

## INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA: INSIGHTS FROM HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS

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### **Abstract**

The rationale for internationalisation of higher education can be political, economic, socio-cultural as well as academic and incorporates motivations for assimilating an international element into higher education. Malaysia aspires to create a higher education system that ranks among the world's leading education systems. The country has had a strong focus on internationalisation since the introduction of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2007-2020. Its internationalisation rationale requires that extensive initiatives and strategies are in place for the country. The study aims to evaluate the rationale for international cooperation in the Malaysian higher education internationalisation agenda. The qualitative study using expert sampling was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 15 officials in the Malaysian public higher education sector. The interview data was analysed using the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo-11. The findings indicate that the Malaysian higher education system focuses on the economic and socio-cultural rationale moderately supported by the political and academic rationale. The study also identifies that international networking through international cooperation is crucial in strengthening Malaysian higher education internationalisation. The results can assist higher education administrators and policymakers to design a comprehensive internationalisation policy to realise Malaysia's aim to become an excellent international higher education hub and attract 250,000 international students by 2025.

*Keywords:* Internationalisation of higher education, Malaysian higher education system, international cooperation, networking and rationale for internationalisation

### **Introduction**

A recent global trend is the formation of higher education hubs and internationalisation of higher education (MOE, 2015, p. 8-1; Vidya & Gauri, 2014). Five countries, namely, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Malaysia are seen to be competing among each other to become an excellent international education hub in Asia (Clark, 2015). Malaysia's key aspiration is to create a higher education system that ranks among the world's leading education systems which will allow it to compete in the global economy (MOE, 2015). The goal of becoming a regional education hub by 2020 (The Economic Planning Unit, 2010) was revised and upgraded to becoming an international higher education hub through the launching of the new policy document, the Malaysia Education Blueprint - Higher Education 2015-2025 (MEB-HE 2015-2025) (MOE, 2015, p. 8-4).

The globalisation of economies, societies and the increasing importance of knowledge have influenced the development of internationalisation of higher education. In developing countries, the globalisation of the education process has impacted on strategies for the internationalisation of higher education. Knight (2003) specified that “globalisation is presented as a process impacting internationalisation” (p. 3). The international dimension in higher education plays an important role in political, economic, social development and academic performance of a country (Arokiasamy, 2012; Chankseliani, 2017; de Wit, 1998, 2010; Jeptoo & Razia, 2012; Knight, 2003, 1994, 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2012; Tham, 2013; Van Der Wende, 2001). The emerging significance and needs of internationalisation of higher education has stimulated countries around the world to compete and become world-leading education hubs (Mohd Ismail & Doria, 2013). Scholars have argued that the recent evolution of regional education hubs is related to three important developments; (1) the growth in the scope and scale of cross-border education; (2) the new emphasis on regionalisation of higher education and; (3) the key role that higher education plays in the knowledge economy (Knight & Morshidi 2011, p. 594).

### **Background to the study**

In 2018, only one Malaysian higher education institution is ranked in the top 100 globally (QS Global ranking). The top Malaysian university, University of Malaya, is currently ranked at 87 (QS, 2018). The Universitas 21 Ranking of National Higher Education Systems 2018 indicates that in 2018, Malaysia is ranked 26<sup>th</sup> overall, a combination of ranks of 12<sup>th</sup> for Resources, 15<sup>th</sup> for Environment, 33<sup>th</sup> for Connectivity and 42<sup>nd</sup> for Output (Williams & Leahy, 2018). The UNESCO benchmarking reported that the annual total expenditure of the higher education sector of MOE is equivalent to 5.5% of the annual Government of Malaysia expenditure (MOE, 2015). Conversely, in accordance with the substantial investment in higher education, the output is very low; Malaysia is ranked 42 out of 50 countries (Williams & Leahy, 2018). Therefore, Malaysia’s internationalisation approach and rationale require extensive initiatives, strategies and efforts in order to fulfil the aim to become an excellent international higher education hub, (Ismail et al., 2011; Knight & Morshidi, 2011; Mohd Ismail & Doria, 2012, 2013, 2014).

The main purpose of this study is to evaluate the rationale for international cooperation in the internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia by focusing on four main areas: political, economic, socio-cultural and academic. This research focuses mainly on the public higher education sector of MOE’s involvement in internationalisation. Effective internationalisation will provide opportunities for greater international cooperation and collaboration as Malaysia moves to become a stronger player in the field of higher education. The findings of this study can assist policy makers, stakeholders and regulators to design and develop a comprehensive internationalisation policy to further strengthen international cooperation in higher education.

### **The Malaysian higher education system**

The Malaysian higher education system officially began in 1959 with the establishment of the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. Since then, the development in the Malaysian higher education system has been very much connected to societal development or domestic needs. In modern Malaysia, international factors such as globalisation, internationalisation and trade in higher education have influenced the Malaysian higher education system (Morshidi, 2010, p. ix). The development of higher education has been given significant focus after the establishment of the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MOHE) on 27 March 2004

(Dobos, 2011). In May 2013, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and MOHE were merged to speed up transformation and to harmonise the education strategic plans between both ministries. Two years later, MOHE was re-established in 2015 to fulfil the demand of human resource development (Sack & Jalloun, 2017); however, it was abolished after the 14<sup>th</sup> General Election in May 2018 in line with the new Malaysian agenda.

In Malaysia, there are 20 public universities, 36 polytechnics and 94 community colleges, 467 private higher education institutions and 10 international branch campuses (as of 30 April 2018) (MOHE, 2018; JPT, 2018). Malaysia is one of the countries in ASEAN hosting a number of branch campuses from Australia and the United Kingdom. The higher education system in Malaysia is generally well structured through the introduction of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2007-2020 in 2007. The plan highlighted seven key strategic principles (MOHE, 2007). The aspiration to become an education hub was illustrated in the fifth thrust - intensifying internationalisation. This thrust aims to achieve the target of 200,000 international students and to position Malaysia as a top-six destination for international students by 2020 (Mohd Ismail & Doria, 2013). MOHE also introduced additional policy documents: National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2 Beyond 2020: Intensifying Malaysia's Global Reach: A New Dimension and Internationalisation Policy for Higher Education 2011 to boost internationalisation. The aim of Phase 2 of the strategic plan is to further enhance the foundation, approach and action plan for the internationalisation agenda at regional and international levels (Azman, Sirat, & Ahmad, 2014). Meanwhile, the Internationalisation policy focuses on six core strategies: student mobility, staff mobility, academic programmes, research and development, governance and autonomy including social integration and cultural engagement (MOHE, 2011).

The MEB (HE) 2015-2025 was launched in 2015 as a continuation of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 which was launched in 2013. MEB (HE) 2015-2025 covers all aspects related to higher education management and development including internationalisation. The substantial goal of the MEB (HE) 2015-2025 is to rank the Malaysian higher education system amongst the top higher education systems in the world and to empower the Malaysian higher education system to survive in the globalised world.

### **Definition of internationalisation of higher education**

Internationalisation is not a new term in the field of education (Knight, 2003); it has appeared since the early 1980s (Knight, 2008a). Higher education internationalisation includes international activities, international linkages, partnerships, joint programmes and projects and delivering education to other countries (de Wit, 2013) and branch campuses (Knight, 2008; Pinna, 2009). Knight (2003) defined internationalisation at the national, sector, and institutional levels as the “process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (p. 3). Knight (2008) introduced five types of approaches: programme, rationales, ad hoc, policy and strategy which are vital to developing policies and strategies for the international dimension of tertiary education.

The national policies for internationalisation are based on various rationale. The rationale approach is vital for a national level higher education to become more international in the higher education sector (Gunsyma, 2014). There are multiple rationale encouraging various national governments, higher education institutions, international organisations and the private sector to proactively engage in educational services across national borders for internationalisation of higher education. Rationale also refers to motivations for integrating an

international dimension into higher education (Jiang, 2010). Knight (2004; 2007) affirmed that rationale dictates the kind of benefits or expected results from internationalisation efforts and it is important to grab new international opportunities that become available.

### **The rationale for internationalisation of higher education**

“Rationales driving internationalisation have been divided into four groups: socio-cultural, political, academic and economic” (de Wit, 2013, p. 17; Knight, 1997, p. 9, 2004a, p. 4). Knight (1997; 2004a) reinforced that these four rationale remain as useful ways to analyse the rationale for internationalisation of higher education. In addition, she claimed that the internationalisation policy is supported by the political, economic, educational and cultural rationales. Knight (2008) also suggested that the imperative national level rationale can be strategic alliances, income generation, commercial trade, competitiveness, human resources development, nation-building and socio-cultural development. But, the main question is why nations or institutions are involved in the internationalisation of higher education. De Wit (1998) expressed that there is no single answer for it and asks what then are the driving forces for internationalisation and what are the benefits? (de Wit, 2011; Florecilla et al., 2015)?

Qiang (2003) concurred that the four types of rationale as identified by Knight (1997, p. 9; 2004, p. 4 and (De Wit, 2013, p.17) have major influences on nations and institutions' involvement in internationalisation. The nations' and institutions' aims and drives for the internationalisation of higher education are deconstructed with the help of these four rationale (Barcaru, 2015; Wadhwa & Jha, 2014). The political rationale is “closely linked to issues regarding a country's status and role as an independent nation in the world” (Jiang, 2010, p. 884) and is related to matters such as national sovereignty, identities, security, stability, peace, culture and ideological influence (Jiang, 2010). The economic rationale is directly linked to higher education as it can be seen as the platform for the production of skilled workers (Beerkens, 2004; Qiang, 2003; Salas, 2014). The academic rationale is one of the major elements in strategic alliances (de Wit, 2011). Knight's (2003) definition of internationalisation emphasises the importance of diversity of cultures that exists within countries, communities, and institutions. The intercultural element is included in the definition to address the global dimension. Wadhwa & Jha (2014) concurred that the intercultural exchange and understanding are important factors for students achieving international competencies.

The four types of rationale are still relevant and have become increasingly important (Knight, 2008). To distinguish the rationale between national and institutional level, Knight (2004) suggested an additional national level rationale that consists of human resource development, strategic alliances, commercial trade, nation building and socio-cultural development. The embedding of these in the internationalisation process is crucial. Strategic alliances have been identified as an important element in international cooperation at the national level. This element can be a driving rationale and an instrument for internationalisation (Knight, 2008) together with the cooperative approach (Teichler, 2009). The strong competition between countries is usually accompanied by strategic alliances with selected partners (Kehm & Teichler, 2007).

Qiang (2003) suggested a rationale model for national policy for internationalisation of higher education for a country (Cited in van der Wende, 1997). Rationale elements introduced by Knight and De Wit are grouped to understand how rationale and strategies are put in place to work together. They show how stakeholders benefit from internationalisation (Qiang, 2003; Salas, 2014). The model proposed (Figure 1) revealed that special attention needs to be given

to various international and national forces and actors to examine the formation of policies and influences on the internationalisation of higher education.

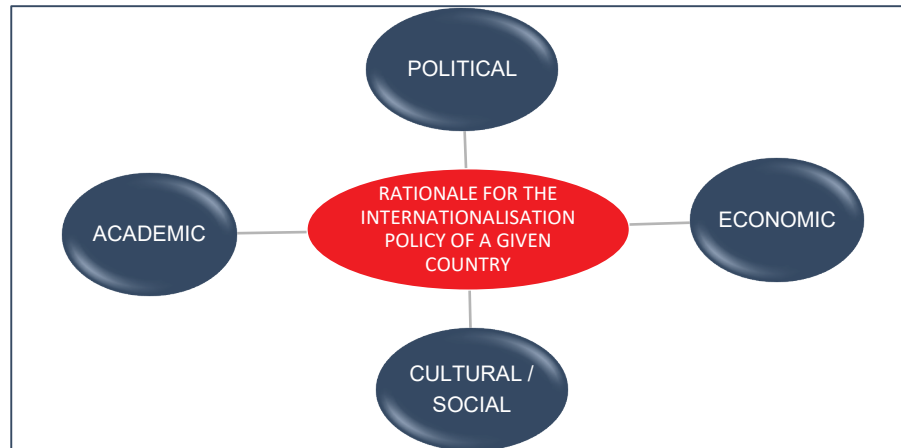


Figure 1: Rationale for the internationalisation policy of a given country

Source: “Qiang (2003). Internationalisation of Higher Education: towards a conceptual framework. *Policy Futures in Education*, 1(2)” (Cited in van der Wende, 1997).

### Internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia

Many Asian countries are leaning towards becoming an education hub in the region by reforming their higher education system through enhancing the quality of higher education, ranking, international collaboration and increasing the total number of international students. Malaysia, like other Asian countries, is paying more attention to the criteria in internationalising the higher education system to become an international higher education hub in the region (MOE, 2015; Shahijan, Rezaei, & Preece, 2016). Internationalisation has transformed the Malaysian higher education system. The phenomena is experienced through the students, faculty members, education and mobility programmes and higher education providers. Since the 1980s, Malaysia has embarked on improving approaches in international collaboration, student mobility and academic programmes (Ramanathan, Thambiah, & Raman, 2012; Shahijan et al., 2016).

Malaysia is actively finding ways to enhance the access and quality of higher education with the final target being to internationalise the higher education system (Mohd Ismail & Doria, 2014). Tham (2013) reported that Malaysia is shifting from being a sending to a receiving country for students and has an embedded ambition to be a regional hub for higher education (p. 649). Since the mid-1980s, Malaysia has supported Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) to brand the country as a regional higher education hub and to internationalise higher education (Morshidi, 2006). Naidoo (2009) identified that in 2006 itself Malaysia already had 490 TNHE programmes with foreign higher education institutions mostly from Australia, United Kingdom, Canada, Ireland and New Zealand. International branch campuses in

Malaysia that have the aim of recruiting local and regional students are also one of the components of TNHE (Garrett, 2002).

Cooperation and competition are also a part of the internationalisation process at national and institutional level. Malaysia is focusing on cooperation strategy as an internationalisation tool to transfer and learn best practices from foreign partners to further enhance the quality of higher education and institutions (Chan, 2013). However, the major challenges in the Malaysian higher education system are the international coverage in the curriculum, higher education institutions' staff involvement in the internationalisation process, resources for projects and new initiatives, research and academic collaboration, exchange programmes, and networks to recruit international students and staff (Arokiasamy, 2012). Therefore, Malaysia needs to focus on international cooperation as it is an integral part of internationalisation to enhance the visibility in the international sphere (Chan, 2004).

### **Data and Methodology**

A non-experimental qualitative study and non-probability sampling techniques were conducted in this study. The judgment sampling or purposive sampling (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016) was used to select samples from a segment of the higher education sector. The expert sampling method was applied under the judgment sampling to select subjects based on their knowledge and professional experience in internationalisation. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 public higher education sector officials from headquarters of MOE including senior officials and top management of departments and agencies under the higher education sector of MOE and administrators of five Malaysian research universities as well as one international expert. The semi-structured interview questions encompassed elements related to the four rationale for internationalisation and the overall understanding of internationalisation, achievements and challenges.

The interview data was recorded using an audio-recorder. The results were transcribed in word format and transferred to the Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) software (Nvivo-11). The data was analysed using the general process of qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz, 2014) by emphasising the qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012). Data was coded according to thematic qualitative text analysis and categories were constructed through the inductive approach (Kuckartz, 2014). The coding frame was created by applying concept-driven and data-driven strategies (Schreier, 2012). Then, the coding structure was generated based on the central themes according to the four rationale of internationalisation. The perception of internationalisation, achievements and challenges of Malaysian higher education internationalisation were also coded under the central themes. Firstly, the volume of data was coded broadly and central themes created. Secondly, the same data was involved in major refined coding and categorisation under the central themes. These provide opportunities to identify new themes within the volume of data through the evaluation and modification of existing themes.

### **Findings**

Malaysian higher education administrators labelled internationalisation of higher education into seven main themes: higher education system competitiveness, the impact of globalisation, competences of local staff and lecturers, Transnational Higher Education (TNHE), international networking, internationalisation at home and mobility programmes. A key element observed under the first theme, competitiveness of Malaysian higher education system, was recruitment of international students. One of the administrators in a research university

stated that *“The focus at the time or probably until now in many institutions are around recruitment of international students. So, internationalisation perceived at bringing in international students only”*. For that reason, building a conducive environment and promotion activities by Education Malaysia Office (formerly known as Malaysian Student Department) abroad play a major role in the recruitment of international students to Malaysia. Teaching in English, publication of papers and journals and international recognition of courses and programmes are also seen to be key measures in staying competitive in higher education.

The second theme highlighted by administrators was the force of globalisation. This has influenced Malaysian higher education system to promote higher education globally and encouraged the sending of Malaysian students to study abroad. Education Malaysia offices supervised Malaysian students' welfare and build networks with foreign higher education institutions. A Senior Officer at the Department of Higher Education said that *“historically Malaysia has set up Malaysian Student Department (MSD) way back in the 50s. It shows that how important internationalisation in education and specifically for higher education”*. The third theme perceived was the competencies of local staff and lecturers. It was observed that local staff and lecturers experienced international exposure through various internationalisation programmes. In addition, internationalisation also occurred due to the influence of the internationally trained local staff.

Under the fourth theme administrators emphasised that TNHE has enhanced technology transfer between Malaysia and collaborating countries. It has also encouraged research collaboration, promoted programmes and courses in collaboration with international universities abroad. TNHE has increased the presence of international staff and lecturers at local higher education institutions. The major impact of TNHE is the establishment of foreign branch campuses in Malaysia. The branch campuses promote Malaysia as an international hub for higher education and increase the visibility of Malaysian higher education on the global map. Furthermore, for the fifth theme, bilateral agreements between governments and between local and foreign higher education institutions have enhanced the international networking required to advance the internationalisation of the Malaysian higher education system. Cooperation with foreign higher education institutions through international networking also *“encourages outreach and getting an international partnership for research output and collaboration,”* according to an administrator of a research university.

The last two themes highlighted were the internationalisation at home and mobility programmes. More emphasis has been given to internationalisation at home to produce graduates with a global outlook through holistic students' development programmes. Additionally, special attention has been given to curriculum internationalisation to achieve a global standard of workforce globalisation. A respondent of a research university indicated that *“our syllabuses are more in line with providing students with international exposure”*. Internationalisation at home has encouraged the establishment of an international office at higher education institutions to oversee students, staff and researcher mobility programmes. Hence, a Senior Officer at the department under MOE said internationalisation also *“involves exporting Malaysian expertise for consultation, technology transfer, or even transfer of mobility of cultures in between and vice-versa countries that we are collaborating”*. The perception of internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia notably touched on several elements of the four rationale for internationalisation.

## The Political Rationale

The political rationale was ranked at fourth place among all rationale. Only 7 out of 15 administrators specified that the political rationale is significant for internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia although some administrators mentioned that these four rationale are important without ranking them accordingly. Many administrators agreed that the political mandate from the Minister in charge of higher education is crucial to foster higher education internationalisation in Malaysia. The mandate is also vital for inter-ministries and agencies cooperation which are directly involved in higher education internationalisation. The welfare of international students at undergraduate and post-graduate level studying in Malaysia in term of scholarships, being allowed to work in Malaysia and other services such as medical and visa requirement are also governed by a clear mandate from the top management of higher education stakeholders. Likewise, the welfare of Malaysian students studying abroad also comes under the political mandate of the Ministry's stakeholders. This include conducting awareness programmes and promoting the national culture by Education Malaysia offices which are also involved in promotion activities for recruitment of international students to Malaysia.

The political directive has also influenced the development of a specific policy on internationalisation and its sub-policies. The policies were introduced to achieve a certain target of international students and the focus was on post-graduate international students. Several administrators from the research universities including a Senior Officer from the Ministry declared that *“Ministry only focus on KPI to reach 250,000 international students by 2025”*; *“So basically the mandate is more numbers of international students..... The previous government mandate in very clear, so by 2025 easily the government could reach the target of 250,000 international students”*; and *“Malaysia is aiming for 250,000 international students by 2025”*.

The aim of becoming an international higher education hub was also mooted by the political mandate. Thus, the Private Higher Education Act (Act 555) was introduced in 1996 and it allows for the establishment of quality international branch campuses such as Monash University from Australia and Nottingham University from the United Kingdom. In terms of leadership, *“the charisma and wisdom of Minister are important for internationalisation process”* stated by a Senior Officer from the agency under MOE. A senior expert of internationalisation expressed that *“... in the case of Malaysia, internationalisation and ranking also about politics because issues of ranking were discussed in the Malaysian Parliament”*. In addition, an administrator of a research university expressed that the *“Government allocate money to strategies internationalisation for ranking”*.

The political rationale influences inter-regional cooperation such as the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and the Asia-Pacific Cooperation (APEC) to promote strategic alliances, regionalism and networking opportunities. *“The idea of the strategic alliances could be related to regionalism such as ASEAN, East Asia and European Union”* (Senior expert of internationalisation, Research University). Malaysia participates in inter-regional cooperation to promote the exchange of students and to enhance the understanding between ASEAN members and with other regions. The country is also involved in the internationalisation agenda predominantly to improve the understanding and learning between collaborating nations and partners.

The networking between Malaysia and other nations through bilateral and multilateral cooperation such as interregional cooperation is also generated through political will. Administrators indicated that networks bring leaders, researchers, policymakers within the region and cross-region to collaborate and exchange ideas to overcome the challenges of the



21<sup>st</sup> century. The inter-universities cooperation or networking is vital for reciprocal research grant opportunities, new ventures, credit transfer and community engagement. It also provides a platform for local higher education institutions to benchmark against foreign higher education institutions. Benchmarking opportunities are also significant in the networking with political influencers. *“Inter-regional collaboration is the formula of success. We can benchmark each other and learn the success story and past mistakes. It enables us to benchmark with best practices from all over the world”* as specified by a Senior Officer of an agency under MOE. Within the framework of international cooperation and networking, administrators specified that soft power also materialised as an important tool for participation in international negotiation and volunteerism.

Internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia has also been promoted to sustain national identity and regional identity. *“Lot of students come to Malaysia because we have a strong national identity in sense of ways of thinking, ways of doing things and the process involved”* was offered by an administrator from a research university. The cultural similarity between Malaysia and several ASEAN countries has contributed towards an enhanced regional identity. This can be seen in through the implementation of the ASEAN International Student Mobility Programme (AIMS). The cooperation within ASEAN and Asian regions have also helped to promote inter-regional exchanges among students and academics

Although many administrators were of the view that the political rationale shaped the inter-regional cooperation for networking and partnerships, several interviewees mentioned that networking often tends to be loose and less effective in terms of cooperation and collaboration in the field of higher education. These are due to the fact that *“interregional cooperation is not binding”* and that it is *“very difficult to get consensus or getting majority agreement between the blocks”* (Senior Officers, departments under MOE).

### **The Economic Rationale**

The economic rationale was placed at first ranking; 12 (80%) out of 15 administrators specified that the economic rationale played an important role for Malaysia to embark in internationalisation. Under the economic rationale, the dominant factors were income generation, financial sustainability, incentives and sources for economic growth. Respondents stressed that revenue from international students and their families' expenses during the study period in Malaysia contributed to income generation. The biggest contributors are postgraduate international students. The international students' positive experiences during their stay in Malaysia encourage them to buy things on their return to their home country which also generates income for Malaysia. A Senior Officer of a department in MOE expressed that *“..... currently (2018) there are 173,000 international students in Malaysia and they are contributing more than RM7 billion. The contribution of international students is equal to the budget of 20 public universities”*. Other sources of income were from the establishment of foreign branch campuses in Malaysia, financially supported exchange programmes and foreign research grants. A senior administrator of a research university stated that research universities in Malaysia receive many research grants through networks and partnerships from abroad.

The interview results confirmed that there is a strong connection between internationalisation of higher education and economic growth. Nearly 70% of respondents stated that international students at local higher education institutions and branch campuses including their families are major contributors to the economic growth in Malaysia. The positive economic growth in Malaysia attracts foreign investment and creates stronger economic ties between Malaysia and ASEAN countries. Opportunities of reciprocal learning and training, international lecturers and

curriculum, internationally trained local lecturers and recognised courses and the presence of foreign branch campuses in Malaysia have all contributed to graduates with a global outlook. Several respondents articulated that the development of human capital in Malaysia through internationalisation initiatives has led to intercultural competencies in Malaysian graduates.

The last two themes that fall under the economic rationale are financial sustainability and incentives. These two elements are reasons that make stakeholders of the Malaysian higher education sector and higher education institutions enter into internationalisation strategies. The major concerns were on strengthening international cooperation, lowering administrative cost, opportunities for human resources and infrastructures development and research outputs. *“We need to put money to strengthen international cooperation for internationalisation”* (Administrator, Research University). Financial incentives are essential for foreign lecturers and foreign branch campuses which operate in Malaysia. Reward incentives for having more international students as well as creative and innovative incentives were also given. However, many of the Malaysian higher education institutions aim for incentives from international organisation and conferences besides incentives through commercialisation. This is why *“universities attending the international meeting to increase the universities capabilities and capacities”* (Senior Administrator, Research University).

The economic rationale is vital to generate income from fees and living expenses for the higher education institution and for the government. The findings from the economic rationale show that the recruitment of international students is an important shift in income generation. Additionally, many administrators aim for other sources of income such as through research grants and international aid.

### **The Socio-Cultural Rationale**

The socio-cultural rationale for internationalisation is listed as second ranking; 13 administrators (86.67%) stated that the essential factor for the social and cultural rationale in Malaysian higher education internationalisation is to sustain the national cultural identity and intercultural understanding for nation and community development. As a multicultural country, Malaysia provides a platform for international communities to learn the Malaysian culture and language. Moreover, respondents are of the view that national cultural identity is vital for nation and community development. The importance of national cultural identity was reinforced in Malaysian students studying and working abroad in order to sustain, maintain and share Malaysian culture with other citizens. An argued by an administrator, *“students going to work abroad must have the national identity and intercultural understanding in order to survive in globalised world”* (Administrator, Research University).

Respondents shared positive thoughts that Malaysian higher education internationalisation strategies and initiatives lean towards the importance of cultural diversity awareness, tolerance for others, intercultural influences monitoring system, adequate knowledge on multicultural literacy and influences on the lifestyle of people. Several respondents stated that in the context of Malaysia as a multi-ethnic country, lack of intercultural understanding causes some tension among citizens. However, intercultural understanding enables the local and foreign students to enhance their understanding of other cultures. A Senior Officer of department under MOE stated that apparently *“international students create much a more diverse society in Malaysia. We can share our best practices in term of building a peaceful society and social and community development”*. Some respondents praised that the presence of international students and lecturers in Malaysia has contributed towards a peaceful society.

The main concern of respondents under this rationale was on the strategies to enhance the quality of education level and prosperity for the locals. Hence, the interview results on the social and cultural rationale also discovered some negative viewpoints. Administrators indicated that there is no study that has been conducted so far to evaluate the rationale for internationalisation in terms of social and cultural aspects.

### The Academic Rationale

More than 50% of respondents concurred that the academic rationale drives internationalisation. *“Leading factor as far as the concern of internationalisation it has to be academic”* and *“we cannot run away from other three rationales, but the very important rationale is academic”* mentioned by several administrators of research universities. The major elements underlined were ranking, quality and competitiveness, the landscape of higher education system, teaching and research and cross-border higher education. Although ranking is influenced by the political rationale, an administrator viewed that *“ranking is the product of successful internationalisation in term of research, employability and teaching”* (Senior Officer, department under MOE). Teaching and research have been identified as a major sub-rationale under the academic rationale. In terms of teaching the focus was to develop an internationally recognised curriculum. This intention is facilitated by the presence of international staff and lecturers at public and private higher education institutions and at branch campuses. *“It is important for international lecturers to improve our higher education system and change the mind-sets of local researchers”* stated by an administrator of a research university. Furthermore, *“Malaysia is moving from teacher centric to students centric”* (Administrator, Research University) by adapting to international teaching methods. 50% of respondents stated that effective research collaboration, publication and outputs has stimulated Malaysian higher education internationalisation. *“Research is nothing without internationalisation especially on scientific and syntactic technology”* (Senior Officer, department under MOE). Internationalisation plays an important role in joint research activities between local and international institutions. A respondent from the top research university in Malaysia stated that *“we encourage research internationalisation mainly because we want our researchers to produce high-quality research work”*.

The competitiveness of the Malaysian higher education system is another imperative element that pushes internationalisation. Competitiveness arises from the local higher education institutions rating system by the Ministry, internationally recognised quality assurance system and the highly ranked international branch campuses in Malaysia. Cooperation with internationally recognised quality assurance bodies such as UK-NARIC (Senior Officer, Agency under MOE) brought about internationalisation of various mobility programmes and qualifications framework development. Several respondents viewed that the competitiveness of the Malaysian higher education system is enhanced through the initiatives implemented under the higher education blueprint.

Besides the internal factors, Malaysia embarked on internationalisation due to the impact of external factors such as cross-border higher education. This external factor has allowed for transnational higher education, transnational and international research, international lecturers and staff presence and cooperation with foreign higher education sectors. One of the major elements expected from these factors is international academic standards. A senior administrator of a research university declared that *“research universities try to copy or emulate the international academic standards which are being used or exit in or from a foreign university”*. In addition, some courses at higher education institutions received international recognition; *“11 or 12 subjects in universities are ranked at top 50 in the world”* (Senior

Director, department under MOE). Foreign countries requested assistance from Malaysian experts to develop their country's higher education policies. Malaysian post-doctoral students are allowed to supervise PhD students abroad. *"It shows that internationalisation process has been successful in making Malaysian higher education system visible in the world"* (Senior Director, department under MOE).

Up to 70% of respondents conveyed that internationalisation initiatives have enhanced the quality of higher education. This is supported by a respondent who stated that *"...in 2017 a British Council survey on Shape of Global Higher Education: National Policies Framework for International Engagement has named Malaysia as the best performer in national policies on quality assurance and recognition, along with Germany, Australia, and United of Kingdom"* (Senior Officer, agency under MOE). A senior administrator of a research university further stated that *"for an example when we do research with Imperial College, Imperial is the one going to mention our name in their circle"*. This shows that internationalisation efforts have pushed Malaysia to focus on research, publication and curriculum development to gain maximum benefit and to enhance the quality of higher education.

Although only 50% of administrators mentioned that the academic rationale influences the internationalisation initiatives in Malaysia, *"international students choose Malaysia because of the quality of higher education"* (Administrator, Research University) and this is directly related to the academic rationale. In addition, *"in terms of educational quality, internationalisation offer great opportunities for the higher education sector to remain dynamic, keeping up with the current trend in teaching, learning and scholarly activities as well as tapping rich academic diversity for mutual benefits"* (Senior Officer, agency under MOE).

## Discussion

The four types of rationale as introduced by Knight (1997, pg. 9; 2004, pg. 4) and (de Wit, 2013, p.17) have been a stimulus in the internationalisation of the Malaysian higher education system. The advantages and outputs of internationalisation can be seen through examining these four as stated by Knight (2004; 2007). The respondents ranked the four types of rationale for Malaysian higher education internationalisation as follows: 1. economic, 2. socio-cultural, 3. academic and 4. political. Income generation becomes an important motivation for Malaysian higher education to pursue internationalisation under the economic rationale. Chankseliani (2017) found that in the United Kingdom higher education system, the economic rationale played a different role by generating swift income from fees and living expenses for the higher education institutions and for the government. Likewise, the interview results proved that Malaysia also emphasises income generation through revenue from international students and their families' expenses. Moreover, in Europe, the internationalisation policies and efforts are dominated by the economic rationale at institutional and national levels (van der Wende, 2001). Hence, a study by Tham (2013) supported that internationalisation effort in Malaysian higher education is primarily motivated by the economic rationale. Although the human capital development is another important sub-element under the economic rationale (Tham, 2013), respondents highlighted that besides human capital development, the economic growth through income is vital for Malaysia. Therefore, the focus is on the recruitment of more post-graduate international students via various internationalisation initiatives.

In terms of the socio-cultural rationale, the study revealed that Malaysia gives priority to sustain and maintain the national cultural identity in internationalisation efforts. But the recent important element was the enhancement of the student experiences (Chankseliani, 2017;

Knight, 2004a; Qiang, 2003). This rationale also emphasised the “individual development as a local, national and international citizen with intercultural understanding and communication skills” (Jang, 2009, pg.13). Intercultural understanding can also be a tool to eradicate any prejudice and be a factor for building a peaceful society. As an example, the international students studying in Norway have adopted Norwegian culture and contributed to the development of diversity and the open-minded society in Norway (Salas, 2014). In the case of Malaysia, efforts to build a peaceful society have been in place since independence. For that reason, international students have the opportunity to learn from Malaysia and can also contribute to further enhancing the community development in Malaysia and in their home country.

The main aim of the academic rationale is to enhance the teaching and learning process as well as achieve an excellence status in research and scholarly activities (Jeptoo & Razia, 2012; Qiang, 2003). The respondents constantly stated that teaching and research are a major focus of Malaysian higher education internationalisation. Through teaching and research, Malaysia continues to develop partnerships with foreign higher education institutions for quality curriculum development and research enhancement. Despite that, Knight (2004a) believes that higher education sectors have “always been competitive in trying to achieve high academic standards and more recently an international profile” (p. 21). In line with that, there is a number of international recognitions that have been received by Malaysian higher education system such as the best performer in national policies on quality assurance and recognition. Another two important elements underlined in the academic rationale for Malaysia were ranking and quality of higher education. Van der Wende, (2001) found that quality improvement becomes a significantly important argument for the internationalisation policies. Conversely, quality becomes a major concern to improve ranking and to attract more international students to Malaysia. But there is no special attention given to ranking in terms of higher education internationalisation. Knight (2004) listed ranking and competitiveness of higher education as one of the important elements under academic rationale. In Malaysian higher education, ranking was emphasised under successful internationalisation and it helps to strengthen the quality of higher education. The quality of higher education improves the ranking. As an example, a study by Al-Zubaidi (2013) shows that 45% of the international students from the sample of 163 respondents chose to study in Malaysia due to academic standard, university reputation and quality of higher education.

The political rationale is “closely linked to issues regarding a country’s status and role as an independent nation in the world” (Jiang, 2010, p. 884). Malaysia is generally politically stable. Therefore, internationalisation of higher education is not much influenced by political matters. Still, the political mandate will be needed to achieve 250,000 international students by 2025 and for Malaysia to attain international higher education hub status. The target for international students is deliberated under the political rationale due to MOE’s stakeholders aspiration through the new higher education blueprint MEB-HE (2015-2025) (MOE, 2015). This is also supported by Education Malaysia offices abroad assigned to bring more international students Malaysia (de Wit, Hunter, Howard, & Egron-Polak, 2015). The same scholars also mentioned that public universities Malaysia have autonomy to recruit and manage post-graduate international students. Beerkens (2004), found that political mandate was used for the international exchange of students, scholarships regulation and management of international students. The political mandate at national level (Ministry) is not only vital for the management of international students in Malaysia, but also crucial for the welfare of Malaysian students abroad in terms of scholarships and sustainability of national cultural identity. One of the important components observed under the political rationale was the strategic alliances through networking. Wendy (2006) anticipated that strategic alliances rise across national borders due

to the impact of globalisation. In the case of Malaysia, networking through regional cooperation and inter-regional cooperation creates important alliances for cooperation and collaboration within nations and higher education institutions. The international cooperation and exchange programmes are important elements for the agreement between nations and its solely driven by political rationale. (de Wit & J.W.M, 2001). The political rationale empowered the Malaysian higher education stakeholders to participate in various international events to build networks in order to promote the exchange of students and staff, knowledge transfer, sharing of best practices and exposure to international cultures. Although ranking is noticeably related to academic rationale, it is also linked to the political rationale due to the concern of Malaysian Members of Parliament. The political rationale fits well with Malaysian higher education system since “internationalisation agenda became a major thrust which will position Malaysia as a hub of higher education excellence and become a destination of choice for scholars, researchers and investors for global community” (Farina et al., 2015, pg. 18).

Even though the target of 250,000 international students by 2025 was perceived to come under the political rationale by administrators, Knight (2004b) argued that in the last decade more emphasis has been given to recruit more fee paying students under the money-making rationale. Therefore, the target of 250,000 international students will certainly contribute to the economic growth of Malaysia. Thus, it is agreeable that recruitment of more international students is linked to both the political and economic rationale. The cooperation and collaboration elements are linked to the political rationale. However, it is also much related to the other three rationales. This is because networking which comes with cooperation and collaboration between Malaysia and foreign countries, higher education institutions as well as within local communities and international students is vital for internationalisation strategies for international cooperation. A study by Van der Wende (2007) about Internationalisation of Higher Education in OECD Countries recommended that intensive networking through cooperation and collaboration could demonstrate strong internationalisation of higher education. In addition, Chan (2013) underlined that to achieve greater internationalisation, comprehensive cooperation and collaboration is needed and this involves large-scale reform at institutions and national level. Therefore, the reform for cooperation and collaboration undoubtedly involves the four rationale of internationalisation of higher education introduced by Knight (1997;2004) and De Wit (2013).

## **Conclusion**

Internationalisation and the development of a higher education hub has become a major trend in higher education across the world especially in Europe and Asia. It has been argued in the beginning that the Malaysian higher education international approach needs extensive efforts to become an excellent international higher education in the region. Therefore, the four rationale as introduced by Knight (1997, pg. 9; 2004, pg. 4) and (de Wit, 2013, p.17) are a useful tool to evaluate Malaysia higher education internationalisation. The findings suggest that Malaysia embarked on internationalisation due to forces of globalisation which impacted the development of higher education at national and higher education institutions level. Scholars and policymakers have stated that the four rationale are equally important for the progress of internationalisation. This study suggests that economic and socio-cultural factors play a significant role. The study raises an important consideration that international networking is an important part of the political rationale and academic collaboration vital for strategic alliances. While internationalisation is an important consideration for building Malaysia’s higher education system, this study calls for the importance of maintaining international cooperation through sustainable relationships through international networking,

partnership and strategic alliance which fall under the political and academic rationale as well as reasonably supported by the economic and socio-cultural rationale.

The study recommends that Malaysia needs to consider all the four rationale as proposed by Knight (2004) in order to further strengthen the internationalisation of higher education. The four rationale have to be inter-related to gain the full benefits of internationalisation and to develop a comprehensive policy as stated by Qiang (2003). Even though Malaysian internationalisation efforts started in the early 1980s and achieved some recognition, there is still room for improvement. It would be fruitful if further research is conducted to identify the rationale for internationalisation focusing on private higher education institutions and challenges faced by the Malaysian higher education system due to internationalisation efforts.

The findings of this study should help policymakers and higher education stakeholders to better understand the current state of Malaysia's higher education internationalisation agenda and its rationale. They should also assist policymakers to develop a comprehensive policy of internationalisation for the Malaysian higher education system. This would help Malaysia to move forward with its internationalisation efforts and achieve 250,000 international students by 2025 as well as become an international hub of higher education in the region.

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