

Strengthening internationalisation of higher education through ASEM

Introduction

Internationalisation of higher education is one of the ways nations react to globalisation. Worldwide, there is a pressing need for nations to seriously enhance the international dimension in higher education through international cooperation to stay competitive in a globalised higher education system. The emerging significance and needs of the internationalisation of higher education have stimulated countries around the world to compete and become world-leading education hubs. A number of higher education institutions are internationalising themselves to attract and increase international students on campus.

Higher education institutions in Malaysia have very little substantive cooperation and collaboration with European institutions or partners and their cooperation mainly involves international student mobility programmes. Thus, the target of Malaysian internationalisation needs to be changed if Malaysia is serious about becoming an internationally recognised centre of learning and knowledge dissemination. Although Malaysia has embarked on the process of internationalisation since 2007 through the introduction of various policy documents, including a new blueprint in 2015, a new approach for international engagement is crucial for Malaysian higher education to handle the complexity of internationalisation.

There are many inter-governmental organisations that offer a platform for nations to develop and enhance their higher education system. Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) was formed in 1996 in Bangkok, Thailand to foster dialogue and cooperation in the field of politics, economics, socio-culture and education of common interest between Asia and Europe (ASEF, 2017). Since 2006, the education pillar known as the ASEM Education Process (AEP) has become more recognised and a Ministerial level meeting was formed in 2008 to foster the exchange of ideas and cooperation in the field of higher education between Asia and Europe. The best practices from Europe, such as the Bologna Process, are important for ASEM partners, including Malaysia, to learn from and acquire key strategies and to strengthen international network and collaboration.

Internationalisation of higher education and rationales

Internationalisation is developed as a transformation agent in higher education in developed and developing countries around the globe. Knight (2003) introduced internationalisation of higher education as *“the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education”* (p. 3). De Wit et al. (2015) revised Knight’s (2003) definition as *“the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society”* (p. 29).

There are different motivations or rationales for the internationalisation of higher education (Knight, 1997). Knight (1997, p. 9) and De Wit (2013, p.17) stated that the *“rationales driving internationalisation have been divided into four groups: socio-cultural, political, academic, and economic”*. Qiang (2003) summarised that (1) the political rationale relates to issues concerning a country’s position and role as a nation in the world; (2) the economic rationale refers to objectives related to long-term economic effects; (3) the academic rationale includes objectives related to the aims and functions of higher education; and (4) the socio-cultural rationale concentrates on the role and place of a country’s own culture and language and on the importance of intercultural understanding (p. 252-253).

The ASEM education process and internationalisation

The political level meetings between Education Ministers and stakeholders, as well as the meetings between Senior Officers and experts are two major components of the AEP. These meetings are supported by four priority areas, namely quality assurance and recognition, engaging business and industries in education, balanced mobility and technical and vocational education and training, including lifelong learning. The progress of the AEP initiatives and organisation of political and stakeholders level meetings are coordinated by a rotation practice that AES first established in Germany and then followed up with the same process in Jakarta and Belgium. As

of 2019, seven ASEM Education Ministers' Meetings (ASEMME) have been hosted by ASEM partners. Various initiatives have been introduced under the four priority areas. Malaysia has been active in ASEM since 1996 and the AEP since 2008, and has hosted more than twenty events in Malaysia. In terms of higher education, Malaysia has become a member of more than ten initiatives and has organised the ASEM-AEI Summer School since 2015.

Malaysia's active engagement in the AEP since the first ASEMME has been a positive effort to enrich greater cooperation with Europe and Asia. The AEP capabilities in setting an agenda for making higher education a fundamental priority of Asia-Europe cooperation is the best opportunity for internationalisation of the Malaysian higher education system. The networking power of ASEM in general and the AEP in particular presents the greatest prospects for Malaysia to enhance the competitiveness of the Malaysian higher education system. Additionally, making use of the five key characteristics of the AEP namely, an agenda setting process, the policy transfer process, a cultural and associational process, a multi-layered partnership and an instrument for regionalisation, will also strengthen international cooperation in the internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia.

Networking for internationalisation

Higher education internationalisation with complex relationships and activities requires robust networking. Networking is an important motivation for higher education institutions to enrich international activities, expand landscapes, share best practices and transfer knowledge and balance risks. The aim and competition to have the best talents in terms of students, staff and resources, including the best technologies, have nurtured various international networks in higher education through multilateral cooperation (de Wit & Stockley, 2011). Furthermore, international networks are developed as a key component in higher education cooperation around the globe and they exist in various forms at national, international and transnational levels to boost mutual benefits for nations involved (de Wit, 2015). International networking assists higher education institutions in building international profiles (Girdzijauskaite & Radzevičienė, 2013) and to benchmark the quality of higher education. International networking is also vital for research cooperation, research projects and research grants created through the effective exchange of information (Beerens, 2004).

Networking shapes a strategic and multilevel partnership between partners that can fulfil the approach, rationales and strategies for the internationalisation of higher education (Kristensen & Karlsen, 2018). The networking perspective in the internationalisation process has innovated as a management tool for the development of higher education internationally (Girdzijauskaitė et al., 2018). Girdzijauskaitė et al. (2019) further reinforced that the network theory of internationalisation supported the internationalisation of higher education for the establishment of branch campuses, which brings revenue, international collaboration and partnerships.

Therefore, the network theory of internationalisation appears to be highly appropriate to be applied in higher education internationalisation at national and institutional levels.

Networking through the AEP

The AEP has a strong platform for network building among ASEM partners through various meetings. The AEP also encourages multi-level partnerships and international integration through intra-regional integration and building regional identity (Dang, 2013). Subsequently, these three elements are also well reinforced by internationalisation through networking. The four components of internationalisation through networking – market penetration, international expansion, multilateral governance structure, and bridging mechanisms – are vital structures for the AEP to support and enhance the internationalisation of higher education of ASEM partners including Malaysia. Firstly, market penetration and international expansion are important components of networking in that they can connect strategies to increase attraction of international students and establish branch campuses abroad (Knight, 2004). The establishment of foreign branch campuses is in line with the network theory of internationalisation characteristics, which emphasises entering foreign markets and strengthening positions (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Secondly, the multi-lateral governance structure is most relevant and appropriate to enhance international cooperation between higher education institutions. Finally, the bridging mechanism characteristic of networking could become a very useful strategy and approach to increase intake of international students. Therefore, the combination of internationalisation through a network model of internationalisation and the roles and characteristics of the AEP will positively strengthen higher education internationalisation of ASEM partners, especially that of Malaysian higher education.

Findings and Discussion

The internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia can be seen to occur according to seven themes: competitiveness of higher education system, globalisation, competencies of local staff and lecturers, Transnational Higher Education (TNHE), international networking, internationalisation at home, and mobility programmes. The present standing of Malaysian higher education internationalisation implicitly emphasises the importance of international networking to further enhance international cooperation in the Malaysian higher education system. The insights demonstrated that the Malaysian higher education system currently focuses more on competitiveness, networking and TNHE to be visible in the global higher education fora.

The four rationales – political, economic, academic, and socio-cultural – became useful tools to evaluate the Malaysian higher education system. Firstly, under the economic rationale, the dominant factors were income generation, financial sustainability, incentives and sources for economic growth. The interview results proved that Malaysia emphasises income generation through revenue from international students and



their families' expenses and this was supported in a study by Tham (2013). Secondly, the essential factor for the social and cultural rationale was to sustain the national cultural identity and intercultural understanding for the nation and community development despite the recent focus on enhancement of student experiences. Thirdly, key elements underlined under the academic rationale were ranking, quality and competitiveness of higher education, the landscape of the higher education system, teaching and research and cross-border higher education. Finally, the political mandate and the inter-regional cooperation for networking were the focus of the political rationale. The findings revealed that a clear mandate is a must to achieve 250,000 international students by 2025 and become an international hub of higher education. It is also necessary for a mobility programme and management of international students (Beerkens, 2004).

The economic and socio-cultural rationales play important roles in Malaysian higher education internationalisation. International networking under the political and academic rationales became significant tools to establish strategic alliances with foreign nations and higher education institutions. It proved vital to sustaining international cooperation via international networking, partnerships, and strategic alliances, which were supported by all four rationales.

The empirical results evidenced that the AEP supports the rationales for the internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia. The roles and characteristics of the AEP have a moderate and significantly positive relationship with networking in internationalisation and advancing Malaysian higher education internationalisation, respectively. Networking in internationalisation maintains a partial mediation on the advancement of Malaysian higher education

internationalisation. The results also demonstrated that international expansion through networking and knowledge transfer through sharing and learning of best practices are key factors in mediating the support of the AEP and the internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia. Mader et al. (2013) believed that the sustainability and success of cooperation and networks between international actors and nations were subject to involvement, belief, trust, and participation. The success of the Malaysian higher education development and internationalisation is ultimately related to the support of the external organisations' cooperation and networking. Thus, the findings are in line with the MEB (HE) 2015-2025 recommendation that underlines the importance of networking and close cooperation with foreign higher education institutions.

The overall findings suggest an appropriate framework for strengthening international cooperation in the internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia. The strategies framework (Figure 1) developed through the triangulation, demonstrates that the AEP could support the rationale for internationalisation through the mediation of networking in internationalisation to build effective international cooperation to advance the internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia. The framework also demonstrates that the AEP could become an intermediary between the rationales for internationalisation and advancing Malaysian higher education internationalisation. The framework proposed is in line with Knight (2008) that the involvement of nations and higher education institutions in the internationalisation process were derived by the four rationales, which are replicated through action plans, activities, programmes and policies.

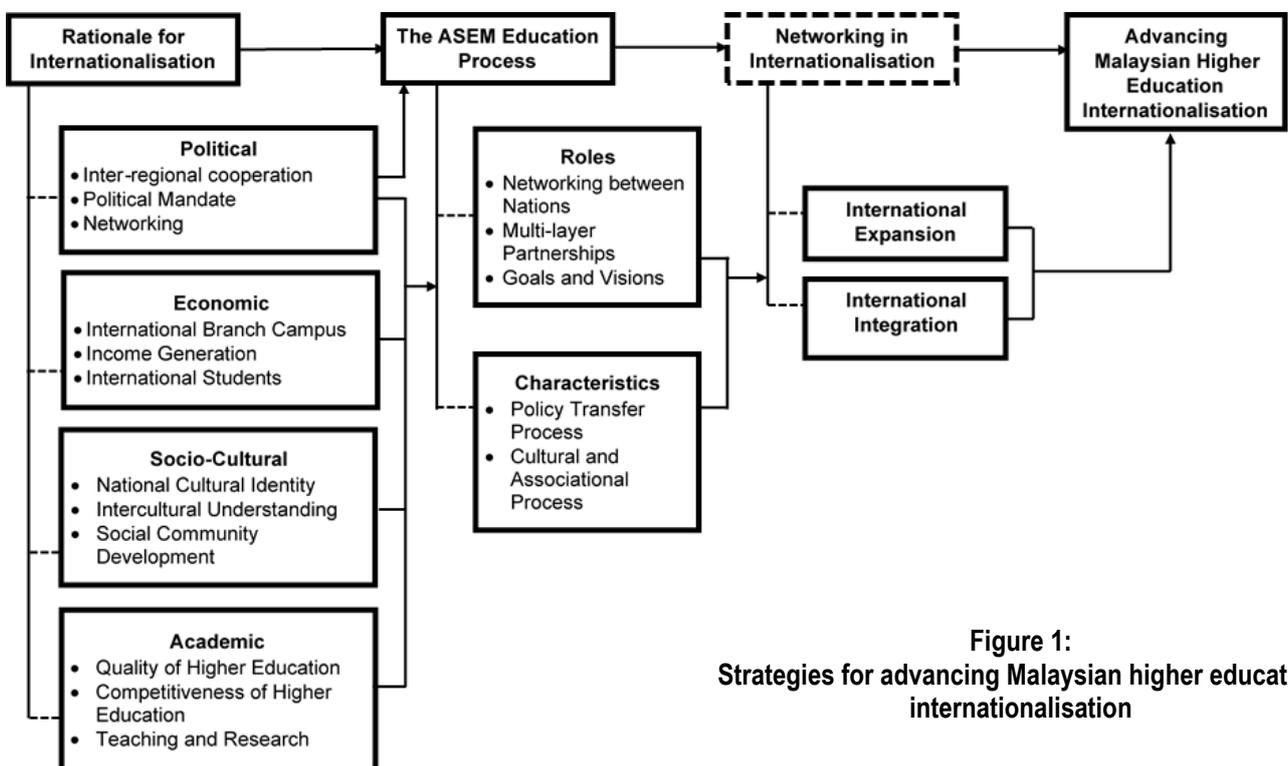


Figure 1:
Strategies for advancing Malaysian higher education internationalisation

Conclusion

The aim of the study is to evaluate the support of the AEP in advancing the internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia through networking. The interviews findings suggest that economic and socio-cultural rationales play a significant role in Malaysian higher education internationalisation and raise the point that international networking is an important part of the political rationale and that academic collaboration is vital for strategic alliances. The empirical results show that the AEP supports the rationales for internationalisation through the mediation of networking in internationalisation to advance the internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia. The proposed strategies demonstrate that the AEP can support the rationales for internationalisation to advance Malaysian higher education internationalisation with the mediation of networking in internationalisation. The findings of the study are limited to the national and public higher education sector of Malaysia. In pragmatic terms, the study contributes to policymakers' understanding of the relationship between inter-regional cooperation and the internationalisation of higher education as well as networking in internationalisation. Theoretically, the study fills a research gap in linking inter-regional cooperation with the internationalisation of higher education. The study suggests that policymakers at the national level need to work closely with Asian and European higher education stakeholders and focus on networking in internationalisation.

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