

A Case Study of Private Higher Education Institutions in Confronting to the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education)

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the conformance of Private Higher Education Institutions to the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), with specific focus on Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates. Conformance is important for optimum outcomes. This research employs a qualitative case study approach. The respondents are leaders of Private Higher Education Institutions in Penang, Malaysia. Data-gathering tools consist of semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Data is analysed using thematic analysis framework. The findings reveal two (2) meta-themes derived from eight (8) emergent themes. The meta-themes are that Private Higher Education Institutions are not fully conforming to Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates; and there is no current movement or momentum by Private Higher Education Institutions towards full conformity to Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates. From these findings, it is recommended that Private Higher Education Institutions should “go back to basics” to familiarize themselves with the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) and other related policies; and current public policy tools need to be strengthened and new ones introduced to guide Private Higher Education Institutions to conform with the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education). This research provides valuable inputs and concrete recommendations for public policy. Good public policy formulation and alignment among all players and stakeholders is crucial for optimum national development.

Keywords: Higher Education; Private Higher Education Institutions; Malaysian Education Blueprint; Case Study; Thematic Analysis; Industrial Revolution 4.0

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INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, the higher education sector is a major driver of economic development and nation-building. The Ministry of Education regulates this sector and not only monitors compliance of the various institutions to current policies but also proactively propels the sector to meet the challenges of the future. To address the challenges of the future in a systematic fashion, the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) (hereinafter abbreviated as “MEB HE”) was conceived in 2015 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). MEB HE is designed as a roadmap with provisions for review, recalibration and reformulation. It is very comprehensive comprising ten (10) shifts or major thrusts to prepare Malaysian higher education to meet the challenges of the future, in particular the advent of Industrial Revolution 4.0 (hereinafter abbreviated as “IR4.0”). IR4.0 has the potential to significantly change, disrupt, or even render obsolete higher education in its current form. Given that the advent of IR4.0 has introduced an added layer of complexity and challenges, and MEB HE has reached its halfway mark in 2020, it is time to review its progress. The ten (10) shifts in MEB HE are depicted in Table 1.

Shift 1	Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates
Shift 2	Talent Excellence
Shift 3	Nation of Lifelong Learners
Shift 4	Quality Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Graduates
Shift 5	Financial Sustainability
Shift 6	Empowered Governance
Shift 7	Innovation Ecosystem
Shift 8	Global Prominence
Shift 9	Globalized Online Learning
Shift 10	Transformed Higher Education Delivery

Table 1: Ten (10) shifts of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education)

MEB HE is ambitious and aspirational, as epitomized by the tagline “Soaring Upwards” articulated by Dato’ Seri Haji Idris bin Jusoh, the minister of higher education in 2018 (QS Asia News Network, 2018). Given the relatively short time frame of ten (10) years, close and constant progress monitoring and conformance evaluation is required to fully achieve all ten (10) shifts of the MEB HE. This paper adopts an admittedly more modest objective of investigating only Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates. As the first shift, Shift 1 sets the tone for all the subsequent shifts. The premise for Shift 1 is “Preparing Malaysian youth to navigate the uncertain future not only requires imbuing them with transferable skills and sound ethical foundation but also the resilience and enterprising spirit to forge new opportunities for themselves and others (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015, p13).” In other words, it is about technical skills and character building in terms of adaptive skills, morality, resilience and an entrepreneurial mindset.

Shift 1 further outlines the curriculum and learning support required to develop graduates with “relevant and appropriate disciplinary knowledge and skills (*ilmu*), ethics and morality (*akhlak*), along with the right behaviours, mindsets, cultural and civilizational literacy (*beradab*) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015, p13). A balanced learning outcome of both hard, technical skills and soft social, spiritual skills is targeted. Students must not only know how to do things right, but also know the right things to do. Shift 1 is seen as the leading and most important shift as emphasized by Education Minister II YB Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh “among the most important shifts were creating holistic entrepreneurial and balanced graduates. This is important as we want better quality students and lecturers in the coming years” (Ganapathy, 2016).

Shift 1 also closely mirrors the national education philosophy (*falsafah pendidikan kebangsaan*) that underpins all education matters in Malaysia. The national education philosophy reads, “*Education in Malaysia is a continuous endeavour towards developing individual potential holistically and comprehensively to realize people that are balanced, harmonious from the aspects of intellect, spiritual, emotional and physical based on the belief in and devotion to God. This endeavour is to actualize Malaysians that are knowledgeable, competent, ethical, responsible and capable of achieving individual well-being, as well as contributing towards the harmony and prosperity of the family, community and nation.*” (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017, p16).

This paper will investigate Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates specifically with regards to Private Higher Education Institutions (hereinafter abbreviated as “PHEI”). PHEIs currently account for more than half of all higher education students in Malaysia. There are almost 1.3 million Malaysian youths pursuing tertiary education and more than half are enrolled in PHEIs (New Straits Times, 2019). There is a total of 471 PHEIs (including 10 foreign branch campuses) as of 2016 (Etawau, 2019). Prominent PHEIs include Sunway University, Taylor’s University, UCSI University, Monash University, University of Nottingham and Xiamen University Malaysia. The importance and significance of PHEIs in the higher education sector is evident in terms of the quantity of students enrolled. However, in terms of quality, the performance of PHEIs is mixed. Quality comprises various dimensions including educational content, educational choices, teaching delivery, learning effectiveness, physical facilities, faculty qualifications, campus culture, social support services, graduate employability, and others. Linking many of these dimensions of quality is the availability of financial resources.

For example, obtaining physical facilities, retaining qualified faculty and providing adequate social support services all require substantial financial investments. The availability of financial resources as viewed from the financial performance of PHEIs is rather worrying as more than half of PHEIs are making losses (New Straits Times, 2018). These financial shortcomings call into question the ability of PHEIs to make the necessary capital investments to provide quality education in its various dimensions. Approximately 137,000 students and 7,000 academic staff are in PHEIs that are at risk of financial failure (New Straits Times, 2018). High-profile failures include Allianz University College of Medical Sciences (AUCMS), a prominent medical college that left its students’ education disrupted (The Star Online, 2015).

On the other hand, selected PHEIs have performed well and achieved world-class rankings (The Star Online, 2019). Based on the widely followed QS World University Rankings 2020, the top 20 universities in Malaysia include eight (8) private universities as depicted in Table 2.

	University	Ranking	Status
1	Universiti Malaya	70	public university
2	Universiti Putra Malaysia	159	public university
3	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia	160	public university
4	Universiti Sains Malaysia	165	public university
5	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia	217	public university
6	UCSI University	442	private university
7	Universiti Teknologi Petronas	482	private university (associated with a government-linked corporation)
8	Taylor’s University	511-520	private university
9	Management and Science University	541-550	private university
10	Universiti Utara Malaysia	591-600	public university
11	International Islamic University Malaysia	651-700	public university
12	Universiti Teknologi MARA	651-700	public university
13	Universiti Malaysia Perlis	701-751	public university
14	Sunway University	751-800	private university
15	Universiti Malaysia Pahang	751-800	public university
16	Multimedia University	801-1000	private university
17	Universiti Malaysia Sarawak	801-1000	public university
18	Universiti Tenaga Nasional	801-1000	private university (associated with a government-linked corporation)
19	Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman	801-1000	private university (associated with a political party)
20	Universiti Malaysia Sabah	801-1000	public university

Table 2: Top 20 Malaysian universities (QS World University Rankings, 2020)

In a nutshell, higher education in Malaysia is a crucial driver of national development and is actively managed and directed by the Ministry of Education via the MEB HE. PHEIs are an important component of the higher education landscape accounting for approximately half of all students enrolled in higher education in Malaysia. As such, the state of conformance of PHEIs with the MEB HE is an area of vital importance. Conformance and alignment ensure efficiency, effectiveness and optimum outcomes. The purpose of this research is to investigate the current state of implementation, conformance and achievement of the MEB HE among PHEIs. Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates of the MEB HE is the focus of investigation as it is the most important shift that lays the foundation for the entire MEB HE.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

The MEB HE follows through on the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2015 (Preschool and Post-Secondary Education) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013) with the objective of revamping Malaysian education to meet future challenges. Preceding the MEB HE is the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2 Malaysia’s Global Reach: A New Dimension (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2011) and The National Higher Education Action Plan Phase 2 (2011-2015) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012). All these plans fall within the framework of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan or *Pelan Strategik Pengajian Tinggi Negara* (PSPTN).

At the international level, direction is provided by the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); in particular Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2017). The United Nations has consistently promoted education as a means of achieving equality, well-being and sustainability. The SDGs were developed from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that expired in 2015 (World Health Organization, 2020). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) include Goal 2: To achieve universal primary education, which is a precursor of the current SDG Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates of the MEB HE envisions that “Every graduate will have the relevant and appropriate disciplinary knowledge and skills (*ilmu*), ethics and morality (*akhlak*), along with the right behaviour, mindsets, cultural and civilizational literacy (*beradab*)” (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015, p12). The overall objective is to achieve a holistic balance in student and graduate attributes. This balance of *ilmu*, *akhlak* and *adab* is further refined into six (6) domains of ethics and spirituality, leadership skills, national identity, language proficiency, thinking skills, and knowledge as depicted in Table 3 below.

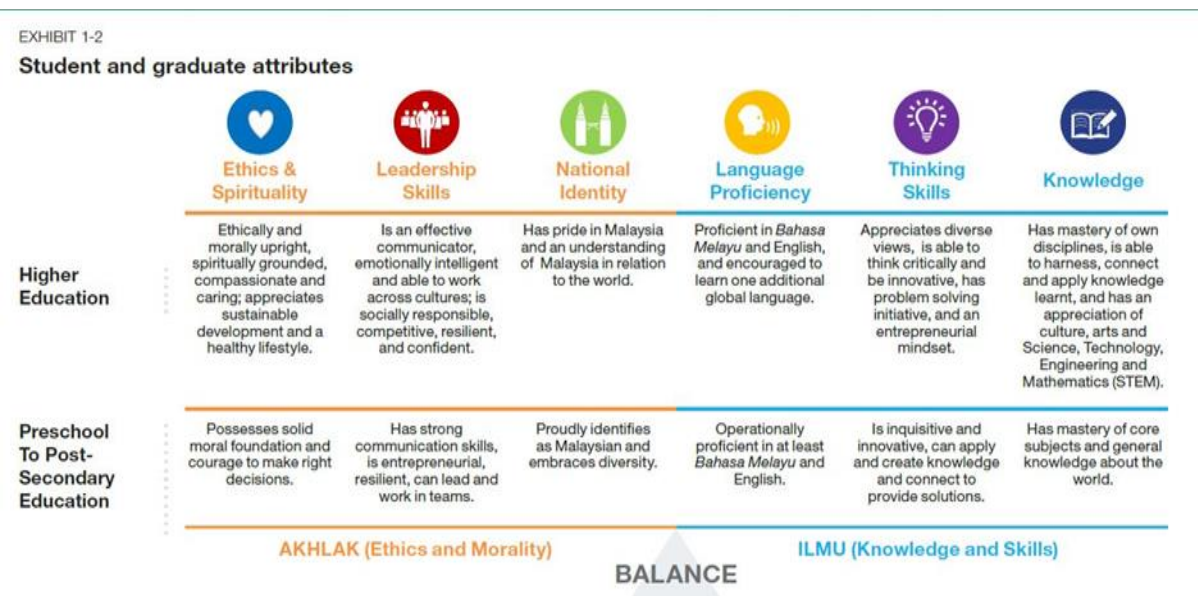


Table 3: Student and graduate attributes (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015)

The targeted outcome is to nurture Malaysians as global citizens with a “strong Malaysian identity, ready and willing to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, society, nation and global community” (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015, p13). Embedded are attributes of technical competence and commercial awareness; spiritual intelligence and attainment; social capital and civic-mindedness; and physical, mental and emotional health. It is noteworthy and meaningful that the Malay words *ilmu*, *akhlak* and *adab* (noun of

“beradab”) are retained in the English language report. This signifies conceptualizations culturally endemic to Malaysia.

Words representing intrinsic, culturally embedded concepts are not easily translated. *Ilmu*, *akhlak* and *adab* are all etymologically Arabic, with its related cultural contextual meanings. *Ilmu* is more than just technical, factual and objective knowledge and skills. *Ilmu* encompasses religious and spiritual knowledge and skills, and one who possess *ilmu* is seen not just as being knowledgeable or skillful but also wise. Full actualization of *ilmu* requires that it be put into practice (*amal*) with the right mindset and understanding in order to be authentic (*berkat*). *Akhlak* is ethics and morality, but not limited to the traditional Western secular conceptualization. Embedded in *akhlak* are religious (customarily Islamic as per its Arabic etymology) considerations. In comparison to ethics and morality that are customarily conceptualized as external to an individual, and hence have to be consciously practised, *akhlak* is more internalized, instinctive and subconscious or “natural”. *Adab* is closely related to *akhlak* and refers to the behavioural manifestations of the latter. *Adab* is more than just appropriate physical actions and conduct; the appropriate cognition needs also be present. For example, a child who addresses an elder with proper honorifics because the child is instructed to do so is merely exhibiting good behavior (*kelakuan baik*). An adult who does so with conscious appreciation and respect to an elder is exhibiting *adab*. The retention of these endemic Malay terms alludes to Malaysia’s aspiration of meeting the challenges of IR4.0 and the future on her own terms with regards to higher education.

The fourth industrial revolution or IR4.0 (Industrial Revolution 4.0) was initially used in Germany to describe impending broad changes in manufacturing that calls for a proactive, strategic and integrated response (Kagermann et al, 2013). Subsequently, the term IR4.0 came into vogue and the label “4.0” has been applied in diverse fields such as Work 4.0 or Healthcare 4.0 (Wallner and Wagner, 2016). The first industrial revolution is characterized by the use of water and steam power, the second industrial revolution the use of electric power, and the third industrial revolution the use of electronics and information technology. The current is IR4.0 characterized as a fusion of technologies that blurs the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres (Schwab, 2016).

Education is inexorably linked to IR4.0 as in the future, human talent will represent the critical factor of production (Schwab, 2016). The traditional factors of production of land, labour and capital, are surpassed by the upcoming factors of intellectual, social and creative capital. All these upcoming factors of production are forms of human capital, and education is crucial in their development. As such, “Education 4.0” is bandied out as a corollary to IR4.0. “Education 4.0 is a response to the needs of IR4.0 where humans and technology are aligned to enable new possibilities” (Hussin, 2018, p92). The Malaysian Ministry of Education has recognized and addressed the close connection between IR4.0 and higher education with the publication Framing Malaysian Higher Education 4.0: Future-Proof Talents (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2018).

Globally, IR4.0 is still unfolding and Education 4.0 is still in its infancy. As in any major change, development and adoption varies. In Malaysia, the socio-economic landscape is diverse. The major cities like Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Johor Bahru are home to a high concentration of both industries and higher education institutions. As such, they have started embarking on IR4.0 and Education 4.0. On the other hand, in rural villages and small towns, providing basic education can still be a challenge in terms of availability, accessibility and affordability. This uneven development is echoed by Demartini and Benussi (2017) who noted that Education 4.0 has just started and has barely dawned on the stage of real life.

Given the uneven development of Education 4.0, several distinct trends or characteristics are nevertheless emerging. These trends currently include remote, self-paced learning; personalization; student choice; project-based learning; experiential learning; exposure to data interpretation; diverse assessment methods; incorporation of student inputs; and independent learning (Fisk, 2017). It remains to be seen what other trends in Education 4.0 will emerge in the near future.

It is in the context of IR4.0 and a VUCA environment characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014) that the MEB HE is crafted. In support of actualizing Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates, an integrated cumulative grade point average (iCGPA) system is introduced as a key initiative to achieve a balanced approach between academic obligations and activities outside the classroom (Lok et al. 2018). The iCGPA system lists subjects and grades in a conventional academic transcript coupled with a “spider web” (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015, p87) visually depicting non-academic achievements such as specific skill sets and extra-curricular activities. The fundamental idea of iCGPA is to provide a balanced and holistic assessment of a student that goes beyond academic grades.

Concurrent with the iCGPA initiative, the second edition of the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2017) outlines five (5) clusters of learning outcomes, namely (a) knowledge, (b) cognitive skills, (c) functional skills, (d) personal and entrepreneurial skills, and (e) ethics and professionalism (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2017, p14). Learning outcomes (a) to (c) correspond to *ilmu*. Knowledge per se is augmented by cognitive skills or how to use knowledge in an appropriate manner. Subsequently, functional skills require the usage of knowledge to function in a practical manner in support of social well-being and human development. Learning outcomes (b), (d) and (e) correspond to *adab* and *akhlak*. Attitudes and mindsets have to align with appropriate values and moral conduct. Satisfactory attainment of all five (5) learning outcomes will convincingly achieve Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates.

METHOD

Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates and the accompanying constructs of *ilmu*, *akhlak* and *adab* are fundamentally qualitative in nature, even though there are attempts to quantify and measure them with tools such as the iCGPA (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015, p87). Similarly, it follows that the extent of PHEI's attainment of Shift 1 is also qualitative in nature. As such, a qualitative research paradigm is most suitable and this research employs a case study methodology (Denscombe, 2007; Yin, 2009). The principal data-gathering instrument for this case study is semi-structured interviews. Interviews enable the researcher to delve deep into the subject matter for rich, comprehensive and quality findings. However, during the fieldwork, one respondent indicated their preference to know the interview questions in advance and respond in writing. As such, a written version of the semi-structured interview is also developed and deployed accordingly.

The conceptual framework employed is that of interpretivism. Interpretivism holds that the study of social phenomena requires an understanding of the social world that people have constructed and which they reproduce through their continuing activities (Blaikie, 2007). People are constantly involved in interpreting and reinterpreting their social reality. They iteratively develop meanings for their activities individually and collectively. Interpretivism is deemed the most suitable conceptual framework as the phenomenon researched, conformance to a qualitative ideal, is fundamentally subject to collective interpretation.

The interview questions start with basic information of the respondents, followed by their general views of the MEB HE, their views of Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates, and finally drilling down onto the component of *ilmu*, *akhlak* and *adab*. A sample of the interview prompts for *adab* is as follows:

With reference to Shift 1 – Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates, a key attribute is *adab* (civic behaviour). What do you understand by the term *adab*? Why do you think *adab* is important? How does *adab* relate to *akhlak* and *ilmu*? How does *adab* relate campus community? How do you/your institution prepare students in terms of *adab*? Can you give examples? How does the academic curriculum support it? How does the extra-curricular support it? How does the campus environment support it? What are the main challenges facing students in terms of *adab*? How do you/your institution inculcate *adab* in students? How much resources (in terms of human, financial, time, space, social, etc.) do you allocate to inculcate *adab* in students? Can you name some examples? Do you think that sufficient resources are allocated? What are your plans moving forward with regard to mastery of *adab*? Any other thoughts with regards to *adab*?

The interviews (both traditional face-to-face and "written version") were conducted from August to September 2018. Prior to the interviews, appointments were made via emails followed by telephone messages as appropriate. All the respondents who eventually agreed to be interviewed had to be contacted several times (one respondent actually commended the researcher for the persistence displayed). The duration of the interviews was from approximately forty-five (45) minutes to ninety minutes (90). Apart from a single respondent who requested the written version of the interview, all interviews were conducted *in situ* at the PHEIs of the respondents. The interviews were recorded (when consent was given by the respondent) and then transcribed or notes were recorded immediately after the interviews (for respondents who withheld consent to be recorded). The interviews were all conducted in English by the lead researcher, assisted by the co-researchers for consistency.

The transcripts, notes and written responses were subject to the thematic analysis framework as articulated by Brian and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a foundational method for qualitative analysis that enables a systematic method to identify, analyse and report patterns within data. The interpretation of the meaning of the themes against the researcher's background and comparison of these findings with literature or theories guides the data analysis (Creswell, 2007). A depiction of the thematic analysis framework and its different phases is shown in Table 4:

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking in the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	On-going analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Table 4: The different phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

An inductive research orientation is adopted whereby there were no hypothesized themes *a priori* to the analysis of the data. In other words, this is a bottom-up approach where the data informs the theory or the themes in the specific context of this research. A similar orientation is adopted in the analysis of the meta-themes.

This research focuses on emergent latent themes. This approach fully capitalises on the rich context of the interviews that are conducted face-to-face and *in situ* at the PHEIs. Apart from the interviews, the researchers toured the campuses of the PHEIs and observed their students for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon investigated. This focus on emergent latent themes is deemed more insightful and appropriate in comparison with the alternative approach of focusing on semantic themes based exclusively on the summarisation of the interview content.

The research field site is Penang Island which is part of the State of Penang in Malaysia. Penang Island is selected based on the following considerations:

- 1) It is a major urban centre
- 2) It is home to numerous PHEIs
- 3) Its PHEIs are located in relatively close proximity easing fieldwork logistics
- 4) To widen research coverage beyond the capital city of Kuala Lumpur or the Klang Valley

The original research design is for the respondent pool to comprise the leaders of all active PHEIs on Penang Island. The focus is on active PHEIs as opposed to PHEIs that only exist on paper but are not in operation. Active PHEIs are determined by the presence of their public communications, documentary analysis and feedback from students and parents. Sixteen (16) PHEIs were contacted via emails to their vice-chancellor/principal/chief executive. Subsequently, follow-up emails and telephone calls were made as necessary. Despite numerous follow-ups, only three (3) responded and were interviewed accordingly. The others either declined to be interviewed citing lack of time or simply refused to respond.

To widen the respondent pool, it was decided to supplement the original research design with snowball sampling and include respondents outside of Penang island and/or who are not designated leaders PHEIs but possess expert knowledge in this sector. This additional snowball sampling yielded two (2) respondents, a leader of a PHEI located outside of Penang island and a university academic whose child is studying in a PHEI and is well versed in the field of higher education and public policy. With this, there are a total of five (5) respondents for this research.

The appropriate number of respondents for qualitative research is subject to some debate. For qualitative case study research, the objective is to reach theoretical saturation whereby additional respondents will not provide additional theoretical findings. This is unlike quantitative research in which its objective is to seek statistically sound representation for the findings to have predictive capabilities. Other factors that come into play include the subject of study, research paradigm, methodology, physical feasibility, time available, costs, and others. In this research, efforts to reach the originally targeted respondent pool have been saturated, and the respondent pool subsequently widened to accommodate additional respondents. As such, these five (5) respondents are deemed appropriate and suitable for this research.

The unit of analysis is the leader representing the PHEIs, usually the vice-chancellor/principal/chief executive. The vice-chancellor/principal/chief executive may delegate to their deputies/director/dean to represent their institution as deemed appropriate. The interviews are conducted in English, recorded and transcribed. Written consent was obtained from all respondents and customary research ethics was strictly adhered. All researchers were involved in the analysis and discussions to reduce personal interpretation biases as per good qualitative research practice.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following themes emerged from the thematic analysis:

Theme 1	Majority of PHEIs are ambivalent towards academic research
Theme 2	Most PHEIs are unfamiliar with the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education)
Theme 3	PHEIs are appreciative and supportive of producing holistic graduates
Theme 4	Focus is on <i>ilmu</i> , at the expense of <i>akhlak</i> and <i>adab</i>
Theme 5	<i>Akhlak</i> and <i>adab</i> are frequently an afterthought in the curriculum design
Theme 6	Focus on <i>akhlak</i> and <i>adab</i> is more prevalent outside the academic curriculum
Theme 7	Campuses are not designed with promoting <i>akhlak</i> and <i>adab</i> in mind
Theme 8	Regulatory compliance requirements are substantial

Table 5: Summary of Emergent Themes

Theme 1: Majority of PHEIs are ambivalent towards academic research

The majority of PHEIs do not give much weight to academic research and are uncooperative or unsure of how to respond to research requests. This is derived from the poor response rate of the leaders of PHEIs despite repeated follow-up communications. Some leaders of PHEIs stated directly that they do not have the time to “entertain” academic researchers. Given that, the focus of PHEIs is traditionally on teaching rather than research, this attitude is still considered surprising as in the context of this research, PHEIs are just expected to passively cooperate with the researchers. Furthermore, research supports and strengthens teaching, and PHEIs being primarily teaching and academic institutions are expected to be more accommodating of academic researchers.

Academic institutions are by definition curators, transmitters and generators of knowledge, and academic research is the heart of the latter. The inference is that the importance of academic research is not ingrained in PHEIs. Furthermore, it is observed that some of the leaders of PHEIs are without doctoral qualifications and hence have not undertaken significant academic research. The logical assumption from this behaviour is that the mindset of PHEIs does not revolve around academic research and academia in general. In other words, they are ambivalent towards academic research. By itself, ambivalence towards academic research is not necessarily an issue. However, it is an issue in the context of the MEB HE as Shift 7 – Innovation Ecosystem, Shift 8 – Global Prominence, and Shift 10 Transformed Higher Education Delivery (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015, p15); all these shifts require moving beyond the status quo of current practices. Without academic research, PHEIs are not knowledge generators but only knowledge transmitters that preserve the status quo but falls short of the aspirations of the MEB HE.

Theme 2: Most PHEIs are unfamiliar with the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education)

Four (4) out of the five (5) respondents are not familiar with or even aware of the MEB HE, let alone Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates. Some of them had to ask the researchers in return for details

of the MEB HE and one of them admitted non-fluency in Bahasa Malaysia and hence was unable to organically grasp the meanings of *ilmu*, *akhlak* and *adab*. Furthermore, the internal directions, visions and missions of these PHEIs do not fully encompass Shift 1. Their internal directions, visions and missions are skewed towards vocational and industrial needs, language and communication, and spiritual and religious values. In other words, they are not balanced as envisioned by Shift 1. This suggests that their internal directions, visions and missions are formulated separately from the MEB HE. As such, divergence is present and any convergence could be coincidental. Some sample responses are as follows:

“The three of them (ilmu, akhlak and adab) are definitely interrelated. They should be in the education blueprint and be heavily emphasized.”
(Respondent A)

It appears that Respondent A is oblivious that *ilmu*, *akhlak* and *adab* are already in the MEB HE, and prominently so in Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates.

“Our institution is unique and different in a way that we do not refer to the Malaysian Education Blueprint to figure out our attributes.”
(Respondent B)

“Not really familiar with the Blueprint. Any Shift should be given time to be properly implemented and the results be evaluated.”
(Respondent D)

Theme 3: PHEIs are appreciative and supportive of producing holistic graduates

Specific terminology aside, the leaders of PHEIs interviewed all display an appreciation and support of the basic concept of producing holistic graduates with *ilmu*, *akhlak* and *adab*. They touched upon the importance of social consciousness, cultural awareness, extra-curricular activities, charity and community service.

“The value of giving back to the community is incorporated in the curriculum, particularly in one of the MPU subjects called Community Service and Co-curriculum. These values are simply about being human. We are social beings. Some people are born fortunate; they have parents around them and they do not encounter family problems; while other are not. Hence, as human beings, we need to help one another.”
(Respondent A)

“Our students hold cultural concerts and food exhibitions as part of their assignments in subjects such as Comparative Religions, TITAS (Tamadun Islam dan Tamadun Asia Sedunia) and Ethnic Relations (Hubungan Etnik). We instill akhlak naturally by embedding it in the curriculum and extra-curriculum.”
(Respondent B)

“In terms of ethics, yes, we do embed that within the case studies and other things in the assessments and teaching opportunities throughout the program. We also embed it in our MPU subjects where student do some outreach in terms of charity and community service.”
(Respondent C)

Theme 4: Focus is on *ilmu*, at the expense of *akhlak* and *adab*

Attention and focus are predominantly towards *ilmu*, at the expense of *akhlak* and *adab*. Reasons provided include market expectations, adherence to the Industry 4.0 trend, the expectation of high incomes upon graduation, and perceived better employability. This theme is supported by the researchers' observations during the campus tour. The bulk of the physical facilities on campus are oriented toward *ilmu* such as classrooms, laboratories and lecture theatres. There are minimum physical facilities for sports and rather limited facilities for social interaction such as student lounges and common areas.

“Yes, it (ilmu) is given more prominence because it has to do with the competitive forces. We are trying to focus strongly upon being different from our competitors, so our tagline at the moment is “hit the ground running” which means you are ready when you graduate.”
(Respondent C)

“We are also constantly revising our programs and courses through our Academic Advisory Board. We are doing our best to make our courses more industry 4.0 focused.”
(Respondent A)

“The curriculum has to be geared towards producing an individual with the right value system. I find the university setting in this country does not have the right infrastructure for that because of our emphasis on science and technology, industry 4.0 and many more. So, if you are pre-occupied with the technological shift, you tend to neglect the spiritual and also the ethical dimension.” (Respondent E)

“An irony is that several leaders articulate awareness that employers are looking for akhlak and adab, but admitted the curriculum is still focused on ilmu. A conscious and deliberate effort to tilt the balance towards more focus on akhlak and adab is absent.”
(Respondent F)

Theme 5: *Akhlak* and *adab* are frequently an afterthought in the curriculum design

As a corollary to the focus on *ilmu* as emerged in Theme 4, the academic curriculum frequently leaves *akhlak* and *adab* as an afterthought. It is commonly left to the government-mandated compulsory MPU (*Mata Pelajaran Umum*) subjects to provide the content and focus on *akhlak* and *adab*. MPU subjects include Community Service and Co-curriculum, Ethnic Studies, Islamic Civilization and Asian World Civilizations (TITAS), Malaysian Studies, and others. In the absence of government directives, it is questionable whether PHEIs will voluntarily offer these subjects given their focus on *ilmu*. In non-MPU subjects, minimal attention is placed upon *akhlak* and *adab*.

“We do not have intentional programs that specifically aim to instill akhlak. Our lecturers work for both ODL and OCL; both of them have different timelines and occur concurrently, so it’s hard for the lecturers to spare their time for extra programs other than academic programmes”.
(Respondent B)

I think because TITAS is a required course, and because students only need to take one course, I don’t think it will be able to change their outlook because of the way it is taught and it’s only one course. And students are not told why they have to take certain courses. To them, it’s just a required course, just like Ethnic Relations is also a required course.”
(Respondent E)

Theme 6: Focus on *akhlak* and *adab* is more prevalent outside the academic curriculum

Outside the formal academic curriculum, the focus on *akhlak* and *adab* is more prevalent. Sports, clubs and societies are established to promote student interaction, proper values, appropriate behaviour, etc. This theme is supported by the researchers’ observation of noticeboards on campus depicting various extra-curricular activities. Nonetheless, lesser resources are committed to developing *akhlak* and *adab* compared to *ilmu*.

“No (to the question of whether sufficient resources are allocated to promote adab). More can be done to create civic awareness in the local community/neighbourhood where the campus is located.” (Respondent D)

“I think it is sufficient (to the question of whether sufficient resources are allocated to promote akhlak). However, optimum would require something far more and some sort like ethical camp, somehow more intensive like in a country with extreme poverty and experience living in that from a different perspective.” (Respondent C)

Theme 7: Campuses are not designed with promoting *akhlak* and *adab* in mind

Not much conscious planning is placed upon developing and designing the physical campus to promote *akhlak* and *adab* as opposed to *ilmu*. Physical resources to promote *ilmu* include classrooms, laboratories, libraries, etc. As verified by the researchers’ observations, these resources are abundant and form the bulk of physical facilities on campus. Physical resources to promote *akhlak* and *adab* include spaces for student interaction and understanding such as common lounges, wide corridors, informal learning spaces, sports facilities, student activity rooms, etc. These resources are not abundant and form a small portion of physical facilities on campus.

“Well, I think knowledge is the focus of most institutions; most resources are in this area. In fact, you (the lead researcher) are part of it; you have lecturers and classrooms. These are all about inculcating knowledge, isn't it? That is a predominant resource allocation, I think.” (Respondent C)

“I think the students need it (sports). They can learn teamwork and team-building skills from there. We don't have ssssss facilities here, so the students venture outside to conduct sports activities. We support them by providing funds; we rent places for them to play.” (Respondent B)

Theme 8: Regulatory compliance requirements are substantial

Generally, the respondents expressed that there is a lot of documentation for PHEIs to comply with the various requirements from the Ministry of Education (MOE) and Malaysia Qualifications Agency (MQA). This indirectly distracts PHEI from paying more attention to developing holistic graduates with *ilmu*, *akhlak* and *adab*.

“I think we must find a way to waive all these bureaucracies and at the same time you need to allow universities to operate autonomously. If you talk about autonomy, it comes with a lot of responsibility, so you need to give freedom to people to discover new things. Without that, I don't think we are able to bring about graduates that are holistic.” (Respondent E)

“The government puts too much attention on “about”, for example, learning about History; we are constantly getting lectures only. We lack a lot on what we “feel about”. The value and purpose behind the knowledge are much more important. Too much focus has been put on academics. The content (knowledge) must be there, but we must also look beyond that.” (Respondent B)

The eight (8) themes that emerged are further analysed via Alfred Schutz's concept of typifications. Social and institutional reality consists of the “cultural objects and social institutions into which we all are born, within which we have to find our bearings, and with which we have to come to terms” (Schutz, 1963). The objective of this further analysis is to reduce or combine the many themes into their fundamental components or meta-themes. These composite meta-themes are envisaged to provide a clearer guide for formulating practical and actionable public policy. Two (2) meta-themes emerged as follows in Table 6:

Meta-Theme 1	Leaders of PHEIs are personally supportive of Shift 1 but this is not translated into institutional reality
Meta-Theme 2	There is an imbalance with too much weight placed upon <i>ilmu</i>

Table 6: Summary of Meta-Themes

Meta-Theme 1 – Leaders of PHEIs are personally supportive of Shift 1 but this is not translated into institutional reality

Derived from Theme 3, Theme 6, Theme 8 and the researchers' observations during campus visits. The leaders of PHEI are personally supportive of the concept and objective of Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates with *ilmu*, *akhlak* and *adab*. However, this is not translated into institutional practice and reality in terms of academic curriculum design, facility investments and resource prioritization. Among the influencing factors are the focus on entrepreneurship and employability among graduates, the focus on moving to a more technology-infused teaching delivery, and heavy regulatory compliance administration.

Meta-Theme 2 – There is an imbalance with too much weight placed upon *ilmu*.

Derived from Theme 2, Theme 4, Theme 5 and Theme 7. These themes collectively show a very clear and significant imbalance with a heavy emphasis on developing *ilmu*, at the expense of *akhlak* and *adab*. This imbalance is systemic and reflected in the academic curriculum design, facility investments and resource prioritization. The fact that leaders of PHEIs are not well versed with the MEB HE, let alone Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates, further exacerbates the imbalance. As such, it is questionable whether Shift 1 can be successfully actualized among PHEIs given the current trajectory.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the two (2) meta-themes derived from the eight (8) themes, Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) are currently not fully conforming to Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates in terms of academic curriculum design, facility investments and resource prioritization. Furthermore, no movement is detected that PHEIs are consciously, deliberately and seriously attempting to fully conform to Shift 1. The reasons for this situation can be multifarious and a deep investigation of all the possible causes is beyond the scope of this current research. Nonetheless, a logical starting point is to investigate and evaluate the dynamics, governance and management of PHEIs, and from this vantage the following recommendations are proffered:

1. PHEIs should “go back to basics” to familiarize themselves with the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), National Higher Education Strategic Plan (PSPTN) and other national policies and priorities. Only by being fully aware and familiar with these national aspirations can PHEIs accurately align and conform their academic curriculum design, facility investments and resource prioritization toward them. This accurate alignment and conformity are vitally important for the optimum development of intellectual, social and economic capital in Malaysia.

2. Current public policy tools need to be strengthened, and new ones as appropriate introduced, to guide PHEIs towards conforming to the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) particularly Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates with *ilmu, akhlak* and *adab*.

In conclusion, this research has found that PHEIs are not conforming to the MEB HE, specifically Shift 1 Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates. This serious situation can potentially derail national development. Public policy actions are required for rectification. The recommended actions are to instill awareness in PHEIs of the MEB HE and other national policies; and strengthen of public policy tools to actualize conformity of PHEIs with the MEB HE. Alignment and conformity among all players and stakeholders are crucial for higher education to progress smoothly and optimally add value to national development. Only with proper alignment and agreement can the ambitious and aspirational goals of the MEB HE be achieved, and Malaysia progresses as a developed nation in a timely manner.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

The lead author affirms that this manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study being reported; that no important aspects of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned (and, if relevant, registered) have been explained.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in this study.

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