

Chapter 2: South East Asia¹

Section 6: Malaysia

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1. Recent development of higher education

The quality assurance of higher education began to draw attention in Malaysia after the mid-1990s, when study abroad became difficult under the influence of the Asian economic crisis, and the number of private higher education institutions and programs started increasing rapidly in order to offer more chances for students to advance to higher education within the country. The Malaysian government launched the National Accreditation Board (in Malay: Lembaga Akreditasi Negara or LAN) in 1996 to ensure the quality of private higher education institutions, and required the establishment of all private education institutions to be approved by LAN. Accordingly, the number of private higher education institutions, which had increased to 600 by 2000, decreased to 532 in 2005 due to LAN inspections (Sugimura, 2009), and the institutions which did not meet a certain standard were forced to shut down.

In 2001, the Quality Assurance Division (QAD) was established in the Ministry of Education, in order to ensure the quality of public universities. QAD was in charge of the qualification and auditing of programs, and its main responsibility was to set a common standard for different programs in various fields of the public higher education. (Sugimura, 2009). In 2004, the Ministry of Higher Education was established, becoming independent from the Ministry of Education, in order for Malaysia to nurture people with outstanding vocational capabilities and to receive more international students, as a hub of higher education. The Recruitment and International Education Division was established in this ministry, and it has been actively promoting the installation of Malaysian education information centers and the recruitment of students in other countries.

Given such a climate of changing higher education in Malaysia, it was necessary to enhance the system to improve the quality of higher education in both public and private institutions, in order to attract excellent students from other countries and to make Malaysia a hub of education. LAN and QAD were unified to become the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) to strengthen the quality assurance systems. The main missions of MQA are to engage in quality assurance and qualification of both public and private higher education institutions, and to make each institution comply with the “Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF)” developed by MQA as the standard for quality assurance, so that the country can ensure high-quality education.

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One of the reasons why MQA was established to unify the functions of the quality assurance of public and private higher education under one organization was the existence of the “National Higher Education Action Plan 2007–2020,” which is to support the Malaysian government’s Vision 2020 (the plan to become a developed country by 2020).

The “National Higher Education Action Plan 2007–2010” has four core elements: governance, culture, infrastructure, and financial resources. The following seven specific tasks support these elements.

1. Expansion of opportunities for higher education and enhancement of fairness
2. Improvement of qualities of instruction and learning
3. Promotion of reform in research
4. Enhancement of higher education institutions
5. Strengthening and promotion of internationalization
6. Expansion of lifelong learning
7. Reinforcement of the Ministry of Higher Education

As a concrete measure to promote the enhancement of higher education institutions, the title of APEX (Accelerated Program for Excellence) is given to the university that is conducting the most characteristic program, and the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) was chosen as the APEX university in 2008. The APEX university is selected from both public and private higher education institutions, based on the same categories and standards. It is worth noting that public universities, have long been protected by the government, are now put under the same frame with private universities in education and research competition. Following APEX, other categories, such as Research University (RU), were created as well. The universities that were selected for on-site visit for this research—the University of Malaya and the National University of Malaysia—have both been chosen to be RUs.

Currently the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006) has been in progress. “National Higher Education Action Plan 2007–2010” has set some step-by-step benchmarks, and they are planning to conduct a mid-term evaluation to check their achievements. With such achievements and experiences, the Ministry of Higher Education is intending to make concrete policy recommendations for the Tenth Malaysia Plan (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007. p.9). The Malaysian higher education, which has been expanding in number since the 1990s, is now strengthening internationalization with the aim of increasing the number of foreign students and mutual exchange, while emphasizing qualitative aspects in research and education. The following section is a summary of the government-level quality assurance and accreditation of higher education institutions.

2. Regulations on credit and accreditation system

According to the MQF, the number of credits is calculated by the number of hours required for a student to achieve the learning outcome. In Malaysia, 40 learning hours is considered as one credit. This conversion system is the same for both undergraduate and graduate courses. The definition of 40 hours as one credit follows the frameworks of other countries (mainly in the West), on the grounds that credit transfer will be more common and student exchange will be more promoted in the future. Student learning activities include lectures, tutorials, seminars, practice, self-study, review, research, fieldwork, preparation for exams, and exams.

The MQF has pointed out the importance of acquiring knowledge in specialized fields as well as improving learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are defined as (1) knowledge, (2) practical skills, (3) social skills and responsibility, (4) values, attitudes, and professionalism, (5) communication, leadership, and team skills, (6) problem-solving abilities and scientific capabilities, (7) information management capabilities and lifelong learning abilities, and (8) managerial abilities and entrepreneurial skills.

The MQF states that these eight learning outcomes can serve as a useful reference for not only setting the quality and standard of courses and programs, but also for developing curriculum, approving credits, and assessing the students' achievement. Therefore, the syllabus at higher education institutions in Malaysia has to include learning outcomes as well as objectives of the specialized subjects.

Qualifications accredited by the MQF are given for three fields of higher education and classified into eight levels. The three fields are (1) vocational skills, (2) specialized techniques, and (3) higher education. Certificates for vocational skills are awarded to students in levels 1 through 3 according to the sector of vocational skills. Certificates are also awarded to students in level 3 according to the sector of specialized techniques and higher education. Diplomas and Upper Diplomas are for levels 4 and 5. Bachelor's degrees are for level 6, Master's are for level 7 and Doctor's are for level 8. The eight levels are classified based on the learning outcomes, number of credits, and number of student learning hours.

The MQF suggests the minimum number of credits required to earn a degree based on these eight levels.

Table 1 Malaysian Qualifications Framework: minimum number of credits

| MQF level | Qualification | Minimum number of credits |
|-----------|----------------------------|--|
| 8 | Ph. D. | (Credit evaluation is not prescribed.) |
| 7 | Research Master's Degree | (Credit evaluation is not prescribed.) |
| | Coursework Master's Degree | 40 |

| | | |
|-----|---|------------------------------------|
| | Quasi-Master's Degree | 30 |
| | Certificate of completion of Master's | 20 |
| 6 | Bachelor's Degree | 120 |
| | Quasi-Bachelor's Degree | 60 |
| | Certificate of completion of Bachelor's | 30 |
| 5 | Upper Diploma | 40 |
| 4 | Diploma | 90 |
| 1-3 | Certificate of completion | 60 |
| | Certificate of vocational skills | Depending on the skills and levels |

Source: Malaysian Qualifications Agency (n.d.), *Malaysian Qualifications Framework*

3. Summary of regulations on grade calculation system, accreditation system,

GPA is used for grade calculation, and the calculation formula is made known to students as well. Official documents from the government and a field research did not identify whether GPA is mandated at higher education institutions or not. However, since Malaysia has sent many students to other countries for studies and many international companies have been located in Malaysia, GPA system seems to be widely spreading in the higher education institutions that are acknowledged by MQA.

Table 2 is a grade calculation table used at the University of Malaya. According to an academic officer from the university, this table is basically the same at many universities.

The way they calculate the grade is based not only on specialized knowledge in the field but also on the nine learning outcomes set by the MQF. However, there is no regulation at the government level over the choice between absolute evaluation and relative evaluation. Each department or each instructor makes its own decision to use either absolute or relative evaluation.

Table 2: University of Malaya grade calculation table

| Points | Grade | Grade points | Definition |
|--------|-------|--------------|------------------|
| 80-100 | A | 4.0 | Distinction |
| 75-79 | A- | 3.7 | Distinction |
| 70-74 | B+ | 3.3 | Good |
| 65-69 | B | 3.0 | Good |
| 60-64 | B- | 2.7 | Good |
| 55-59 | C+ | 2.3 | Pass |
| 50-54 | C | 2.0 | Pass |
| 45-49 | C- | 1.7 | Conditional Pass |
| 40-44 | D+ | 1.3 | Conditional Pass |

| | | | |
|-------|---|-----|------------------|
| 35–39 | D | 1.0 | Conditional Pass |
| 00–34 | F | 0.0 | Fail |

Source: University of Malaya (2006), *University of Malaya Rules 2006*.

4. Summary of student exchange programs and credit transfer

“National Higher Education Action Plan 2007–2020” advocates emphasis on internationalization and sets the target for the rate of international students at 10%. It also encourages research and educational collaboration with universities from overseas. Scholarships are given to send Malaysian students, especially post-doctoral students, to other countries to increase their research capabilities. The Action Plan also promotes credit transfer system to become more actively engaged in student exchange mobility (Sugimura, 2009).

As for credit transfer systems, private higher education institutions have established partnerships with foreign universities since the 1990s so as to develop transnational education programs, such as a twinning program (sometimes called 2+1 program or 3+0 program), in which students receive a degree by earning a part of their credits for the course curriculum at the home university and the rest at a foreign partner university. As a result, those private institutions have been involved in assuring quality of their education through degree programs that are monitored and developed with foreign partner universities. In that case, the government encourages credit transfer without imposing any regulations on a specific credit transfer system.

The Malaysian government has made a plan to receive 100,000 international students by 2010, but the number of international students in 2007 was 47,928. In 2010, the final year of the plan, some national universities started offering the “Student Mobility Programme,” a short-term program that is for international student to stay in Malaysia and learn its culture for 2 to 4 weeks. The programs range from the conservation of nature to Malaysian culture, and are taught as an integrated study combining lectures and extra-curricular activities. The participants will be given 2 to 3 credits.

As mentioned above, since Malaysia is trying to become a hub in education, the government will continue to promote internationalization, including the active recruitment of international students and credit-based student exchange programs. . Currently there is a limited access for international students to the public undergraduate courses, up to 5% out of total, due to the demands of local students. This limited access at the undergraduate level will also push public universities to increase international students at the graduate level to develop its research capacity.

5. Summary of accreditation system to ensure the quality of higher education programs

In Malaysia, systems to ensure quality are managed by MQA, and the MQF, as mentioned above, is the overall framework for quality assurance. Based on the Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act 2007, programs qualified by MQA are registered on the Malaysian Qualifications Register (MQR). Credits from programs registered on the MQR are transferable.

Under the National Accreditation Board Act 1996, accreditation of a program is valid for five years (except the qualification given by an organization in a specialized field), and it should be renewed six months before expiration. On the other hand, a program approved under the Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act 2007 does not have an expiration date. In this system, the date of approval will be registered on the MQR, and if the approval is renounced, the date of renouncement will be recorded as well. In order to maintain the quality of a program registered on MQA, at least one audit every three years is mandated (MQA, 2009). Accreditation status by MQA proves that the institution maintains a certain level of education. This enables the institution to advertise its own education and programs that are approved by MQA.

Approval by MQA has various advantages. According to the MQA website, (1) students are eligible to apply for a loan from funding agencies, (2) students can continue their studies at different higher education institutions, both home and abroad, by transferring their credits. The final decision is made by their home institutions, and (3) students from the MQA-accredited institutions can be considered for employment in the public sector. private Even private employers tend to attach importance to it as well.

The functions of MQA that was established in 2007 are as follows.

1. Implementing the MQF as a standard of quality in Malaysia
2. Developing and enhancing the national standards and levels in awarding degrees, in cooperation with stakeholders in higher education
3. Ensuring the quality of institutions and programs of higher education
4. Accrediting courses that fulfill the criteria the standards
5. Raising the awareness of quality assurance
6. Maintaining the Malaysian Qualifications Register (MQR)

MQA provides the MQF as a framework of quality assurance, but also offers supplementary guidelines so that each institution can work on quality assurance and improvement. The guidelines are (1) the Code of Practice for Programme Accreditation (COPPA), and (2) the Code of Practice for Institutional Audit (COPIA). Both COPPA and COPIA list the following fields as the object of quality assurance: (1) vision, mission, educational goals, and learning outcome, (2) design and provision of

curriculum, (3) student evaluation, (4) selection of students and provision of support services, (5) instructors, (6) educational resources, (7) monitoring and developing programs, (8) leadership, governance, and management, and (9) continuous improvement of quality.

However, these guidelines are not intended to control the quality of higher education institutions; they simply provide the standard for quality assurance. The autonomy of each institution over education, research and management is supposed to be respected. .

6. Case studies: 1 universities

Here are some examples of how quality assurance is conducted at the institution level. The summary of each of the three institution is based on the their websites, documents, and the on-site visit for this research.

(1) University of Malaya

1) Outline of the university

The University of Malaya, established in 1961, is the oldest public university in Malaysia. Designated as a Research University (RU) by the Malaysian government in 2006, the university intends to further strengthen its research activities. One of the agenda is that it will decrease the intake of undergraduate students by 10% and enroll more graduate students in the future in order to develop its research capacity as an RU.

According to the most recent data, there are 27,396 students, including 3,367 international students (12.3%). Of the total number of students, 17,797 are in undergraduate schools (64.7%) and 9,599 are in graduate schools (35%).

The university has also set the following objectives to be achieved by 2010 to enhance graduate school education and research:

The ratio between instructors and students in both undergraduate and graduate courses = 1:8

The ratio between undergraduate students and graduate students = 1:2

2) Summary of regulations on credit system and activities concerning quality assurance

The university uses a semester system, and the school calendar starts in June. From the academic year of 2011/12, however, the school calendar will be adjusted to start in August, in order to follow foreign (especially Western) academic calendars and make student exchange more active. The Departments of Medicine and Dentistry maintain a term system due to their special curriculum. It takes 3 to 4 years to complete an undergraduate course, but it usually takes 4 to 5 years to graduate from the Department of Medicine because more credits are required to complete its course.

The University of Malaya has been implementing curriculum reform to provide education of higher quality in line with the MQF. In the past, students were required to earn about 100 to 130 credits to complete an undergraduate course at the University of Malaya. After this reform, however, the required number of credits for graduation will become between 121 and 136 in the academic year of 2011/12. (However, this does not apply to the cases where a certification organization of a specialized field approves the degree.)

Bachelor's courses consist of subjects assigned by the university and specialized subjects, and the ratio of these two core subjects is designated as well (Table 3). Subjects assigned by the university are based on the instruction of the Ministry of Higher Education. These subjects, such as Malaysian culture, communication, information and entrepreneurship, provide knowledge and skills to train highly-skilled manpower that is necessary for Malaysia to become a developed country.

Table 3 Structure of Bachelor's course program

| Course content | Categories of courses | Ratio of credits |
|--------------------------------------|---|------------------|
| Courses designated by the university | Civilization of Islam and Civilization of Asia course (TITAS) | } 15% |
| | Ethnographic Research course | |
| | Information Engineering course | |
| | Common curriculum courses | |
| | Elective courses by visiting lecturers | |
| | Entrepreneurial Spirit and Culture course | |
| Courses designated by the department | Core courses | } 85% |
| | Compulsory courses | |
| | Elective courses | |
| | Total | 100% |

Source: University of Malaya (2006) *University of Malaya Rules 2006*.

3) Summary of regulations on grade calculation and activities concerning quality assurance

When the University of Malaya changed its system from a term system to a semester system (excluding some departments, such as the Departments of Medicine and Dentistry, where a term system continues due to the special curriculum), it changed the grade calculation system as well and adopted a point system (100-point system). The same system is used for both undergraduate and graduate programs. Grades are given based on the grade calculation table shown in Table 2, but the specific points are not listed on the transcript nor made public to students.

At the University of Malaya, it will become mandatory to include learning outcomes based on the MQF in course syllabuses from 2011/12. A syllabus is either online or

paper-based, depending on the department, so a unified web syllabus has not yet been developed. However, students can view general academic information and rules online by logging into the university website.

4) Summary of regulations concerning credit transfer system in student exchange programs and activities to ensure its quality

As a strategy for internationalization, the University of Malaya is increasing the number of specialized subjects taught in English. English is already the language of instruction at graduate schools, except for some special programs (Studies of Malay, Islam, etc.). On the other hand, as Malay is mainly used in undergraduate courses, it seems that the university faces a dilemma concerning how to attract international students in undergraduate courses.

When undergraduate students of the University of Malaya wish to study abroad at an affiliated university and transfer the credits earned at the foreign university to the University of Malaya, it is necessary for them to submit an application in advance to their departments, indicating the name and the content of the courses in . The students have to meet various conditions in order to have the credits approved and transferred, such as (1) 75% or more of the content of the course should overlap with that of the subject offered at the University of Malaya, (2) the grade of the course needs to be C or better, and (3) the number of credits to be transferred cannot exceed one third of the credits required for graduation.

On-site visit and interviews revealed that some language issues, the promotion of in-house documents written in both English and Malay, the improvement of instructors' and other staff members' command of English, and the lack of housing for foreign instructors and students are issues that need to be reconsidered to enhance student exchange and attract foreign-born researchers.

5) International curriculum and international education programs in other languages

The Asia-Europe Institute, established at the University of Malaya in 1997, has Master's courses in Asian and European studies. The institute awards international Master's degrees in four fields: information management, regional integration, management of small- and medium-sized enterprises, and ASEAN studies. The language of instruction is English, and 80% of the instructors are international.

As for joint degree programs, the Department of Engineering started a Ph.D. program in conjunction with the University of Liverpool in 2010. According to the interviews at the Department of Engineering, it is comparatively easy to manage an international program and develop an international curriculum in the field of engineering since it is accredited by an international accreditation agency of engineering besides MQA and has more courses taught in English than other departments.

(2) National University of Malaysia (UKM)

1) Outline of the university

UKM is a public university that was established in 1970. It has been designated as a Research University (RU) since 2006, just like the University of Malaya. About 5% of its students (25,574 in 2009/10) are international students, of which 180 are in undergraduate and 1,912 are in graduate schools. As an RU, the university has to increase the number of graduate students and develop its foundation for research, and is now facing how to increase the number of both Malaysian and international graduate students.

UKM has a semester system that starts in June, like the University of Malaya. It is not planning to change the beginning of the school calendar to August to match those of other countries.

2) Summary of regulations on credit system and activities concerning quality assurance

UKM conducted an internal audit in 2008, and after the introduction of a new curriculum in 2009, it received an MQA audit. The new curriculum emphasizes the students' learning outcomes and mandates the inclusion of learning outcomes in syllabuses, as well.

The Malaysian government recommends universities to teach all their undergraduate-level subjects in English, but this is not actually happening yet. However, UKM has its own rule that if even a single international student enrolls in a class, the class must be taught in English, unless the student is from Indonesia. Courses in graduate schools are taught mainly in English.

3) Summary of regulations on grade calculation and activities concerning quality assurance

UKM uses a system similar to that of the University of Malaya, and it has introduced not only GPA, but also CGPA (accumulative GPA) and SGPA (GPA of the semester). The grade calculation system is written in the student handbook or online syllabus, depending on the department. Regarding grade calculation, there is no difference between undergraduate and graduate courses.

As is shown by the UKM rule to include learning outcomes in syllabuses, traditional lecture-style courses conducted by instructors have been changed into student-oriented. This has brought about drastic changes of course evaluation as well. Course evaluation by students is conducted at the end of the semester, and if a course receives a rating of 6 or below out of a possible 10 points in its overall evaluation, the dean will send a letter to the instructor to request course improvement and the instructor will receive guidance.

4) Summary of regulations concerning credit exchange system in student exchange programs and activities to ensure its quality

When undergraduate students at UKM wish to study abroad at affiliated universities overseas and want its credits transferred to UKM, it is necessary for them to submit an application in advance to their departments, showing the name and the content of the class in which they will earn the credits they want to transfer. This procedure is quite similar to that of the University of Malaya. The students have to meet various conditions in order to have the credits approved and transferred, such as (1) 70% or more of the content of the course should overlap with that of the subject offered at UKM, (2) the grade for the class should be B or above, and (3) the number of credits to be transferred cannot exceed one third of the credits required for graduation.

5) Concerning international curriculum and international education programs in other languages

The Department of Engineering has implemented an undergraduate-level double degree program in conjunction with a German university (the University of Duisburg-Essen, UDE) since 2002. Students in this program study for three years in Malaysia and one and a half years in Germany, complying with the German tuition system while enrolled at UDE. In order to study in Germany, CGPA after the completion of the third year should be 3 or better. After taking an intensive German language course in Germany, the students will take specialized subjects for two semesters and receive degrees from both institutions.

(3) UCSI University

1) Summary of the university

UCSI University was originally established as the Canada Computer Science Center, and was given the status of college so that it could become Sedaya College in 1989. In 2001, it changed its name to Sedaya International College, aiming to be an international college. It was upgraded to become a university college status in 2003, and then a university in 2008. UCSI is the acronym of the university's motto, "Unwavering Commitment to Serve Intentionally." Malaysian students and students from 60 other countries are enrolled at UCSI University. The ratio of international students is about 38%, and the language of instruction is English only.

In order to smoothly send students to their partner universities overseas and make the recruitment of students from other countries more active, UCSI University accepts new students three times a year. According to the information collected during the on-site visit, it is common for private universities that run programs with foreign universities to accept new students two or three times a year.

2) Summary of regulations on credit system and activities concerning quality assurance

Since UCSI received the status of university, it has gradually increased the number of their own degree programs and received MQA accreditation. Until the status was given, it could not award their own degrees to students, so it had to run programs in partnership with foreign universities and send its students to those universities. As a result of working with their foreign partner universities, it was quite a common and natural process for the UCSI to develop a strict quality assurance system for its programs that would meet the standards of foreign universities.

3) Summary of regulations on grade calculation and activities concerning quality assurance

UCSI introduced a grade evaluation system with GPA before the MQF even existed, and used it for submitting papers to foreign institutions concerning quality assurance in order to run programs with foreign universities. Therefore, the grade calculation method did not need to change greatly with the introduction of MQF guidelines, which are based on the model of quality assurance organizations in foreign countries, especially those in the West.

4) Summary of regulations concerning credit exchange system in student exchange programs and activities to ensure its quality

UCSI has become able to award its own degrees since it received the status of university. On the other hand, it has already had strong international degree programs with foreign universities since the beginning of its establishment. It still carries on agreements with universities in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the U.K., and U.S.A, and offers students the option to study at those universities to gain degrees (UCSI International Degree Pathway, or IDP). Students who wish to study abroad can receive support from the International University Placement Centre at UCSI concerning various matters, from the selection of a university and submission of an application to finding an apartment. It has more than 200 partner universities to which students can transfer their credits, and it has accumulated various know-how on sending their students to foreign countries.

7. Summary

This chapter has briefly described the recent policy trends and the role of the quality assurance of Malaysian higher education, and used three cases of universities to show their actual application. Until the establishment of MQA, the quality assurance of higher education institutions was conducted separately at private and public institutions, but it was not necessarily making expected progress, due to the rapid globalization and the need for human resources development. Since 2007, when

MQA was established, accreditation and evaluation based on the MQF guidelines were introduced and other supplementary guidelines were added as well. As a result, the practice of guidelines seems to have been a big burden on universities in Malaysia. As stated in the National Higher Education Action Plan, educational institutions are not only encouraged to change drastically in both qualitative and quantitative manners, but are also required to gain domestic and international competitiveness, autonomy, and originality, through the higher education reform toward 2020. In this field research, some people expressed opinions that educational reform initiated by the Ministry of Higher Education is making rapid progress, and that in order to improve and spread the quality assurance system at the institutional level to provide a better environment for education and research, closer dialogue is necessary among various stakeholders in higher education.

As for the quality assurance and credit transfer for the sake of promoting student exchange within the region, one of the reasons why Malaysia unified the accreditation and evaluation of private and public educational institutions under MQA was its desire to fulfill the credit transfer scheme among accredited programs and enhance student exchange programs between both domestic and international universities. Although the development of quality assurance has just begun in Malaysia, it is possible for Malaysia to be positively involved in the credit transfer programs in ASEAN + 3. Also, MQA has stated that the development of quality assurance in Malaysia will contribute to make Malaysia an education hub as well as a regional center in quality assurance by showing the region a model of quality assurance. Therefore, it seems very likely that Malaysia will become positively involved in the regional student mobility scheme of ASEAN + 3 in the medium and long terms.

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