

## Global Leadership for a Reputable University

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### ABSTRACT

In Malaysia the concept of a reputable university is very hotly debated. It was a hot issue when an opposition Member of Parliament mentioned that Malaysian universities are not ranked among the top 100 world universities. Some of our premier universities did poorly in the ranking. One of the key factors of transforming Malaysian universities into reputable universities is leadership. In the context of globalization, Malaysian universities need leaders who can work on a global stage. This study attempts to understand the concept of global leadership, which is important for leading a university of international repute. This research employed qualitative means, utilizing the in-depth interview for data collection. Data were collected from eight past and present top leaders of a university in Malaysia. The data collected from the interviews were then transcribed verbatim, coded, analyzed, interpreted and discussed accordingly. There are various factors that will enable our universities to become internationally reputable universities. Among others are abundance of resources, quality academicians, quality students and good governance. Based on the findings of the study, one of the key factors of transforming our universities into reputable universities is leadership. In the context of the new environment, we need leaders who can become global players.

Keywords: Reputable university, global leadership, and leading a reputable university

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### INTRODUCTION

This research focused on exploring global leadership for a reputable university. It begins the exploration with an attempt to understand what reputation of higher institutions is all about. In recent years having a reputable university is a very hot issue in Malaysia (Abu Daud Silong et al, 2010). It was well-debated in the Parliament that none of our premier universities are listed in the top 100 in the world. In fact, ranking by THES (Times Higher Education Supplement now changed to THEM or Times Higher Education Magazine) showed that our universities are on the decline. Even the Prime Minister made comments on the poor performance of Malaysian universities. Then others such as the media, political leaders and individuals joined in the debate. But is ranking the only measure of a reputable university? The ranking conducted by THEM has some serious flaws and thus needs to be examined further. It is one of the aims of this paper to explore the issue of a reputable university in Malaysia.

Going to the future Malaysia aims to be a fully developed nation through its vision 2020. To achieve this we have the New Economic Model (NEM) to transform the country from a middle income to a higher income nation with targets of US17, 700.00 per capita income by 2020. But to achieve this we have to compete globally. We need global leaders to be able to compete worldwide. Thus to be placed higher in the ranking system in the world our universities need to be led by global leaders. It seems everybody and every nation needs an internationally recognized university but very few really understand what it means. And still fewer understand how to go about in getting an internationally recognized university. It is also the aim of this paper to answer the question: What is a global leadership in the context of leading a reputable university?

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the literature related to a reputable university and global leadership. It discusses the concepts and meanings of global leadership and reputable university.

### *Reputable university*

Universities are facing greater competition. Aula and Tienari (2011) mentioned “*this is timely challenge as it is clear that in the contemporary global economy issues related to the form and appearance have become vital in organizational survival and success*”. In an academic setting where ranking and accreditation have acquired importance, reputation has emerged as a key factor for decision-makers (Ressler & Abratt, 2009, Sauder & Espeland, 2009, Sauder & Fine, 2008, Espeland & Sauder, 2007, Wedlin, 2006 and Elsbach & Kramer, 1996).

Getting the recognition of a reputable university has a positive impact on students applying to selective universities (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010). Prior research in the U.S. indicated ranking has an effect on institutions and student behavior and also the assessment of institutional reputation and prestige made by leaders (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010).

Institutional action is related to the quality and it is hard to measure it because it is difficult to understand what your competitors are doing to improve academic performance (Podolny, 1993 and Bowman & Bastedo, 2010). Herson and Nitecki (2001) defined service quality based on four perspectives, which include excellence, value, conformance to specifications and exceeding expectations. Ramaiyah et al. (2007) divided service quality into four classifications, which are expected service, desired service, adequate service, and predicted service.

According to Altbach (2003) most countries in the world strongly want to have reputable universities that are highly recognized by the global community. He mentioned a few characteristics for a reputable university which are:

1. Ranking among foremost in the world (of an international standard of excellence).
2. Excellence in research, teaching and extension (recognized by international and local peers and the ones that expand the frontiers of knowledge)
3. Recruiting and retaining top quality academics and students via providing an atmosphere of intellectual excitement and academic freedom.
4. Operating with a significant measure of internal self-governance and accountability to the government, industry and community.
5. Providing adequate resource and facilities for advanced and creative research, teaching and extension services.
6. Operating with sufficient, consistent and long-term funding from the government and contributions from university alumni.

Further, Altbach (2003) discussed the idea of a reputable university:

1. International academic standard improvement
2. The roles of university and society
3. How academic institutions position themselves in a “boundary-less” higher education system (local and global)

Salmi (2009), noted that a reputable university should:

1. Produce outstanding graduates (high demand in the labor market)
2. Develop outstanding faculty:
  - a) Who conduct leading-edge research published in top scientific journals
  - b) Demonstrate high quality teaching
  - c) Contribute to technical innovations through patents and licenses
  - d) Provide excellent extension and consultancy services to the government, industry, and community
  - e) Favorable university governance
  - f) Having high concentration of talent and abundant resources

Abu Daud Silong et al. (2010) listed several criteria and measures of a reputable university:

1. International reputation and recognition - has an international reputation in research and teaching, recognized by other well-known universities, attracts the most able students and produces the best graduates, has high proportion of overseas students, with international activities such as research, and good linkage with other universities.

2. Attracts international talents - can recruit students and staff from overseas.
3. Excellent research and innovation - generates innovative ideas and conducts basic and applied research, produces excellent research outputs recognized by peers.
4. Abundant resources - good finances and facilities, has diversified source of income, e.g. government, private sector, research income, fees, high quality and supportive research and educational environment for both staff and students.
5. Effective governance and leadership - has a first class management team with strategic vision and implementation plans.
6. Making an impact - produce graduates who end up in positions of influence, often has a long history of superior achievement, makes a big contributions to society, continually benchmarks against the top universities worldwide, and has the confidence to set its own agenda.

Abu Daud Silong et al. (2010) concluded that “ranking is not an absolute measure but only a relative measure”. He mentioned some major flaws against THES World University Ranking which are:

1. Only certain criteria are factored into the measure of rankings.
2. There are serious questions about the methodological validity and reliability of data collected.
3. Rankings are more business-oriented, vying for the global economy.
4. There are deeper political, economic and methodological problems of ranking
5. The vital aspects of higher education such as moral and ethical role not considered in the measure

Altbach (2003) cautioned that:

*Over-emphasizing attaining world-class status may harm an individual university or an academic system. It may divert energy and resources from more important and perhaps realistic goals. It may focus too much on building a research-oriented and necessarily elite university at the expense of expanding access or serving national needs. It may set up unrealistic expectations that harm faculty moral and performance.*

### *Global Leadership*

One of the key factors of transforming our universities into internationally recognized universities is leadership. In this new environment, we need leaders who can operate on the global stage. For this to happen universities need formal leadership that is, leaders occupying certain positions such as Vice-chancellors, Deputy Vice-chancellors, Dean, Director, and Head of department. These leaders are responsible for setting and accomplishing the vision and mission of the university to be a reputable university. They are responsible for putting the strategic plans and implementing them in order to achieve international recognition for our universities.

Besides the formal leadership, the universities also require top leaders. They are informal leaders who are specialists in their respective fields of study. They may not occupy any positions, but usually are well-respected and recognized through their knowledge and their disciplines. They often lead research groups or projects and have networks across the globe. They are often consulted by peers, students and others outside the university for their expertise. They are usually scientists who are innovators with new ideas and patents.

To establish a reputable university recognized worldwide, we need a global leader that is, leader with new tasks and competencies. For this leader to perform effectively there should be a new mind-set or new perspectives regarding the new environment affecting our universities. These are globalization and internationalization. Globalization is often related to external factors that affect universities such as competition. On the other hand internationalization is a process control by our universities that we need to have in order to gain world recognition and reputation. Thus our leaders need to act globally, that is, by getting connected to others in the world. We need collaboration and networking with other universities worldwide.

Our universities need a new generation of leaders that can compete on the global stage. Abu Daud Silong et al. (2010) citing Caliguiri referred to leaders of the future as global leaders, defined as:

1. Executives who are in a job with some international scope.
2. Leaders who must manage through the complex, changing, and often ambiguous global environment.
3. Leaders, who are involved in foreign markets, conceive strategies on a global basis, manage and motivate geographically dispersed and diverse teams.

To operate at the global level, Terrell & Rosenbusch (2013) indicated that global leaders required competencies in order to perform their roles effectively. Also they identified seven categories of competencies for global leaders that include: (1) cultural awareness and sensitivity, (2) global mind-set or perspective, (3) learning from experience, (4) developing and maintaining relationships, (5) communication, (6) traits or attitudes and (7)

knowledge and skills. Tubbs & Schultz (2006) emphasized that it is vital to define and describe competencies for global leaders.

Competencies include behaviours, personality, values and knowledge (Prewitt, et al., 2011). They are qualities that allow global leaders to perform their roles outside their own country (Jokinen, 2005). Caligiuri (2006) identified ten competencies for global leaders which are:

- 1- Work with colleagues from other countries
- 2- Interact with external clients from other countries
- 3- Interact with internal clients from other countries
- 4- Speak in a language other than their mother tongue at work
- 5- Supervise employees who are of different nationalities
- 6- Develop a strategic business plan on a worldwide basis for their unit
- 7- Manage a budget on a worldwide basis for their unit
- 8- Negotiate with people from other countries
- 9- Manage foreign suppliers or vendors
- 10- Manage risk on a worldwide basis

## **METHODOLOGY**

This section describes and discusses the methodology of the research being conducted. It includes in-depth interviews, the participants, the data collection, and analysis.

This research employed the qualitative in-depth face-to-face interviews for data collection using an interview protocol developed by the researchers. Eight top leaders of a selected university were chosen as the participants. Appointments were made for the date, time and place for each interview. Each interview lasted for about two hours and was conducted at their respective offices, residences or any suitable places agreed upon.

The responses of the participants indicated that they were very happy to be chosen as participants. The interviews were recorded with permission of the participants. The recorded interviews were then transcribed verbatim, coded and analyzed qualitatively according to themes.

Data were analyzed manually and categorized into themes and sub-themes. Data analysis was carried out simultaneously with the data collection phase. The analysis started as soon as the transcripts were completed.

The analysis began with repetitive readings of the transcripts and listening to the interviews. We sketched emerging ideas that transpired from the interview transcripts. This assisted us in suggesting tentative themes for further analysis. Multiple readings of transcripts helped us to identify the main themes and sub-themes that were then grouped together to organize key concepts. The findings of the study attempt to explore global leadership for a reputable university.

## **FINDINGS**

Based on the in-depth interviews the data collected were transcribed verbatim, coded and analyzed qualitatively according to themes. The themes and sub-themes are described as below:

### *Elements of a reputable university*

There were three themes that described a reputable university (Table 1).

- 1) Academic excellence - one of the most important elements to have a reputable university is excellence in academic and research activities. According to the participants we should have a group of excellent researchers, young researchers and quality research. In fact they emphasized that everything in campus must be research-based. We should also focus on our strengths, be aware of our strengths and build on them. We should improve by learning from others such as through exchange programs, using other reputable universities experiences and information to improve, with leaders traveling overseas looking for ideas and strategies and information from other universities to improve. The university should also be able to attract talent not only locally but also internationally.
- 2) Finance - a reputable university should have adequate financing. The respondents emphasized that our university must have adequate grants. With a good budget we can market and promote the university.

Sometimes under more difficult circumstances the university has to be more creative in providing facilities to staff and students.

- 3) Culture - the respondents indicated that having a research culture is the key to developing a reputable university. They also emphasized the importance of developing a diversity of cultures in university, especially in light of having international staff and students in the university. The university also needs to change the mindset of people to accept new ideas and challenges.

#### *Competencies to lead a reputable university*

There were two main themes related to competencies to lead a reputable university. These are (Table 2):

- 1) Personal attributes- learning from others, being flexible, being an idealist, having patience, willing to take risks and be honest with the system.
- 2) Skills- being able to create a global vision followed by local mission and action, be able to inspire others, work with universal cultures, and network with others

## **DISCUSSION**

### *Academic Excellence*

Academic excellence is one of the key factors in developing a reputable university. It is related to academic achievement, freedom, and integrity. The participants viewed that research is a very important factor to build an internationally recognized university. Research groups and culture should be developed in a reputable university. As indicated by the participants:

*...if you go to a university to become a Vice-Chancellor, then you are in the wrong profession. You should go there to promote academic excellence. The first requirement everybody in a university must promote is academic excellence.*

*If I don't have a big team to do the research, I cannot publish anything.*

*We were lucky because we had young researchers.*

Most authors (Altbach, 2003; Salmi, 2009; Abu Daud Silong et al., 2010) mentioned that academic excellence is the key in developing a reputable university. Excellence means having an international academic standard in the areas of research, teaching and extension.

### *Finance*

Finance is also a very important element for developing a reputable university (Altbach, 2003; Salmi, 2009; Abu Daud Silong et al., 2010). If resources are limited then the leader must be creative enough in trying to provide the necessary facilities for staff and students. Altbach (2003) and Abu Daud Silong et al., (2010) mentioned that a reputable university should have abundant resources while Salmi (2009) emphasized on adequate resources and facilities for research, teaching and extension services. Also as noted by participants:

*It was smooth to be a reputable university with the promise of Rm 50 million.*

*We set up the promotion office, MARCOM. MARCOM is a marketing and a communication unit of the university*

To lead a reputable university there must be a smart leader that can use limited facilities and budget to change the university into a reputable university. As indicated by a participant *"they dealt with the private sector, so they got TM telecom service free, for the university"*.

### *Culture*

Culture is also an important element to build a reputable university. Creating a culture that is globally accepted is important as we try to attract talents and students from overseas. Attracting international students is vital in developing a reputable university (Abu Daud Silong et al., 2010) in order it can position itself globally (Altbach,

2003). Also developing a culture that makes people ready to change and face new challenges. As noted by a participant:

*They were all trying to change the mind-set, not only stockholders but also the people inside. Leaders have to be aware of different cultures and develop a global culture in the university.*

TABLE 1  
Elements of a reputable university

Elements of a reputable university		
Academic excellence	Finance	Culture
Academic achievement, academic freedom, academic integrity	Create more facilities from limited sources	“Drive” on diversity
Having a group of researchers, Having young researchers, Quality of research, Everything in campus must be research-based,	Grants, Good budget	Doing research should be part of university culture
Promote academic excellence, Find the best examiners in the world	Marketing is needed to promote the university	Change mind-set of the university’s people
Focus on the strengths, Be aware of your strengths, Update old concepts of your strengths, and Refocus on the strengths of university		Implement diverse cultures in university, Having global culture
Attract talent not only local but also international, Competitive strategy to attract talent, Having top students		
Specific template which fits the nature of the programs, Not only RU but also relevant		
Pick the other universities’ plans, particularly those of other reputable universities; use information to take shortcuts to improve, Stand with tradition plus new strategies		
VC travels all over the world		
Exchanging programs		
Conduct research for government		
Having plans for country’s future		
Becoming an RU not necessarily starts with VCs; it can be started by faculty or individual.		
Having an education centre		

TABLE 2  
Leadership competencies to lead a reputable university

Competencies to lead a reputable university	
Personal attribute	Skills
Learning from others	Be able to network with others
Always ready for any “killing situation”	Be able to create a global vision and followed by local mission
Patience	Be smart enough to use small facility or situation, be creative enough to work on limited budget
Flexible	Be able to work with universal cultures
Idealist	Be able to inspire others
Taking risk	
Honest with system	

## Competencies

Competencies identified from the study include personal attributes and skills. Personal attributes are important for global leaders such as learning from others: “the leader needs to learn from other universities especially from reputable universities”. And “if they want to be an effective leader they have to be 100% honest with the system”. In terms of competencies leaders should be able “to inspire others to achieve the goals set by the university”. Leaders also should be able to network with others, for example “networking with graduated students and formal classmates and peers”. These findings were supported by past research (Terrell & Rosenbusch, 2013; Tubbs & Schultz, 2006; Prewitt, et al., 2011; Jokinen, 2005; Caligiuri, 2006) who indicated that global leaders need a new set of competencies in performing their global leadership roles.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the review and the findings, our view is that an internationally reputable university is a meaningful concept if examined beyond the number as provided by the ranking system. A reputable university should be understood and interpreted beyond the position in the ranking. It should be related to the achievement of some standards of excellence at the national and international levels related to the core business of the university, be it in teaching, research or service to the society. Being internationally recognized means, we have to achieve some kinds of world recognition.

We should not be too alarmed if our universities fall in their rankings but we should pursue the idea of academic excellence that should include both tangible and intangible measures. Besides pursuing world recognition, we should also look at our national needs. Thus, progressing in our efforts we should analyse our strengths and build on them. Some of the elements of a reputable university mentioned in the study include academic excellence of which research is a vital component, adequate finance and global culture.

In terms of global leadership we need to identify the right leader to lead a reputable university. This call is for a leader who has global vision and appropriate attributes and skills to be an effective global leader. Thus we have to design a systematic program for global leadership development.

Based on the findings, feature studies on global leadership are also needed in other sectors such as business, public and private sectors. These kinds of studies can further help us to understand concepts and practices of global leadership in a wider context.

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