Globalisation, Affirmative Action and Higher Education Reforms in Malaysia: A Tightrope Walk between Equality and Excellence

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Introduction

'We are living in a period of crisis', declares Michael Apple (2001), referring to the era of globalization. According to him, 'the crisis has affected all of our economic, political, and cultural institutions' (Apple 2001: 409). One of the institutions at the centre of this crisis is not just 'the school' as he claims, but higher educational institutions as well. The crisis and contention within the higher education sector primarily emerges out of the very crisis that exists within the societal contexts of which the institutions are part. In the past, the contention within the higher education sector was mainly concerned with how those who attend higher education were rewarded with upward social mobility and endowed with the highest positions in the society. But with the emergence of critical and radical thinkers like Pierre Bourdieu, the issue has been re-cast and, now, the issue of who attends and how the educational institutions reproduce the social class affiliations is treated as the most important issue.

In the context of globalization, higher education systems have become sites for competition and contestations of various kinds in various societies. The competition and contestation for access and equality has become inevitable as there are higher levels of demand for fewer places in higher education and employment and, therefore, calls for the attention of policy makers and sociologists to examine the impacts of globalization on strategies adopted to include the hitherto historically excluded social, ethnic and racial groups, on the one hand, and to achieve the requirements of the emerging labour market, industry and the global system of higher education on the other. In this context, the study of Malaysia provides an opportunity to learn and understand the experiences of countries that have adopted neo-liberal economic reforms to address and balance the challenges posed by globalization, on the one hand, and multi-ethnic social fabric[1], on the other.

In Malaysia, neo-liberal economic policies have co-existed with a policy of affirmative action that aims to maintain ethnic balance in the economic, political and educational spheres. However, the developments of the past year or so have demolished the myth of the state's ability to manipulate, maneuver and maintain a fine balance between the aspirations of both the market and the local ethnic identities due to conflicting agendas of the forces of globalization and affirmative action. The forces of globalization drive the state to initiate policy reforms to achieve excellence, relevance and marketability of the higher education system and the local ethnic polarizations work in diagonally opposite directions by demanding equity in opportunities, access and treatment. This makes the policy reform process strained and contested between individuals, groups and institutions. These contestations are symptomatic of the tensions that prevail in the society and economy at

large. It is this argument that this paper advances while examining the impact of globalization and affirmative action in Malaysian higher education.

Globalization, Higher Education Reforms and Inequalities: Theoretical Context

The term "globalisation" has become short hand for the condition of our time (Wagner 2004) suggesting that some world-wide processes have begun to shape each and every walk of our lives. If globalisation is such an encompassing change in our condition, then there is a good reason to assume that educational systems are also affected by it (Daun 2003). Many nations are now witnessing a transformation in the ways in which education systems are organised, controlled and managed. 'The period after nineties saw fundamental changes in the structure and nature of educational institutions, in the organisation of the curriculum, in the nature of teachers' work and professionalism, and in the aims and purposes of assessment' (Philips and Furlong 2001: p. 3). It is also a period which has been characterised by profound and often confrontational debates over the nature and purposes of higher education in society, particularly those between education, the economy and the society (ibid, p. 3). Specifically, institutions of higher education now face new pressures and demands for accountability, access, quality, and the introduction of new technologies and curricula (Altbach and Davis 1998).

In simple terms, Rees and Stroud (2001) describe the evolving scenario in higher education: 'the social transformation has entailed a fundamental restructuring of the organisation of higher education itself. First and foremost, the financial implications of higher education expansion has been managed by successive governments though substantial reduction in the public funding of each student, necessitating higher education institutions to reshape their internal organisation and practices. To be a university student – or indeed, member of the staff – today implies a different working environment from previously. The impacts of the substitution of student grants by loans and the more recent introduction of fees for undergraduates are further transforming the student experience of higher education. Equally, higher education institutions are currently much more dependent for their revenue on their entrepreneurial capacity to recruit students and to raise money from research grants and contracts and from endowments. As in many other areas of public sphere, higher education has been significantly marketised, especially since the mid-1980s" (p. 72). In other words, from the economic point of view, the constriction of monies available for post-secondary education gave rise to the privatisation of higher education (Slaughter 1998; Carnoy 2000).

Moreover, governments are under pressure to attract foreign capital and this means providing a ready supply of skilled labour (Carnoy, 2000). This translates into pressure to increase the average level and quality of education in the labour force. The higher levels of education are important in a society transitioning from economic production to knowledge-

intensive production (Kamogawa 2003). The shift from manufacturing to the services sector is another important development in the nineties. Correspondingly, the institutions of higher education are under pressure to increase the levels of education and expertise in the technological labour force putting increased emphasis on the mathematics and science curriculum (Carnoy, 2000), and techno-scientific areas of knowledge (Slaughter, 1998). Thus, the discourse today is about the skills 'relevant' for the employment, technically 'useful' knowledge, 'competence' and 'enterprise' (Yang 2003). These dimensions certainly have some effect on the national planning for labour force, industries, and professions, on the one hand, and on the higher education systems, on the other. All this entails a higher education system which stresses excellence and relevance of the student selection, content and delivery within the institutions.

However, it is important to note a contrary development mainly driven by the political and social considerations of the contexts in which higher education systems exist. The concerns and processes of globalization highlight the ever-increasing inequalities among individuals and groups in terms of their ability to access a higher education system that operates on market principles. Market principles serve to reinforce and reproduce the class and race based hierarchical dominance or subordination among higher education institutions. Inequalities persist between the institutions imparting various kinds of knowledge -- namely, science, technology, and liberal arts, -- between the groups that can and cannot afford higher education, and between the individuals looking for choices in terms of institutions and courses. The institutions of higher education compete for status and excellence in order to stand out among their peers to attract both capital and human resources.

According to Marginson (2004), "status competition in higher education has a dual character. There is both competition among producer institutions (…) and competition between student-consumers. Producer institutions compete for the custom of the most preferred students, those with the best academic standing; while students compete for entry to the most preferred institutions. (…) The prestige of elite institutions sustains both high numbers of applications and high student entry scores; the scarcity of places enhances the value of the prize and reproduces the prestige of the institution" (p. 186). As a result of such a competition, the universities and higher education systems adopt various strategies. "In a status market universities have a vested interest in raising entry scores, increasing their academic exclusiveness in order to maximise their prestige. This objective is in conflict with the maximisation of social access and equity in education; more so because the distribution of prior academic achievement correlates to socio-economic power" (Marginson 2004: 187). Therefore, globalization brings to the fore the dilemmas of both equality and excellence in higher education systems across the world. The Malaysian case is unique as it has a very clear racialised system of higher education and an equally clear market driven reform agenda.

Higher education policy reforms since Independence:
Managing racial, national, and global agendas

There are three distinct phases of the higher educational policy evolution in Malaysia since Independence in 1957: the pre-New Economic Policy[2] (NEP) era, the NEP era and the era of globalisation (post-NEP era). Each of these phases dominated discourses about a particular agenda and addressed a specific pressure within Malaysian society. In the first phase, the focus was on maintaining national racial harmony and meeting the human resource needs of the emerging postcolonial society. The second phase focused on addressing the pressures of ethnic/racial inequalities and, the third phase, on making Malaysia a regional and global centre of excellence in higher education.

Pre – NEP Era: Racial/National Unity and Meeting Human Resource Needs

During the pre-New Economic Policy (NEP) Era (1957-1970), the focus of educational policy was on national unity and the supply of manpower to different sectors of government services. This phase witnessed many changes in the formation of the postcolonial state, the development of a federal structure, and the building of a multi-ethnic society. The construction of a national identity through education was utmost in the minds of the ruling classes. Both the Razak Committee (1956) and the Talib Committee (1960) emphasised the need to create a national identity through the education system. The Education Act of 1961 reflected this concern to create a harmonious Malayan society where education was to be used as a tool in this endeavour. The higher education system[3] mainly addressed the issue of supplying human resources to serve the needs of a newly emerging postcolonial state. This phase was characterized by the relatively slow growth of higher education -- there were only eight public and one private institutions of higher education in Malaysia in 1970.

NEP Era: Impact of affirmative action on Malaysian higher education

The inequality between ethnic groups became a central issue in the sixties. Particularly, income inequality had worsened. (Shari 2000). The average non-Malay income increased at a faster rate than the average Malay income leading to the widening of income inequality. The incidence of poverty was also higher among the Bumiputeras compared to the Chinese and Indians. A higher proportion of Bumiputeras were employed in agricultural and less skilled occupations and Chinese and Indians were employed in high skilled and high-income occupations. In the corporate sector, Bumiputeras owned only 2.4 percent of the equity in 1970, while the Chinese owned nearly one third. In higher education, the representation was far from satisfactory (Table 1). Thus, the realisation of this economic and educational backwardness among Malays precipitated a serious ethnic conflict in 1969.

The economic imbalance between the Chinese and the Malays was not acceptable to politically dominant Malays who began asserting their economic deprivation. Malays felt that their economic progress was not satisfactory and the government needed to detract from its laissez-faire approach, which was thought to be favouring the Chinese, and adopt a more pro-Malay economic policy. A more upward social mobility was sought for Malays through education, employment and economy. On the other hand, the Chinese were also not happy as they felt that the National Government was biased and doing too much for the Malays. This paved the way for the formulation of a New Economic Policy (NEP) in favour of Malays.

The NEP incorporates a two pronged strategy: "The first prong is to reduce and eventually eradicate poverty, by raising income levels and increasing employment opportunities for all irrespective of race. The second prong aims at accelerating the process of restructuring Malaysian society to correct economic imbalance, so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the identification of race with economic function" (Malaysia 1971: p. 1). It is the second prong that paved the way for affirmative policies in higher education to correct the past distortions of ethnic imbalances. The policy envisaged that the enrolment in each subject should correspond to the communal composition of the population as a whole. However, the state never made explicit the exact quota of seats in higher education institutions and sometimes the proportion of seats allocated to each of the ethnic groups far exceeded their proportion in the country's population.

The results of the affirmative action policy are striking. For instance in the 1970s, the Chinese and Indian students in Malaysian Universities outnumbered Malays to a great extent[4] (Tables 2 and 3). Within a few years of the implementation of the policy of quotas, nearly three-fifths of all students enrolled in higher education were Malays and only one third were Chinese. More than half the Chinese applicants for University admissions were turned down (Table 4). Overall, there was a steady increase of Bumiputera students in public institutions of higher education and a steep decrease of Chinese and Indian students.

There were certain changes wrought by the student body on higher education. 'As Malay students became numerous in the university, they began to pressure authorities to increase these quotas even more, to speed the process of displacing English with Malay as the language of instruction, and also to establish Islamic Studies Programmes' (Provencher 1990: p.4). Moreover, the overall results achieved by the Malay students were said to be poor and many of them continued to opt for liberal arts and subjects such as Islam, Malay Studies, and Malay language, and very few opted for science and technology courses (Table 5). In order to redress this situation, the Malaysian government opened a number of residential science schools to equip Malay students for entry into the technical courses at the colleges and universities. The steady increase of higher education among the Malays also restructured the professional classes of Malaysian society (Table 6). The number of professionals among the Malays registered a tremendous increase over the years.

The policy of affirmative action was viewed differently by different ethnic groups. For Malays, it was seen as delayed justice. For non-Malays, it was seen as unfair discrimination resulting in a lot of disillusionment among non-Malays. Even today, the college and university campuses in Malaysia are segregated along ethnic lines, in the classrooms and canteens, as well as in the student associations, politics and social life of the institutions (Gomes 1999: p.86). However, affirmative action made Malaysian higher education, which was initially elitist[5] in nature, into a more mass based or egalitarian system; from nearly one percent (Yaakub and Ayob 1999) of the cohorts in the seventies to about 29. 9% now (Malaysia 2005).

Some scholars, however, are critical of the achievements of the NEP. Since almost half of the Malay population was officially considered poor, they would then comprise the majority of intended beneficiaries of measures to eradication of poverty and restructuring of the society regardless of race. However, 'only the most well-to-do, probably comprising no more than 3 percent of the Bumiputera community, benefit significantly from efforts to restructure society' (Jomo 1985: 87). Mehmet and Hoong (1983) also argue that the benefits of the large scale scholarship programmes are regressive, inordinately benefiting the upper income group among the beneficiary Malay community. According to them, poverty in Malaysia is no longer severely limited to Malays as at the outset of the NEP. Therefore, they call for dividends to be provided to all poor whose incomes are below poverty line[6].

The Post- NEP Era: Impact of globalisation

The post 1990s witnessed the emergence of Malaysia as a neo-liberal state with the policies of the then prime minister, Mahathir Mohammed. Particularly, Mahathir's belief in the market system, capitalism, and globalization have far reaching implications for all segments of economic, political and social life of Malaysia[7]. In the words of Mahathir Mohammad (2002), 'the fact that the globalisation has come does not mean we should just sit by and watch as the predators destroy us (p.7)'. Further, he emphasises, 'globalisation at the moment is not about egalitarian sharing about the common good. Presently, globalisation is about competition, the competition of the market place. It is about the dominance of the most efficient (Mohammad 2002: 13)'.

This statement of Mahathir goes against the very spirit of affirmative action launched by the Tun Razak government in the 1970s: '…we have a blue-print for rapid socio-economic development, a development in which all Malaysians have the opportunity, the right and the responsibility to participate and share equitably. The fruits of our endeavours for nation building will be enjoyed not only by us in this generation but by many generations of Malaysians' (Tun Razak, in his 'Foreword' to the Mid-term Review of the Second Malaysia Plan, 1973, p. iii). Thus, the neo-liberal agenda of the Mahathir government directly confronts the goals of affirmative action policies and Malay special privileges.

Malaysia could negotiate this situation by advocating the continuation of quota based policies in admission to public institutions of higher education even after NEP era officially ended in 1990. But, the continuation of quotas is not spelt out through the reiteration of the policy after the 1990s. Though it is stated that meritocracy is followed in the selection process for entry into the university, the Malaysian state unofficially adopts the ethnic quota policies even more rigorously today. At the same time, to contain the discontent among the ethnic minority groups, the Malaysian state encouraged the private sector to flourish, which helped the Chinese and Indian middle classes to seek respite. In the words of Mahathir Mohamad (1993), 'We have decided that the private sector can actually set up universities. We said that the government is not in the position to provide the universities that the country needs. (…) The government, (…) wants to withdraw from being too involved in this kind of thing'. In light of this, privatization of higher education in Malaysia in a general sense refers to the reduction of public funding in higher education provision, and a corresponding encouragement to the private sector to provide higher education (Mei 2002).

Thus, the post - NEP phase heralded an aggressive neo-liberal policy thrust[8]. The process of withdrawal of the state from the expansion of public higher education and in funding public universities was much more explicit[9]. The government has also undertaken public awareness campaigns on the government's burden of financing higher education (Malaysia 2001: pp.105-107). Notwithstanding pressures of the NEP, the spirit and fervour of Mahathir for globalization prevailed and ultimately, all three different stakeholders in higher education -- namely, public, private and corporatised public sector institutions -- were to make Malaysia a regional or a global hub for excellence in higher education by the year 2020, the year Malaysia set for itself to be called a 'developed society[10]'.

The intent of the government of Malaysia is in fact driven by multi-lateral organisations like the World Bank which spearheads market oriented economic reforms all over the world. This concern of the World Bank has been adopted by the government and its institutions in letter and spirit. Dato Mustapa Mohamed, the Minister of Higher Education observes, 'within the Malaysian context, this call for two main philosophies, namely, the democratisation of knowledge and the transmission to k-economy within the current trend of globalisation'. The language of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (2007) and National Higher Education Action Plan (2007-10) reinforce the concerns of the World Bank, namely, 'to make the country an even more competitive player in the world economy', 'making the university system to contribute to the value added production', 'to generate and diffuse relevant knowledge', 'to produce a critical mass of graduates with appropriate skills' and 'to transform universities into dynamic and responsive institutions which can hold their place internationally[11]'.

Further, Malaysian students have traditionally sought higher education in relatively large numbers in Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Middle East and in neighbouring countries like Singapore, India and Indonesia. In the economic recession of the

eighties and nineties, middle class families faced with a cash crisis halted their willingness to send their children overseas. To accommodate the concerns of the middle class families, the state had to respond through privatization in much more aggressive way. The privatization agenda of the Malaysian higher education system also intended to attract foreign investment as well as students into Malaysia. According to Bank Negara Malaysia's Annual Report (2006), the number of foreign students in private higher educational institutions increased from 33, 903 at the end of 2005 to 38, 900 at the end of 2006 (p. 20).

Thus, privatisation reduced the flight of capital, both financial and human, mainly from the Chinese and the Indian ethnic minorities, to foreign shores; it also attracted foreign students to Malaysia triggering a massive growth of for-profit colleges in the private sector. For instance in 2005, there were 559 institutions of higher education in the private sector as against 71 in the public sector (Table 7), many of which had undergone the process of corporatisation in order to keep pace with the growing private sector and to match their funds in the wake of the state's withdrawal of support. Nonetheless, enrolment in private HEIs has increased tremendously over the past few years (Table 8), particularly in branches that are market or industry friendly (Table 9).

Paradigm shifts and responses of public and private institutions

As mentioned earlier, there have been paradigm shifts within the higher education sector in Malaysia in the neo-liberal era[12]. Embong (2005) summarises these paradigmatic shifts in the context of globalization, 'since last two decades or so, universities have been reined in – and to some extent 'captured' – by the forces of neo-liberal globalisation and market imperatives. Knowledge has increasingly become commodified, with education turning into a budgeoning industry whose major concern is the bottom line (…) with the renewed emphasis on value for money, accountability, efficiency, good management, resource allocation, performance indicators, etc., subjects that are favoured are those that make a direct contribution to the economy, namely, science and technology, while the social sciences and humanities have to prove their relevance by developing skills oriented courses' (2005: 16 – 17). Different stakeholders have responded to the emerging reforms in a particular way (Lee 2004, 1999a, 1999b). They were primarily guided by the overall conditions unleashed by a strong neo-liberal, interventionist state in the higher education sector (Lee 2004).

During the Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001 – 05), the governance system of public universities was changed to include more representatives from the private sector. Public Universities were allowed to generate funding from external sources based on the business plan agreed to by the institutions and the government. At the same time, the government launched public awareness campaigns on the government's burden of financing higher education (Malaysia 2001: pp. 105-107). The corporatisation of higher education in Malaysia

led to the involvement of large corporations in the delivery of higher education[13], either singly or in collaboration with local or foreign partners[14]. A senior university administrator observes, "… once corporatized, (administration) may want to look at the kind of research one does – more hands-on, more practical, market-oriented, not the ivory tower type (…) there will be more stress on external linkages, professional connections, collaborative research (…) local linkages with industry will also be important (…) we want faculty to generate consultation business (…) also to help reorient themselves (…) after corporatization, assessments will be conducted on uses of our products. We need to find out what's lacking, what's not".

The stress on excellence and innovations led to the declaration of four public universities[15] as 'Research Universities[16]' in 2006 as part of the Ninth Malaysia Plan. More recently, in 2007, university management has been reorganized to include the appointment of specially-designated Deputy Vice Chancellors to monitor and boost industry-university linkages. Public institutions have increased their capacities to meet the demands of the market in terms of enrolment at different levels of post-graduate courses and industry relevant disciplines.

Public universities now struggle to come up with strategic plans and construct future scenarios[17] to attain what is called 'apex university' status, which the government defines as a special university that would promote only excellence. One of the existing universities will be accorded the apex university status by 2010 or 2012 in order to make it competitive with the very best universities in the world. According to Professor Rafiah Salim, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Malaya, 'the apex university status will empower the universities and result in healthy competition and creativity'. To attain this status, one of the requirements is to achieve financial independence. Interestingly, public universities are also asking for autonomy from the government. Professor Salim points out, 'Now we are treated like government agencies (…) Autonomy would mean handing over power of administration to a Board of Directors, which would run the University like a corporate body' (NST, September 1, 2007, p. 19).

In terms of admission policies, the State frames and monitors student recruitment process through the 'Pusat Universiti' (University Council). The universities have no role in deciding whom or how they should admit. This process itself is closely monitored and the details seat allocation remains a mystery that cannot be questioned. Admission policy is the sole prerogative of the Federal bureaucracy. However, with the notions of the research university and the apex university gaining momentum, universities are asking for flexibility to follow some autonomous admission strategies in order to attract the best. The competition between the institutions also leads to campaigns for autonomy in student admissions.

On the other hand, the response of private higher education institutions may be differentiated in three distinct ways (Goh 2005): First, private higher education institutions are set apart from the public institutions by their substantial tuition fees. Second, the demands of the quota-based affirmative action for entry into public institutions resulted in approximately a 95 percent non-Bumiputera student population in the private institutions. Third, the medium of instruction in private institutions is English. Thus, the ethnic and social class character of the private institutions is very clear. In other words, the state adopted an open approach in encouraging the private sector to flourish as it could not expand the state provisioning of higher education.

However, in the past twenty years of globalization, the private sector became proactive and today even asks for budgetary allocations for student loan programmes to partner with the government in providing higher education opportunities and accessibility to all Malaysians irrespective of race and to spearhead the growth of foreign students in Malaysia. According to Ooi Chee Kok, president of Taylor's College Malaysia, 'A coupon system where students enrolling in private institutions are given government subsidy equivalent amount to the individual subsidies students in public institutions benefit from. This will contribute to providing equal educational opportunities to students who did not enroll into the public institutions and need financial support in enrolling into the private institutions'.

Globalisation and responses of parents and students to racialised higher education

It is important to note that, in Malaysia, the institutions are racially stratified and segregated -- Malays mainly attend the public institutions, Chinese and Indians either attend private institutions or go abroad to undertake further studies. There are universities that cater primarily to one ethnic group. UiTM and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) were established to serve the Bumiputeras and in UiTM, Bumiputeras comprise more than 98 percent of its student population. On the other hand, two private universities University Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) and Inti primarily serve the Chinese communities and APIIT and Tafe College primarily serve the higher educational interests of the Indian communities. It may also be said that the public universities mainly cater to the Malay constituency and the private universities and colleges cater to the non-Malay and foreign constituencies.

Not only are the institutions racialised, the pathways to entry are similarly racialised. In the present Malaysian public education system, allocation of students to universities occurs centrally even though they are free to determine their Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) for entry into specific programmes. Students select and rank eight programmes and universities of their choice. Currently, there are five different paths of entry into the university system. These include Matriculation, Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM)

(Malaysian Higher Secondary Certificate), University Pre-foundation Studies, Cambridge 'A' levels, and Higher Religious Certification.

The first is a yearlong program and is the pathway for entry for a majority of Bumiputeras. It was put in place to increase the chance of access of the Bumiputeras. The ethnic minority groups (Chinese and Indians) primarily choose the second and third paths. Those who attend the 'A' levels are not eligible to enter public institutions of higher education and therefore, have to opt for private colleges and universities or go abroad for further studies. Interestingly, those who choose to take 'A' levels are mainly Chinese and Indians who have decided beforehand to reject the public system as they feel the affirmative action policy would not allow them a fair chance. Denny (1999) in his study of Chinese student choices to attend private colleges cites this as a major reason. A breakdown of secondary enrolment data by ethnic origin shows that the majority of students enrolled in private schools are Chinese (79 percent), followed by Malay (8 percent) and Indian (7 percent). This pattern of ethnic distribution in private schools extends beyond the secondary level to universities. Non-Bumiputeras make up the majority of students enrolled in private tertiary institutions (EPU and World Bank 2007: p. 46).

Regardless of the path of entry, the CGPA is taken as evidence of eligibility for university access even though no clear procedures are applied to establish the equivalency of the CGPA acquired in the different programmes leading to some dissatisfaction among the parents and students of ethnic minority communities. For example, in one civil engineering programme, the CGPA requirement for STPM is 2. 67, while the CGPA requirement from a Metriculation programme is only 2. 50 (EPU and World Bank 2007: p.49). As a result of this anomaly, students who did well do not get the discipline they applied for. Sometimes, students are given courses they never had any idea of. For instance, a student who applied for medicine was given a seat in marine technology, which is far from her chosen subject!

In another case, a student, Michelle Lee, aspired to be a pharmacist when she received a CGPA of 4.0 in STPM, which she thought was enough to secure a seat in any course of her choice. According to her, 'I filled up all three universities that offer pharmacy courses as my top choices. Not wanting to leave the remaining five options empty, I randomly filled in course that I had a passing interest in. Now I did not get seat in Pharmacy, but in my fourth choice, that is human resource management. Now I feel sad and insulted.' The response from the authorities if one complains about such problems is as follows: "If you didn't get the course of your choice because you didn't make the grade, then may be you should stop complaining and focus on enrolling in private universities instead".

Parents complain that though meritocracy has been the supposed basis for admitting students in public universities since 2002, ethnicization comes in as co-curricular points are important to make the cut. According to a Higher Education Ministry Official, 'There were

several cases this year (2007) where students had a CGPA of 4.0 but because of their low co-curriculum marks, their merit standing was lower than those with a lower CGPA and higher co-curricular points'. What many ethnic minority students and parents complain about is that the points submitted by their schools were inconsistent with what they actually achieved, while some students allege that their schools did not submit any points at all.   Thus, for parents and students from the ethnic minorities, inequitable standards applied to enter public institutions of higher education leave them with no option but to enter the private institutions of higher education and, therefore, the practice is discriminatory[18]. In a way, the expansion of private tertiary education in the context of globalization has ameliorated the non-bumiputera concerns (Brown 2005).

Even the process of redressing grievances in admission matters is also racialised. Students who have grievances are asked to represent their cases through the political party that looks after a particular ethnic/racial interest. For instance, a Malay student will represent his/her grievance through UMNO Youth Education Bureau, a Chinese student will represent his/her grievance through Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) Education Bureau, and the Indian student through Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) Education Bureau.

Another important issue that is contended in the arena of education is the issue of language of instruction. The recent attempt by the Malay political elite in UMNO to back-track on the use of English in the teaching of mathematics and science has raised the racial and social class discontents. While the ethnic minorities and middle class students treat the use of English as most essential for making themselves competent in the global job market, the Malay students see it as encroaching on their sense of Malay nationalism. It is important to see this in relation to the choices of the entry paths chosen by the parents and students. While matriculation, STPM and pre-university studies are primarily conducted in Bahasa Melayu and are attended predominantly by Malays and other Bumiputeras, the 'A'levels, which are in English medium, are mostly attended by the Chinese and Indian middle classes. The poorer sections of the ethnic minorities are left behind by both private and public institutions of higher education as they cannot compete for fewer places in public higher education and neither can they afford the costly private higher education. It is one of the major concerns of equity in the era of globalization where the number of slots in the public system shrinks and those in the private systems expand numerously.

For some middle class parents, the ever-increasing privatization of higher education means expanded opportunities but for others it means sparing a few thousand ringgits for their children's higher education. Though there are loan facilities, they are beyond the reach of many. One of the parents remarked, 'It's a catch that misses some desperate parents, and it could be an expensive one. A parent or a student could end up owing to the National Higher Education Fund Corporation RM 50, 000 for getting a degree' He argues that the parents and children are scouted by the private institutions in various ways, "My mail box is clogged

daily with pamphlets and brochures from private colleges and universities, and the phone keeps ringing as their promoters try to sell their universities and colleges to my son".

Despite their payment of the exorbitant fees, some parents and students are weary of the quality of education in many private colleges in the country. One parent narrates an incident, 'It was a story about a student who dreamt of becoming a nurse. After registering for a nursing course, she thought she was on her way to achieving her dreams. But the 19 year old had given up after she did not receive any response from the college after paying the registration fee. To make things worse, she received a Lawyer's notice from the college to settle RM 3, 500 for a semester's fees. The course was scheduled to start in November 2006, but was postponed to March 2007 as it did not have enough students to run the course'.

In other words, the parents and students are constantly under pressure to receive what is due them and as another parent put it, 'are we compromising on the quality of education in these private universities and colleges and do we need these many (nearly 600) colleges in our small country?' This situation is not specific to some private colleges, but also to the public institutions as well. Parents and students point to the mismatch between the education imparted in institutions and industry requirements. A student from Universiti Technologi Petronas, who attended a Foundation Course at the IT sector giant Infosys in Bangalore remarks, 'Whatever I learnt in one semester here, I did it in just three days. What I have learned in my University before, I did not know how to use that knowledge. I was not confident of going out into the real world but after the training I am'. According some of her friends who have also attended the course, it is not the curriculum that is deficient but the delivery of that curriculum. 'It was difficult to obtain answers from lecturers in Malaysia if the subject went beyond the textbook'.

Concluding remarks

The EPU – World Bank Report (2007) on 'Building a World Class Higher Education System', clearly spells out the agenda of globalisation as follows: 'The quality of students entering a University is an indicator that appears on almost all international rankings and the ability of universities to select their students from the largest pool of applicants is one way of ensuring that they get the best academically qualified students into their system' (p.150). The Prime Minister, Mr Badawi, also reiterated a similar point of view at a United Malay National Organisation (UMNO's) gathering in April 2007, but with a concern for equity issues. He stated that 'to achieve the National Mission of making the country a fully developed country, we need to harness knowledge and develop human capital, while making sure we value-add on to these aspects' (NST, November 9, 2007). At the same time, he called on the Malays to work hard to improve their lot. According to him, 'the Malay community must create a critical mass of educated and skilled Malays, so that we contribute more effectively in a variety of sectors. Intrepid Malays will be able to see the NEP from a perspective that will no longer alarm non-Malays. We should champion the fulfilment of the

objectives the NEP, ensuring the development of deep professional and middle classes among the Malays, so that Malaysian society is no longer divided by profession'. In this the Prime Minister presents us with a clear case of handling both the demands of the globalization, on the one hand, and the local pressures of equality.

Across all ethnicities, the educational opportunities created by the rapid economic growth saw the emergence of a large Malaysian middle class (Ramaswamy 2004), which stakes claims for a greater share of the public and private educational and occupational spaces. However, 'in a multi-racial country, old inter-racial problems[19] co-exist with new problems of intra-racial dimension" (Hock 1991: p. xii). The developments of the past year or so have demolished the myth of the state's ability to manipulate and maintain a balance between the aspirations of both the market and the local ethnic identities and testify to the continuing intra and inter-ethnic cleavages. While the race riots of 1969 were primarily between the Chinese who were economically well off and the Malays who were economically deprived but politically dominant, the recent standoff did is not specifically restricted to any one or two ethnic groups and has indicated the cleavages within each of the racial categories (Indians, Chinese, and Malays) as well.

During the past year, the Malay economic underclass, under the stewardship of several non-governmental and civil society organisations and the opposition parties, has unified in the name of '*Bersih*', the movement for electoral reforms. The Indians have expressed their anger at the continuing neglect of the Malaysian state under the banner of Hindu Rights Action Forum (Hindraf). The Orang Aslis, the aboriginals or the original inhabitants of Malaysia, have also deplored their pathetic living conditions and the encroachment of the Malay state on their age-old habitations in the deep forests and hilly tracts. All this is primarily because of the increasing income differentials within each of the racial groups as a result of the neo-liberal economic policies pursued in the country for more than two decades and also the policy of preferences which favours the politically and numerically dominant ethnic group (Malay), particularly the economically stable and well off sections of that group. The beneficiaries of the affirmative action policy in higher education are primarily sons and daughters of the once or twice benefited groups, already well placed within the economic, educational and social hierarchy. Thus, what this crisis has brought into the centre of discourse in Malaysian higher education are the chinks in the implementation of the affirmative policies.

On the other hand, the Chinese and Indians reject the policy as reverse discrimination and claim that the policy is exclusionary in terms of accessing equal opportunities. They call for liberal practices of meritocracy and equal opportunities irrespective of race and ethnic identifications. Between the racial minorities like the Chinese and Indians, Indians are even more deprived and neglected. They are neither rich as the Chinese nor are they covered by state support. For racial minorities such as Indians, the issue is mainly a life of seclusion and residential exclusivity. A considerable proportion of Indians continue to live in the plantation

frontiers or as marginalised daily wage earners in the urban settings where educational and other life chances are inaccessible (Ramachandran 1995). For the Chinese, the issue is more of competition for the reduced access into higher education.

Thus, the overall orientation of the affirmative policies and development planning in Malaysia so far reflects a commitment of the dominant classes to capitalist development and to the promotion of capitalist interests as a whole (Shamsul 1986; Ramaswamy 2004). They do not wholly focus on addressing the economic and social underclass from among all the ethnic groups. Further, the forces of globalization tend to serve middle class interests, excluding those who cannot afford, who cannot compete and who cannot start their journey in higher education with better preparation and resources. As Stephen Ball (1998) argues, 'the diversification and rehierarchisation of schooling in various educational market places display an uncanny concommittance with widespread middle class concerns about maintaining social advantage in the face of national and international labour market congestion' (p. 128). Thus, the poorer sections of the society lose out in this race. What needs to be emphasized in speaking of globalization is that the students from poorer families lack such preparation for university education as the considerable numbers of Malay, Orang Asli and Indian families in rural areas and urban slum locations live on the margins of existence (Abraham 2006).

Continuation of inequalities within and across ethnicities/races is detrimental to the achievement of the developed status that Malaysia aspires for in the next few decades. Under the influence of neo-liberal agendas of the forces of globalization, the State would no longer be responsible for the education of the masses. Higher education institutions are like forts where entry is possible only to those who come from the elite schools and elite sections of the society (Levy 1994). In these circumstances, positive discrimination and affirmative action policies in educational selection can and does increase the degree of social mobility (Wang 1983), which has far reaching implications for the equality of educational opportunity to the socially disadvantaged sections (in terms of race, ethnic group, caste, social class, gender, etc.) in multicultural and democratic societies such as Malaysia. But, the contention or the question that needs to be resolved: Who should be part of such affirmative action policies and how should they be accommodated given the advocacy of competition and meritocracy within the multi-ethnic societies in the era of globalization? This issue is pertinent as both the public and private sectors are adopting a commercial approach to higher education (Lee 2004 p. 36) instead of welfare-oriented approaches towards the ethnically and economically deprived groups.

TABLES

Table 1: Enrolment by race and level of education, Peninsular Malaysia

Level of education	1970			
	Malays	Chinese	Indians	Others
Primary	53.4	36	10	0.6
Lower Secondary	50.9	38.8	9.6	0.6
Upper Secondary	48.8	43.4	7.0	0.8
Post Secondary	43.3	49.6	6.0	1.0

Source:
1. Malaysia. 1973. Mid-term Review of the Second Malaysia Plan (1971 – 1975), Kuala Lumpur: Government Printing Press, p. 192.

Table 2: Proportion of Enrolment in Tertiary Education by Race (Percentage) (Covers the first degree as well as post-graduate enrolments)					
Year	Bhumiputera	Chinese	Indian	Others	Total Number
1970	40.2	48.9	7.3	3.6	7677
1980	47.3	42.2	9.7	0.8	40279
1988	61.8	31.1	6.6	0.5	48539

Sources:
1. Malaysia. 1981. Fourth Malaysia Plan 1981-85, Kuala Lumpur, National Printing Department; p.352.
2. Malaysia. 1986. Fifth Malaysia Plan 19886-90, Kuala Lumpur, National Printing Department; p.49.
3. Malaysia. 1989. Mid-term review of the Fifth Malaysia Plan 1986-90, Kuala Lumpur, National Printing Department; p.274.

Table 3: Tertiary Intake after 2001

Race	2002	2003	2007
Bumiputera	68.7	62.6	62.13
Chinese	26.4	32.2	31.77
Indian	4.7	5.2	6.10
T 9otal number of seats	32, 752	37, 034	40, 116

offered			

Sources:
1. Sato, Machi. 2005. Education, Ethnicity, and Economics: Higher Education Reforms in Malaysia 1957 – 2003, NUCB JLCC, 7 (1), p. 86 (pp. 73 – 88).
2. New Straits Times, Kula Lumpur, June 19, 2007, p.1

Table 4: Proportion of accepted applicants in university intake 2007

Race	Total applicants	Accepted Applicants	Proportion of accepted applicants to the total applicants (Percent)
Bumiputera	45, 881	24, 924	54.32
Chinese	16, 290	12, 745	78.23
Indian	4, 753	2, 447	51. 483
Total	68, 110	40, 116	

Source:
New Straits Times, Kula Lumpur, June 19, 2007, p.13.

Table 5: Participation of Ethnic Groups in Arts and Science stream in Higher Education								
Year	Bhumiputera		Chinese		Indians		Others	
	Arts	Science &Tech	Arts	Science &Tech	Arts	Science &Tech	Arts	Science &Tech
1985	66.7	58.7	27.2	32.6	5.4	7.9	0.7	0.8
1988	63.8	59	29.8	33	5.9	7.5	0.5	0.5

Source: Malaysia.1989.Mid term review of the 5th Malaysia Plan 1986-90, KL, Govt Printing Department; p.274

Table 6: Registered Professionals by Ethnic Group (Percentages)												
	1970				1990				2005			
Profession	Bumi	Chinese	Indian	Others	Bumi	Chinese	Indian	Others	Bumi	Chinese	Indian	Others
Accountants	6.8	65.4	7.9	19.9	11.2	81.2	6.2	1.4	20.8	73.6	4.4	1.2
Architects	4.3	80.9	1.4	13.4	23.6	74.4	1.2	0.8	45.3	53.1	1.4	0.2
Doctors	3.7	44.8	40.2	11.3	27.8	34.7	34.4	3.1	36.7	29.9	26.6	6.8

Dentists	3.1	89.1	5.1	2.8	24.3	50.7	23.7	1.3	44.4	35.3	18.4	1.9
Veterinary Surgeons	40	30	15	15	35.9	23.7	37	3.4	39	32.2	24.8	4
Engineers	7.3	71	13.5	8.3	34.8	58.2	5.3	1.7	46	47.6	5.4	1
Surveyors					44.7	49.6	3.7	2	48.2	47	3.2	1.6
Lawyers					22.3	50	26.5	1.2	38	37.1	24.1	0.8

Sources: 1 Malaysia.2006.9th Malaysia Plan 2006-10, Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, Putrajaya, p.335.

2.Malaysia.1996. 7th Malaysia Plan 1996-2000 Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, Putrajaya, p.84.

3.Malaysia.1986. 5th Malaysia Plan 1986-1990 Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, Putrajaya, p.104.

Table 7: Growth of tertiary institutions								
	Public				Private			
	1965	1970	2000	2005	1965	1970	2000	2005
Universities	1	3	11	11	-	-	5	11
University Colleges			0	6	-	-	0	11
Polytechnics			11	20		-	3	5
Colleges/Community colleges	3	5		34			632	532
Total	4	8	22	71	-	-	640	559

Sources:
1. Malaysia. 2006. Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-10, Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, Putrajaya, p.244
2. Malaysia.1971. Second Malaysia Plan 1971 - 75, Kuala Lumpur: Government Press

Table 8: Enrolment in tertiary education by levels of study and type of institutions						
	2000			2005		
Levels of Study	Public	Private	Total	Public	Private	Total
Certificate	23816	81754	105570	37935	94949	132884
Diploma	91398	117056	208454	98953	131428	230381
First Degree	170794	59932	230726	212326	110591	322917
Masters	24007	2174	26181	34436	4202	38638
Ph.D	3359	131	3490	6742	140	6882
Total	313374	261047	574421	390388	341310	731698

Source:
Malaysia. 2006. Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-10, Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's

Department, Putrajaya, p.245

Table 9: Output of skilled and semi-skilled human resources by course						
	2000			2005		
Course	Public	Private	Total	Public	Private	Total
Engineering	16428	9730	26158	31633	17337	48970
Building Trade	1417	547	1964	2566	1200	3766
ICT	903	7520	8423	1016	11844	12860
Total	18748	17797	36545	35215	30381	65596

Source:
1. Malaysia. 2006.Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-10, Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, Putrajaya, p. 246

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End Notes

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[1]Malaysia is often described as a diverse, plural, multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-racial society, which is often referred to as 'Asia in microcosm' (Gomes, 1999). For instance, the Malaysian population, which now stands at 27 million, is divided along the ethnic lines as 61.9% 'Bumiputera' (the indigenous people or the sons of the soil, mostly Malays), 29.5% Chinese, and 8.6% Indians. Orang Asli, the original inhabitants or aboriginal people of Malaysia form only a very negligible part of the Bumiputeras. Kadazans and Dayaks form the other two major indigenous groups of Malaysia, mainly inhabiting the Sabah and Sarawak provinces of the Malaysian federation.

[2] The New Economic Policy (NEP) is nothing but the affirmative action policy in favour of Bumiputeras, the 'sons of the soil', of which Malays constitute around 98 percent.

[3] In the early years of Independence, there was only one university, the University of Malaya, located in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. In 1962, the University of Malaya was bifurcated into two – University of Singapore in Singapore and University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. University of Malaya remained as the only university till 1969 when two more universities, University Sains Malaysia (USM) at Penang and University Kebaangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in Selangor were established. The birth of UKM in a way is the beginning of the second phase of the evolution of an aggressive Malay nationalist and political agenda.

[4] The ethnic breakdown of the population of Malaysia in 1970 was as follows: Malays (46.8 percent), Chinese (34.1 percent), Indians (9 percent), Aboriginals (8.7 percent) and others (1.4 percent) (Nagata 1975: p. 118). In 2005, the ethnic composition was as following: Malays (54.1 percent), Chinese (25.3 percent), Indians (7.5 percent), Other Bumiputeras (11.8 percent), and others (1.3 percent) (Swee-Hock, Saw 2007: p. 70)

[5]In his seminal analysis, Martin Trow (1973) distinguishes between elite, mass and universal systems of higher education. According to him, elite systems are defined as those which enrol up to 15 percent of the age cohort; mass systems as those enrolling between 15 percent and 40 percent; and the universal systems as those which enrol more than 40 percent (cited in Rees and Strand 2001: p. 73). In these terms, Malaysian higher education system has transformed from being an elite system into a mass system. It is envisaged to increase this percent to beyond 40 percent to make it a universal system.

[6]Mehmet and Hoong (1983) put forth a specific proposal for getting rid of elitist benefit distribution in the arena of human capital development through university education at public expense. They suggest that in other areas of public policy as well, similar micro-economic evaluations are needed to determine who exactly benefit and who lose under each of the numerous subsidy programmes which exist in Malaysia.

[7] For more on the role of the state in globalisation, see Chin (2000).

[8]During this phase, there has been a major overhauling of policies. Five new or modified versions of the old legislations were formulated: the Education (Amendment) Act, 1995; the Universities and Colleges (Amendment) Act, 1995; Private Higher Education Act, 1995; National Council of Higher Education Act, 1996; and National Accreditation Board Bill, 1996. All these legislations reflect the preparation of Malaysian higher education for the demands of globalization. Malaysia enacted a statutory act Private Higher Education Act 1995 to encourage, control and regulate the private as well as entry of foreign institutions of higher education. The Ministry of Education in Malaysia has also established a Department of Private Education.

[9] Scholars like Heng Pek Koon (1997) argues that while NEP was conceived by the UMNO and imposed on the Chinese, the UMNO was, however, pragmatic enough to liberalise the NEP in its later stages, in the face of widespread Chinese alienation and falling foreign investments during the recession of the mid-80s. In this context, he argues that the Malay political elite have accommodated the privatization of education as an option for Chinese middle classes to educate their children in the home country rather than overseas.

[10]Ungku Aziz (1993) defines what a developed society might imply: "…….a developed society implies a sufficiently sophisticated system of education and training that will disseminate knowledge and skills through out the society. It is one that has become the learning society" (p. 329)

[11]Mr. Abdullah Badawi, the Prime Minister, in his Foreword to the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006 – 2010), *"The nation is now at the mid-point of its journey forwards becoming a developed country by 2020……. Together towards 'Excellence, Glory, and Distinction' is the theme of the Ninth Plan"* (pp. v – vii)

[12] The Future of Higher Education Project undertaken by the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) (2007) identify three main paradigms important to shaping the future of higher education at USM: the market-centred paradigm, financial (corporate) centred paradigm and the creator centred (autonomous university) paradigm.

[13] With the passing of the Private Higher Education Act in 1996, some private universities such as Universiti Telecom (UNITEL), Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN), Universiti Teknologi Petranas, etc. were established.

[14]One of the first diploma granting private colleges to be set up was the Tunku Abdul Rahman College. Subsequently, private sector colleges were allowed to establish twinning programmes with foreign universities whereby Malaysian students completed the first part of the course in the Malaysian private college and then traveled to the foreign university to complete the rest of the course. Their degrees would be awarded by the foreign university partner in the twinning programme. In more recent years, Malaysian private colleges began offering '3 + 0' programmes where students can study for their franchised foreign university degrees entirely in Malaysia.

[15] Currently, Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, and Universiti Putra Malaysia are granted the status of Research Universities.

[16] A research university has the following characteristics: 60 % research staff must be Ph. Ds, research staff must raise a minimum of RM 10, 000 a year for their research projects, 10% obtain fellowships of a prestigious nature, each research staff should supervise 3 PG students, publish at least three papers in international journals, file at least 30 patents a year, and seek to produce Nobel Prize Winners and World Class research outputs.

[17] See Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) 2007, for more detailed discussion of one such exercise.

[18] Almost about 30, 000 qualified students did not get any place in the public universities in 2007 and all of them had to go to private or foreign universities to continue their higher education.

[19]Colin Abraham (2004), in a study of roots of racial polarisation in Malaysia, argues that ethnic and social differentiations were related to the colonial social structure in such a way that the class structure became co-terminous with and manifested itself in ethnic and subsequently racial group identities. In other words, Malays, Indians, and Chinese had identifiable group-like physical characteristics in terms of biological race that became juxtaposed with criteria of social differentiation. Race rather than ethnicity or social class, came to be accepted as the meaningful basis for social interaction (Abraham 2004: p. xxi).