

Excellence in Malaysian Universities: Senior Academics in Public and Private Institutions Discuss this Notion

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ABSTRACT

An article from the Times Higher Education inspired this investigation into the perception of university excellence in Malaysian universities with senior academics. Focus group discussions took place in two private and two public universities with random keywords supplied to facilitate the discussions. Discourse analysis of the transcripts of the tape-recorded discussions revealed the academics in private universities tended to use more lexical items associated with industry and liberal market ideologies, such as “employability” and “brand,” which conform to a newly-identified description of the research university as an academic entrepreneurial paradigm. By contrast, public university academics emerged as intellectual purists, with references to “curiosity-driven research,” “academic freedom,” and “commitment” to the transfer of knowledge, in their discussions. Such terms are reflective of more traditional notions of our oldest social institution, the university.

Keywords: excellence, Malaysia, public and private universities

INTRODUCTION

In 2001, self-proclaimed “academic tourist,” Professor Graeme Harper embarked on a quest to discover the definition of excellence in a university. To date his travels have taken him to Australian, British, Japanese

and American universities and he has increasingly found excellence to be an elusive, multi-faceted notion. At MIT, greatness derives from curiosity-driven research; in Melbourne, Australia, from creative reciprocity between students and faculty; at Harvard, from inherent leadership quality; and at St Andrews, from local pride in being Scotland’s oldest university. At the delightfully-named FUN University or Future University Hakodate, Japan, openness and human values contributed to the perception of excellence (Harper, 2010).

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 18 December 2013

Accepted: 1 January 2014

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Universities are proliferating annually in Malaysia and many promote themselves as “excellent,” “premier,” or “leading.” The problem with using such superlatives is that they tend to lose their potency and meaning with over-use over time. Moreover, as Harper finds, excellence defies a singular definition.

Our objective in this exploratory study of Malaysian universities, which was fundamental research, was to discover whether the notion of “excellence” differed between the older, more established public universities and newer, industry-supported private universities in the eyes of academics with more than ten years’ experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study commences with a brief background of the university, our oldest social institution, to form the rationale for some of the keywords provided for the focus group discussions.

The first university was a garden, not a structure. At Plato’s Grove of Academus, located outside Athens, circa 360 B.C., the patrician classes of Greece and Asia Minor held informal philosophical discussions concerning the governance of the ideal society. The first formal institutes of learning were constructed in parallel in North Africa and Europe between the 10th and 12th Centuries. Islam established and informed a broad range of subjects at the universities in the Maghreb, whereas the Church established the universities in Europe. The University of Bologna, Italy, in particular, was notable for enshrining the concept of

“academic freedom,” granting travelling scholars the right to pursue knowledge without hindrance.

It was not until 1850, a time of profound social and economic change in Western Europe, that the purpose and character of Higher Education was discussed by John Henry Newman. Rejecting the passive rote memorization he had experienced at Oxford, Newman maintained education should cultivate the intellect to form and express individual opinions and judgments, with knowledge pursued as an end in itself (Newman, 1996). Until this time, Oxbridge had remained a bastion for the sons of wealthy landowning families to forge useful social connections. Valued professions today such as Law, Medicine and Engineering were acquired not by attending university but through systems similar to apprenticeships (Garland, 1996).

In America, the first modern research university, John Hopkins, was established in 1876 to emulate the new German university model. It gave prominence to science and research over philosophy and teaching, and its academics were given absolute freedom to write or publish. Abraham Flexner, who founded the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, was an alumni of John Hopkins. He was critical of mass enrolment in American universities, believing education to be incompatible with business. In Flexner’s opinion, the smaller the institution, the better the quality of education (Iwabuchi, 2004). Flexner’s vision for Princeton seems to bear similarities to Newman’s i.e. a haven devoted to cultivating curiosity and

liberating scholars from a utility-oriented, outside world.

Two influential manuscripts on Higher Education were published in 1963 in the USA and Britain. Clark Kerr, President of the University of California, documented the impact of unprecedented increases in student enrolment and with great prescience, introduced the term Multiversity (Kerr, 2001). The implication is that of a corporation: having thousands of students and hundreds of courses; responsibility for its infrastructure; different locations; contacts with government and industry; an impact on its immediate vicinity and many employees. The analogy appears complete when Kerr compares UC with IBM.

The Robbins Report was published in Britain in 1963 with the intention to advance technology and achieve social change in a decade by doubling student enrolments, funded by taxation increases (Her Britannic Majesty's Treasury, 1963). Nevertheless, Lord Robbins exercised patrician concern regarding academic freedom at individual and societal levels by stating:

Such freedom is a necessary condition of the highest efficiency and the proper progress of academic institutions, and that encroachments on their liberty, in the supposed interests of greater efficiency, would in fact diminish their efficiency and stultify their development

(Her Britannic Majesty's Treasury, 1963, p. 229).

By 2000, with increased enrolments and increasingly knowledge-based economies in Western Europe and the USA, fully or even partially, public-funded universities had become unsustainable, although possibly this was less problematic for some American universities receiving generous, tax-exempt endowments from alumni. Many universities worldwide finance themselves by charging tuition fees, although ethically these cannot be raised to an extent which jeopardizes equality of opportunity for poorer students. As institutions for the production and dissemination of knowledge, universities were urged by their governments to market and patent more of their inventions. To illustrate this more recent entrepreneurial university, a theoretical triple helix was suggested involving linkage between the separate entities of academia, industry and government (Etzkowitz, Webster, Gebhardt & Cantisano Terra, 2000). Acquiescence to this entrepreneurial model appeared in the film *The Social Network* (2011) documenting Mark Zuckerberg's creation of Facebook at Harvard. When three fellow undergraduates accused Zuckerberg of intellectual theft, they were dismissed from the President's office with the memorable line, "Harvard graduates believe inventing a job is better than finding one" (Fincher, 2011). Of particular import here is that the President was giving all the students concerned academic freedom.

This relatively recent entrepreneurial model requires academics to liaise and negotiate outside the university but relationships may sometimes be tense due to

conflicting interests. Blumenthal, Causino, Campbell and Louis (1996) highlighted issues concerning patent applications between researchers and Life Sciences industries i.e. agriculture, chemical and pharmaceutical. Firstly, such applications were secretive and time-consuming, thus delaying the publication of graduate theses. Moreover, funding tended to be exaggerated in the Life Sciences, when in reality it was often for less than half a million dollars and less than a two-year duration. Similar tensions have also been documented between universities and the U.S. National Institute of Health with researchers experiencing attempts by the economically and politically powerful to silence or politicize their research, particularly studies involving the tobacco industry (Rosenstock & Lee, 2002).

Industry operates in an aura of secrecy to maintain its profitable edge, whereas the role of universities from ancient times has been the dissemination of information to improve society. Campuses with barbed-wire fences resembling maximum security prisons are a far cry from Crick and Watson sketching the structure of the DNA helix on beer mats in the Blue Boar, Cambridge. This new entrepreneurial paradigm then, places academics in unfamiliar negotiations raising finances for research with high-risk venture capital companies, when their ultimate aim is to publish in scholarly journals (Florida, 1999).

Dramatic changes with the advent of computer-mediated communication have also had an unforeseen impact on universities over the last 50 years. This

has facilitated distance learning, making it possible for students to work autonomously and interactively off campus (Landow, 1996). Compare, for example, today's Harvard undergraduate accessing the Perseus Project, an electronic corpus of Ancient Greek with numerous hyperlink texts, to John Henry Newman reciting classical Greek under the tutorage of scholarly Oxford dons.

Turning to the Malaysian context of this study, the country's oldest university, The University of Malaya or UM, celebrated its centenary in 2005. This means all universities in Malaysia, public and private, are still in their infancy compared to their American and European counterparts. The British colonial heritage of Universiti Sains Malaysia, or USM in Penang, is evident from many of its campus buildings. The American influence on all universities, lies in the relatively recent introduction of the Grade Point Average system, or GPA, for student assessment.

Measurement and accountability structures are notable features of universities in Malaysia. Whilst students are rated using GPAs, the quality of an academic, primarily in teaching and research, is measured using Key Performance Indicators, or KPIs. They also provide information to assess eligibility for promotion with the criteria set by institutions. Whether KPIs, do measure academic excellence remains a contentious issue as the system may be circumvented to achieve the periodically-reviewed targets. For example, in order to fulfill research quotas, research papers may be submitted

to inferior quality journals or journals requiring payment for publication, thus prioritizing quantity over quality. A time-consuming preoccupation with fulfilling research targets can easily be considered a distraction from the core functions of the university since antiquity i.e. teaching and learning.

In January 2013, five public universities in Malaysia, including UM and USM, were given autonomy in 4 areas: finance and wealth creation; institutional governance; human resources and academic management; and student admissions (Kulasagaran, 2012). The expressed objective was to encourage excellence. This however, is institutional and financial autonomy, not, as Sharom (2012) noted, academic freedom which would require the Statutory Bodies Discipline and Surcharge Act to be amended or revoked. No academic freedom implies a major deviation from the objective of Plato’s time which was to improve society.

Recently, one newspaper article criticized higher education in Malaysia for conformance to a pre-established, instrumental, economically-useful agenda (Yusoff & Munir, 2012). It therefore seems opportune to ask Harper’s question regarding the perception of excellence with relation to Malaysian universities.

METHOD

Four universities participated in this qualitative study of Senior Academics’ perceptions of excellence in Malaysian universities. The two private, government-linked, city universities are in Bangi, just

outside Kuala Lumpur and have been in existence for less than 20 years. Multimedia University, or MMU, was established by Telekom Malaysia, or TM, and has a twin campus in Melaka. Universiti Tenaga, or UNITEN, was established by Tenaga National Berhad, or TNB, the national electricity supplier. The two private universities are Malaysia’s oldest, The University of Malaya or UM, in Kuala Lumpur, and Universiti Sains Malaysia, or USM, established in Penang 45 years ago.

Each university was emailed with a brief outline of the study and the 30 minutes required for the discussion, for academics to voluntarily participate. Sixteen Senior Academics from a range of disciplines i.e. the humanities, social science, pure science and engineering, were involved in the four discussion groups: eight from the private universities, eight from the public. Senior Academics had previously been defined as lecturers / researchers with at least 10 years’ teaching experience and therefore a Senior Lecturer, PhD or Professor. Table 1 below shows the status and gender of the participants, who were assured confidentiality and will therefore remain anonymous throughout this study.

TABLE 1
Participants’ Status and Gender

Multimedia University	2 Professors 1 PhD	3 males
Universiti Tenaga National	3 PhDs 2 Senior Lecturers	3 females 2 males
University of Malaya	4 Professors	3 males 1 female
Universiti Sains Malaya	2 Professors 2 Associate Professors	4 females

Qualitative data was preferred over structured interviews and questionnaires as it was believed senior academics would be more amenable to sharing their subjective perceptions in the relaxed setting of a focus group (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Moreover, power relations are inherent in data collection procedures, e.g. with surveys, the interviewer has control by deciding which questions are asked. By contrast, a focus group implies a transfer in the locus of control, with the participants determining the features to be discussed in this particular instance. This was considered to be more appealing to higher status academics. The selection of senior academics, as opposed to lecturers, was deliberate for two reasons: to ensure wealth of experience and to possibly uncover any perceived changes over time.

We introduced ourselves, gave a brief outline of the study, its funding, and instructions for one university as they were unfamiliar with focus group discussions. The major structuring question written on the whiteboard was:

Your notion of excellence in a university

A number of keywords from a preliminary discussion between the researchers were also randomly written on the whiteboard to prevent any interruption by the researchers during the discussion. The focus groups were informed they could refer to these keywords or use their own ideas during the 30 minute recorded discussion. The keywords were :

*Facilities...Collaboration...
Library...Teaching... Trimester...
KPIs.*

*State vs. Private...Urban vs.
rural...Publishing house...*

*Salaries–Tenure – Grievances.....
Commitment...Longevity*

*Curiosity vs. Market-driven
research...Corporate Culture.....*

Architecture.....

Multidisciplinary vs. Specialist...

With permission, the discussions were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Two Private Universities

“Functional” and “businesslike” describe the locale of the private universities where the discussions took place in meeting rooms accommodating up to 10 people. There was little decoration in the MMU meeting room, except two TM posters, bearing the slogans, “Customer Centricity” and “performance-based culture”, alongside an empowerment message from The Mental Warrior, Lawrence Ng. We did not get a full impression of MMU as most doors remained closed. UNITEN’s Chancellery was more inviting, with flowers at the Information Desk. There were illustrated signs to “use the water wisely” in the toilets and “Burn calories, not electricity” by the lift. UNITEN follows the five S principles of Japanese manufacturing culture, which explained the neat, minimalist ambiance. The UNITEN

meeting room allocated for the discussion had more motivational posters.

Deference describes the focus group session at MMU with the two expatriate Professors largely dominating the discussion. Prof 1 began with the acknowledgement the terminology surrounding “excellence,” i.e. “premier” and “leading” had become predictable but he proudly added MMU’s research was only outranked by four public universities. Prof 2, an Engineer, pondered the question before objectively listing his four criteria to determine excellence in a university: students’ admission and output; research, consultancy and projects. He then elaborated on each of these features with Prof 1 concurring a particular strength at MMU was its collaboration with “an enormous number of companies” However, after the mention of strength, its antonym, weakness, caused the discussion to change direction.

The first weakness concerned location, as Prof 1 thought the campus, described as a little isolated and 35 kilometres. from the capital, is too distant for MMU to be considered a Kuala Lumpur university. However, being a multimedia university, meetings are usually conducted by video conference. Prof 1 then selected the keywords “salary-grievances-tenure” which engaged all three academics and formed the backbone of the discussion. Prof 2 revealed he initially believed MMU paid one of the best salaries,

But now I find MMU is one of the lowest paid institutions

This comment was followed with details of actual salaries and was supported by the Doctor. Steering the group back to excellence, Prof 1 stated that the highest MQA requirement is the proportion of staff with PhDs. All concurred a quarter of the academics in most faculties hold a Doctorate. Another weakness came to light because there is a tendency for new PhDs to join other private universities offering better salaries and Associate Professorships. Prof 1 claimed the logical solution would be to instantly promote new PhDs but speculated reluctance was probably due to salary concerns. Prof 2 argued promotions should be determined by criteria and not according to a predetermined allocation of positions.

The keyword “tenure,” was described by Prof 1 as a joke because the majority of staff are on contract “which is increasingly the norm in many universities” The Doctor stated permanent staff have a number of privileges i.e. maternity and hospital leave and job security because dismissal is extremely difficult. However, Prof 1 revealed contract renewal was not automatic, prompting younger staff to seek permanent positions at a nearby university.

At this point, the discussion reverted to the perception of excellence. The Doctor said that, in his opinion, this was the recognition given to the university by the academic community, particularly the international community. Both Professors agreed universities on the whole should not be considered excellent, only specific, renowned faculties within particular institutions.

The discussion commenced at UNITEN with the most senior academic present, and an almost uncanny overlap of MMU's unanimous conclusion that excellence in a university is conferred by the outside academic community. The female Doctor at UNITEN, Doc 1 added excellence did not depend on the institution, but was dependent upon field, research, teaching quality or graduates produced. She added recognition of the university's name was an indicator of excellence. As she explained:

*You have a brand, you know...
your brand is known and I think
that will indicate the sort of
excellence in terms of university*

Collaboration, particularly with companies or foreign universities, was also cited as an indicator of excellence, by Doc 1.

There was a notable reliance on the keywords throughout the session with people nominating topics for extension by the group. Overall, the discussion centred on the notion of excellence at UNITEN being dependent upon three interconnected factors: the students; the staff and the management team.

A significant amount of time was taken discussing student excellence with all academics contributing. Doc 1 claimed student excellence depended on their performance and excelling in their grades. The two female Senior Lecturers contradicted her, claiming good communication skills were important for employability after graduation and Doc 1 conceded presentation

skills and team working ability had to be taken into consideration. The older male, Doc 3, who arrived late and said relatively little, was critical of an exam-oriented school system and grade-focused university students unable to apply their knowledge. He maintained students lacked

*Clear Mission and Vision...they
just study, study, study....don't
have target*

However, the younger male Doc 2 defended the students, claiming they were still too young to have clear objectives.

Doc 2 said the description of "well-rounded" for students was equally applicable to lecturers and this was the implication of the KPIs. At this point Doc 1 and Doc 2 were engaged in a forthright dialogue about KPI standards, with Doc 2 describing them as a personal standard of excellence. However, he doubted that all lecturers could perform well or excel in all areas by adding:

*You can only achieve if you are
like Superman*

Doc 1 agreed the high expectations for research, teaching and consultancy in a Trimester system were "a bit killing" and she expressed concern that lecturers might compromise in one area or sacrifice teaching quality. As the same doctor had earlier defined excellence in staff as

*How well we produce research
and how well we publish*

She suggested certain administrative work and exam invigilation should be delegated to part-time staff or students to enable lecturers to focus on teaching, research and projects.

TNB was described as UNITEN’s “partner” and this was considered a beneficial relationship by the group. Doc 1 said a number of lecturers had previously been employed by TNB and could provide project and consultancy work through their networks. The provision of facilities was a further advantage and one lecturer praised the new language laboratories provided by TNB.

Discourse analysis for private universities

Table 2 below summarises the topics of the private university focus groups

TABLE 2
Topics of discussion for the two private universities

MMU	UNITEN
Research	Research
Students’ admission & output	Students’ employability
Projects & Consultancy	Facilities KPIs
Location	Peer Reviews
Salary-grievances-tenure	
Peer Reviews	

The academics in both private universities made reference to *Consultancy*, *Projects* and *Collaboration*, realized through affiliation with their respective corporations. This appears to indicate their conformity to the Entrepreneur model (Etzkowitz, Webster,

Gebhardt & Cantisano Terra, 2000). In addition, UNITEN referred to TNB as their *partner*, suggesting equality rather than the asymmetrical relationship implied by *parent* company. UNITEN appeared satisfied with the relationship, possibly because of the tangible assets i.e. language and computer laboratories, provided by TNB. By contrast, MMU did not mention TM once in their discussion. Given the time spent by two of the academics criticising certain contractual conditions, we would speculate the relationship is not as harmonious as UNITEN’s.

Discussing the students, both groups used words more familiar in a business milieu e.g. *employability*, *output* and *performance*. As performance was clarified by *presentation skills* and *team working*, the terminology appears more indicative of physical rather than cognitive capability. The words *target*, *objectives* and *standards* were used in relation to KPIs, again lexical items more common in industrial environments.

Two Public Universities

“Established” and “spacious” describe both public university campuses. UM has a new, aesthetically appealing white Chancellery with numerous Bougainvilleas on the upper balconies. Even the cleaners wear smart purple jackets with the University crest embroidered on the pocket. We initially declined an invitation to use a gymnasium-sized conference venue and settled instead for a smaller, but equally opulent, meeting room seating up to 20 people. Ensnconced in comfortable, high-backed seats, we were

surrounded by glass-fronted bookcases displaying a plethora of plaques and trophies. Two office assistants discretely dispatched fresh coffee and cakes before the discussion began. At USM, we were shown into another capacious conference room with individual microphones and a smaller central table for 15 people. It had a slightly raised dais with a lectern and a large painting of Angkor Wat, presented as a token of appreciation, hung on one wall. We were informed every USM department has a meeting room of similar dimensions.

The University of Malaya focus group tended to be dominated by two of the males, Prof 1 from the Social Sciences and Prof 2 from Engineering. The most senior, Prof 3 was a female Physicist and Prof 4, who was less vocal, a Geographer.

The session commenced with Prof 1 politely offering the most senior academic the opportunity to open the discussion but Prof 3 declined. Prof 1 clearly asserted excellent universities, public or private, should be driven by curiosity to address societal issues and therefore contribute to the country's development. Prof 2, arguing for a balanced approach throughout, countered that research should be both curiosity and market-driven and universities concerned with teaching as much as research. Prof 3 conceded theoretical social science research was more time-consuming and difficult to publish compared to pure science.

Switching to the keywords Multidisciplinary vs. Specialist, Prof 3 cited Cambridge as a university with excellent engineering and academic i.e.

non-science, faculties. She added MIT, as its name implies, is supposed to be purely technological, but is multidisciplinary. Prof 1 and Prof 3 agreed Caltech and Loughborough were two examples of excellent specialist universities. Prof 2 then stated Cambridge had not only achieved a standard of excellence but had sustained that level for many years. He added,

So I think we should try to understand this procedure and I think one of the things that is relevant to an excellent university is academic freedom

At this juncture, there was a clear consensus of opinion and the discussion became heated. Several examples were given of research that had been blocked from publication because it touched upon sensitive issues. Prof 3 maintained scientists tended to have more freedom simply through avoidance of controversy.

Prof 3 said excellent universities should have an equal commitment to teaching and research or knowledge would not be imparted to the students. Prof 1 added a number of academics were only interested in their own research excellence and not in the excellence of the institution.

Location was then mentioned briefly with the agreement urban universities tended to attract more students and good academicians. There was a cursory remark that this had an impact on salaries. Prof 3 then spoke of NUS, the National University of Singapore, stating they bought Professors

from all over the world with the implication this improved their standing in World University rankings. Prof 1 maintained NUS had good research facilities which attracted good lecturers, particularly scientists. She added UM's superior facilities attracted science and engineering lecturers from private universities even though private universities were offering higher salaries. Prof 4 joined the discussion to mention Government policy, which allocates 60% of the places for Science students and 40% for Arts students. This, he said, had resulted in UM having fewer Arts enrolments, and had prompted some staff resignations.

Prof 3 mentioned KPIs were the same for Science and Arts lecturers and reiterated the publication difficulties of the social scientists. Prof 4 said previously professorships were awarded according to book publications. Prof 2 interjected to state KPIs had to be realistic, relevant and fair, but acknowledged some faculties had better support and facilities. He added peer reviews from other universities were important in considerations of excellence, to which Prof 3 agreed. The session concluded with Prof 2 and Prof 3 reiterating Prof 4's comment of book authorship and criticizing KPIs for narrowly focusing on ISI journals, with Prof 1 and Prof 4 voicing their agreement.

The USM focus group of two female Professors and two female Associate Professors, was more relaxed throughout, yet it began with a clear affirmation,

So we start off...we are very committed...we want to be excellent in research

Prof 1 and Prof 2, have been with USM 20-30 years and were therefore instrumental in the university gaining its research status in the last 5 years. Research excellence, said Prof 1, was dependent on several factors: infrastructure, global networking and financial support. She was appreciative of the RCMO, Research Creativity Management Office, for providing advice and assistance to win grants and overcome bureaucratic constraints.

From the outset, it was clear from Prof 1 that research excellence was connected to teaching. As she said,

We also look at the kind of students..... the quality of students that we have.... we try to make them more critical

Her colleague, Prof 2 elaborated on the teaching style for her Microbiology students who have one-week, practical, mini-projects, requiring them to monitor over a 24-hour period. In her opinion, excellence in teaching is when students understand the skills required for the work environment. Theory, she added, "is back-up knowledge." Prof 1 confirmed their tuition is strongly guided i.e. one-to-one with the intention that the student learns to be analytical. Later, Prof 2 reiterated that she wanted to be recognized as a teacher and expressed her support for mentoring to enable the continuation of their research. Prof 2 laughed when Prof 1 teased her about being a "grandmother" to several students who had studied under her for a number of years.

Prof 1 and Prof 2 nostalgically recalled studying in the UK, particularly how university courses focus on a single subject, unless they are Joint Honours' degrees. There was comparison with the Malaysian university system and the enforcement of a number of unrelated, extra-curricular activities which tend to create timetabling problems. In their opinion, this restricted the time for students to think and socialize among themselves.

At this point, AProf 4 stated excellence was unquantifiable and the quest to find it is full of contradictions. For example, some academics were good researchers but poor teachers and vice-versa. Similarly, a student might not achieve a high CGPA but write a good thesis. Prof 2 said KPIs provided a measurement of teaching excellence but added experienced lecturers should produce books on their discipline as she had written two books. In defence of the students, Prof 2 claimed the coursework assessment helped to produce higher CGPAs.

AProf 3, from the Architecture faculty, explained how her department was linked to industry practice and therefore distinct from the others. Students have to pass a 9-day schedule each semester and they organize a conference. The department is accredited by International Professional bodies every 2 years and consultancy work is a feature of the lecturers' KPIs. Prof 1 stated standardization was not a good approach for KPIs, because the social scientists cannot publish the same number of papers as pure scientists. She jokingly described AProf's department as "money-making people" but added this was

good for the university. She then expressed her concern that Biotechnology students, unlike Architects, faced difficulties finding relevant employment after graduation as this was not a prominent industry in Malaysia.

Prof 1 then spoke of her faculty's commitment to humanitarian research, particularly ideas to help the poor and underprivileged. Both Prof 1 and Prof 2 clarified their research was not to compete with the products from multinational companies or to achieve patents, but had a social responsibility e.g. prevention of Malaria and Dengue fever; prevention of biodiversity loss in the Mekong River. It was the first mention of KIP or Key Intangible Performance, concerned with sustainability. Furthermore, their research is multidisciplinary e.g. with Information Systems they developed a simple communication system for farmers. Prof 1 and Prof 2 said that they were known in their field but they were more concerned to address their contribution to the country. A poignant conclusion to this Focus group came when the most senior lady said,

We are a bit different because we are a human being... we cannot forget the community

Discourse Analysis for Public Universities

Table 3 below summarises the topics of the public university focus groups.

TABLE 3
Topics of discussion for the two public universities

UM	USM
Curiosity-driven Research	Research & Teaching
Commitment	Commitment
Multidisciplinary vs Specialist	Multidisciplinary vs Specialist
Location	KPIs
KPIs	Peer Reviews
Peer Reviews	
Academic freedom	

The word *Commitment* was prominent in both focus groups, with academics at both venues asserting their commitment to research, in particular, from the outset, as this defined excellence in universities. Most of the discussion at UM related to *curiosity-driven research* and the importance of academics addressing societal problems. It was clear these academics, from pure science and social science disciplines, were concerned by what Lord Robbins terms “encroachment” on their *academic freedom*.

Although it was not stated explicitly, it was apparent Professors 1 and 2 at USM valued and had achieved academic freedom by choosing to prioritise humanitarian research.

At UM, 2 professors were critical of academics prioritizing research over teaching, although the term *imparting* knowledge seemed to imply a more

traditional, transmission style of teaching. At USM, the greater part of the discussion concerned commitment to teaching. Clearly, there are close, almost familial relationships between these female professors and their students. Moreover, the reference to one-to-one tuition and encouraging critical thinking suggest a more facilitative teaching style. The definition of excellent teaching as “when students understand the skills required for the work environment”, suggest intellectual engagement and seems to contrast markedly with references of *employability* expressed at the private universities.

Both focus groups were notable for the absence of industry terminology. Although AProf3 at USM said the Architecture faculty is linked to industry by *collaboration*, she spoke of the discipline as a *profession*. We should, however, acknowledge USM’s Research Creativity Management Office, as this provides a comfortable interface between the academics and any industrial liaison.

As research universities, these academics know the expectations of them regarding the KPIs. There was, however, reiteration that standardization was unacceptably unfair, from scientists and non-scientists.

A limitation of this small-study was the absence of genuinely, private universities i.e. those not established by State companies, and those with overseas affiliations, primarily UK and Australian universities. Further studies should encompass the notion of excellence at these universities for a truer perspective.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative enquiry into the notion of “excellence” in the eyes of senior academics in private and public universities in Malaysia aimed to uncover whether perceptions differed between the older, more established public universities and newer, industry-supported private universities.

In 2010 Professor Graeme Harper maintained excellence in an academic community could not be constructed because it involves a myriad of human activities and a gathering of important ideals. The implication was that excellence involves intangible, as opposed to tangible features.

The focus groups in this study did not mention keywords of tangible features e.g. library, publishing house and architecture but concentrated on intangible aspects. In the public universities, in particular, the intangible ideals of curiosity and ability to criticize dominated the definition of excellence. In the private universities the discussion of excellence was notable for its concern with economically-useful, instrumental factors and usage of the clichéd language from manufacturing and management. However, the discussions may have been influenced by the corporate environments and the subconscious acquisition of this terminology from the motivational posters on the walls. It is notable that all focus groups mentioned commitment, providing affirmation of the intangible humanitarian aspect of teaching in higher education.

It is hoped that some of the comments from the learned academics in this study

are informative in shaping an excellent, culturally distinct, Malaysian university.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their gratitude to Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS Research Centre for their generous allocation of funds to complete this investigation (STIRF Code 96/10.11)

An earlier draft of this paper was presented at ICMESH2012 at Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre on 14 June 2012. The authors would like to thank Professor Kate Kearins of Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand, for her advice and encouragement at the conference.

The authors would like to acknowledge the kind assistance of Professor Alan Oxley at Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS on a later draft of this paper.

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