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HOW “EFFECTIVE” SHOULD MALAYSIAN NATIONAL EDUCATION PHILOSOPHY BE?

Aminuddin HASSAN*
Norhasni ZAINAL ABIDDIN**

Abstract

This is pioneering research that has been conducted on a large scale involving academics in a single country on this topic. This research has been conducted on academics in Malaysia by using an online survey questionnaire, an invention of a new procedure in Social Science research. The response rate of 42.43% looks very promising in comparison with similar procedures in the past. This study is the first to look at the impacts of elements of National Educational Philosophy (NEP) and their implementation in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Malaysia. The study reveals the impacts of NEP in HEI alongside the possible constraints that could bring valuable positive indicators of the performance of current HEI in Malaysia as a whole.

Key Words: Education, Higher Education Institution, Malaysian, Philosophy

Introduction

This paper is devoted to qualitative data analysis and answers, comprehensively about the implementation of the National Educational Philosophy (NEP) in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Malaysia. The implementation of the NEP in HEI is important in the context of higher education in Malaysia and also a necessary inclusion for another reason. The researcher is required to investigate the NEP as part of the conditions of the grant that he has been receiving for conducting this research.

The academics, primarily as teachers, must play a very effective role in moulding the students' minds in ways that are expected by the people of a dynamic society. Teaching is not just simply standing in front of a lecture room and discussing a topic. The academics must be very innovative, creative, up-to-date and inspiring when giving lectures, and must always be looking for other effective ways and methods of teaching so that the students can be trained successfully in the university without wasting any of their time while in contact with the academics.

The academics' indirect contribution to the country is where, through their scholarship, they will produce other scholars who will be important for the country's future economic and industrial development. However, their direct contribution is of course also important, where they themselves are undertaking several roles in developing the country today. These roles include pro-active teaching in a wide range of subjects, highly productive and useful research activities, and energetic administrative work and service¹ to the community and to higher learning itself. These important academic roles are in line with an official government document which stated the necessity of ensuring that Malaysia becomes a centre of excellence in higher education (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2001).

* Department of Foundations of Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia

** Department of Professional Development and Continuing Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia

¹ Can be any form of service within the academic sense. It includes, for example, effective management of the universities, running higher learning centres that make a considerable contribution to academic excellence, and expert consultation offered to government or private agencies.

An Ideal Idea for Operating HEI

There has been an increasing number of Malaysians in search of tertiary education in recent years. Therefore a comprehensive higher education plan should first be prepared so that the expansion and development of higher education will be in line with the aims of the NEP. Specifically, HEI in Malaysia need to structure their tertiary master plans by analysing the needs and objectives of prospective students.

One aspect of an ideal educational objective is that it continues to produce university graduates with a high capability of becoming valuable parts of the country's human resources in all areas. Although these objectives need to be sympathetic to the current development of Malaysia, they should also be able to continue contributing to the building of Malaysia into a quality nation

The Malaysian government also needs to match this ideal objective with its existing resources, and if the resources are not sufficient, efficient and intact, the objective will need to be revised; for example, by allocating appropriate personnel to appropriate responsibilities, training the individuals efficiently, taking a fresh look at the structure of higher education bodies, and always revising the higher education process to continuously improve it. However, any extensive changes to the higher education system must be properly planned to avoid any unnecessary waste of the country's income or resources.

Malaysian HEI

In the context of the advanced developing nations, Malaysia has set a good example by coping with any problems and challenges that have arisen as it expands its higher education (Hussin, 2004). At the time of independence in 1957, Malaysia had only one university. Four universities were established between 1969 and 1971, and now it has twenty public universities, without counting the private universities that also offer excellent academic services.

In general, HEI, which are always referred to simply as universities in the context of Malaysia, are actually a sector that comprises two major components – the Public and Private Universities - and all of them run undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and also offer diplomas for undergraduate programmes. The former (public universities) are universities that are fully controlled and funded directly by the federal government and indirectly by the public sector (Selvaratnam, 1992). Because these universities are using public funds, this study can be in the interest of all people in Malaysia. This concept of being fully owned by the government is still maintained even though the government suggested, as early as in the 1994, that these public higher institutions should undergo the process of corporatisation (which relates to privatisation), at least in some respects (Berita Harian, 1997a, Berita Harian, 1997b, Nordin, 2005).

Although these institutions have their own governing bodies, in reality all their personnel are government servants. Their decisions and actions are subject to government policies, rules and regulations. Because the set-up of public universities in Malaysia was historically influenced by the British before Independence, the structure of each of these institutions is very similar to the British university system. Generally, each of the public higher learning institutions in Malaysia is headed by a Chancellor, followed by the Pro-Chancellors, and then a Vice-Chancellor. In terms of policy making bodies, the highest is the University Council, then the University Senate and then the management team of the university. The Chancellor is always the head of a Malaysian state (the King, Sultan or Governor) or their representative. Pro-Chancellors are always high-ranking personnel who have contributed a lot to the country. The council members consist of experts and successful people from the public and private sectors, and this also applies to the Vice-Chancellors of the respective institutions.

The Senate, on the other hand, consists of the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Faculty Deans and the Professors² of the institution; therefore all of their members are academics of the institution. The management team implements policy and is headed by the Vice-Chancellor, followed by Deputy Vice-Chancellors, a Registrar, a Treasurer, a Chief Librarian and some other senior officers. Vice-Chancellors, by virtue of their office, head the daily operations of the institutions. Under the centralised higher education

² Professor is meant here in its British sense, namely the highest academic rank.

system in the current context, they report to the Minister of Higher Education who heads the Ministry of Higher Education.

The development of the higher education sector in Malaysia, consisting of public and private institutions, looks encouraging when considering the increasing number of institutions in recent years, but this does not mean that the demand for tertiary education in Malaysia is fulfilled. How far this demand is fulfilled can be indicated by the proportion of young people attending the various HEI and how this compares with other countries in the region and with the UK as well as an example of a developed country. Statistical data published in 1992 shows that the percentage of the 20-23 year old cohort attending university in Malaysia was 7%; it was 5%, 7%, 16% and 28% in Burma, Singapore, Thailand and The Philippines respectively (Yee, 1995). These four countries, together with Malaysia, are countries in Southeast Asia that share many common values, and comparing the percentages for university enrolment of the student-age cohort seems reasonable. According to Yee again, in the U.K., as an example of a Western developed country, the percentage at that time was 24%.

Several years later, the great educational development of the U.K., which provided opportunities for more school leavers to go into higher education, brought the proportion to 32% of those in the 18-21 age group (Gibbs, 2001). Malaysia, on the other hand, had only 9.95% of the 19-24 age group in higher education in 2003 (Malaysia, 2004). This is the percentage of the age group or cohort attending public HEI, but even if this percentage were doubled to 20% to include those entering private institutions (which is not very likely as private institution enrolment is always understood as being at a much lower level), the gap between the percentage in Malaysia and in the U.K. is still wide. By simply looking at the comparison between these two countries as an example, it can be deduced that there is still plenty of room for Malaysia to cater to the needs of its qualified young people³ seeking higher education. There are about 100,000 students who want and qualify to go into HEI in 2005/2006 intake who cannot do that (Utusan Malaysia, 2005, Wahari, 2005). The increasing number of HEI established nowadays cannot solve this problem simply by being there. More action is required, and building up new universities is only one of the solutions.

Significance and importance of the study

For a developing country like Malaysia, which aims to become a developed country by the year 2020, and where higher education has become important as a pool of expertise of which the academics are a part, this study is important as it aims to ascertain the extent to which the NEP has been implemented in the present higher education system involving the students and also the academics.

This research does focus on the question as to how far the implementation of the NEP has gone in higher education in Malaysia. This is one way to show how important this study is. Philosophically, fewer parties can impose their ideals on students or academics (as could happen, for example, in schools) as university members are autonomous people who will decide for themselves what they want to do within the teaching and learning process in the universities (White, 1997). What one can do is look to see how far the excellent values (as expressed in the NEP in this context) are being implemented in the universities, and the extent to which these will affect the students and the academics. In this way, the public needs can be seen as being fulfilled or not, and the government can then decide on whether to revise or maintain the policies in question.

The purpose of this study is to assess the level of knowledge and understanding of the NEP among Malaysian academics. It is to evaluate how well the concept of the NEP is understood. The second purpose is to provide a perspective on the success of the implementation of the NEP in HEI in Malaysia. It is the method for looking at how well the NEP implementation is understood is by assessing each element of the NEP, and also as a whole, to see how far each of them is being implemented for the benefit of the students and the academics in the university system in Malaysia. The researcher will be the first to do this in the context of the

³ An example is those school leavers whose Malaysian Higher School Certificate (M.H.S.C) {taken at the end of Form Six} results meet minimum requirements to get into universities, but they are unable go to university to study because the public universities are full and private universities/institutions are too expensive, offer very limited courses, or their qualification are not well recognised.

philosophy of higher education in Malaysia. In relation to this, the university system in Malaysia needs to be clarified first in relation to the perspectives, so as to understand the system better. The nature, features and background of each of the public universities has already been identified, such as year of establishment; location, number and size of their branches; whether they have university or university college status; type of staff by general category (such as Malaysian or expatriate); and under what circumstances and act the universities were established.

The third purpose is to acquire personal opinions from academics regarding the possible constraints that exist alongside the process of implementing the NEP in HEI in Malaysia. It is to gather as much information as possible from open-ended responses on constraints of any type that have potentially affected the NEP's implementation in HEI.

Research questions

Three research questions are outlined as follows. The questions stress on to what extent is the NEP a reality in HEI in Malaysia.

- a) What is the level of knowledge about the NEP among Malaysian academics?
- b) How successfully has each element of the NEP been implemented in HEI in Malaysia?
- c) What are the constraints working against the concept of the NEP being practically implemented in HEI?

These research questions seek to examine the level at which the NEP exists in HEI. The first seeks to ascertain the degree of knowledge of the NEP among the academics. For the second, the academics need to assess the success or otherwise of the implementation of the NEP, by looking at each element inside it. The third seeks to identify any constraints on the practical implementation of the concept of NEP in HEI. The number and level of constraints that exist could in some ways affect the existence of the NEP in HEI. The academics are requested to give their opinions openly here in recognizing constraints damaging to the implementation of the NEP in HEI. This will help to identify if there need to be some particular internal or external policies that can then be introduced by the universities to react to this useful information. It might be necessary, for example, to have government involvement in the universities' decision making. However, before that, the constraints should first be identified as to whether they really exist. The effectiveness of the universities' administration in handling matters of academic programmes, student development, research and development, facilities development, and economic resources can also be identified when respondents come to this section in the survey questionnaire. These are just a few examples from a long list that will be highlighted.

Determining sample size

The sample size needs to be controlled because it affects sampling error (Williams, 2002). It is always understood that the determination of the sample size is related to statistical power and effect size (Mohamed, 2001, Stevens, 1986). In addition, considering a suitable significance value is required in any statistical analysis. Therefore, there are four basic elements that should be considered before making any analysis of quantitative data obtained in any particular social research. These are effect size, significant value, statistical power and sample size.

To explain simply, when considering all the above four elements - effect size, significance value, statistical power, and sample size - in this context, sample size is a function of the other three. This means that, by knowing the values of the three elements, the value of the sample size can easily be determined. As it stands, having chosen the values of the effect size, significance value and statistical power, the value of the sample size can be identified straight away. It would be safe to round up the sample size from the calculations to 700 here (which represents nearly 20% of the total population of 4,122).

As long as the sample size is large enough, even if the final results are non-significant, the research can still reduce the likelihood of Type II errors to a reasonable level. In brief, the bigger the sample size, the better. Thus, the researcher is free to use up to the value of 1,000, or even the whole population of 4,122, but it is practical in the context of this research to aim at 700.

Results

There are various responses from different academics, with most of the responses appearing in the form of short sentences, some in point form, and some in even longer versions with a number of sentences.

What is the level of knowledge of National Education Philosophy among Malaysian academics?

The different levels of self reported understanding of National Education Philosophy (NEP) among academics are explained in Figure 1 and Table 1 below, where most of them seem to have a fair or good understanding.

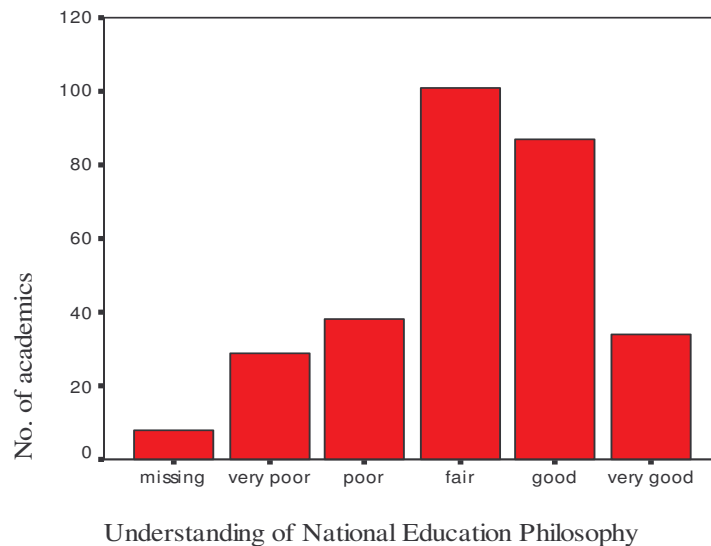


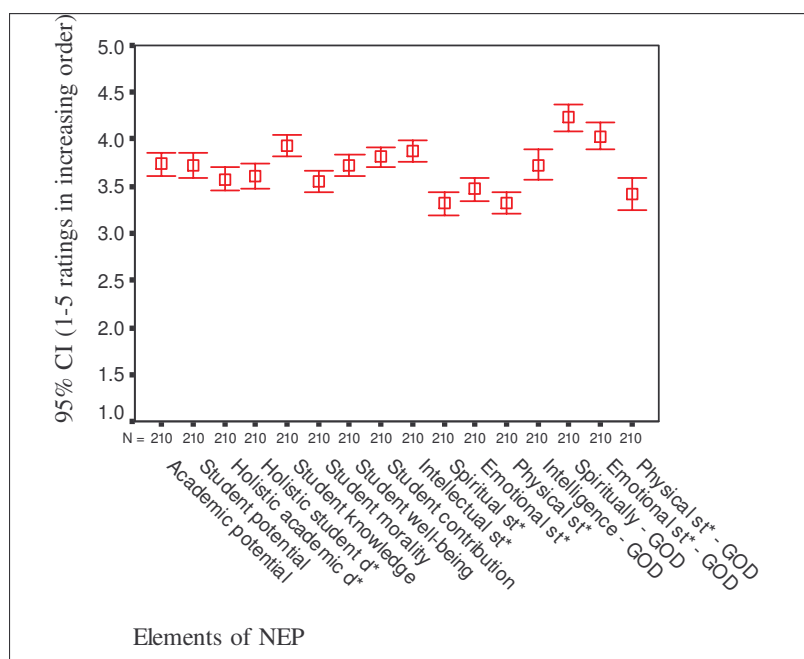
Figure 1: Bar chart in relation to understanding of NEP among academics

Table 1: Frequency table in relation to understanding of NEP among academics

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	Very poor	29	9.8
	Poor	38	12.8
	Fair	101	34.0
	Good	87	29.3
	Very good	34	11.5
	Total	289	97.3
Missing	System	8	2.7
Total		297	100

How far and how successfully has NEP been implemented in HEI in Malaysia

This question can be answered by, first, looking at the 16 elements of Malaysian National Education Philosophy (NEP) and, in the context of Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEI), the level of achievement of each element from the perspective of the academics (see Figure 2 and Table 2). We can then combine all the elements to form a single composite measure to show the level of successful implementation in a single unit. In order to make this measure more specific, only responses about students, who are the major products of higher education, will be used. The composite measure will then be checked for validity by correlating it with responses to the question ‘How well has the NEP in HEI been implemented in your institution?’ This question asked for a general statement on the successful implementation of NEP in HEI.



Note: d* = development; st* = strength

Figure 2: Error bars to show mean comparison in relation to degree of achievement of each NEP element in HEI

Table 2: Mean comparison in relation to the degree of achievement of each NEP element in HEI from the perspective of the academics (in a rating of 1-5 in increasing order)

	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Development of academic potential	281	3.69	0.91
Development of student potential	272	3.72	0.97
Holistic academic knowledge development	275	3.52	0.92
Holistic student knowledge development	266	3.60	0.92
Knowledgeable graduates	284	3.95	0.77
Highly moral graduates	282	3.55	0.86
High personal well-being of graduates	283	3.71	0.78

Graduates able to contribute nationally	277	3.81	0.77
Intellectually strong students	280	3.87	0.84
Spiritually strong students	279	3.33	0.92
Emotionally strong students	276	3.49	0.90
Physically strong students	275	3.32	0.87
Intelligence based on belief in & devotion to God	267	3.69	1.17
Spirituality based on belief in & devotion to God	269	4.17	1.07
Emotional strength based on belief in & devotion to God	268	4.01	1.10
Physical strength based on belief in & devotion to God	256	3.39	1.32

Of all the NEP elements, from the perspective of the academics, the one that has been adapted and implemented best in HEI is in terms of making sure the students feel that if their spiritual achievement is to be excellent, it must always be based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. The second highest is in terms of making sure the students feel that if they are to have emotional strength, it also must always be based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. It is accepted in Malaysia that the firm belief in and devotion to God is an important aspect to be integrated into any core national policy, and it is the highest element of the five 'rukunegara' (a national ideology).

Constraints that have happened or could happen in the in process of implementing the NEP practically in HEI in Malaysia

The constraints have been identified in this exploration study approach. They were classified into fourteen different categories for their own common ground. Even though there is imbalance in the number of responses to the different categories, in terms of some categories were mentioned many times, whereas some only a few, this is not the basis on how the categories have been formed. Instead, the importance of each constraint, as represented by the respective categories, become the basis of the categories formation in the eye of the researcher by using his academic judgment.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, this research seems to have made a great contribution towards the process of continuous improvement of the operation of higher education in Malaysia. While the NEP in general is fairly well understood and implemented, there are still plenty of problems, and constraints can still exist that can keep on giving risks. This needs to be traced, identified and then solved continuously to maintain the NEP integrity in future. This shortcoming, and also the other possible weaknesses, need to be overcome as far as possible in fostering the development of Malaysia, particularly in the higher education sector.

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