

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION FOR TERTIARY EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This paper provides a conceptual paper on the impact of affirmative action for tertiary education in Malaysia. The topics was analysed according to three areas that include historical analysis, case study and in-depth interview. From the historical analysis, the research has shown that Malaysia has been successful in implementing affirmative action policies in the field of education, and this achievement has been recognized by many researchers and scholars. In the case study, this institution has successfully metamorphosized through its four stages and has reached adult stage. However, there is increasing recognition of the need to sit back and reflect of the future directions that this institution should take. From the interviews revealed that most interviewees regard the development of UiTM positively, however some interviewees caution that much more needs to be done, especially in order to achieve quality.

Keywords: Tertiary Education, Affirmative action, education policy, higher education, social science, education

INTRODUCTION

Ever since Malaysia was formed in September 1963, and even prior to that, when the nascent nation gained independence from Britain as the Federation of Malaya in 1957, its citizens have had to grapple with a number of issues that would determine the course and future of this multi-ethnic nation. The issue of affirmative action for higher education has been the subject of intense debate and discussion. As the country is made up of different races who practice and support various languages (especially English, Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and Tamil), there have been concerns expressed about the lack of educational opportunities for the *bumiputeras*

(literally sons of the soil or indigenous people) whose plight had been neglected during British colonial times. Faruqi(2016) states that the Federal and State Constitutions would normally equate the term to “Malays” and the “Natives of Sabah and Sarawak”

As the field of affirmative action is wide, this article presents a brief overview on developments in tertiary education, and then focuses on the development of educational opportunities for *bumiputeras*.

TERTIARY EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Puthuchery (1978) notes that secular schools in Malaysia were largely a legacy of the British colonial government. Initially, there was no provision for Malay-language secondary schools, forcing those who had studied in Malay during primary school to adjust to English-language education. Because of this, many Malays (*bumiputeras*) were deprived of opportunities to pursue tertiary education. Only two educational institutions were established i.e. Sultan Idris Training College to produce Malay teachers and Malay College Kuala Kangsar, which aimed to educate the Malay elite.

Malay politicians and academics have criticized this state of affairs. During the British colonial period, the Chinese and Indian immigrant communities established vernacular schools with school curricula and teachers from China and India respectively. During this period too, “mission schools” were established in major cities and towns to provide English education at primary and secondary levels. It was only from the 1950s that there were serious attempts to develop the national education system.

Kuhonta (2011) observes that throughout Malaysia’s history, the educational system has been heavily unequal, with the roots of such inequality going back to a policy of benign neglect under British rule. Hence, the central issue in the politics of education during the period of independence was as much one of national unity as one of expanding access and opportunity for the disadvantaged Malays.

Following the country’s independence as the Federation of Malaya in August 1957, there was an expansion in the number of public universities. Furthermore, the establishment of private *Higher Educational Institutions* (HEIs) marked a significant change in tertiary educational policy. Hence, there was a systematic move away from the elitist approach to education (inherited from Britain) to the egalitarian approach, especially after the initial Federation was expanded and the country was renamed Malaysia.

Currently, there are a number of public universities in Malaysia. Students also can enroll in private HEIs, many of which offer courses in collaboration with foreign HEIs. These programmes are diverse and range from the full "twinning" programme where all credits and

transcripts are transferable and admission is automatic, to programmes where the local institution offer an "associate degree." Nevertheless, despite the expansion in HEIs (both private and public), policies regarding tertiary education in Malaysia have continued to be debated and remain contentious.

Lee (2015: 302) describes education as playing a central role in Malaysia's economic growth and national development, with the government investing heavily in education. Hence, in 2011, the government spent 3.8 per cent of *Gross Domestic Product* (GDP) or 16 per cent of total government spending on education. In terms of equity, she notes that the issue is not only that disadvantaged groups gain access to education, but also to ensure that they have a certain degree of success after gaining admission.

Table 1. Types and numbers of higher educational institutions in Malaysia

Category	Type of Higher Institution	Number
Public / Government Institutions	University	31
	Polytechnic	30
	College / Institution	158
	Total	219
Private Institutions	University	72
	University College	35
	College / Institution	378
	Total	485
	Grand Total	704

Source: Malaysian Qualification Register (MQR)

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

Historically, affirmative action policies were introduced to assuage the anxiety of *bumiputeras* over their status in the land that they believed was theirs. Their anxiety was moderated when the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) formed in 1946, implemented pragmatic social reforms along ethnic lines with collaboration from other parties in the ruling Alliance Front and subsequently, the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition that has ruled the country since independence.

Consequently, ethnic and class divisions were redressed through a combination of party organization, state intervention and moderate policies of redistribution. It was also felt that education was one of the primary means to redress the economic imbalance in Malaysia.

Affirmative action means taking positive steps to end discrimination, to prevent its recurrence, and to create new opportunities that were previously denied. Affirmative action in most countries tends to focus on issues such as education and employment, specifically granting special consideration to racial minorities. Some have opposed affirmative action on the grounds that affirmative action could stigmatize people and hurt a person's work environment. Others view it as a reverse discrimination process which could remedy the economic & education imbalance.

In the Malaysian context, affirmative action policies were enhanced following the racial riots in May 1969 (known as the *May Thirteenth Incident*). The *New Economic Policy* (NEP), implemented in 1971 serves as a form of affirmative action. NEP provides affirmative action to the *bumiputera* majority because this group was deemed to have been given less opportunities in businesses and industries.

With regard to admissions in public universities, the Malaysian government implemented an affirmative action programme in 1973 setting a quota of 55% of public university places for *bumiputeras* and remaining 45% for students of Chinese and Indian origin (Lee, 2015).

Bumiputera students were selected for admission based on matriculation examination results, while non-*bumiputera* students were selected based on Higher School Certificate (STPM examination results). She notes that critics call the system unjust because the results of these examinations are not comparable.

However, the most significant move to implement affirmative action policies in tertiary education was the metamorphosis of a training college called DewanLatihan RIDA into a business college, then a much bigger institution and finally, a full-blown public-funded university known as UniversitiTeknologi MARA (UiTM) in 1999. Starting off as a small training centre, it has evolved into a multi-disciplinary university with branch campuses in all 13 states in Malaysia. Currently, it is home to 170,000 students and has produced approximately 600,000 graduates in various disciplines.

The author opines that this academic institution has largely succeeded in achieving its goals and objectives, especially in redressing the racial imbalance in meeting the country's manpower needs. However, as it moves forward into its full-blown adult stage, there needs to be a re-examination of its present and future roles in the context of the larger Malaysian society. Among the key issues that need to be addressed are:

- **The dilemma of quality versus quantity:** How do the administrators maintain the quality of education, especially in the far-flung rural campuses?
- **Pedagogical considerations:** What new teaching and learning strategies need to be adopted, and what are the infrastructural requirements? What is the relevance of courses taught *vis-a-vis* the needs of the job market?

- **Inbreeding and related issues:** How do the policy makers ensure that there is an injection of new blood into faculty and student populations, and should it open its doors to non-*bumiputeras*?
- **Returning to the Roots:** Since UiTM was set up in the first place to cater for the needs of the rural poor and reduce the imbalance between the haves and have-nots, what measures need to be implemented so as to ensure that the rural poor (regardless of racial origin) are the beneficiaries?

According to Prof A. MuradMerican in an article in *Utusan Malaysia* (2016), UiTM should move from the conventional framework to be more brave and study educational initiatives in the Malaysian plural society. This includes studying the way of business that the Chinese undertake, the impact of the new economic policy and the economy and politics of ASEAN and China. He asked the question why should UiTM not be the nucleus of the history which has produced so many graduates in the fields of economy entrepreneurship technocrats and intellectuals in the *bumiputra* community. He asked why UiTM should concentrate only on the *bumiputera* but why not other members in the plural society that is Chinese and Indians from all over Malaysia.

While this researcher basically endorses this suggestion, for the present it may be too early in the transformation process of UiTM. Perhaps it can be implemented once UiTM has achieved the targets set under the NEP, a policy that also needs to be re-examined in the light of contemporary developments in Malaysian society. There needs to be a paradigm shift in the thinking, not only about tertiary education in Malaysia but also about affirmative action, so that there will be greater national integration and unity.

With regard to the case study of UiTM undertaken as part of the research, it can be concluded that while UiTM has succeeded in producing *bumiputera* graduates in term of numbers, much more needs to be done in order to enhance the quality and marketability of graduates in certain fields of study.

DISCUSSION

This was focused mainly on analysis of affirmative action policies in the field of higher education. The research has shown that Malaysia has been successful in implementing affirmative action policies in the field of education, and this achievement has been recognized by many researchers and scholars. The exploration revealed that most interviewees regard the development of UiTM positively, however some interviewees caution that much more needs to be done, especially in order to achieve quality.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, the two inter-related areas of inquiry described in this article i.e. affirmative action and tertiary education in Malaysia, will continue to be discussed and debated. They are also issues that evoke varying sentiments from a wide spectrum of politicians, educators and civil society representatives.

The key concern is with regard to the question of permanence of affirmative action. There is a possibility of discontinuation of affirmative action in economic and education fields, as diversity in type of economy, education and work force increases. This is exemplified when, a number of writers have questioned the “newness” of the NEP, given that it was introduced more than four decades ago, that perhaps it has outlived its usefulness and that there is a need for new and relevant policies to meet contemporary needs of Malaysian society (Aihara, 2009; Lee, 2015).

At the micro level, the re-examination of affirmative action policies on tertiary education should focus on the roles and future directions of UiTM, along the lines mentioned earlier. It should also look at the roles of public universities and private HEIs. Though this initiative should be spearheaded by the Ministry of Higher Education, it should involve representatives from the public and private HEIs, and representatives from concerned civil society organizations.

At the macro level there needs to be a re-examination of the entire gamut of affirmative action policies. As this involves all segments of Malaysian society, it should be undertaken by a special independent commission of enquiry that is set up by the Malaysian Parliament. Such a reexamination is necessary not only for UiTM but also to determine future directions for this multi-ethnic nation.

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