

TOWARD A POLICY OPTION FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN PURSUIT OF WORLD CLASS HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Aspiring to become world class appears to be a preoccupation of many Southeast Asian universities. Measures of achievement are normally through internationally recognized rankings. The wordings used to enshrine this desire can be read from the Visions and Missions Statements showcased by these universities. However, only a few of them has made it through the ranking barrier of top 200. They could be considered as being World Class and the aspiration of the Asian or Southeast Asian universities'. Having aspirations and desires is obviously a necessary but not sufficient condition to achieving World Class status. This paper proposes a conceptual model based on many years of personal and vicarious experiences in higher education in several countries involving World Class and non-World Class universities. The model considers Management, Technology, Generational Gap and Curricula (MTGGC) as the fundamental dynamics to move universities towards global recognition and World Class ranking. These dynamics are constantly interactive in a planetary cluster with Management in the focal location. Each of these dynamics has its own elements which trigger innovation in pedagogy, education technology and even in educational structure and philosophy. Examples are given to show these innovations. The paper concludes by suggesting the need to consider reforming the structure of higher education in order to ensure its effectiveness in the midst of continuous change. This will provide inputs to and simultaneously guide the development of policies on higher education in Southeast Asia in particular.

Keywords: Higher Education, Southeast Asia, Policy option, world class, generation gaps

Introduction

It is an understatement to say that higher education has changed since it was recognized in the 11th century (de Ridder-Symoens, 1992). Indeed a lot of changes have taken place only in the last twenty or thirty years, mainly brought about by advancements in technology which pervade all aspects of human endeavours including higher education (Beanland, 2012).

Some investigations on higher education in Southeast Asia (Idrus 2002a,b,c,d; Idrus 2004a,b,c,d; Idrus 2007; Idrus 2008; Idrus 2010; Idrus 2011a,b; Idrus 2012; Idrus and Dyah, 2001; Idrus and Koh 2007; Idrus et al 2007) have provided rationale for pursuing world class but also indicate the need for an integrated model to achieve world class higher education status.

The Four Dynamics

In line with such development and observations (Idrus, 2011a), four fundamental dynamics are proposed, namely Management, Technology, Generational Gaps and Curricula which are placed in a planetary arrangement with management in a pivotal position and role. The other three are interacting with management but also with each other. The author is not lost on the existence of many other factors such as cultural, ethical, economics which necessarily transcend all these four dynamics.

This paper contends that improvement in management aspects is the gateway that opens more doors to more improvements even into the three other dynamics discussed here.

Management

Transformations are continuous just like quality which one never reached but continually improve. In respect of quality the reason for not ever reaching the quality target is simply that as quality of a product or service is considered improved, customers' expectations go up with it. The management of higher education is also asymptotic.

Higher education is a service industry by nature since it does not have a tangible product it actually sells. Graduates are indeed products of the education processes, but they are no more than a manifestation of the real products of education which hopefully is knowledge. Importantly it is also a service industry by virtue of the capital it exploits

and how it does so. Consequently, effective management of higher education is one that successfully manages people, their idiosyncrasies, aspirations, problems and successes. Who are these people in higher education? Essentially the staff and the students and all the people and organizations that help achieve the vision and missions of the institution.

However, borrowing from mathematics, the above are necessary but not sufficient conditions. This paper is not about management theories. It is about how to practically improve the management of higher education particularly in Southeast Asia and to raise the quality of those universities that need it so that we could get closer to the concept of global or world class university.

The author proposes perceived management shortfalls (Table 1) as the starting point for this model. It is subjective and non-scientific, but it is not conceit, as the aim is to improve the management. The subjectivity may be ameliorated scientifically or otherwise later, but the pursuit on improvement is started.

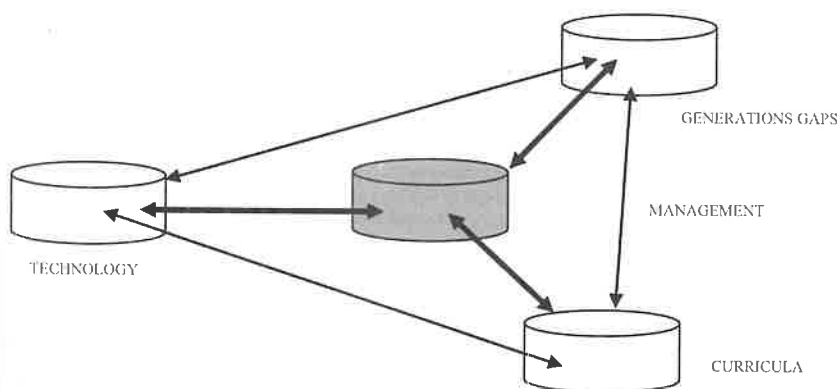


FIGURE 1: The relationships between the four fundamental dynamics

TABLE 1: Shortfalls in higher education management in a typical Southeast Asian university

NO.	SHORTFALLS	PROBABLE CAUSES	OBSERVABLE EXAMPLES
1	Lack of creative and innovative management and Lack of creative and innovative staff	Autocratic, inexperienced inflexible top management, centralized control, poor leaderships up and down the hierarchy and shackled by tight rules and regulations that were not developed together with their users and affected stakeholders	Good work by staff are not publicly acknowledged, Work beyond the <i>first mile</i> are not recognized, rewarded and celebrated
2	Time and energy wastages due to the bureaucracy	Management thinks that this is the right way to manage Management thinks that staff simply cannot be trusted and rules and regulations had to be set up <i>Taylorism</i> being perpetuated by management Management believes that through rules and regulations staff can be controlled most effectively and efficiently	Over-regulated or too many rules and regulations, too many unnecessary measurements and reporting Normally there is no follow up or at most times the resulting reports are not even read
3	Basic physical resources unavailable during critical times (teaching, exams)	Breakdown maintenance (of systems, equipment, as well as policies, rules and regulations) is practiced when the requirement is for strategic maintenance including <i>on-time conditioning monitoring and maintenance</i> Management is not omnipresent nor omniscient, so does not have a priori knowledge about new needs, while at the same time staff do not see it their job to let management know	Anachronistic systems of administration No air-conditioning in class and staff rooms for days Non-functioning AVA in lecture theatres (that naturally compromise the effectiveness of the lecture) No lights during final exams
4	Institutional pursuit for new teaching and learning methods is non-existent Continual quality improvements do not exist	Previous experiences of staff who had initiated changes to teaching and learning, e.g. no dispensation in terms of their probable dip in students' evaluation of their teaching given that students prefer the <i>status quo</i> Again management is not omniscient	Anachronistic teaching and learning practices perpetuating <i>rote learning</i>
5	Staff expend <u>minimum</u> effort in pursuit for excellence	No reward from management for doing these although they are important for academic and intellectual development	Lack of intellectual interchanges and intercourses, e.g. informal seminars, discussion groups
6	Lack of openness	Staff take the cue from management as they may be penalized if they practice openness As staff are not trusted by management, they are therefore not going to trust students	Staff and academic offices are closed, uninviting, locked, windows covered and thus disallowing anybody to look in. They almost resemble <i>Fort Knox</i> Staff lock themselves in

7	Lack of trust	Management practices, particularly on fairness, ethics, rewards, punishment, public recognition	No staff would raise anything and normally would not participate in discussions during meetings, therefore no new ideas arise
8	<i>Everyone for himself</i> culture observed and is distinct	The fear that they will themselves be facing the same predicament as the people they tried to help. The demise of others would mean bigger opportunity for them	Staff take pleasure in the demise of others, instead of helping the unfortunates
9	Misunderstanding, mediocre to low productivity abound	The real and accurate information were seldom communicated and when they are communicated the <i>damage</i> has normally been done	The level of gossips is high to very high (without any intention of being gender bias) not only amongst women Staff movements are not easily decipherable by others
10	Lack of staff loyalty, lack of pride in their work	Staff's frustrations, helplessness, hopelessness Staff is convinced that they are infallible because it is management that does not allow them to do the right and needy things	Open or almost open <i>allusions</i> to management inefficiencies across the institution
11	Staff's skills in problem solving appear non-existent	Staff are not empowered or not made aware that they could try to resolve the problems and they are supported by management in doing so. It is also probable that staff with initiatives had in the past been <i>penalized</i> for trying to do just that	Complaints aplenty but nobody comes up with any idea to resolve the problems Whether it is real or imaginary, sometime people simply do not seem to see and/or understand the problem although it is staring them in their faces. Naturally, if one does not see or understand the problem there will not be any possible answers
12	Lack of new ideas	Staff are not empowered Staff are not encouraged New ideas are not supported Believed that new ideas will rock the boat Management pride (new ideas must always come from management)	Ideas from newcomers are derided or at least the newcomers are told that new ideas are futile there, have been tried before and did not work, management does not support new ideas and so on
13	Lack of quality overall	Data collected or are available but no one analyses them to come up with improvement possibilities There is no direction regarding Institutional Research (IR) There is no knowledge on <i>Value Analysis</i> (VA) to rid of unnecessary costs	Staff are not aware of IR and how IR could help their teaching and learning Staff are not aware of VA

The other three dynamics viz. technology, generational gaps and curricula are directly and profoundly impacted by management shortfalls. If these are not resolved, no amount of technology and attempts to plug the generational gaps or aligning the curricula with industries' needs will transform the institution or put it on the path towards world class.

That is, management holds a pivotal position and role in the quest for excellence, quality and world class. In our practice of scientific compartmentalization, a lot had been written about the roles of the other dynamics and normally in a septic focus. This obviously does not bring an optimized or even a comprehensive result.

A higher education policy that only looks at pedagogy or technology or generational gap in isolation for example will not deliver the required changes.

Technology

The impacts of technology are so pervasive that a profound discussion on it here seems superfluous. What is important to mention and underscore is that it must inevitably rattle the philosophy of education itself. The roles of professors, lecturers and teachers appear to have been significantly changed. Previously they were the experts who transferred knowledge to the novice. The convenient, rapid and 24/7 access to information and knowledge nowadays surely make that role redundant. If technology in the past had been to assist the transfer of knowledge, for example through AVA (Audio Visual Aids) such as OHP, Slides Projectors, and thus were subservient to the professors and lecturers, the technology now seems to have usurped their very roles. If academics were to survive then they will have to change.

Either for altruistic or other reasons, MIT's Open Course Ware (Ross, 2009) and Open Culture Free on-line courses from top universities (<http://www.openculture.com/freeonlinecourses>, <http://www.myebook.com/>) are just some examples that clearly revolutionized and "egalitarianized" education. Those who do not accept that the monopoly in knowledge and information has now disappeared will face a harder fall than those who are prepared to accept and to change. As technology grows rapidly, changes in education and mindset regarding education must also move quickly.

A number of new pedagogy has emerged in recent times (Mazur, 1995; Idrus & Koh, 2007) not necessarily because of technology per se but

would most probably not happen without technology

Generational Gaps

Accompanying technology explosion is generational revolution. Those born into the computer age, that is, those who were born after 1980 became popularly known as Gen-Y or Net-Gen (Network Generation) or the Millennials and research showed that they have distinct characteristics (Idrus, 2011b) which are different from its previous generation(s). In higher education this signaled a potential dilemma in learning effectiveness.

A lot of research had been done in North America on these characteristics (Tapscott, 1998; Tapscott, 2008, Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005). Given the observed differences in several educational factors between North America and Southeast Asia, Idrus (2011b) carried out a comparative study by surveying students from several universities in Malaysia, Indonesia and The Philippines (Table 2).

TABLE 2: Net Gens characteristics in North America and Southeast Asia

No.	Net Gen Characteristics	NTH AMER	M/I/P
1	They have a great facility for technology and an eagerness for change	√	√
2	They assume that information is to be shared, not hoarded	√	√
3	They have a lack of patience with bureaucracy	√	?
4	They have a passion for service, and a desire to make a (big) difference	√	?
5	They are multi-skilled and able to do up to four different things at the same time	√	×
6	They tend to teamwork, prefer experiential activities and use technology	√	√
7	They prefer to be involved in creating rather than being passive recipients	√	×
8	Students coming to college expect a 'transformative education'	√	×
9	They are ready for multimedia learning to be delivered on a flexible learning schedule, one that is not tied to a set time and place	√	×
10	They would want faculty members to use information technology to communicate knowledge better	√	?
11	They preferred instructors to make moderate use of information technology	√	√
12	Social networking is the basis of net gens characteristics – Facebook is used by students extensively and is beginning to be used by faculty members	√	√

NTH AMER = North American

M/I/P = Malaysian, Indonesian, Philippines

Further research is being conducted to seek more understanding why seven out of 12 characteristics identified in the North American students are not matched by Southeast Asian students.

However it is clear that these characteristics are directly contradictory to the characteristics of the previous generations and/or just different from them. In both cases the potential for conflicts and consequent waning in learning effectiveness is evident.

In the pursuit of world class quality it is essential that the learning in those institutions should be as effective, efficacious and efficient as possible.

Both government and institutional policies must be a fine balance between espousing the lecturers' wisdom and catering for the students' characteristics.

Curricula

In Malaysia, for example, we increasingly hear and read open criticisms that its higher education is not catering for its industry (Aruna, 2012; Bernama 2012). Asia generally and Southeast Asia in particular are already seeing higher education qualifications as tickets to good and well-paying jobs. However, universities are in a precarious position if they only cater for industry as their roles also include the insemination and development of new knowledge, critical and creative thinkers. Importantly therefore, their curricula must also be fine-tuned to a moving target. This could only happen with conducive management practices.

How does this model work?

It is important that the interactions between these four dynamics create synergy for the whole university while enriching themselves respectively so that they will each further contribute to the synergy of the whole.

It seems logical that universities need a network of environmental scanners located in all units of the university tasked with uncovering and analysing new products, systems and services for their potential of providing further competitive advantages to the university. This network should be active in regularly discussing, analysing and evaluating the findings by members with the intention of proposing changes to various aspects of the university operation. In particular of course any proposals

must refer to the four dynamics above. In other words, any proposed changes say in technology should be evaluated as to its effects on management, on generation gaps, on curricula. There are obviously many ways of doing this and one example is given here (Table 3).

TABLE 3: Impact evaluation of proposals for change on the four dynamics

NO.	PROPOSAL	IMPACTS ON MANAGEMENT	IMPACTS ON TECHNOLOGY	IMPACTS ON GENERATION GAPS	IMPACTS ON CURRICULA
1	Change learning style to <i>Flipped Learning</i>	Full empowerment of staff Need new ways of staff supervision Acceptance by staff Acceptance by students More effective learning = costs effectiveness?	Increased Internet communication bands Increased internet utilization	Gaps reduced Staff begin to under-stand the need for alignment Increased learning enthusiasm	Assessments methods Evaluation of curricula
2	xxx....				

Clearly the relationships are rather complex. We need to decide what it is that we should do to achieve synergy. A mathematical optimization may be ideal in such a case. However, at this stage a qualitative series of impacts on the dynamics brought about by various proposals (second column Table 3) need to be established first. Indeed the proposals themselves will need to be identified in the first place. For these we need a group of well-informed people who also have experience whether directly or vicariously in each of the four dynamics. The Steps will be elaborated on at the conference presentation.

Discussion

While this Model is conceptual at this stage and it is recognized that its implementation would need a courageous university President to implement, it is observed that it is rapidly becoming inevitable for

universities in Southeast Asia to seek a solution to their predicament particularly as competitors (including those from overseas) can no longer be kept at bay.

Personal experience of microcosmic implementation of the Model in an Australian university resulted in tripling enrolment in 4 years, improving quality of both intakes and graduates and significant reduction in financial deficits at one faculty. Similar experiences in an Indonesian Graduate Business School resulted in 72% increase in enrolment in 2 years and returning it to profitability within 3 years. While at a faculty in a private Malaysian university, enrolment doubled in less than 4 years, a new teaching and learning method was introduced while staff morale was significantly improved.

It appears feasible that the Model proposed here will not only allow a university to survive, but through the unfolding and the resulting release of innovation and creativity in management, technology, generations understanding and curricula, increasing opportunities will evolve which will be a moving competitive advantage. In turn this provides the path towards a world class status.

Conclusion

Instigated by a desire to be part of the race towards world ranking, Southeast Asian universities need an effective model. The conceptual model proposed in this paper resulting from the author's extended experience in higher education in five countries gives initial insights. Examples of its use by the author in three different countries appear to yield tangible results. The underlying thread is a sustained synergistic approach at least in four dynamics namely management, technology, generational understanding and facilitating curricula. This paper has discussed how each of these needs contribute to that synergy and a path towards a facilitating higher education policy at least in Southeast Asia.

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