Public HEIs have been reformed and further categorized into their distinctive functions and status such as Research University, focused university and comprehensive university; and to date there are 20 public universities in the country (MoHE, 2007). Meanwhile, private HEIs also have grown in number and upgraded to university colleges and full-pledged universities (Da, 2007). By September 2016, there were 70 private universities (including branch campuses) and 34 private university colleges in the country (MoHE, 2016). The demand for higher education has forced HEIs in Malaysia to evolve and continue to improve the institutions according to the standard outlined by MoHE. Many college universities from both public and private HEIs are being upgraded to universities to accommodate the growing number of students' enrolment in higher education. The reason behind the upgrade lies in the perception of many Malaysians towards college universities. College universities are often viewed as second-class academic institutions compare to the universities as suggested by Goi and Goi (2009). As a result, in 2007 six public university colleges were upgraded to full-pledged university status after few successful attempts to increase students' enrolment in the respective HEIs. The status of the HEIs is crucial as it defines how the HEIs operated and the types of suitable changes can be executed in order to

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accomplish national higher education objectives set by the government. For example, HEIs with university college and university statuses are able to offer their home-grown curriculum up to postgraduate level and implement systematic alteration to their whole operations in equipping Malaysia towards becoming high-income nation. In fact, the status will strengthen these HEIs in carrying out five aspirations tabled in Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025. The five inspirations include expanding access of higher education to all (access), providing quality higher education to all (quality), giving equal opportunity of education regardless of background (equity), utilizing education to unite the nation (unity) and optimizing revenue on the investment for higher education (efficiency). Hence, it is imperative that status transformation of university colleges to full-pledged university is further explored. Changes in HEIs are not an isolated trend.

All different kinds of HEIs face different types of challenges in maintaining sustainability and competitiveness for the future. Having said that, much of the researches on the transformation of HEIs in Malaysian context have been exploring the challenges in the case of APEX university (Sirat and Ahmad, 2010; Nasruddin et al., 2012), research, comprehensive and focused universities (Ramli et al., 2013; Sirat, 2013; Ahmad et al., 2014; Janudin et al., 2015), polytechnics to college universities

(Hamed et al., 2010; Wahab and Zakaria, 2011) and community colleges (Leong, 2011; Don et al., 2014).

Few have conducted studies on the transition of university colleges to full-pledged universities. Therefore, this paper examines the transformation of HEIs in Malaysia particularly the requirements involved in transforming university colleges to universities, the key strategies implemented and the impacts it has on the academics. Subsequently, the paper proposes a conceptual framework in investigating the issues and challenges related to transforming Malaysian's university colleges to full-pledged universities.

2. Requirements to transform university colleges to full-pledged universities

To transform university colleges to full-pledged universities, any HEI must be first invited by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) to be upgraded to full-university status. Apart from that, the HEI needs to meet the compulsory and auxiliary requirements tabled by the Ministry. Table 1 indicates the compulsory requirements that must be obliged by the HEIs in their operations in order to be upgraded to full-pledged university status. 10 main categories were identified in the requirements such as operation, finance, curriculum, quality, faculty, governance, R & D, infrastructure, students and track record.

Table 1: Compulsory requirements to be a full pledged university (MoHE, 2007)

Category	Compulsory Criteria
Operation	Minimum 5 years as university college (start from the registration date under 555Act)
Finance	Minimum RM20 million in capital investment
Curriculum	100% home-grown curriculum/ programs (including Master and PhD), Received ≥ 90% full accreditation for programs, Minimum 15% Master and 10% PhD programs executed
Quality	Improvement in teaching and learning (including teaching staff, academic programs, infrastructure, co-curriculum, teaching and learning methods)
Faculty	Minimum 20% PhD holders, 80% Master holders, 80% full time and 20% part-time teaching staff
Governance	Minimum 70% governance members PhD holders, Minimum 8 years experienced managing a HEI, Chief Executive-PhD holder with minimum 10 years management experience
R&D	Minimum 30% operation cost attributed to R&D purposes, Receive external grants/funds for R&D activities, Minimum 10% research outcomes presented locally and 5% internationally, Participate minimum 3x a year in local research exhibition and 1x international research exhibition, Academics minimum 5 years' service conducted 6-8 researches, published 10 articles and minimum 5 articles in international journals
Infrastructure	Operating at permanent premise (purpose-built campus)
Students	Minimum 20% international students
Track Record	Excellent track record; none of which involves violating Private Higher Education Act 1996, Premise Visit Report indicates the HEI is well-equipped and fulfil all the criteria required by MoHE

Secondary requirements are also tabled by the Ministry to be fulfilled by the respective HEIs. These criteria value add to the HEIs application to be

considered and upgraded as full-pledged university. Table 2 provides details on the secondary requirements as listed by the Ministry.

Table 2: Secondary requirements to be a full-pledged university (MoHE, 2007)

Category	Secondary Criteria
Vision, Mission and Rational	Possess clear and justified vision, mission and rational in relation to conversion of the institution from university college to full-pledged university.
Quality of the Faculty	Minimum 10% Professor and min. 20% Associate Professor
Curriculum	Nil
Student Affairs Management	Implement fee refund policy. Minimum RM200,000 yearly allocations for scholarship and student donation, Accommodate minimum 60% students on-campus hostel, Possess International Student Office with 3 officers, Possess active Student Representative Body. Annual election is conducted every year, Possess Community Service Program organized by students' clubs and organizations
Internal Quality Management	Possess strong Quality Assurance System Minimum 30-40% home grown programs recognized at the international level Minimum 40% external examiners from local expertise and 20% international expertise in the respective field

Three of the aforementioned criterion such as quality, faculty and R&D directly involve the academics. They are the main actors in the transformation process who face changes and challenges in these aspects for providing their services to the university and the students (MoHE, 2016). Therefore, it is pertinent for the dissemination of information with regard the requirements to be a full-pledged university to the academics. By knowing the academics will be more encouraged to perform and strive together with the institution to obtain full-pledged university status.

3. Key strategies of HEIs transformation

The success of HEIs transformation requires carefully planned and organized conversion process. Apart from that, practical mechanism in implementing these strategies also should be meticulously carried out and supported from the bottom up and vice-versa. Hence, Kezar and Eckel (2002) identified 5 core strategies to ensure the success of institutional transformation involving HEIs: senior administrative support, collaborative leadership, robust design, staff development and visible action as depicted in Fig. 1. These strategies were derived from teleological models which propose transformation or change requires "strategic planning", "bureaucratic and scientific management" and "organizational development" (Kezar and Eckel, 2002).



Fig. 1: Five core strategies for successful institutional transformation process (Kezar and Eckel, 2002)

The first strategy providing senior administrative support refers to the aids available in terms of financial incentives, new structures, governance restructuring and dissemination of knowledge about the institutional transformation by campus leaders (e.g. president, provost, rector, chief executive officer etc.) to staff during the transition. This strategy is essential to the process as it motivates the staff to stay committed in the efforts of transforming the institution.

The second strategy recommends collaborative leadership which represents the method on how

outcome and decision are made in the institution. The process involves a team of representatives from every level of the institution to continuously develop and shape the end result. This method encourages these representatives to voice out their concerns and resolve problems.

Meanwhile, the third strategy recommends that HEIs to integrate robust design in the transformation. The institutions must have clear vision and mission so that organizational activities (e.g. strategic planning, staff employment, incentives provisions, leadership and effective communication within the institution) can be accomplished accordingly. Vision and mission become the blueprint for staff at all levels to strive towards the desired goals and guide them in dealing with the new and unfamiliar territory yet advantageous in the long run.

The fourth strategy involves constant staff development program via seminars, workshops and discussions. These opportunities provide knowledge, encouragement and support much needed by both the academics and support staff in achieving the intended changes. Finally, the fifth strategy is visible action of which activities related to making changes to the HEIs are in plain sight of the staff. By seeing and noticing the efforts contributed, staff continue to be driven in pursuing the goals and have sense of hope and achievement of what the future hold as an institution with the new status can offer.

Implementing the key strategies is essential in ensuring the goals of institutional transformation are achieved. However, the main challenge in the actual operation is to get every member of the institution particularly the academics to understand the approach and the direction the institution is heading (Abdullah and Rahman, 2011).

4. The impacts of institutional transformation on academics

Constant changing of HEIs influences the roles of academics as managing academics, researchers, entrepreneurs and teachers. Policymakers and the citizens consider the triumph of HEIs transformation falls on the shoulder of the academics (Altbach et al., 2009) considering the various roles they play in HEIs operation. With such pressure and responsibility, it is imperative to observe the impacts of HEIs transformation on the academics. Delanty (2008) and Musselin (2013) stated that the academics are affected in three different areas: academic identity, academic career and academic activities as shown in Fig. 2.

Academic identity refers to the perception which the academics have about their memberships to the institution (Martin, 1993). The traditional identity of academics in HEIs has expanded. Many academics no longer recognize themselves only as teachers and researchers but also as entrepreneurs particularly those at the universities (Delanty, 2008). Nevertheless, most do not associate themselves with

their administrative identity [p.129]. Participating in the governance of the HEIs undergoing change is inevitable particularly those who are chief executive officers/rectors, deans and head of departments. They have to assume the aforementioned positions to ensure the success of the HEIs transformation and its smooth daily operation.

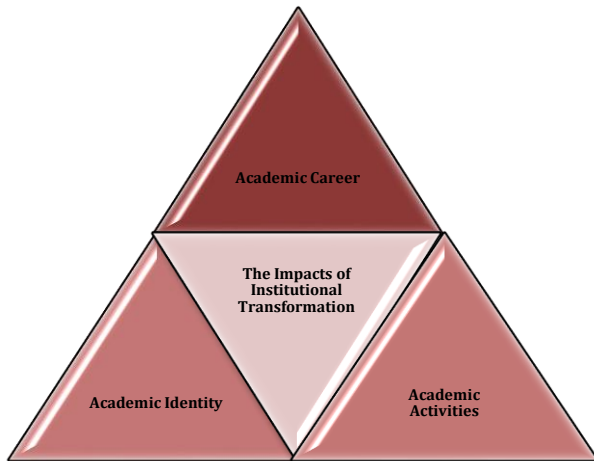


Fig. 2: The impacts of HEIs transformation on the academics (Delanty, 2008; Musselin, 2013)

The transformation of the HEIs becomes a platform for the academics to construct their professional identity. For example, an academic at a university which is transformed into a research university needs to focus more on research and at the same time still teach postgraduate courses. Thus, the roles as teacher and researcher are developed. While, an academic at a college university which is transformed into university has to conduct research, commercialize the findings of their research and hold a position as dean of certain faculty. Therefore, the roles as researcher, entrepreneur and administrator are developed. These examples show that the status of the HEIs determine how the academics construct their multiple professional identities. Performing many different roles causes their identity to become unstable and indefinite. As a result, many academics become stress and are incapable to handle the changes to their identity.

The management of academic career including hiring, promotions and rewards are also affected by the changes of HEIs. With the HEIs now have the authority to recruit and evaluate individual performance, academic career management becomes more organized, standardized and justified. Standardized entrance qualification to academic profession is practiced. Hiring international academics becomes an indication of reputation, performance and quality. Academics performance appraisal is differentiated based on teaching, research or administrative inclination. Less reliance on one size fits all performance indicators as the academics' specialization vary according to their positions and work distribution. This is due to the fact that the academics have less autonomy on the distribution of works and specialization. As a result,

human resource department of the individual HEI has greater authority in managing academic career (Musselin, 2013).

However, issues still emerge particularly concerning the academics' job status whether they are hired based on permanent, contract, full-time or part-time basis. This formal status determines their wages, bonuses, increment, career advancement, trainings, research grants and other benefits. Henceforth, the transformation of the HEIs also promises uncertainty of what the future hold for the academics because institutional strategies implemented vary from one institution to the other.

Academic activities are the works performed by the academics in teaching, research and administration. These activities are determined by the individual academic institution and supports provided. With the transformation of HEIs, academic activities and the means to perform the activities also change. Among the changes is the academics' reduced control over the distribution of duties and tasks as well as the growth of contract positions for research or teaching purposes depending on the hiring team.

Apart from that, other changes noticed include specialization in research, teaching, administration or somewhere in between and lack of authority in organizing preferred individual academic activities. In completing the activities, the academics have to adhere to recruitment contracts, regulated procedures and equipment necessary for the tasks particularly for research. Meanwhile, in teaching, the incorporation of technology e.g. video-conferencing is expected.

The extension of academic tasks in research and administration contributes to the development of new roles of administrator and scientist with academic profile. The emergence of this new category known as managing academics is inevitable as their works focus more on managerial related tasks compare to teaching and research.

The transformation of HEIs leaves tremendous impacts on the academics in many different ways. Thus, by identifying these changes it provides better understanding on the challenges experienced by the academics during the transformation and possibly provide supports needed.

5. Proposed conceptual framework for university colleges to full-pledged universities transformation

To further understand the transformation from college universities to universities, the requirements set by MOHE, key strategies implemented and impacts of the HEIs transformation on academics are reviewed.

Based on the literatures reviewed the conceptual framework shown in Fig. 3 is proposed. The framework is adapted from Kezar and Eckel (2002), Delanty (2008) and Musselin (2013). It shows that the academics are the key individuals in the transformation process as they play diverse roles

from their duties in teaching, research, administration and commercializing their research. Understanding the impacts of HEIs transformation on the academics is significant. Therefore, relevant concepts proposed deemed to be pertinent in explaining issues and challenges experienced by the academics in the process of transforming college universities to universities in Malaysian context.

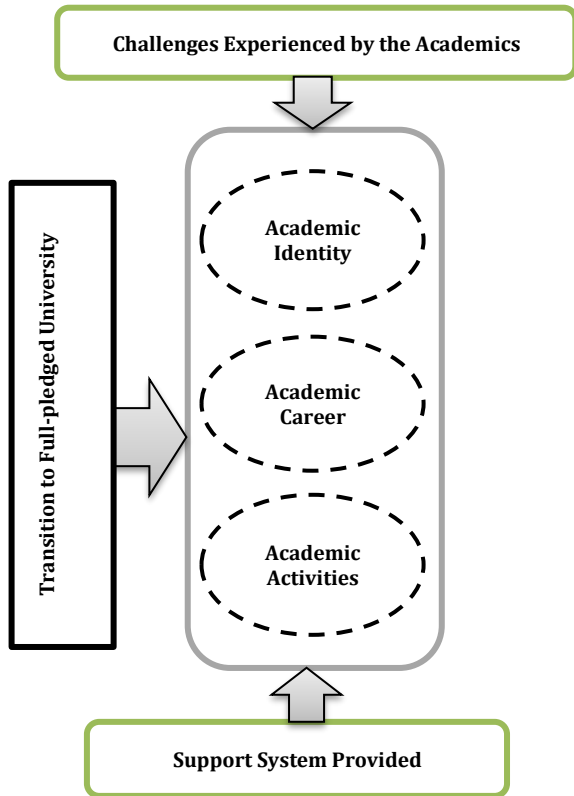


Fig. 3: Proposed conceptual framework for transformation of university colleges to full-pledged universities

6. Conclusion

Overall, this study has identified some of the issues and challenges arise from the change of HEIs and its impact on the academics in terms of academic identity, academic career and academic activities from the available literature. Researchers, HEI leaders, policymakers and strategists who aim to have successful HEIs transformation should consider the aforementioned vital elements in the enactment of relevant policies and devising the action plan to smoothen the transitional process. These elements shall assist the HEIs to efficiently utilize their resources in accomplishing its' transformational objectives. Apart from that, this paper also proposes a conceptual framework for studying the transformation of university colleges to universities in Malaysia. Nevertheless, further studies shall be conducted to prove the effectiveness of the conceptual framework proposed. Future researches will be carried out and proposed framework shall be implemented.

Finally, the scope of this paper is limited because the requirements to transform university colleges to full-pledged universities are subjected to Malaysian

government regulation via Malaysian Qualification Agency and MOHE as previously discussed. Since the regulations may be different from one country to another, one should bear in mind that this may have affected the academics' experience differently. Thus, the paper may or may not reflect the situations in other countries but the paper will assist in providing suggestive insights into the phenomenon for future researchers.

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