

## THE CHALLENGES FACED BY PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA FROM THE 1990s TO COVID-19

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### Abstract

The significance of private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in human capital formation, graduate employability, and the modernisation and internationalisation of a country's education system cannot be overstated. They are, however, not immune to a variety of structural, institutional, internal, and domestic obstacles. This article focuses on the issues that PHEIs in Malaysia experienced in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, as well as the post-Covid-19 era in 2021. The first section focuses on the common challenges that PHEIs encounter. These include difficulties with financial and institutional administration, problems with course accreditation and institutional rating, student involvement in illegal activity, and the misuse of student passes and visas. The second section investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the development of PHEIs. Emphasis is placed on the negative financial/economic impact of the breakout of the disease, as well as difficulties in adapting to the online teaching and learning process.

**Keywords:** Private Higher Education Institutions, Finance, Management, Accreditation, Criminal/Illegal Activities, Covid-19

### Introduction

During the British rule, the development of PHEIs in Malaya demonstrated the sector's potential in aiding the development of the country's tertiary education. PHEIS began to provide opportunities and accessibility for those who wished to pursue their education to the tertiary level during this era. The founders of PHEIS were very aware of the massive gap in the education sector. In the early twentieth century, the British administration's public higher education institutions only produced subordinate administrative officers, vernacular elementary school teachers, and medical professionals. Recognizing the situation, several private institutions began operating on a modest scale as early as the late 1930s. Private higher education in post-independence Malaysia emerged in the 1960s to accommodate students who wished to further their education but could not get into public higher education institutions to obtain basic academic certifications. When private education investors began to focus on pre-university courses in the early 1970s, the function of the private education system shifted. This paved the door for the establishment of PHEIs such as Rima College, Segi College, and a number of other colleges. Private higher education grew rapidly during the 1980s. The privatisation programme implemented by then-Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in 1983 cleared the way for and accelerated the formation and development of private colleges.

The New Economic Policy (DEB), which was fully implemented as a socioeconomic plan at the time, revealed the weaknesses of public institutions in terms of providing access to postsecondary education. The outflow of many non-Bumiputera students abroad as a result of the government's policies restricting their enrolment into public institutions made matters

worse. The government was well aware of the adverse implications of this policy, particularly the long-term reduction of local human resources. Higher education accessibility was identified to need improvement for more local students to continue their studies to the tertiary level after finishing high school. This condition encouraged the expansion of PHEIs as an alternative by providing pre-university education. Genting College, Stamford College, and Kolej Tunku Abdul Rahman were among the PHEIs that offered this programme. To pave the road to the degree level, the credit transfer programme and the twinning programme were launched and expanded. Kolej Damansara Utama (KDU) was the first to implement this programme in 1983-1984.

Another significant issue developed, which was the public institutions' incapacity to accommodate many students. They were also less effective in broadening study curricula in response to the rapid rise of the global commercial economy. These issues sparked worries among parents, students, and the government about how to permit more students who graduated from Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) to enter tertiary education. Other issue was the rising cost of attending higher education institutions (IPT) abroad. As a result, the government recognized that a reform of national higher education policy was required. This step was seen as critical in improving students' marketability and local employment.

From 1991 to 2000, the government pushed the process of liberalisation and privatisation of higher education based on its nation-building framework. This contributed to PHEIs' quick expansion. They were the given a task under the liberalisation policy to find a solution to the accessibility issue that public higher education institutions had failed to implement. In the 1990s, the government also undertook a corporatisation agenda in addition to the privatisation policy. The government amended and introduced the Education Act 1996, the Private Higher Education Institutions Act 1996, the National Higher Education Council Act 1996, the University and University College Act 1996, and the National Accreditation Board Act 1996 to regulate the quality of excellence in private higher education in accordance with the national education philosophy. Hundreds of commercial programmes of study and entry requirements that required little qualifications spurred the rapid growth of IPTS throughout the 2000s and 2010s. The government acted to withdraw higher education from the supervision of the Ministry of Education in order to regulate and enhance the administration of higher education institutions. Higher Education has since been managed by the Ministry of Higher Education, which was founded in March 2004.

Although PHEIs actively plays diverse responsibilities, it cannot be denied that the sector has faced numerous challenges since the beginning of large-scale operations in the 1990s. Management issues, particularly in the financial realm, are the most common concerns. Relying solely on private capital exposes the business to macroeconomic risks and institutional mishandling. PHEIs also struggle with its financial status to refresh curricular and non-curricular areas in order to remain relevant in line with changes in the labour market and higher education industry itself, as well as the rapid growth of technology. This is especially so when PHEIs has to deal with a large number of admissions and enrolments. This situation compelled certain PHEIs to misuse (*Perbadanan Tabung Pendidikan Tinggi Nasional*) PTPTN loan funds in order to alleviate their financial situation, and they were later charged by the government. Financial management issues have caused several courses to fail to receive MQA approval since they did not meet the established standards due to a lack of funds or fiscal capacity to upgrade the study courses. PHEIs have also had to deal with cases of international students misusing their visas. Alarmingly, some PHEIs students, particularly foreigners, have been involved in terrorist activities.

What is known is that any economic shock might push PHEIS to the brink of bankruptcy. This was most acutely felt following the Covid-19 outbreak, which resulted in the suspension of PHEI activities following the government's implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) in March 2020. PHEIs were unable to generate revenue from overseas student admissions, which had previously been one of its primary revenue sources. The periodic implementation of MCOs had a negative impact on the learning process as well. Even though learning was ongoing online, this method had several practical, psychological, and social difficulties. This includes a lack of internet access for some groups of students in some areas, difficulties in conducting practical teaching, and depression among PHEIS students as a result of the possibility of not being able to continue their studies due to families losing their source of income and restrictions across districts and states that caused some of them to be separated from their families for an extended period.

### **Financial and Management Problems**

PHEIs that are semi-government in character and rely on public funds in the form of subsidy allocations can survive when faced with a financial crisis. However, because PHEIs rely on private financial resources in general, they are easily impacted by intense competition in domestic and international markets. In comparison to the public sector, the private sector frequently encounters this issue when conducting academic affairs. The freezing and reduction of public funding for private higher education further increases PHEI's dependence on financial capital provided by private means.<sup>1</sup> Small PHEIs lack the initial funds to construct a major campus and must function in industrial districts and shophouses, in contrast to all public institutions that have a huge campus.<sup>2</sup> The government solely provides fiscal support (through taxation) and does not contribute additional funding. As a result, PHEI's financial position is particularly susceptible to shifts in the market and commercial burdens with private financial organisations.

One of the advantages of PHEI in Malaysia over public higher education institutions is its potential to attract a large number of students. PHEI, for example, admitted 250,000 students in 2008 after enrolling only 15,000 students in 1985.<sup>3</sup> According to the Malaysian Education Development Plan 2015-2025 (drafted prior to COVID-19), student enrollment in PHEI will skyrocket as compared to the public sphere.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, the former is expected to accommodate up to 867,000 students, while the latter will place up to 764,000.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the admission of thousands of students to PHEI who receive government financial aid invites a financial crisis. Although PHEI students are eligible for Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) loans, the high expense of attending PHEI results in a significant debt burden.<sup>6</sup> For example, in 2010, despite the fact that only 30% of PHEI students obtained up to 45 percent of PTPTN loans, the majority of them faced a significant financial burden.<sup>7</sup>

PHEI graduates failed to repay their PTPTN loans due to stagnant wage rates and a competitive labour market.<sup>8</sup> The problem compelled the government to cut PHEI student loans in 2014.<sup>9</sup> According to Geoffrey Williams and Paul Lim, a researcher in the field of PHEI economics and policy, PTPTN loans accounted for 70% of PHEI income that year.<sup>10</sup> They also showed that the government's 2014 reduction of 15% of the 70% loan to PHEI students impacted PHEI. Due to this policy, PHEI is unable to generate revenue, despite the fact that the number of students increased from 120,000 to 215,000 that year.<sup>11</sup> From 2016 to 2018, some PHEI were also involved in PTPTN embezzlement charges.<sup>12</sup> According to Teo Nie Ching, Deputy Minister of Education, they engaged in fake documentation by extending the

study term to 6 semesters although the programme only required 5 semesters.<sup>13</sup> It is clear that the PHEIs involved are willing to create false statements in order to transfer PTPTN funds because they are unable to cover their losses. As a response, the ministry suspended new student study loans and charged the relevant PHEI with repaying the misused PTPTN loan. Despite the fact that PHEIs pursue the strategy of balancing institutional expenses with revenue from student enrollment in order to increase competitiveness, Williams and Lim estimate that 70% of PHEIs in Malaysia suffered losses in their operations in the 2010s, which had a negative impact on students.<sup>14</sup>

In Malaysia, 86 percent of PHEI are classified as 'for profit' enterprises or for-profit organisations. However, several PHEI have already begun to declare losses as a result of debt burden and inadequacies in financial resource management. In 2013 – just prior to the government's decision to reduce the percentage of PTPTN loans – financial statements from 27 university colleges, 41 private colleges, and 8 overseas university campus branches revealed that 46 percent of those institutions lacked assets to cover current liabilities.<sup>15</sup> Williams also stated that the majority of PHEI are having difficulty paying their utility bills. Many PHEI are engaged in a debt trap, especially with short-term loans, due to low revenues and a lack of financial resources. This circumstance means that PHEIs with more liabilities than assets cannot protect their financial standing and are more vulnerable to the risk of a financial collapse. In 2016, it is predicted that 64% of PHEI have significant debt worries since the value of debt exceeds the value of assets, resulting in negative equity.<sup>16</sup>

From 2013, the percentage of PHEI insolvency increased from 26% to 40%.<sup>17</sup> 43 percent of the PHEI in Malaysia made a pre-tax loss in 2013.<sup>18</sup> PHEI loss rate increased to 55%.<sup>19</sup> Even PHEIs with a profitable financial standing are not financially reassuring. In 2010, for example, the average pre-tax profit was 54%, and the after-tax profit was 78%.<sup>20</sup> According to Williams, PHEI's financial predicament is caused not only by compounded losses and rising debt levels, but also by inadequate financial management. This issue has to do with the majority of PHEI Vice-Chancellors over the age of 60, who do not fully comprehend the present commercial environment in order to guide university enterprises toward profitability.<sup>21</sup> The selection procedure for the Vice Chancellor at PHEI is also said to be less transparent, and the appointed committee frequently fails to take into account the interests of many stakeholders, especially financial stakeholders.<sup>22</sup> Some PHEI also select Vice Chancellors from outside the country who have little expertise of the local private higher education sector. Foreign operators ran 78 percent of PHEI in Malaysia in 2013, and the majority of these institutions experienced financial restrictions.<sup>23</sup>

PHEI management is an important component for the sustainability and stability of a PHEI since every slight change in revenue due to market volatility poses a considerable danger to the institution's operation. For example, a 5% drop in revenue is expected to result in losses for 69% of PHEI. Even more damaging is the 15% reduction in PTPTN loans to PHEI students, which has put PHEI on the verge of insolvency.<sup>24</sup> Masterskill Education Group Berhad, Asia Metropolitan University's management owner, discovered that the reduction in share price from RM4.24 in August 2010 to RM0.30 in May 2014 and RM0.68 in April 2015 had an impact on the institution's operation.<sup>25</sup>

The closing of the Allianza University College of Medical Sciences (AUCMS) in Penang is another example of PHEI management instability. AUCMS launched its main college site in London in 2013 with a USD47 million grant from Middlesex University, despite the fact that the institution has a branch in Indonesia in collaboration with Universitas Sumatera Utara.<sup>26</sup> AUCMS underwent a financial crisis as a consequence of the acquisition of the London

campus. According to Zainuddin Wazir, the college's founder, the establishment of the London campus strives to fulfil his objective to propel AUCMS to the international scene. On the other hand, since this college was founded in 2002 and has not yet reached maturity in terms of academic reputation or financial stability, the ambition is very premature. This issue plainly demonstrates administrative incompetence and a lack of critical thinking in financial science, which led to the college's closure in 2014.<sup>27</sup> Up to 2000 AUCMS students were unable to enroll in other PHEIs, and the college was forced to lay off up to 500 employees.<sup>28</sup>

Many colleges closed in the 2010s due to financial difficulties and inefficiency in private college administration. For example, from 2012 to 2016, a total of 46 PHEI were shuttered due to the moratorium on their establishment.<sup>29</sup> Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh, Minister of Higher Education at the time, stated that the number of PHEI closures was increasing year after year due to financial difficulties and a lack of students.

### **Course Accreditation Challenges**

In addition to financial and administrative management issues, PHEI in Malaysia often confront difficulties in ensuring the quality of courses and institutes. This is due to the fact that most PHEI that employ English as the medium of education stress economics, management, science, and technology rather than humanities such as language, philosophy, history, and literature. Understandably, PHEI prioritises non-humanities courses to meet contemporary economic and market demands.<sup>30</sup> However, this overemphasis has occasionally led to PHEI compromising course quality.<sup>31</sup> Due to this situation, the government has supervised PHEIs' courses and pedagogical culture from the start to ensure that their ideology is consistent with the national development philosophy. On June 8, 1993, the *Berita Harian* daily stated clearly the government's concern about this issue:

*“Dapatkah kita mempercayai pertambahan kolej swasta seumpama itu benar-benar tidak bercanggah dengan dasar dan falsafah pendidikan kebangsaan dari segi falsafah, kandungan dan pelaksanaannya...perkara itu hanya boleh terlaksana jika pentadbiran Kementerian Pendidikan mempunyai kekuatan azam politik.”*

[Can we believe that such an increase in private colleges really does not contradict the national education policy and philosophy in terms of philosophy, content and implementation...the matter can only be implemented if the Ministry of Education administration has the political will to do so].<sup>32</sup>

To ensure the quality of education provided by PHEI, the government requires courses offered for certification, diploma, and degree levels to be accredited by the Malaysian regulatory agency, namely the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) and several professional bodies such as the Board of Engineers and the Malaysian Medical Council.<sup>33</sup> PHEIs must satisfy the quality assurance system in order to meet the education quality standards established, so that the courses given are not only in line with the industry's current needs, but also of acceptable standard. The government also recommends students to consult the MQA and confirm the status of the PHEI of their choice before registering.<sup>34</sup> However, some PHEIs are unable to meet the accreditation agency's standards. According to one government agency director:

Some of them even said that our requirements are too high, some said that the requirements stated in COPPA are too many. So you have to fulfil them because one of the yardsticks in higher education is through MQA accreditation. So, probably a challenge for them to obtain MQA accreditation based on the requirement set.<sup>35</sup>

Williams believes that most PHEI in Malaysia are encountering accreditation issues due to budgetary difficulties and managerial shortcomings. However, the real issue is PHEI's business strategy, which is geared toward profit.<sup>36</sup> They actively promote new courses in order to attract potential students before the course is approved and accredited by MQA.<sup>37</sup> The new courses that are being offered necessitate the use of qualified instructors or subject matter experts. However, most PHEI are unable to acquire the necessary teaching personnel and are obliged to hire part-time or contract teachers with insufficient academic credentials for the new courses offered at low pay. PHEI is troubled by frequent staff replacement due to poor management and financial considerations. These issues have a negative impact on course quality and the operation of a PHEI. After performing an audit, the MQA suspends or rejects the course accreditation application. Williams underlines that MQA rejecting course accreditation applications at PHEI is common.<sup>38</sup> Private institutions also take a risk by bypassing the MQA evaluation and providing courses on offer. In 2018, for example, a private college in Malacca was fined RM35,000 for offering a course that was not approved by MQA.<sup>39</sup>

According to the Ministry of Higher Education (KPT), the Enforcement and Inspectorate Unit issued 60 compound notices totaling more than RM1 million to different PHEI that violated the ministry guidelines.<sup>40</sup> 33 of 398 private colleges were closed in 2017 due to a shortage of students and lecturers, poor teaching and learning processes, and the expiration of the college registration period.<sup>41</sup> Students who take the course are directly affected by accreditation difficulties. For example, graduates of Kolej Universiti Insaniah (KUIN) faced large consequences in 2012 due to accreditation issues. Graduates' job applications at the Kedah Public Service Commission were rejected because their degrees were not recognised by MQA. Furthermore, four graduates are alleged to have failed in the interview (to follow the Postgraduate Management Course in Jawi, Al-Quran, Arabic, and Fardu Ain) due to accreditation issues, and a total of seven graduates failed to acquire a job.<sup>42</sup>

Not only small institutions, but also prominent private universities, have recently faced the issue of course accreditation. MQA denied accreditation for many undergraduate degree programmes, MBA (Masters of Business Administration degree), and Phd courses at Limkokwing University of Creative Technology in 2019. Mohammed, an international student representative, is concerned about his future and the futures of 800 other students after learning that the university's MBA programme failed the MQA evaluation.<sup>43</sup> As stated by the institution, he was permitted to complete the course but could not guarantee that the course would be recognised. Teo Nie Ching, Deputy Minister of Education, stated that the student's course has been completely accredited since 2010. However, due to the course's poor quality, MQA was forced to take action. In 2021, Limkokwing would face the problem of losing MQA accreditation for some of its study courses, which are undertaken by a large number of international students.<sup>44</sup> It was claimed that Limkokwing took a long time to fix the problem.<sup>45</sup>

PHEI in Malaysia also had difficulties securing PTPTN loans due to the issue of students pursuing unrecognised courses and failing to repay PTPTN loan money. about 972,000 borrowers did not repay their loans within the specified time frame in 2019, resulting in arrears totaling RM6.4 billion.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, PTPTN decided to discontinue lending to students pursuing courses that are not authorised by MQA. Furthermore, the Public

Consultation Paper (PCP) proposes that loans be made available to students who complete courses that meet the SETARA (a system for assessing the achievements of universities and university colleges) or MYQUEST (a system for assessing private colleges) in addition to the MQA.<sup>47</sup> Ching solicited proposals in 2018 to require all PHEI and public higher education institutions to participate in the SETARA or MyQUEST evaluation to assist prospective students in choosing the correct institution.<sup>48</sup> PHEI operators were concerned by the plan. Although the change has the potential to increase the institution's quality and the marketability of PHEI graduates in theory, in practise it will exacerbate the institution's financial issues in its efforts to reach the designated status. Accreditation is viewed as one of the challenges that all private schools and universities must face in order to maintain operations in Malaysia.

### **Involvement of PHEI Students in Crime and Misuse of Pass and Student Visa**

Some PHEIs are also dealing with the issue of international students engaging in criminal terrorist activities. This attracts negative public opinion and rigorous government oversight. The bulk of PHEI students are from other countries and lead a distinct lifestyle. Certain PHEI overseas students are alleged to be involved in criminal cases and unlawful activities, and they are joined by some PHEI students from local campuses. This issue not only tarnishes the institution's reputation, but it also has an impact on student enrolment. According to Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Jusoh, 0.075 percent of Malaysia's 113,752 international students were implicated in criminal cases in 2015.<sup>49</sup> He did, however, admit that the government has no control over the admittance of international students who come to PHEI for short-term courses.<sup>50</sup> Although the ministry imposed some limitations and harsh measures, their activity could not be thoroughly overseen.

According to Datuk Seri Mustafar Ali, Director General of Immigration, many Nigerian students have been arrested for criminal activity. Between 2015 and 2017, 358 foreign students were arrested for narcotics possession and trafficking.<sup>51</sup> Seven private college students were detained in 2018 by the Criminal Investigation Division of the Serdang District Police Headquarters on suspicion of drug trafficking and misuse.<sup>52</sup> In 2020, police arrested several private college students and a public servant at a private party in Batu Pahat, Johor. Ketamine and Ecstasy Erimin 5 tablets were also seized.<sup>53</sup>

PHEI students are also easily enticed to join terrorist organisations. In 2014, for example, an International Islamic University College in Selangor student was influenced Islamic State (IS) jihadists using the social networking site Facebook.<sup>54</sup> Another PHEI student in the Klang Valley was detained the same year for marrying an IS fighter. Emotional attachment created through personal relationships has been recognised as a terrorist tactic used to persuade female students to join IS terrorists through the concept of *jihad*.<sup>55</sup> The English newspaper in Bangladesh, *The Daily Star*, published the name of Monash University, Bandar Sunway, in 2016, after two Bangladeshi militants named Rohan Imtiaz and Nibras Islam pursued their higher education in the university. Nibras is suspected of belonging to a militant cell that carried out a terrorist attack in Dhaka, Bangladesh, killing 22 people.<sup>56</sup> Problems such as these degrade PHEIs' reputation and pose a significant impediment to their internationalisation efforts.

Another of the issues that PHEI in Malaysia commonly faces is the misuse of student passes. In 2011, 76 international students were detained for misusing student visas and indulging in prostitution. According to Bukit Aman Police records, Chinese students had the highest number of prostitution cases, with 73 in 2011 and 29 in 2012.<sup>57</sup> Despite the fact that

Bukit Aman Police Statistics showed a decline in the arrest of foreigners who misused student cards in 2013, 674 abroad students were detained for the offence in 2017. According to Datuk Ibrahim Abdullah, Deputy Director General (Control) of Immigration, 413 of the students were from Bangladesh, with another 51 from China. Cases like this, he adds, occur often in several PHEIs, and the premises of these institutions are always under the observation of the Immigration Department. The most recent incidence occurred in 2017, when a PHEI student was accused of engaging in illegal activity by abusing a student pass. The immigration department requested that the PHEI report the situation to the ministry so that the student might be identified. The PHEI hesitated to report this case for fear of tarnishing the institution's reputation.<sup>58</sup> Normally, the government issues visas to international students immediately upon their arrival. As a result, some PHEIs abuse this facility. For example, the Immigration Department discovered in 2011 that certain universities took use of this chance to register as many as 1000 international students, well beyond their actual capacity to accommodate international students.<sup>59</sup> During the same year, 22 PHEIs were blacklisted for exploiting student visas; this sort of PHEI is known as a 'visa college'.<sup>60</sup>

As per Abdul Hamid Ahmad, Head of Operations Sector, Anti-Human Trafficking Unit, Immigration Department, certain PHEIs were unable to provide a rational explanation for this visa abuse instance. He went on to say that there are powerful organisations that employ private institutions to bring in foreigners disguised as students for profit.<sup>61</sup> According to Mustafar, the organisations used these student cards and visas to run prostitution syndicates, customer relations officers (GROs), and amusement centre personnel.<sup>62</sup> Student visas are often used by foreign nationals to operate or assist terrorist organisations. For example, Ardit Ferizi, a student at a private college in Kuala Lumpur studying Computer Science and Computer Forensics, was arrested for leading the operation of an online hacking gang called Kosova Hacker's Security. He is suspected of hacking and passing information to IS on 1,351 American service members and government employees.<sup>63</sup>

As a response, the government took action to regulate visa issuance in order to reduce document fraud. PHEI can only issue student visas under the ministry's approval after the student has accepted an offer from the university.<sup>64</sup> According to the Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh, four PHEIs were barred from taking new overseas students in 2015. This decision was made in response to an increase in the number of foreigners using student visas to enter Malaysia and work.<sup>65</sup> PHEIs had to follow the government's tight standards once more in order to solve the problems mentioned. To cope with incidents of student pass and visa misuse, the cabinet adopted many new methods to tighten international student recruitment beginning 1 January 2016.<sup>66</sup> International student pass applications are made online by students to Malaysia Global Education Services (EMGS), which was wholly run by the Ministry of Higher Education.<sup>67</sup> EMGS also collaborates with the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM), the Ministry of Higher Education (KPT), the Ministry of Home Affairs (KDN), the Immigration Department, and other law enforcement agencies to address problems with overseas students.<sup>68</sup> However, the screening method used by EMGS before the National Immigration Department approves student permits may limit the number of international students admitted to PHEI.

EMGS ensures that the student's academic prerequisites satisfy the conditions outlined in the Study Course Approval letter. EMGS evaluates student applications online via the STARS (Student Application and Registration System) system for this reason.<sup>69</sup> This system assures that only high-quality international students are admitted to the country. However, these stringent requirements limit the number of overseas students with average academic competence who can pursue higher education in Malaysia, thus reducing PHEIs' income.



Government guidelines requiring that every course offered to overseas students be fully accredited by the MQA also have an effect on international student enrollment. The Department of Higher Education issues the Course Approval letter only after receiving response from the MQA.<sup>70</sup> The reality is that not all PHEI courses are fully accredited, and the procedure entails a lengthy process.

Following the development of the SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19) pandemic, the Malaysian government issued the first Movement Control Order (MCO) on March 18, 2020. In addition to the food business and other daily necessities, all economic, social, and educational sectors are periodically closed and reopened. This movement restriction order paralysed the majority of the country's economic sector. There is no disputing that the Covid-19 epidemic has casted doubt on the future of PHEI in Malaysia. After the onset of the pandemic, the operation of PHEI in Malaysia, which had encountered numerous obstacles throughout previous decades, was further hampered in terms of finance, administrative organisation, and the instruction and learning method.

### **Critical Financial Problems and Organizational Paralysis of PHEI Administration**

PHEIs in Malaysia are one of the largest economic contributors to the GDP, with around 437 PHEI contributing RM31.5 billion every year in the form of student fees as of 2020.<sup>71</sup> PHEI had 666,000 students out of a total of 1.3 million students in the country by that year.<sup>72</sup> However, the MCO implemented in stages following the Covid-19 outbreak in Malaysia beginning in March 2020 forced the closure of all educational institutions, including PHEI campuses.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, the government's decision to close the country's borders places financial strain on PHEIs, paralysing their operations.<sup>74</sup> PHEI was totally unable to attract overseas students by the end of 2020. The percentage of PHEI income in Malaysia derived from international students is relatively high, and this obstruction has a detrimental impact on the institution's financial stability. Losses were anticipated to reach up to RM11 billion in 2020.<sup>75</sup>

According to Datuk Dr. Paramjit Singh, President of the Malaysian Association of Private University Colleges (MAPCU), most PHEI are experiencing financial difficulties because their students are requesting tuition reductions in response to the MCO.<sup>76</sup> This issue may further limit PHEI's income, which is dependent on tuition fees for corporate survival.<sup>77</sup> He also stated that the government's 2021 Budget did not ensure PHEI's sustainability.<sup>78</sup> Mohd Isham Fauzi, President of PHEI Sarawak, is also concerned since the government's Additional SME Concern Package, which is an economic stimulus package, does not benefit the PHEI sector.<sup>79</sup> At the same time, it was learned that the government might contribute RM300 million under the Mudah Jaya Financing Scheme (SPim) to ease the burden and ensure the commercial continuity of Bumiputera PHEI operators.<sup>80</sup> This indicates the government's indifference to PHEI's financial crisis, which also generates a significant portion of the national income.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Higher Education directed that all national PHEI postpone the return of their students to campus and the registration of new students begin in October 2020, particularly for students from red zone locations (areas with active Covid cases).<sup>81</sup> Paramjit reportedly advised the government to address the PHEI problem seriously because the closure of many PHEIs would have an impact on the nation's growth and the quality of the qualified and professional workforce required for the country's economic progress.<sup>82</sup> He also suggested to the government that PHEI continue learning operations on campus by adhering to the government's Standard Operating Procedures in order to avert complete shutdown.<sup>83</sup> He

also expressed his opinion that PHEI would most likely have no choice but to increase tuition fees if this situation persisted.

However, Datuk Dr. Noraini Ahmad, Minister of Higher Education, claimed that the government is not ready to accept petitions from PHEI to increase tuition costs from June 1 to December 2020.<sup>84</sup> This act is intended to safeguard students' welfare, but it also shrinks PHEI's revenue. Additionally, the charge rate decided by PHEI must be approved by the Ministry of Higher Education.<sup>85</sup> Due to the strict control in the pandemic circumstance, PHEI in Malaysia was unable to generate funds in order to protect their financial status and continue operating. Most PHEIs had difficulty paying staff salaries, utility bills, and rental rates.<sup>86</sup>

Paramjit also believed that the crisis would force many more PHEI to cease operations. The fact that soon following the first MCO, an estimated 60 PHEI shuttered their doors in 2020.<sup>87</sup> An estimated 376 PHEI would face significant financial challenges in 2021 and would likely stop operations.<sup>88</sup> According to Mohan Raj Gurubatham and Geoffrey Williams, in this pandemic environment, as much as 97% of PHEI suffer losses and 51% are insolvent.<sup>89</sup> The closing of PHEI resulted in the loss of thousands of PHEI instructors and personnel who were earning monthly income from PHEI. This has an impact on the 600,000 PHEI students, including international students, as well as the teaching and learning process (P&P).<sup>90</sup> PHEI students are also in debt because the majority of them receive PTPTN loans, yet their studies are delayed owing to institution closures and rescheduling.<sup>91</sup>

### **Problems in The Teaching And Learning Process (P&P) Through Online**

Besides the economic difficulties, private colleges and universities were having difficulty carrying out the teaching and learning process as a result of the MCO directive. Although all educational institutions were temporarily closed, students' teaching and learning cannot be neglected. The government encourages the institution's functioning to continue using an online platform. PHEIs were pushed to transition from traditional methods to online. To accompany this shift, all colleges and universities were spending millions of ringgit to quickly convert instructional materials, assessment papers, and notes to online data forms.<sup>92</sup> In addition to the high cost of expenses, this adjustment strains faculty staff by requiring them to upload all materials for the purposes of educators and students.<sup>93</sup> Professor Datuk Dr. Raduan Che Rose, President of the National Council of Professors, stated that because the pandemic crisis happened unexpectedly, not all higher education institutions were fully prepared for the online teaching and delivery procedure.<sup>94</sup>

Most higher education institutions, including PHEI, encountered challenges in conducting teaching since not all students had access to the internet or the financial means to purchase a laptop or desktop computer to follow their classes online.<sup>95</sup> internet connection in Malaysia's rural and sub-urban areas is limited in comparison to urban areas, which have widespread access.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, students and faculty face issues with internet coverage and speed because this is dependent on the amount of internet data that can be delivered based on a student's subscription and location.<sup>97</sup>

According to Professor Datuk Dr. Raduan, more over 30% of students did not have access to the basic facilities for online learning.<sup>98</sup> Some study programmes that require laboratory facilities, such as medicine and dentistry for indirect clinical instruction could not be completed online.<sup>99</sup> In such a case, the government issued a public release on 20 March 2020, instructing higher education institutions to take responsibility for guaranteeing that all of

their students have internet connectivity so that they do not miss their learning sessions. The government released the following statement:

*“KPT membenarkan semua IPTS untuk meneruskan pembelajaran dalam talian dengan syarat bahawa semua pelajar secara keseluruhannya mendapat akses, pensyarah serta infrastruktur telah sedia sepenuhnya. KPT berharap agar tiada pelajar yang ketinggalan dalam sesi P&P ini kerana tidak mendapat akses internet.”*

[KPT [the Ministry of Higher Education] allows all PHEIs to continue learning online on the condition that all students as a whole have access, and lecturers and infrastructure are fully prepared. KPT hopes that no students will miss out on this P&P [teaching and learning] session because they don't have access to the internet].<sup>100</sup>

This trend toward online P&P, known as "pandemic pedagogy," stressed PHEIs and limited their ability to continue operating.<sup>101</sup> Not all private universities could provide their students with internet modems and laptop computers. In light of this issue, many students were unable to access the internet, while PHEIs, which are undergoing a financial crisis, are unable to properly assist their students. Dr. Raduan believed that the government should expand internet access because the MyREN (Malaysian Research & Education Network) initiative, which was introduced in 2005, was ineffective in extending internet access for teaching and learning sessions. This is due to the fact that this effort was limited to a few universities. He also noted that the support announced in the 2021 Budget to offer laptops and other amenities was insufficient for the total number of university and polytechnic students, which is 1.2 million individuals.<sup>102</sup>

### **PHEI Students' Psychological Health**

In addition to financial issues and online teaching and learning operations, PHEIs were desperate to manage for students' mental health so that they did not suffer from depression during the pandemic. This was because the bulk of IPT students were all on their respective campuses and were unable to visit their families or participate in activities with their friends. Students must also acclimatise as soon as feasible to attend classes online.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, the transition from face-to-face to online learning places a strain on students who live on campus or at home in terms of adapting to the concept of virtual learning. There are times when those who lived at home needed to isolate themselves in order to properly concentrate.<sup>104</sup> Due this situation, PHEIs were under pressure to address the issue of student stress, because it cannot be argued that the level of student pressure at PHEI was considerable, given the payment of hefty semester fees and a highly competitive learning environment.<sup>105</sup>

Most parents and guardians who lost their source of income due to the economic sector's closure during the MCO faced difficulties in paying tuition fees on time.<sup>106</sup> Students who have not paid their debts were said to be barred from participating in several academic activities at private universities and institutions. A more serious effect was that students would not be able to graduate.<sup>107</sup> Some students were forced to work part-time or full-time as food delivery drivers for companies like Grab Food, Foodpanda, Dah Makan, and Lapar in order to pay their college tuition and attend online classes.<sup>108</sup>

At the same time, constant pressure led to students taking desperate steps such as hurting and risking their own and others' lives. Due to various stresses, two PHEI students in

the Klang Valley committed suicide within a week in 2019.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, on 25 May 2020, a student from Egypt studying Business Foundation at one of the PHEI in Miri, Sarawak, was discovered dead in the corridor of the condominium he rented. According to CCTV evidence, the student went up to the 15th floor through the lift and sat in the corridor in an unstable condition until 2.16am, when he jumped from the floor.<sup>110</sup> On 6 May 2021, a PHEI student was stabbed to death by a roommate at a Damansara Perdana condominium. Due to a disagreement over drugs and debt, the suspect allegedly tossed the victim from the 26th story. The police were reported to be launching an inquiry to see whether drug smuggling occurred on the university campus.

The National Student Consultative Council (MPPK) requested that all higher education institutions pay special attention to their students in order to deal with problems caused by the implementation of the MCO directive.<sup>111</sup> The council also proposed that all educational institutions organised online activities that were beneficial to their students so that students could make the best use of their free time.<sup>112</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Since the era of large-scale operations began in the 1990s, PHEIs have faced numerous hurdles in order to continue operating in Malaysia. This chapter finds that the most prevalent problem is financial management, both before and after the Covid-19 era. Most side difficulties, such as accreditation and rating issues of schools, student involvement in illegal activities, misuse of student visas, and limits in the teaching and learning process, could be overcome if PHEIs were able to balance their financial condition. Financial crisis generated concern for all PHEIs, particularly those that rely on private firms for financial capital.

At the same time, PHEIs play a role in increasing highly qualified citizens in order to boost the national economy. PHEIs are frequently carefully regulated by the government for this purpose, and as a result, they are anxious to maintain the quality of its courses from time to time so that the courses given are not revoked by MQA. However, the Covid-19 outbreak and the subsequent MCO order caused many PHEIs to go bankrupt. Another issue for PHEI during this MCO period is that only PHEIs owned by Bumiputeras are prioritised for government support. Meanwhile, non-Bumiputera PHEIs are asked to devise their own strategies to overcome funding constraints. It should be emphasised that PHEI requires the involvement and support of an inclusive government to continue working in the present and in the future. The government's role should not only be to regulate and supervise PHEIs, but also to create constructive relationships with PHEIs.

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## Biodata

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Received: 11 November 2022

Reviewed: 20 Januari 2023

Accepted: 21 Februari 2023

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