Improving Teaching Quality In A Public University: A Case Of Uitm

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Introduction

The Malaysian government is placing more emphasis on public universities to perform and contribute towards the economic growth through quality education (9MP, 2006). Hence to ensure this outcome, academic excellence at all the public universities are guided by five tenets or star areas which comprise of: teaching and learning, R&D, community services, internationalization and, harnessing the full potential of the university (MoHE, 2006).

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Higher Education has divided public universities into two categories: teaching or research. Currently, UiTM is a teaching university as the university still offers diploma courses. However, UiTM aspires to be a research intensive university (RIU) by the year 2010.

Meanwhile, UiTM's teaching remains the core competency for the university. The remaining years should be concentrated to setting standards for the production of quality graduates. This can be achieved through quality and efficient teaching methods so that the graduate becomes a 'wholesome' individual who matches the needs of the market, the industry and the nation.

World University Rankings

In general, there is wide agreement that universities have three major roles: (i) excellence in education for their students; (ii) research, development and dissemination of knowledge, and (iii) activities contributing to the cultural, and civic life of society. Around the world, students are encouraged to seek the best university education, at home or abroad. Thus, universities now are challenged to

be world class and, ranking universities to be in "world class" or "international" stature has become a challenging attempt.

SHJT and THES

One widely referred to international ranking of universities is the Shanghai Jiaotong University (SHJT). The Institute of Higher Education at SJU began to rank universities world-wide in 2003. Its rankings are based upon several indicators of academic or research performance, including alumni and staff winning Nobel prizes and Field medals, highly cited researchers, articles published in Nature and Science, articles indexed in major citation indices, and the academic measures for each institution when divided by professional or staff.

Another ranking is by The Times Higher Education Supplement (THES), a weekly newspaper based in London that reports specifically on issues related to higher education. In partnership with QS Quacquarelli Symonds Ltd, it published the annual The Times Higher – QS World University Rankings, also popularly known as THES. While the SHJT ranking gives a greater weight to direct indicators, it is largely restricted towards scientific research. However THES ranking criteria covers more categories (Table 1.0). Thus, THES is the preferred ranking and is referred to in this paper.

Table 1.0: Times Higher Education Supplement World University Rankings 2006 Criteria

Criteria	Indicator	Brief Description	Weight
Research Quality	Peer Review	Comparison score drawn from peer review	40%
	Citations per Faculty	Score based on research performance factored against the size of the research body	20
Graduate Employability	Recruiter Review	Score based on research performance factored against the size of the research body	10%

International Outlook	International Faculty	Score based on proportion of international faculty	5%
	International Students	Score based on proportion of international students	5%
Teaching Quality	Student Faculty	Score based on students/faculty ratio	20%

On the Home Front

On the Malaysian scene, two Malaysian universities have remained in THES's The World Top 200 Universities, 2006. The two universities are Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (ranked 185 from 289 in 2005) and Universiti Malaya (ranked 192 from 169 in 2005).

As UiTM's vision is to be of a world class stature by the year 2010, it has to fulfill the criteria set forth. And since THES criteria are wide ranging, the focus of this paper is on Teaching Quality, to make it manageable. The primary reason for choosing this criterion over the others is that teaching has been the main thrust of UiTM since its inception in the late 1950s. With its targeted enrollment of 200,000 students by the year 2015 from the current enrollment of 110,000 students, the focus on teaching is further emphasized. Thus, the need to strategize the approaches in teaching quality would help UiTM in attaining its vision.

Teaching Quality

Teaching quality refers to the quality of what goes on in the classroom, lecture theatres, laboratories and in all places where teaching and learning occur. Teaching quality only exists if it brings about quality learning (Wain, 1997). Teaching quality should relate to the quality of the learning experience of the students. It should set to bring about the environment within which the learning experience takes place and takes note of different teaching styles by providing a range of suitable learning experiences.

Furthermore, adequate facilities for teaching and learning are essential and, this includes the curriculum (MoHE, 2006:124). The most innovative teaching relies on access to appropriate libraries and other electronic resources. The Internet has eased access to many kinds of knowledge and cost savings and makes seeking information easier. The technologically advanced facilities must not replace the traditional teaching and learning process. However, the facilities needed to go beyond laboratories and libraries; lecturers and professors must have adequate space and offices as well. Teaching and learning too require professors and students to be in direct contact with one another (Altbach, 2004).

The university must also commit itself to attract, cultivate and retain, based on international standards, the best possible faculty members and students, combined with relentless evaluation in the form of internal and external reviews (Awang, 2006). A world-class university is recognized as an eminent institution, a place where top academics will wish to congregate. The university is also a place where people will want to spend time to experience and associate with the fame and respect that goes with the name of the university. Absolutely fundamental to building such a climate is the quality of its staff, especially the academic faculty members (Niland, 2000).

Issues in Quality Teaching

For any academic endeavor, there will always be issues and this includes the quality of teaching. In order to enhance the teaching quality for UiTM academic staff, some of the issues to be tackled include:

The Faculty-Student Ratio

The Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) defines teaching quality simply as the faculty-student ratio. Thus, the higher the faculty per student the higher is the score. Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), ranked by THES at 277, has a faculty-student ratio of around 1:20. USM has improved its standing when it was ranked at 326th place in 2005. Currently, USM has around 35,000 students enrolled including 28,000 undergraduates and about 1800 lecturers. This leads to

the lecturer-student ratio of 1:20. In Britain, the University of Southampton appears in the top 200, with a ranking of 141. The University has nearly 20,000 students and 5000 staff based across its campuses in Southampton and Winchester. The ratio of faculty to student numbers and the university's success in attracting foreign students has helped in its ranking (University of Southampton, 2006).

UiTM which aspires to be ranked favourably in 2010 currently has a student population of 110, 000 students and 5266 lecturers, leading to a faculty-student ratio of 1:21. This compares favourably to that of USM's ratio. However, UiTM students are not distributed evenly throughout the faculties and the branch campuses. The ratio can be higher in certain faculties and campuses. The ratio may affect UiTM's ranking and accreditation purposes.

Student Intake

The number of students to be admitted must be determined by the university's resources and the number of its qualified personnel. The ability of the institution to deliver effective teaching and learning processes at all stages of the program must be addressed relative to student intake. UiTM claims to have received the largest budget from the government compared to other public institutions of higher education (IHEs). In 2006, UiTM received over RM1billion from the government. Proper allocation of resources should be devised based on focused areas of interests especially on the academic programs. UiTM's mission is to provide more education to less fortunate bumiputera irrespective of socio-economic background while the affluent ones should enrol at private IHEs.

According to the Malaysian Qualifying Agency (formerly known as Lembaga Akreditasi Negara or LAN (2006), there is no best method of student selection. Whatever method is used, the university has to justify it. The criterion and process of selections have to be made public, free from discrimination and biases. However, UiTM's position is unique whereby it practises affirmative action policies. Does that mean that 'real meritocracy' can not serve its purpose

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in UiTM? University Malaya's (MU) dismal ranking by THES is claimed to be attributed to its failure to practice real meritocracy and poor student intake. Do UiTM's criteria for student intake satisfy the pre-requisite and the minimum skills needed to be enrolled in a particular program?

The Faculty Member

The idea that administrators, rather than quality students and faculty, make a good university is a myth. Rather, the quality of students, faculty and other academic staff are the most important components in assuring the quality of teaching. Every effort must be made to ensure that suitably qualified lecturers are recruited. If difficulty arises in recruiting suitable lecturers, measures must be taken to prevent the `brain drain'. The recruitment policy must seek a balance between senior and junior lecturers. UiTM lecturers' recruitment policy requires a potential candidate to have a second upper honor's degree (master's degree) with a good command of the English Language, from a recognised university. UiTM also needs professionals as lecturers to teach professional courses. However, many of these professionals do not possess masters' degrees and can not be recruited as lecturers. The reality is that only professionals can train or teach a professional. Also, faculty members with doctoral degrees (PhD/DBA) are less than 10%. Those appointed to full professors are at a low 1%. These factors also contribute to low ranking and teaching quality.

Suggestions

Faculty-student ratio, one of the important criterion used by THES in the ranking of university, is used to measure the teaching quality of an institution (Levin, et al, 2006). Looking at the current ratio of faculty-student of 1:30 or more in most faculties in UiTM, especially at the undergraduate level, a lot needs to be done to lower the ratio in order to make the university at par with current world-class universities such as Harvard and Cambridge (THES, 2006). However, this is no easy feat. Currently, there are slightly over 5266 lecturers in UiTM teaching about 110,000 students in 14 branch campuses. The number of students will double to 200,000 by 2010 to give more opportunities for Bumiputra students to

get quality education, and the increase in the number of faculty is not in tandem with the increase in student intake. This means that lecturers will be burdened with high teaching load, with some teaching up to 22 hours per week. This will adversely affect lecturers' involvement in research because a lot of their time is spent in the classroom and less on research. If this trend continues, UiTM's goal to be ranked in the top 200 universities by THES by 2010 may not materialize. To ensure that we deliver our teaching to the highest possible standards, the following suggestions may help:

Recruit High Quality Staff

To cope with the double increase in student intake and to deliver quality teaching, UiTM has to recruit more qualified staff to teach and carry out research. However, getting qualified staff is not easy because of stiff competition from other IHEs. In order to attract and retain well-motivated and high-caliber academic and support staff, UiTM needs to invest in staff development by offering more scholarships such as the Young Lecturer Scheme (TPM) and improve staff remuneration at all levels.

Hire Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) and Graduate Research Assistant (GRA)

To help lower the faculty-student ratio and improve teaching quality, capable graduate students can be hired to teach undergraduate classes, assist lecturers in research areas and invigilate in examinations. Hiring GTA and GRA to assist in teaching and research, as what is being practiced in universities abroad, will help lessen the teaching burden of lecturers to enable them to engage in more research. In order to do this, UiTM has to attract high quality post-graduate students to the university and offer attractive remuneration package to the GTA and GRA.

Admit High Quality Students

Although UiTM's main social obligation is to offer quality education to Bumiputra students, we should not compromise on the quality of the student intake. Therefore, UiTM needs to review its entry requirements for post-graduate and undergraduate programs to ensure only qualified students are selected. Post-graduate applicants must provide TOEFL/GRE scores, good CGPA,

recommendation from referees and, adequate working experience to make sure only quality students are admitted. The Centre of Graduate Studies, UiTM needs to develop a rigorous marketing plan in order to increase the quantity and quality of post-graduate students. For undergraduate admissions, applicants must have excellent SPM/STPM/Matriculation/ Diploma/MUET results and preference must be given to candidates who are proficient in English. In addition to that, applicants must also attend interview and sit for the IQ/EQ test.

Offer State-of-the-Art Academic Facilities

Adequate academic facilities are essential if UiTM wants to attract high quality students. We are not only competing with local universities, but international universities as well for the same pool of students. Given the stiff competition, good libraries, computer facilities and laboratories as well as access to the internet and other electronic resources are essential if innovative teaching and learning are to take place.

Therefore, excellence in teaching is important if UiTM's goal is to be included in the THES ranking in the near future. The above suggestions may help the university to lower the faculty-student ratio and improve teaching quality, which is one of the main criteria used in the ranking.

Conclusion

If UiTM aspires to be ranked as a world-class university by the year 2010, teaching quality has to be addressed with serious urgency. This goal is going to be challenged by double student population by the year 2015, thus, teaching quality should not be compromised. One of the criteria of the ranking by THES is faculty-student ratio which is the equivalent of teaching quality. Teaching quality translates into effective teaching and learning which includes faculty-student ratio, quality staff, quality student intake and, state-of-the-art academic facilities to facilitate teaching and learning. Effective implementation of these measures will ultimately lead UiTM to be world-class.

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