Chapter 13

Emerging New Identities for Public Universities: Implications for the Postgraduate Programs in University of Malaya

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Introduction

The past decade has seen an extensive evolution of the higher education landscape at the national and regional levels. The first part of this chapter presents the discussion that had taken place with management level personnel at one institution of higher learning each in Thailand, Vietnam, China, and Malaysia. The management personnel comprise a Vice-Chancellor, a Deputy Vice Chancellor, a Deputy President, Directors of the International offices, and a Director of Research Management office. Open-ended questions were asked during one to one interviews with the objective of seeking their individual perspectives on the higher education scene at their own universities and identify similar trends that may appear. These “trends” or discursive practices are representative of the universities’ emerging identities that unfold as they take on different roles from the traditional ones they used to play.

The second part of the chapter addresses one of the implications that these trends have on the postgraduate program offered at the University of Malaya — that is, the initiation of the Dual PhD program.
Discussion

As universities move toward preparing their students for the globalized world, external forces determine the directions that universities must take in order to survive as relevant entities in the public domain. Traditional methods of universities in teaching and learning, research, skill development, and knowledge management are swiftly being re-emphasized along market lines, with a focus on the particular needs of a knowledge economy (Johnston and Murray 2004). In this era of globalization and internationalization, universities struggle to remain relevant.

Among the external agencies that have a major influence on the evolution of universities are market forces, world university ranking bodies, and quality assurance agencies. Universities go through periodic curriculum reviews and faculties provide an international flavor through planned activities such as student exchange agreements and study abroad programs. As a result, universities evolve in terms of practices and new identities emerge.

Universities in the South East Asia region have ceased to be ivory towers distant to most except for those carefully selected few that make the mark. Most, if not all, countries in the region conduct common examinations set by the respective ministries of education for all school leavers. The results of these examinations will then determine if candidates may or may not be successful in getting a place in university. And those who have made the mark in previous years are relatively few as the number of seats available in universities then were so limited. Competition was, and still is, extremely stiff to get a place in low fee (almost nil) paying public universities. In Malaysia, the government subsidizes up to more than 80 percent of the fees in public universities. Thus, there is great incentive to make one’s way to a public university. Much literature has covered the phenomenon of massification of higher education (e.g., Neubauer and Tanaka 2011; Goolam 2008; Calderon 2012). The availability of secondary-level education to most which translates to an increase in the number of student population in schools, and the emphasis on knowledge-based economies (see National Higher Education Research Institute 2010 for further discussion), saw the mushrooming of higher education institutions in the past couple of decades.

As governments strive to educate the youth, they are limited in resources to meet the demands involved in setting up tertiary institutions that are capable of maintaining quality standards. Therefore, private institutions are allowed to be established and work hand in hand with public institutions to not only meet the national education agenda, but also to increase