An Overview of Public Funding for Higher Learning Education in Malaysia and the Prospect of Waqf Funding

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Abstract

Malaysia is one of the few Muslim countries with high literacy rate of 92%. This achievement has been made possible due to robust educational policies and programs. The country now aspires to become international hub for higher education. This will require sustainable effort towards developing local capacities and attracting talents and students from different parts of the world. Recently, however, there are indications that public funding of higher education may not be sustainable, for example due to high cost of student loan being incurred by the government and the high rate of loan defaults. There is therefore a need for a critical relook into the factors undermining this sustainability and the prospects for Waqf as an alternative source of funding this sector. This exploratory study, which adopts library research and secondary data, surveys the literature on funding higher education in Malaysia. The study also examines how the inherent perpetual features and the good track record of Waqf can be viable in funding modern education in the Malaysian context. The outcome of this study is expected to provide some insight on the extent to which waqf fund can be mobilized for the benefit of tertiary education in Malaysia. The study will conclude with policy recommendations and suggestions for future research.

Key words: Waqf fund, higher learning education, sustainability

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1. Introduction

The shift into sharing the cost of funding higher educational sector between the stakeholders comprises of the government, parents, students and institutions/philanthropists have been accepted and practiced in a number of countries. The method of totally dependent upon financial support from the government or public fund deem not feasible in the light of the global phenomenon of an increase cost of higher-education provision, and the diminution of expenditure allocated to the sector. Under the innovative concepts of cost-sharing, the students and parents are required to share tertiary education expenditure through the imposition of certain fees for admission into public higher learning institutions, which was previously free. In the meantime, student loans scheme and financial assistance from government agencies and charitable organization are offered to ease the financial burden towards the students. However, public higher education in a few countries, including Malaysia has been facing sustainability issue of funding an increased cost of student-loan arrangement and to cover operational expenditure of public universities. These two challenges have been accentuated with the high rate of defaulters of student loan and the demanding task of fulfilling the financial need of twenty public universities for teaching and learning as well as purchasing research facilities and equipment. Based on the above mentioned background, this paper provides an overview on on the public funding of universities in Malaysia and on the prospect of cash waqf as an alternative to the existing funding model. This paper is divided into five sections starting with an introduction. The global trend of funding higher education is discussed in section two. The third section provides background of higher education in Malaysia.. This is followed in the forth section by discussion on issues related to the sustainability of public funding of higher education in Malaysia. The fifth section focuses on the prospect of waqf for financing modern higher
education in the Malaysian context, and the final section concludes and elucidates the recommendations of the paper.

2. **Global Trend of Funding Higher Education**

The global trend of changing higher education funding policy started at the end of twentieth century. Public fund which was the main source of funding for higher-education development seem to be not sustainable due to an increased enrolment into tertiary education institutions and the diminution of fund directed into the sector. (Woodhall, 2007; Johnstone, 2009; Bruce, 2004). Other factors found to be affecting the allocation of the government money into tertiary education are the worldwide transition into knowledge-economy (k-economy), demographic factor, democratization of basic education and globalization (Aldrect and Ziderman, 1992; Chen and St. John, 2011; Tandberg, 2009) The authorities in the developed and developing countries, for example, UK, USA and China have been grappling with strategies to reduce public fund allocation for public universities and for students.

The new direction of funding higher educational sector through cost-sharing concept is led by Bruce Johnstone through his magnum opus “Sharing the Cost of Higher Education” (1989). His study on higher education funding in five countries; UK, France, Germany, Sweden and US, concluded that the cost of higher-education is shared by four parties; taxpayers, parents, students and institutions/philanthropists. Cost-sharing concept has been widely influential in the higher-education funding policies especially on designing the mechanism for charging tuition fees and educational loans to the students. This concept has been applied in the developed and developing countries such US, UK, Australia, some of Asian countries and most of African countries (Johnstone, 1991, 1992, 2002, 2003, 2007, 2009). There are many forms of cost-sharing, for
example, the imposition of tuition fee that was previously free, the diminution of student grants or scholarships, and an increase in the effective cost recovery on student loans.

An effective cost recovery on student loans known as Income Contingent Loan (ICL) is considered to be a popular educational loan scheme. Australia is the first country adopted ICL through the establishment of Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) in 1989 whereby students would be expected to contribute about 20 percent of the average costs of HE, but payment could be deferred until after graduation when it would be collected through the income tax system as a percentage of a graduate’s earnings. Since then, a number of countries such as UK, South Africa, China, Hungary and Ethiopia implemented this new funding approach (Ziderman, 2004; Barr and Crawford, 2005; Woodhall, 1992; Ziderman and Albrecht 1995; Chapman and Ryan 2002; Johnstone, 2003b).

The above discussions indicate the shift towards implementing cost-sharing concept to maintain higher-education sector globally. Most of the literatures focus on the active role of the government, parents and students to share the cost of tertiary education through educational loan scheme such as ICL. The notion of cost-sharing also involves the contribution of institutions/philanthropists. Studies in this area however are still very limited. Indeed, the establishments of philanthropic organization for the purpose of raising and distributing fund for higher-education can be supported by the public including the government, parents and students.
3. Higher Education Funding in Malaysia

Malaysian educational sector which comprises basic and tertiary education has been receiving financial support from the government to provide teaching and learning facilities for the masses and offer knowledgeable human capital for the development of the country. The role of the government as the founder of the sector is highly appreciated considering the general perception that education is the fundamental right of the citizens (UNESCO, 2013). Ever since the historic establishment of the first public university during the sixties, the authority has allocated a significant amount of fund into higher-education sector through annual grant distributed to the public universities and educational loans to the students. With an increasing number of public universities, which currently stands at twenty institutions located nationwide and an influx of students’ enrollment into universities, the sustainability of the public fund allocated into the higher-education sector has become a contentious issue.

The government fund has been the major source of funding of public universities, which was started in 1962 with the establishment of University of Malaya. Further development in the past four decades has increased the number of public universities into twenty institutions located nationwide encompassing Sabah and Sarawak (K.A Khoon et.al, 2011). The analysis of the allocation directed towards tertiary education from the first Malaysia Plan until the Ninth Malaysia Plan shows significant upward trends of the amount of fund allocated for this important sector. In fact, the Vision 2020 also outlined the need to transform the higher educational sector into a regional hub of excellence which incurs a high cost on the government expenditure (S. Tham, 2011). This target has been reiterated and emphasized in the Seventh, Eighth and Ninth Malaysia Plans (7th MP: 1996–2000; 8th MP: 2001–2005; 9th MP: 2006–2010) (Tham, 2007). From just RM30 million and around RM500 million allocated during the First and Second
Malaysia Plan respectively, the expenditure for tertiary education jumped to 13 billion in 8th Malaysia Plan and RM16 billion in 9th Malaysia Plan (EPU, 2013). The above findings show the earnest support and commitment on the part of the government towards establishing a high standard tertiary education environment by allotting a huge portion of the expenditure to the sector.

However, heavy reliance on government fund to support public universities expenses has a dire impact on the operation of these institutions, especially in the situation of economic downturn. In Malaysia, the twin deficits' problem of the nineties and huge depreciation of the currency during the 1997-98 Asian financial crises affected the government expenditure to maintain a number of public sectors, including higher education (Fong, 2008; Tham, 2010). The government, thus, seems unable to expand the tertiary education sector greatly demanded due to the transition of global economy into knowledge-economy (k-economy). K-economy requires advanced and high-technology skills and expertise, by and large, offered at higher learning institutions, an influx of students registered for completing their tertiary education in the expectation of a clear path into employment (Kamogawa, 2003; Mok Ka Ho, 2008, Molly, 2005). The mismatch between the low supply of tertiary education places and a high demand of student’s enrolment compelled the authority to liberalize higher education in 1996. Further reformation exercises in the 1997 and 2007 set the formation of educational loan scheme to the students and new funding technique for public universities respectively. Whilst the establishment of Higher Education Fund Board (PTPTN) in 1997 provided educational loan scheme to students, the launching of National Higher Education Strategic Plan beyond 2020 (NHEP) (MOHE, 2007) on the hand, outlined the government’s strategy to reduce public expenditure into tertiary education and offer more autonomy to public universities to generate their own income.
The enactment of Private Higher Education Act (PHEA) 1996 changed the structure of the higher-education sector in Malaysia. The act allows the participation of private entities in the provision of higher learning institution, which had solely relied upon the government initiative. The government has supported the foundation of these institutions by providing incentives and tax exemption that stimulated the growth of private universities and colleges from 354 in 1996 to 551 in 2010 (MOHE, 2006). Private higher learning institutions have been complementing the role of public universities and widening the access to tertiary education that recorded a high number of 921,797 in 2009; the majority (52.5 percent) of the students is studying in the private higher learning institutions. Most of private universities and colleges are operated under profit-oriented purpose and focusing on high demand under-graduate programs, for example, business, engineering and communication (Wan Chang Da, 2007). By virtue of their long track record and collaboration with international players these institutions are able to provide high standard of teaching and learning facilities as well as financially strong to maintain its operation regardless of economic condition (Tan, 2002). It appear that in the current globalized and uncertainty economic circumstances, the operation of private higher learning institutions will not be affected severely as compare to public universities vulnerability in the occurrence of economic crisis.

In addition to liberalizing tertiary education, the launching of National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) beyond 2020 in 2007 was another strategy to enhance financial stability of public universities. Among the main strategies adopted in the plan is to reduce public spending currently subsidizing ninety percent of total expenditure of public universities into seventy percent by 2020 (MOHE, 2007). Public universities, thus, are given greater autonomy to set up a subsidiary focusing on income generation activities as well collaborating with private entities for endowment projects. This new policy has been further supported in the 10th Malaysia
Plan where public universities funding is based on a new Rating System for Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (SETARA) (EPU, 2010). The new system divides public universities into three different categories, namely; research, focused and comprehensive, and the allocation of fund is depending on the status of the particular university. It is expected that the liberation of tertiary education and funding reform of public universities will ensure steady growth of both public and private universities for the benefit of the students.

Considering the high volume of student’s enrolment into public and private universities, the government introduced a student educational loan scheme in 1997 managed by National Higher Educational Fund popularly known as (PTPTN). In fact, the scheme has been successfully implemented in the developed countries such as USA and Australia under the cost-sharing concept that required some portion of tertiary education to be shared by the students through educational loan (Johnstone, 2009; Woodhall, 2006 and Barr, 2002). PTPTN is the Government agency under the Ministry of Higher Education that has been mandated to manage student-loan schemes and channel them to students studying at both public and private universities with the condition that the programs are certified by Malaysian Quality Assurance (MQA). Between 1997 to 2008, PTPTN channeled around RM25.89 billion to 1.25 million students who represent 80 percent of the total 1.57 million of higher-education students at that period (Shafinar et al., 2011; S. Benjamin et.al 2011).

Nevertheless, the default in the repayment is considerably high as only 50 percent of the amounts borrowed have been paid by the students. This created deficit on PTPTN’s running account, and in 2007, after ten years of its operation, PTPTN had to apply for a loan totaling RM2 billion from the Government budget, which was turned down (Ismail & Serguieva, 2009). As an alternative, this institution got the permission to borrow from the Employees Provident Funds (EPF); an
agency under the Ministry of Finance. The above scenario has raised a doubt on the sustainability of the fund coupled with the increasing number of student’s enrollment in higher learning education every year.

Therefore, apparently, the above discussion on higher-education funding in Malaysia shows the challenges facing public fund for sustaining an increased cost of operating public universities as well as subsidizing educational loan scheme to students. The subsequent section that follows highlights sustainability issues of public funding of higher-education in Malaysia. The section that follows focuses on Waqf as a prospective mode that is viable in funding higher education.

4. **Sustainability Issue of Public Funding of Higher Education in Malaysia**

The sustainability issue of the government fund to maintain higher education expenditure has been greatly debated in Malaysia especially in the post-period of Asian economic crisis that occurred in the late nineties. Malaysia’s economy was greatly affected by the crisis which resulted in twin deficits of annual budget and huge depreciation of the currency that forced the authority to reduce public sector spending including higher education (Foong, 2005; Wilkinson and Yusof, 2005;). Prior to the crisis, the provision of higher education totally relied on public fund for the establishment and maintenance of operational cost of public universities as well allocation of financial aid to the students (Ahmat, 1987).

The policy of public fund spending for Malaysian higher education sector can be traced back to the establishment of New Economic Policy (NEP) launched in the 2nd Malaysia Plan ranging from 1971-1975. NEP was introduced as a mechanism to restructure socio-economic condition of multi-ethnic country badly affected by the infamous racial riot occurred in 1969. The paramount task of restructuring the socio-economic condition of the people through NEP
required the government to transform the public sector, including the higher-education sector. Under NEP, ethnic quota admission policy is implemented in public universities whereby the enrolment of students into public universities is based on ethnicity the majority of whom are Malays (Sharum, 1980; Morsidi, 2009; Kamogawa, 2003). The enactment of The Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) 1971 on the other hand empowers the Ministry of Education as the sole provider of higher learning institutions in the country (Chang Da, 2007). In this regard, the Malaysian government has a vital role to ensure the unique characteristic of developing higher education for economic balancing in this multi ethnic country is fulfilled under NEP.

The government has subsidized a total of ninety percent of public universities expenditure (MOHE, 2007) that enable these institutions to charge low fee admission for the students. The method of channeling the fund is through negotiation between the universities and the Ministry of Education; once agreed the fund will be transferred to public universities (Ahmad, 2012; D. Albrect and A. Ziderman, 1992). Scholarship scheme on the other hand, have been given to students studying locally and abroad subject to academic excellence and strong co-curriculum activities (Ozay Mehmet & Y.Y. Hoong, 1985). These two methods of funding higher education, namely; macro and micro, have contributed to the expansion of public universities and subsequently produced knowledgeable human capitals for the development of the country.

However, the economic crisis that occurred in the nineties is among the main factors that contributed to higher education funding reform (Fong, 2008; Tham, 2010). The crisis affected public spending on the government sectors including higher education sector which resulted in the reduction of expenditure allocated to the public universities and scholarships to the students. Public universities were unable to accommodate the high demand of school leavers pursuing
tertiary education certificates in the global economic transition into k-economy (Kamogawa, 2003; Mok Ka Ho, 2008, Molly, 2005). The depreciation of the national currency coupled with the imposition of high admission fee for international student’s enrolment into universities in US, UK and Australia had distracted the government and parents to send students to study abroad. It was reported that before the crisis around fifty thousand Malaysian students studying abroad especially in USA and UK were either sponsored financially by the Government or self-sponsored.

Besides the economy, the democratization of basic education has also contributed to the high demand of tertiary education in Malaysia. The literacy rate which stands at 92% is among the highest compare to other developing countries (World Bank, 2013). The government policy of widening the accessibility and equity of elementary education sector subsequently has increased the number of students from different backgrounds and the opportunity to pursue higher education level. In fact, the trend of an influx of students looking for tertiary education enrolment is not only occurring in developing countries like Malaysia, but also happening in developed countries such as UK and USA. Similar to other countries, various funding strategies and policies changes have been adopted by Malaysian authority to ensure higher education sector operate smoothly and effectively.

The method of funding higher learning institutions and students has changed dramatically in the late nineties through the liberalization of higher education and the establishment of educational loan scheme managed by National Higher Education Fund popularly known as PTPTN. The promulgation of PHEA in 1996 has changed tertiary education system in Malaysia into two main category; public and private. This vital policy change has dramatically increased the supply of higher education places and eased the burden of the government expenditure in developing the
sector. The formation of PTPTN in 1997 on the other hand, offers educational loans for students studying at higher learning institutions with the condition that the program must be accredited by Malaysia Quality Assurance (MQA). These two new policies have contributed to the growth of students which recorded the highest number of one million in 2012 (MOHE, 2013). The shifting of higher education cost from public fund to private entities and students shows the implementation of cost-sharing strategies adopted by the government.

Nevertheless, the sustainability of educational loan managed by PTPTN has become a debatable issue partly on economic factor and another on political factor. The economic factor relates to an increase of students enrolments couple with a huge number of defaulters as of 2007 only fifty percent of the borrowers repaid the loan ((Shafinar & Serguijeva, 2009; Shafinar et al., 2011; S. Benjamin et.al 2011; Elitina et.al, 2006). According to Morshidi (2010), the implementation of higher education policy is also subjected to political debate especially in the post period of 12th General Election in 2008. Currently, during the pre-election of 13th General Election among the debatable issues were the abolishment of PTPTN and the establishment of free education at the level of tertiary education (Berita Harian, 2013; Utusan Malaysia, 2013).

The launching of National Higher Education Plan Beyond 2020 (NHEP) in 2007 is another strategic plan to develop higher education sector in Malaysia based on cost-sharing approach (Ahmad, 2012; Morsidi, 2010). NHEP outlines two main strategic plans; to transform higher education sector as a hub of higher education and to decrease public spending allocated to public universities. The transformation of higher education sector into a hub of higher education in the region is expected to generate revenue for the country through international students’ admission charges (Ka Ha Mok, 2008, 2010, 2011; Morshidi, 2010; Tham, 2010). As of 2010 the number of international students’ enrolment into Malaysian higher learning institutions stood at eighty
thousands and the figure is expected to increase into two hundred thousand by 2020 (MOHE, 2012). Under NHEP, public fund expenditure allocated to public universities which currently covers ninety percent of public universities’ expenditure will also be reduced to seventy percent in 2020. Public universities are given greater autonomy to cover another thirty percent of the expenditure through various income generating activities such as venturing into business activities, consultation and setting waqf fund for higher education purpose (Ahmad, 2012; Morsidi 2011).

Based on the previous discussions, the challenges in public funding of higher education in Malaysia can be divided into two main factors; internal and external. An influx of enrolments for tertiary education which subsequently increase the amount of educational loan, large number of loan defaulters, large number of public universities currently stand at twenty institutions nationwide, and, the high cost incurred for purchasing materials and equipment for teaching and learning as well as conducting research activities are identified as the main internal factors. Meanwhile, global economic uncertainty is considered to be the main factor that undermines the public fund directed into higher learning sector. Among the funding alternatives suggested for public universities to cover their expenses are venturing into business activities, consultation and the creation of waqf fund. The next section focuses on the prospect of creating waqf for funding higher education.

5. The Role of Waqf in Funding Higher Education in Muslim Countries

Waqf is one of the important institutions in Islamic economic system that plays a vital role in the provision of centers for socio-cultural activities such as mosques and shrines, education, healthcares, and, public goods, for example, roads and bridges for the benefits of the community.
charitable activities through waqf are highly recommended in Islam and have been practiced in the majority as well minority Muslim population. Although the term waqf is not clearly mentioned in al-Quran, the acts of the Prophet and his companions have been replicating by Muslims who dedicate their immovable and movable properties for the welfare of the communities and to get a huge rewards from the Almighty. (Kahf, 1999; Ahmed 2001, M. Sadeq, 2002).

Throughout Islamic history, education sector are among the main beneficiaries of waqf. Waqf assets in the form of lands and buildings have been dedicated for the construction of schools and universities. The return from waqf generating assets such as commercial and residential buildings on the other hand, have been allocated to pay salaries for teachers as well given to students for the payment of tuition fees and living expenses (G. Maqdisi, 2001). It was reported that in Jerusalem, at the outset of 5th and 12th century around 70 schools were funded by waqf. Waqf funding was also the main source of operating high schools and universities in the major Islamic cities such as Cairo, Baghdad al-Quds and Nisapor. For example, the famous al-Azhar University in Cairo, University of al-Qurewiyyin in Fez and the Shrine College of Abu Hanifah in Baghdad (Maqdisi, 2001; Kahf, 1999; Mashitoh, 2006). Some of these institutions, for example, al-Azhar University in Cairo are still in existence and becoming the highest Islamic education institution in the world.

The strength of waqf lies in the pillars and religious motive which inspire the donors as well as the manager of waqf to safeguard and maintain the assets once declared as waqf (Maqdisi, 2001). As mentioned above, waqf institution has evidently been managed to sustain the operation of al-Azhar University in Cairo for hundred years and provide tertiary education at low cost. The perpetuity characteristic which is one of the main pillars of waqf has contributed to safeguard
waqf assets from misappropriation and confiscation. Although the changes of the regulation as in the case of the Republic of Turkey had resulted to the devolved of waqf assets, nevertheless a few of them are still in existent. Religious motive of dedicating immovable and movable assets contribute to the widespread of waqf practice since the early days of Islam until now (Kuran, 2001). Muslims in the minority and majority population areas are motivated to follow the Prophet tradition by dedicating their valuable properties such as lands, buildings and cash money not only for the construction of mosques and schools but also for income generating projects, for example, the building of commercial and residential buildings. The profits generated from these activities have been directed for various sectors including education.

6. **Waqf for Funding Higher Learning Education in Malaysia**

Historically, it is presumed that waqf institutions existed in Malaya later known as Malaysia, since the advent of Islam in the country around 1500CE (Mashitoh, 2006). The origin and development of waqf in the country can be divided into three different periods; pre-colonial, colonization and post-independence. During colonization period which lasted for more than four hundred, the implementation of secular policies by the British had forced the Muslims to safeguard their religious rites. Muslims were encouraged to donate their lands for the purpose of building mosques and religious schools. At the end of 19th centuries and in the beginning of 20th century the number of madrasah or Islamic school constructed on waqf lands had increased due to the demand of Muslim community. Sekolah Menengah Agama Al-Attas; formerly known as Madrasah al-Attas in Pahang, and Madrasah Misriah in Penang are considered to be the earliest waqf assets developed for education purposes and they still operate until now (Ahmad Zaki et. al, 2008). The above statement shows that education sector mainly in the area of Islamic knowledge is one of the main beneficiaries of waqf in Malaysia.
Although the contribution of waqf in the development of educational sector is considered to be very limited, the capability and capacity of this institution to accumulate fund and channel them for various purposes including education is highly recommended. The motivation of adopting waqf concept for funding education especially tertiary education division in Malaysia can be examined in the two premises, namely; current collaborative nature between state and federal government in developing idle waqf assets and the innovation of waqf models.

Anan (2012) and Asharaf & Abdullah (2013) have explained in detail the collaboration between MAIN in a number of states and the federal government represented by JAWHAR in developing idle waqf assets during 9th and 10th Malaysia Plan. The venture has successfully developed a number of waqf assets with the total amount allocated by the Federal government valued at RM200 million. It is worth noting that waqf assets are not only developed for the construction of religious places but extended to the building of commercial and residential buildings which later generate income for waqf fund. Considering the largest size of waqf lands which is currently valued at 8,825.03 hectare and 63 million, the huge potential of developing these assets for the benefit of higher learning education is highly.

With regard to waqf innovations, Malaysia is among the pioneers in establishing cash waqf and corporate waqf models. The innovative concept of cash waqf adopted by Majlis Agama Islam Johor (MIAJ) known as Saham Wakaf Johor, for example, had accumulated the total amount of RM6 million for the construction of students hostel in Cairo (MAIJ, 2013). Recently, Bank Muamalat Malaysia Berhad and Perbadanan Wakaf Selangor have collaborated to introducing cash waqf scheme, namely; Wakaf Selangor Muamalat. This new scheme aims to accumulate fund and distribute for two main areas; healthcare and education (BMMB, 2013) Johor Corporation involvement in the formation of corporate waqf manage by WANCORP; its
subsidiary, on the other hand, shows the commitment of Malaysia’s corporate entity participation in waqf activities (Hajah Mustafa et.al, 2011; Borham, 2011; Asharaf & Abdullaah, 2012). Waqf assets manages by WANCORP comprises shares of JCorp companies which is totally different from cash waqf concept. The innovation of widely accepted cash waqf concept and the participation of private as well corporate entities in establishing and managing waqf assets have contributed into the confidence of Muslims in the country as the these concepts involve a huge amount of money.

7. Conclusion

The challenges of public funding of higher education in the current globalized and uncertainty economic conditions require the adoption of suitable and appropriate financing mechanisms for the sustenance of the sector. The new trend of applying cost-sharing concept has been widely accepted and applied in the developed and developing countries including Malaysia. However, the high default of educational loan managed by PTPTN coupled with the huge cost of maintaining twenty public universities raised the sustainability issue of public funding of higher education in Malaysia. Among the alternative funding method suggested is through waqf concept which is widely practiced throughout Muslim history and educational sector is among the main beneficiaries. Given the strong support from the entire stakeholders; the government, private and corporate entities, and, Muslims in the country, it is expected that waqf fund could be a viable alternative for funding higher education sector in Malaysia.
Bibliography


