

Role of Malaysia-China Business Council (MCBC) in Promoting Higher Education to China

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INTRODUCTION

The 2015–2025 Malaysia Education Blueprint highlights that Malaysia aims to attract 250,000 international students by 2025. This aspiration to become a global education hub will generate RM15.6 billion from 200,000 international students. Malaysia is well positioned to attract more international students amidst the tension between China and the US and between the UK and Australia. In 2019, there existed approximately 13,450 Chinese students in Malaysia (Hirschman, 2020). According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 703,500 Chinese nationals were studying abroad in 2019, marking a 6.25% increase over the previous year (MOE, 2020). This trend will continue despite the temporary disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This mobility of large number of Chinese students studying overseas is due to the high demand for higher education in China and the highly competitive nature of Chinese universities. The exclusivity and difficulty to secure a place in elite Chinese universities, such as Peking University, Tsinghua University, Zhejiang University, Shanghai Jiaotong University and many others, have driven many Chinese to seek higher education abroad. This is not the only reason why the Chinese travel abroad. The opportunity to immerse in a new culture, learn a new language, meet various types of people and develop independence incentivise many Chinese to pursue higher education away from their motherland.

MALAYSIA AS A HIGHER EDUCATION HUB

Kashif Ansari, CEO of IQI Global group, has stated that Malaysia has the advantage to attract Chinese students to enrol in Malaysian universities, instead of in the US, UK and Australia (Aisyah, 2020). China is the largest source of international students. However, most of them deem to seek their educational future in western-developed countries. With the latest data from UNESCO, with over 1 million Chinese students abroad, the US, Australia and the UK have captured over half of the global flow of Chinese tertiary-level students (UIS, 2021). This large cross-border flow of tertiary-level students prompted many countries to develop their own education industry as an education hub, Malaysia is no different. To date, 127,583 international students, mainly from China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Yemen and Nigeria, were studying in Malaysia in 2019. With the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of borders worldwide, the prospect of achieving the goal of Malaysia Education Blueprint seems dim. Nonetheless, a silver lining exists for Malaysia given the increased success of the vaccine rollout plan. Once the threat of pandemic has subsided and borders reopen, Malaysia is poised to be an attractive destination as an education hub.

The Malaysian government market liberalisation has allowed for international institutions to participate in the Malaysian higher education landscape, and the higher education sector has always been a focus in all Malaysian Plans to elevate the country's regional and global standing. Following the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE)'s report 'The Way Forward for Private Higher Education Institutions: Education as an Industry (2020-2025)' 70% of international students are enrolled (92,415 students are in private higher education institutions), and 30% (39,099 students) are registered in public higher education institutions. Malaysia has emerged as a popular higher education destination for many Chinese and other international students owing to several factors.

LOWER CURRENCY VALUE

The lower ringgit value has led to the increased international enrolments in Malaysian private higher education institutions, thus cementing Malaysia as a sustainable destination (Abu Hasan Asari, 2017).

FAVOURABLE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Malaysia is recognisable as an international hub acting as a bridge between the East and the West, entailing cultural and religious diversity and stable socioeconomic environment. Malaysia scored the highest in openness and international mobility policies, quality assurance, degree recognition, access and sustainability (Jusoh, 2017).

EXCELLENT INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

The Malaysian government has been striving to improve international student management. Student visas for international students are issued for the duration of the programme instead of yearly basis. With the launch of the 2013 Education Malaysia Education Services (EMGS), the application process for higher education institutions is expediated as a one-stop centre for all student visa applications.

MALAYSIAN QUALIFICATIONS AGENCY (MQA)

The Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) established in 2007 under the Malaysian Qualifications Act 2007, is a statutory body that accredits academic programmes offered by all higher educational institutions according to the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF). The MQA's specific functions are as follows:

- Implement MQF as a reference point for Malaysian qualifications.
- Develop standards and credits and all other relevant instruments as national references for the conferment of awards with the co-operation of stakeholders.
- Quality assure higher education institutions and programmes.
- Accredite courses that fulfil the set criteria and standards.
- Facilitate the recognition and articulation of qualifications.
- Maintain the Malaysian Qualifications Register (MQR).

This agency's primary role is to ensure higher education quality and act as a reference point for national qualification criteria and standards (Mokhtar et al., 2014). MQA accreditation not only serves as a standard of quality assurance, but it also allows institutions to franchise their accredited programmes to other institutions, student credit transfer, student loan from National Higher Education Fund and employment in the public sector.

INTERNATIONAL BRANCH CAMPUSES (IBC)

The Malaysian government has been substantially investing in public and private higher education institutions. The Private Higher Education Institutions Act of 1996, encouraged the private sector to collaborate with international partners to establish domestic educational institutions to promote cross-border, borderless and transnational higher education. Moreover, English is the language of instruction of private higher educational institutions and some public institutions, thus generating prospects for twinning programmes between private international universities. 2+2 and 3+1 twinning programmes became a popular option to attract prospective undergraduates, allowing the students to pursue their education in Malaysia and overseas. The internationalisation of Malaysian education is supported by government initiatives, such as the EduCity in Iskandar and Kuala Lumpur Education City (KLEC) (EduCity Iskandar, 2020). These institutions signify Malaysia's paradigm shift to attract more international students, given that many international educational institutions establish their branch campuses in Malaysia. Currently, there exist 10 international branch campuses in Malaysia: *Curtin University, Monash University, Swinburne University of Technology, the University of Nottingham Malaysia, Heriot-Watt University Malaysia, Newcastle University Medicine Malaysia, University of Southampton, University of Reading Malaysia, Xiamen University Malaysia, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and University College Dublin Malaysia*. Despite that most of the international branch campuses are from the West, Malaysia is beginning to take a different stride by further collaborating with its Asian neighbours, such as the Shanghai Jiaotong University from China and the University of Tsukuba from Japan (David, 2021). International branch campuses in Malaysia have proven their strengths, such as promoting as a regional education hub, ability to attract a large pool of international students, capitalising on the power of MQF, self-accreditation status granted to transnational higher education institutions and cost advantage (Rashad, 2020). IBCs have a significant role in the Malaysian higher education landscape as they emphasise greatly on research, innovation and post-graduate studies. Moreover, their mother institutions in the country of origin boost the IBCs reputation, attracting more qualified, internationally renowned scholars as academics. These factors contributed to the sustainability of IBCs to attract more international students and increase Malaysia's status as a global higher education hub.

MCBC'S FACILITATION TO PROMOTE HIGHER EDUCATION TO CHINA

Malaysia-China Business Council (MCBC) acts as a non-profit organisation. Under the purview of the Prime Minister's Special Envoy to The People's Republic of China Office, it focuses on enhancing the Malaysia-Diplomatic relations from every aspect. Although the main focus is trade and investment, education is also another critical area to improve the close relationship of both countries. MCBC aims to collaborate with other governmental and non-governmental organisations in Malaysia and China for encouraging more China students to pursue their higher education in Malaysia.

SIGNING MOU WITH EMGS

On March 15, 2021, MCBC has formally signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Education Global Malaysia Services (EMGS) at the Ministry of Higher Education office in Putrajaya. The MoU was signed by the Chief Executive Officer of EMGS and MCBC, Mr. Mohd Radzlan bin Jalaludin and Mr. Samuel Lee, and witnessed by the Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Seri Dr. Noraini Ahmad and the Prime Minister's Special Envoy to the People's Republic of China cum Chairman of MCBC, Dato Sri Tiong King Sing. Amongst the

other guests of honour were the Deputy Minister of Higher Education, Dato' Mansor Haji Othman and the senior management of Ministry of Higher Education, EMGS and MCBC. With the signing of the MoU, MCBC has become the strategic partner of EMGS for the promotion and marketing as the international higher education hub of choice for students from the territories of China, Hong Kong and Macau (EMGS, 2021).

XIAMEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA PROJECT

Xiamen University Malaysia (XMUM) was a joint venture education project chosen by the Chinese Ministry of Education to be the first Chinese university to establish an overseas campus in Malaysia. By that time, XMUM was one of the 800 Chinese universities whose degrees have been recognised by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education. Meanwhile, Tan Sri Ong Ka Ting (the Prime Minister's Special Envoy to China and chairman of Malaysia-China Business Council, MCBC at that time) has been appointed visiting professor of XMUM since 2008 and has been striving to encourage the university to set up a branch in Malaysia.

In September 2019, 371 students received their bachelor's degree in XMUM, of which 242 are Malaysians and 129 from China. They are the first batch of university students that have graduated from XMUM. Today, the total enrolment of the university has exceeded 5,000 students. (XMUM, 2019)

In addition, all the programmes offered are recognised internationally, with dual accreditation by the Malaysian and Chinese governments. Moreover, the XMUM recognises the foundation programme of other institutions approved by the MOHE Malaysia. This recorded another milestone of people-to-people exchanges between China and Malaysia and the friendship between Malaysia and China.

The establishment of XMUM marked a milestone for China as an international higher education player. As four world-recognised universities, Australia National University, Newcastle University, Cardiff University and Victoria University of Wellington had signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) in 2019 with XMUM. Furthermore, this MOA grants a pathway for greater co-operation between students and faculty exchange with the respective universities, and currently, XMUM has established co-operation with 11 partner universities in the US, UK, Australia, Ireland and New Zealand. (XMUM, 2019).

PRIME MINISTER'S SPECIAL ENVOY TO THE PRC CHINA'S STATEMENT

During a meeting with the Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Seri Dr. Noraini Ahmad, Dato Sri Tiong King Sing (Tiong, 2021) suggested that Malaysia should develop more active and closer co-operation with relevant educational institutions, including implementing student exchange programmes and industry-university co-operation with China. He further suggested for Malaysian educational institutions to establish sister school relationships with Chinese universities and set up a branch campus in China to strategically open the door for Chinese students to study in Malaysia and accelerate their adaption to the learning environment in Malaysia.

He also mentioned that the Ministry of Higher Education can directly submit a petition to the Cabinet to seek for the local institute of higher learning to accept Chinese people working in the region for studying on the job. He pointed out that many Chinese who work in Chinese companies in Malaysia often have plans to further their studies. Therefore, the Ministry of Higher Education should recommend to the cabinet that these people should be accepted for further studies in the local educational institutions to expand the Chinese market in the local educational sector.

SET UP OF EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Meanwhile, MCBC had set up a subcommittee on education to promote and facilitate education between Malaysia and the People's Republic of China. The subcommittee has planned to organise Malaysia-China International Education Expo (MCIEE), Malaysian Visit to China for Education Cultural Exchange Program.

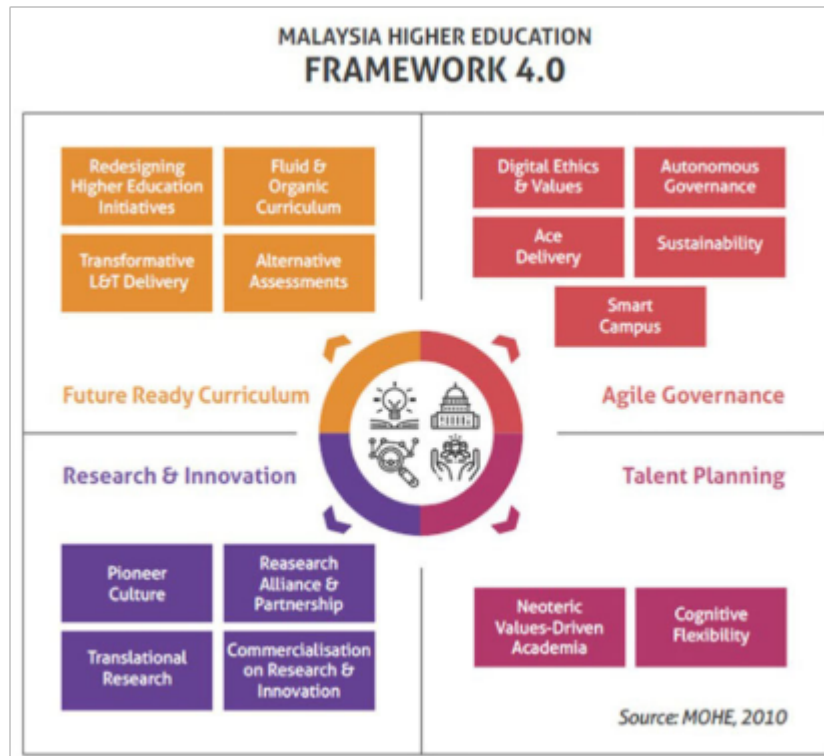
WAY FORWARD

Malaysia has made significant strides in recent decades in developing the higher education sector. This is evident in the increase of global university rankings, growth of transnational education partnerships and the establishments of international branch campuses in the country. Although the US, the UK, Canada and Australia will likely remain the top education destinations, Malaysia can position itself to capture a major segment of global international student flow with its distinct cultural diversity, location, affordability and quality. However, Malaysia is not the only country vying for this lucrative opportunity. Dubai, Singapore, New Zealand and other countries are all strategising to ride on this momentum. Although Malaysia has earned its reputation as a regional education hub, new strategies must be adopted to propel Malaysia to the next stage.

UPGRADE AND ADAPT

Globalisation has increased transnational travel, eradicating territorial boundaries, which compels the educational system to produce decontextualised and human capital-oriented knowledge. Malaysia is on the precipice of the internationalisation of higher education amidst the ever-changing demands of market economies. Highly globalised economies require graduates who are innovative, creative and flexible in problem solving, given that Malaysia strives to evolve from a production-based economy to an innovative, knowledge-based economy, it requires a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce. To achieve this, Malaysian higher education must develop and attract cutting-edge technologies and talents to elevate the standard of higher education institutions. The fields of cybersecurity, big data and protection, artificial intelligence and robotics are jobs on the rise in Malaysia as the Asia-Pacific countries delve into the Fourth Industrial Evolution. Figure 1 illustrates the Malaysian Higher Education Framework 4.0, which highlights the necessity for the higher education sector to innovate teaching and learning delivery systems to produce qualified graduates equipped for the workplace.

FIGURE 1. Malaysia Higher Education Framework 4.0



Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Professor Dr. Abdul Karim Alias, Director of Centre for Development of Academic Excellence (CDAE) from the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) has stated that, ‘the online learning and online education are no longer an option – it’s a must’. E-learning or distant learning has become a hot topic in response to the ‘new normal’, albeit its mixed results. To ensure the efficacy of the e-learning system, adequate computer hardware and high accessibility to quality Internet connection are necessary. Government initiatives, such as National Fiberisation and Connectivity Plan (NFCP) 2019–2023, Domestic Investment Strategic Fund, the Smart Automation Grant, the Skills Development Fund Corporation, along with MIDA-Academia-Industry collaboration framework, all serve to spearhead the higher education towards Industry 4.0 to maintain the institution’s international sustainability (MIDA, 2021).

However, despite the ample support, major obstacles exist, such as resistance to change by educators and students. Technology plays an important role in the higher education sector in today’s ever-changing digital era. However, educators doubt the effectiveness of implementing the latest technology in improving teaching and learning experiences (Burroughs, 2017). Additionally, even though technology provided convenience and connectivity for us, in reality, we are digitally connected but socially disconnected. Individuals nowadays are overly reliant on technology and are disconnected from the practical world (Kushlev, 2017). This phenomenon is also apparent in China’s higher education.

CHINA’S MULTI-MODAL HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

The Chinese government initiative of Massively Open Online Course (MOOC) or Youth Active Learning Network (SWAYAM) has directed that universities must complete the syllabus through 25% conventional (face-to-face) teaching methods and 75% through online teaching methods (PRC, MOE, 2020). China has been experimenting with the transition to online and distance education delivery modes. The Chinese Ministry of Education ‘*Guidance on the organisation and management of online teaching and learning in regular higher education institutions*’, requested that higher education institutions shift to 22 online platforms

to facilitate remote study with the majority of the platforms being established with a partnership with top Chinese universities or enterprises. Furthermore, three platforms and apps developed by the Chinese institutions and enterprises, namely, iCourse, Dingtalk and Mosoteach, were recommended by UNESCO as resources to help facilitate education to the world amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2020).

Chinese students studying abroad also received support from the Chinese government with the verification of the Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange (CSCSE) (an MOE-affiliated agency that verifies foreign academic qualifications). On April 3, 2020, the CSCSE announced that foreign qualifications obtained partially online due to an inability to attend campus during the COVID-19 pandemic should not influence the verification of foreign qualifications (Chinese Service Center, 2020). As the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be stabilising in China, students in China and across the world have gained extensive experience in online studies in recent months. It will be interesting to observe the effect of the multi-modal higher education system utilised in China to see the possibilities of online-offline teaching and learning methods.

MALAYSIA-CHINA FUTURE HIGHER EDUCATION COLLABORATION

The year 2021 marks the 47th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China, despite the global pandemic raging on, the Malaysian government and people from all walks of life have actively supported further co-operation between the two countries under the Belt and Road Initiative. With Malaysia's education earning great reputation globally, 13 Malaysian universities are on the 2019 QS World University Rankings, with six amongst the world's top 500, reflecting the success stories of the Malaysian higher education system. Numerous successful endeavours to deepen co-operation and establish educational partnerships with China have been carried out. The Belt and Road Business School is a collaboration between Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), Association of Chinese Returned Students from Malaysia (ACRSM) and Association of Overseas Chinese Students in Malaysia (AOCSM) for greater international co-operation and exchanges (Peng, 2019). On December 30, 2020, the first Malaysia-China (Yunnan) Higher Education Dialogue was held successfully with 25 universities to explore future educational exchanges and resource sharing (NST, 2020). Furthermore, with the collaboration of Malaysia-China Business Council with the Education Global Malaysia Services (EMGS) to promote Malaysia as an attractive higher education destination and aid in the promotion and facilitation of Chinese international students' process will accelerate the mobility of the global flow into Malaysian higher education institutions.

CONCLUSION

The internationalisation of Malaysia's higher education has been largely supported by public and private institutions. From the 2015–2025 Malaysia Education Blueprint and the Malaysia Higher Education Framework 4.0 to other governmental initiatives, we can observe the evolution of Malaysia's higher education landscape as it tackles the future challenges of digitalisation and international co-operation. The opportunities involving the establishment of international branch campuses in Malaysia are evident and aligned with the national aspirations and goals to establish Malaysia as an international education and talent hub. Moreover, the ambitious projects of EduCity Iskandar and EduCity KL to develop education zones will act as an impetus to stimulate greater investment and transform the Malaysian higher education landscape. Malaysia is responding to the demands from the fast-changing global higher education landscape, and the government has considered that education is vital to its future. To

spearhead the process of transforming Malaysia into a knowledge-based economy, the implementation must be top driven. This visionary undertaking must be initiated by government political will with a public-private partnership with endorsement from top policymakers to foster effective education and innovative outcomes. As a rising world power, China has become a reference point for countries worldwide to learn from in the field of education. Malaysia-China Council (MCBC) will continue to serve as a bridge for further co-operation with China in this field to achieve the goal of internationalising higher education expeditiously. Regardless of what the future holds, Malaysia will strive forth and forge its path to leave its marks in the annals of history.

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