Upgrading Performance of a Premier University: A Malaysian Case Study

* Dr. Junainah Mahdee
** Dr. Hasliza Hassan
*** Vincent Oh Kim Seng

*, ** & ** Faculty of Management, Multimedia University, Cyberjaya, Malaysia

Abstract

The study aims to explore how a top Malaysian university upgrades its performance through innovations. The upgrade has not only involved many changes but also challenges. The intellectual capital model suggested by Stiles and Kulvisaechana (2003) is used in the study to map out the innovations that the university has made to strengthen its human, social and organisational capital arrangements. This case study uses the qualitative method which comprised of semi-structured interviews with senior level management such as Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Directors and Heads. The paper concludes the use of intellectual capital model as an ideal tool for universities to assess their innovations that they have focused on to achieve high performance. The result of this study will benefit any education institutions which striving to reach high performance, if not world class status.

***Keywords**: High Performance Organisation, World Class Universities, Intellectual Capital, Human Capital, Social Capital, Organisational Capital, Malaysian Higher Education*

Introduction

Salmi (2009) in his book "The Challenge of Establishing World-Class Universities", argues that tertiary education institutions can play a vital role in local and regional economies. In particular, the author regards tertiary education as crucial to building a strong national human capital base and efficient national innovation system. The notion is relevant because as economies mature, advanced countries are likely to become increasingly dependent on how they acquire knowledge and how they compete in service sector activities. Thus, universities can play a vital role in creating the human capital foundation for a knowledge-based economy. On the one hand, universities are probably the most cost-effective institutions for developing computer skills that are an indispensible aspect of knowledge-based business activity. On the other hand, they are also the most appropriate site for building communication and information-processing skills, again a key skill for knowledge-based economies. As the university's role is crucial in this context, it is important to ensure that universities are of high performance to produce quality graduates for the labor market.

The tertiary education system in Malaysia is still a relatively young system. The official record states that the first public university created in Malaysia was in 1962. From this late start, the system has evolved rapidly to the point where the Malaysian higher education structure is divided into public and private higher education institutions. Both sectors are under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). Table 1 below shows the breakdown of higher education institutions in Malaysia:

Table 1: Malaysian Higher Education Institutions

Public Higher Education Institutions	
Public University	20
Polytechnic	30
Community College	72
Private Higher Education Institutions	
Private University	27
Branch Campus (Foreign University)	5
University College	21
College	415
Total	590

Source: http://jpt.mohe.gov.my(2012)

The study aims to explore how a top Malaysian university upgrade its performance through innovations. The upgrade has not only involved many changes but also challenges. The intellectual capital model suggested by Stiles and Kulvisaechana (2003) is used in the study to map out the innovations that the university has made to strengthen its human, social and organisational capital arrangements.
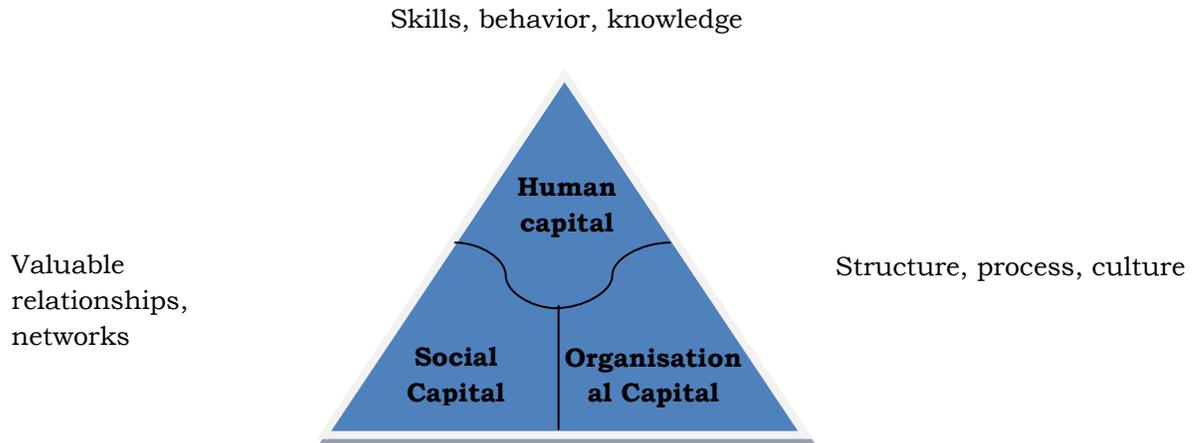
Methods

This study was carried out by a qualitative method. Semi-structured questions were used on in-depth interviews with nine respondents in a case study of a top Malaysian university. The respondents of the study include the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Directors, Registrars and Heads of the University. Most of the questions were asked started by "what", "how" and "why" with focusing more on the strategic policies particularly towards achieving goals and solving problems. All interviews were transcribed before being analysed using a range of qualitative research packages includingNvivo software. All findings were compared to the Organizational Intellectual Capital framework model by Stiles and Kulvisaechana (2003).

Intellectual Capital Framework

In essence, any public policy framework set up to establish high performing universities is about creating organisational architectures within universities that will help to produce high grade research and deliver world class teaching. John Kay (1995) has defined organisational architecture as 'a structure of relational contracts within and around the organisation, with employees and with customers and suppliers'. The main purpose of an organisational architecture is to develop positive employee attitudes and behaviour in a manner that allows them to achieve maximum performance.

Most of the literature on the nature of organisational architectures focuses on what can be called the three Cs – social capital, organisational capital and human capital. These are seen as the core elements of organisational architectures and thus there has been a preoccupation to assess how each is constituted, how each operates and how they interact with each other (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Coleman, 1998; Stiles and Kulvisaeclana, 2003).

Skills, behavior, knowledge

Valuable relationships, networks

Structure, process, culture

Human capital

Social Capital

Organisational Capital

Source: P.Stiles& S. Kulvisaechana (2003)

Figure 1: Intellectual Capital Framework

Social Capital

Consider first the highly fashionable idea of social capital, an idea imported into organisation theory from sociology. Essentially, social capital is about building trust and sociability among organisational members (Leana and Van Buren, 1999; Kramer, 1999; Andrews, 2010). Table 2 sets out the various dimensions to social capital. A range of benefits can emerge from these organisational attributes. They facilitate everyday modes of transaction efficiently among employees (Baker, 1990; Lazerson, 1995). Information flows are improved as is knowledge sharing (Boxman, et al., 1991; Coleman, 1998). Systems of reputation and influence are built up and collective action is encouraged to advance group benefits (Coleman, 1998; Adler and Kwon, 2002). In addition, where trust and sociability is abundant, social processes are likely to emerge to keep employee behaviour positive (Nelson, 1989).

Table 2: Dimensions of Organisational Social Capital

Dimension	Description
Empowerment *(Bolino, et al. 2002)*	Employees feel that they are listened to; are involved in processes that affect them; can take actions to initiate changes in the organisation.
Participation *(Bolino, et al. 2002)*	Employees are provided a voice in the decision-making processes of the organisation.
Common Purpose *(Leana and Van Buren, 1999)*	Employees cooperate with each other through teams and other formal and informal groups. Together, employees define collective goals, which are then enacted collectively.
Reciprocity *(Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1993; Uzzi, 1997)*	Employees and management cooperate to support one another for mutual again. An expectation emerges within the organisation that help would be given to or received from others when needed.
Collective Norms and Values *(Coleman, 1988; Adler and Kwon, 2002)*	Employees and management share common values and understandings as well as norms of behaviour.
Trust *(Putnam, 1993; Portes, 1998; Fukuyama, 1995)*	Employees feel that they can trust both their co-workers and all tiers of management.
Well Being *(Edwards, 1992)*	A range of policies and practices are developed by the organisation to secure the well-being of employees.
Belonging *(Podolny and Baron, 1997)*	Employees have a sense of belonging to their job, their co-workers and the organisation.

Organisational Capital

Recently, the concept of organisational capital has figured prominently in the organisational theory literature yet there is no consensus on what exactly the concept means, how it can be measured and how best to quantify its output. Black and Lynch (2005), for example, take the concept to consist of training, employee voice and work design, while Stiles and Kulvisaeclana (2003) consider it to have a much broader canvass, covering such things as: organisational and reporting structures; operating systems; processes, procedures and task design; information and communication infrastructures; resource acquisition, development and allocation systems; decision processes and information flows; incentives, controls and performance management systems; organisational culture, values and leadership. Probably the broader approach is more accurate. As a result, organisational capital can be seen as performing five interrelated functions. First of all, it combines and orders in a particular manner the tasks and activities that are deemed necessary to realise the mission statement of the organisation.

Teece et al. (1997) suggest this process allows a firm to identify how it can invent and maintain its dynamic capabilities and competencies in a manner that makes imitation difficult, if not impossible. Second, it establishes the nature of the interdependencies between different parts of the organisation and relationships between organisational actors. Aoki (2001) argues that the process of creating intra-organisational interdependencies determines the extent to which organisations capture complementarities between tasks, a source of idiosyncratic dynamic capabilities. Third, it establishes organisational routines and ways of doing things in a manner that brings order and predictability to organisations tasks (Nelson and Winter, 1982; Teece, et al., 1994). Fourth, it influences the extent of organisational flexibility and adaptability, particularly in terms of responding to unanticipated events (Zammuto, 1982). Fifth, it gives rise to processes that address the problems of bounded rationality and self-interested behaviour, which Herbert Simon, one of the founding fathers of organisational studies, suggested was the core problem associated with organisational design (Simon, 1959).

Human Capital

The third component of an organisational architecture is human capital (intellectual capital), which can be viewed as the know-how, skills and capabilities in an organisation (Schultz, 1961; Coleman, 1988; Dess and Picken, 1999). There is wide agreement that organisations have to develop processes that ensure they have the appropriate quantity and quality of employees, and thus the appropriate intellectual capital that will deliver its core mission (Klein, 1998). To some extent, obtaining and nurturing human capital has always been a core function of firms. But this function has seen to have taken on added importance with the relentless shift towards service sector activity. In the past, real estate and physical capital were hugely valuable assets to most firms. But in the service sector, where the creation and processing of knowledge is more central to competitive performance, employees and their capabilities, become the most important asset base of firms. Thus, the collective management of knowledge, skills, abilities and experiences of employees – the management of human capital – becomes more central to competitive success. Employees are the main source of intangible assets enjoyed by firms (Sveiby, 1997) – those assets that competitors find hard to read and thus to imitate. A strong theme in the literature on organisational architecture is the notion of complementarily. On this view, it is not important only for organisations to get the right type of social, organisation and human capital, but also to ensure that each element interacts positively with the others (Stiles and Kulvisaeclana, 2003).

With using these three capitals of the Intellectual Capital framework, the study assesses how the University manage to upgrade its performance. Thus, it is best to highlight more about the University first.

The Case of a Premier University of Malaysia

The case study of this research is about a premier university of Malaysia. It is considerably a unique case study not only because it is the oldest university in Malaysia but also has the reputation in the country for producing leaders and intellectuals in a variety of disciplines. The name of the University is not disclosed here for some security reasons and also to protect the University's interest. Recent statistics show that the University has about 6,271 staff, comprising 2,613 academics, including almost 600 expatriates, and 3,658 non-academic staff. About 22,354 students are studying here, including 3,120 international students from 78 countries. Because of this reputation for producing high quality graduates, the University enjoys considerable public status and Malaysians regard it as their premier institution.

Even the Vice-Chancellor of the university is an exemplary leader. He has set a remarkable goal for the university.

"Actually I promised the Minister and this was in 2010, that in 5 years time, this university will become one of the top 100 in the world" (Vice-Chancellor)

New Strategic Priorities

In pursuit of top 100 ranking, a new transformational plan was developed by the University. This plan identified six key initiatives to improve the performance of the University: quality academic staff,

quality students, quality facilities and infrastructure, quality support system or services, quality leadership and last but not least a healthy endowment. It may be useful to say more about some of these objectives.

Quality Academic Staff

To move up the league tables, the university recognised that it had not only to recruit more high performing academics, but also to improve the skills of existing staff. Thus, a policy was introduced to increase the number of PhD holders amongst academic staff. At the moment, about 73% of academic staff has a PhD, while the remaining 27% are enrolled on PhD programmes. It is the aim of the university that all academic staff possesses a PhD as soon as possible.

Quality Students

The University has also stepped up efforts to attract high quality students.It has certain entry requirement to be fulfilled by potential students. Tough entry requirements were established for all undergraduate programmes, which the university considered the key to developing strong, high caliber programmes - "In terms of students also, we look at the quality and even now as a Research University, we are going to increase or improve the ratio of undergraduate to postgraduate." (Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic & International)

Quality facilities and infrastructure

In 2009, the university spent almost 20 million (RM) to carry out maintenance jobs on buildings and infrastructure. A further 611 million (RM) budget has been approved to carry out new building projects such as a Great Hall, Graduate Teaching Centre, Dental Treatment, Labs, New Water Supply system. On top of that, it has also developed an Off-Campus site to cater for the welfare of staff and students in university accommodations. All of these projects are designed to ensure the University has state-of-art world-class facilities.

Quality Support Systems and Services

Many of the university's staff is responsible for delivering support systems and services. In 2009, out of a total staff number of 6,095 staff, 4,242 were support staff and 352 were management and professional staff. Changes have been made to these support services to boost efforts at improving performance. To reinforce the new emphasis on quality, a new committee was set up to create and implement a quality framework.

Another organizational innovation was the creation of an Expert portal for all staff to update their profile from time to time. Besides storing information, this portal is used by the Human Resource Department to clarify staff achievement during the yearly promotion exercise. As a result, academic staff is encouraged to update their information details, such as on publications, conferences, seminars, consultancies or even the amount of research grants that they have secured. The portal presents the profile of staff members to the outside world in an integrated manner. It also improves the administrative efficiency of the university as it allows information about different staff members to be collected easily.

Quality Leadership

Improving the leadership roles of senior managers was another new policy goal. To this end, selected staff was sent on leadership progammes in China organized by the National Academy of Educational Administration (NAEA). The purpose of sending senior people on this programme was to improve their strategic decision-making, change-management and problem-solving skills. The hope was that a cadre of senior managers would be created to engineer performance improvements at the university.

Healthier Endowment

The university's top management believes that obtaining additional endowments can boost the university's ranking.

"This is the richest university in Malaysia and has large untapped resources which we are going to develop. Because, at the end of the day, you cannot go up the rankings without money.

The top 100 universities have around 1 billion dollars in their accounts – the university OPEC. The poorer universities cannot make it into the chart. So, one of the most important things for the university is that we must create large, sustainable income sources." (Vice-Chancellor)

A New Organizational Monitoring Culture – Organizational Capital Initiatives

To ensure a concerted effort was made to advance these strategic goals, a set of performance indicators were established.

"And every area has certain goals and for every goal, we have strategies and for every strategy there is an action plan. So it becomes very measurable and we measure the success by saying, "Ok, this action plan has achieved this, therefore what do we do next?" It is not a strategic plan with no time scale. We have actually decided that by 2015 we must achieve this number of things." (Director, Global Planning & Strategy Centre)

Benchmarking

This new strategic approach, which emphasizes the use of targets and metrics, had implications for the university's organizational capital. For a start, it impinged heavily on the operating rules of the organization in several important ways. The University now places more importance on benchmarking its performance against other universities as a tool to upgrade its activities by gaining insight into best practice in particular areas. In an interview, the VC was adamant that the university could learn from any of the top 100 world universities. The Vice-Chancellor himself and his team have been travelling all over the world to visit top universities to learn about their best practices, and he stated, "Any of the top 100 is a model to me." (Vice-Chancellor).

Measurement and monitoring system

KPIs and other organizational targets are measured regularly at the strategic level, as the Director of Global Planning & Strategy put it, "the outputs are measured quite frequently. They are measured on more or less a monthly basis. The monthly meeting is to discuss the progress that has been made, as well as issues that may occur during the process of implementing a particular strategy. Meetings on target achievements also occur at a lower level, which reflects the strong move towards a metrics culture. In sum, all of the efforts in the organizational capital are meant to create better structure, process and culture for the University.

Human Capital Initiatives

The knowledge, skills, competency, and experience of staff are what make up an organization's stock of human capital. As is the case in most organizations, the Human Resource department of the university is responsible for upgrading its stock of human capital, which has set certain objectives in the area, including the following: "To recruit and maintain the top performers for the university. That is our main objective. To recruit them and then to retain them in the system." (Deputy Registrar, Human Resource Management)

The human capital strategy of the University has a number of different elements:

Talent

Increasing the quality of academic staff is central to human capital strategy. Unsurprisingly, this has two main components; one is to increase the number of academic staff with a PhD and the other is to upgrade the quality of the staff.

Reward and incentives

The University is eager to increase the number of its staff publishing in high quality, internationally ranked journals and at least in ISI journal papers. To encourage this type of behaviour, the University recognised that it had to rely more or less solely on incentives. The use of sanctions, or punishment, to put it more bluntly, was not seen as a viable option.

Research and Publication

As a research university, it has been producing a high quantity of research and publications every year. This high number is largely attributed to a research strategy applied by the university as a principal effort to increase research and publication activities.

"So, research-wise, we have this Research University Grant whereby in our research strategy, not less than 70% of our staff must be P.I. (Principal Investigator). So, each of them has a research grant. So, there is no reason why they cannot publish. In addition, there is no reason why they cannot get a grant. Everybody must apply, everybody must get a grant." (Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic & International)

The research strategy requires each academic staff member to apply for a grant and do research. As the grant applications can be made either internally or externally, there is no excuse for them not to be able to do research and publish. This also includes assistance to improve poor research proposals.

Training and support

A wide consensus exists in the human resources literature that training and support are crucial for staff development. Formal teamwork training is seen as improving team behaviours, reducing errors, and improving staff attitudes. At the university, extensive training and support are given to staff at all levels aimed at upgrading their performance. The procedure followed is that staff discusses their training needs with their immediate superior and then an appropriate training programme, which can be delivered either internally or externally, is devised.

Performance

In terms of performance, quality is always the ultimate output that the university wants to achieve. It needs quality to perform and this is why the university sets quality as the main criteria in its KPIs.

"So, that is why we need quality students, quality staff and quality facilities." (Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic & International)

Certainly public criticism of certain issues at the university had made the university alert to the need to improving its quality and performance.

Social Capital Initiatives

The social capital element of intellectual capital covers issues related to participation, trust, well-being, organizational norms of collaboration and cooperation and so on. A number of initiatives have been introduced at the university to strengthen social capital includes:

Feedback and Participation

There are many ways staff at the University can provide feedback on issues other than by sending a direct e-mail to top management (Vice-Chancellor). Firstly, they may choose to give feedback to the University's management through the Quality Management and Enhancement Centre (QMEC), which handles the ISO audit system, as one option out of many other mechanisms.

The University places considerable store on middle managers communicating any changes to policies, rules and regulations to staff. The university's website is also used to announce organizational changes. Thus, two-way communication has become a common practice at the University, to encourage staff to participate in various activities as well as to promote better understanding between staff and the management at the university.

Internationalization

The internationalization agenda is a part of social capital initiatives as it brings all staff together to agree and participate in the effort of projecting the University to a wider global access. In addition, it gives rise to tolerance of diversity in the University. The core aim of internationalization was to attract more international students and staff to the university. At the same time, the initiative was also aimed at raising the university's ranking in the World University Rankings, which is aligned with the MOHE's overall agenda.

Community Connection

The community connection initiative at the University is designed to develop a social network that allows all staff expands their access to wider networks. Collaboration which is commonly used by universities to expand social networks is an example of initiative to strengthen community connections at the University. The collaboration idea is reflected through platforms such as joint-ventures or alliances, and mainly engaged through research, publication, consultancy and commercialization.

Well-being

There is considerable evidence to suggest that the University has taken strategic action to keep its staff happy. Other than basic facilities and infrastructures, staff well-being is another important aspect, which is given careful attention by the University. To support this effort, the University management has accepted and recognized the establishment of KEKAUM (a union for supporting staff); and PEKAUM (an association for academics and professionals).

Trust

There is a broad consensus in the literature that suggests trust as a key mediating variable between relationship constructs. Many scholars argue that trust plays a central role in organizational life. It facilitates exchanges among individuals, enhances cooperation and coordination, and contributes to more effective relationships. As this element is crucial, the University management is generally trusting.

Common Values

Senior management at the University has sought to promote a set of common values amongst employees that are consistent with the university's vision and mission.

"Yes, we have 10 values. Staff will know..all 10 of them. We work on the values - integrity, professionalism, respect, meritocracy, academic freedom, teamwork, open-mindedness, creativity, accountability and social responsibility." (Deputy Registrar, Human Resource Management)

Interaction with the Government – the MOHE

While the University has been upgrading its performance, interactions with the government – the MOHE - have been made at various stages. This interaction is crucial to ensure that activities carried out by the university are aligned with the national goals and public policy, set by the MOHE.

Discussions

As a result of the new initiatives being implemented at the university, many organizational processes have been affected. When implementing its strategies, the overriding goal of senior management has been to improve the position of the university world ranking tables. Strategies to enhance performance have touched all aspects of university life, including research, publications, academic peer review, citations, student faculty ratios, internationalization, endowment, infrastructure and teaching. However, particular attention has been focused on five core Key Performance Indicators (KPIs): publications; research funding; teaching; supervision; and consultancy. Figure 2 below seeks to describe the type of intellectual capital model that senior management at the university are trying to implement.

Figure 2: Intellectual Capital Model (Case Study University)
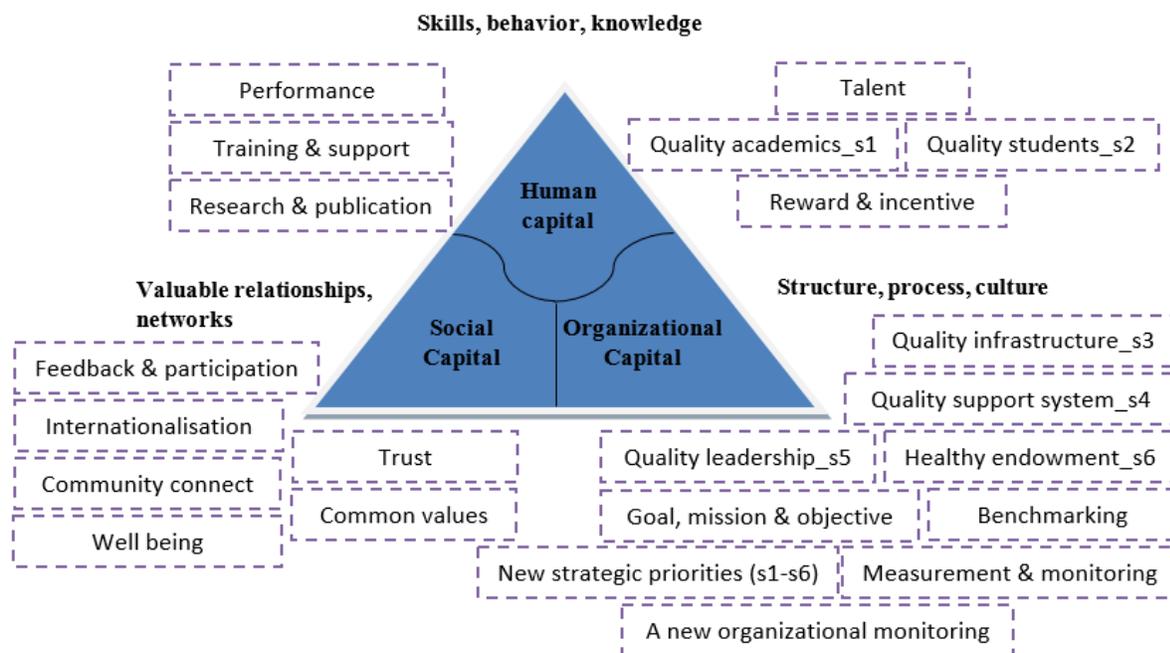
It is hardly coincidental that these indicators are similar to the criteria listed by the World University Rankings bodies. While other universities have followed criteria set by the Times Higher Education or Shanghai Jiao Tung World University Rankings, The University decided to follow the QS World University Rankings. This is because the criteria and metrics in the ranking body are more transparent and easily understood.

"We go for QS ranking, not THES 2015, because we understand the methodology. We are not comfortable giving data where the method is not well understood". (Director, Global Planning & Strategy Centre)

Main Issues

Like many other organizations that need to face changes in order to move forward, the University has realised that to improve performance, some form of change is inevitable, although this might meet with resistance. This is one of the main issues at the University. "I think the biggest problem is resistance to change." (Director, Global Planning & Strategy Centre)

At times, the misalignment of the expectations of staff and University management has created tensions. Indeed, at times this tension has escalated to the point where staff complained publicly through media channels. Instead of publishing academic papers in ISI journals, they aired their dissatisfaction in the local newspapers, recounting how they were being ill treated by the University. These complaints created a public stir and went viral among the public in Malaysia. While most of this opinion was negative, the Vice-Chancellor was more phlegmatic about the public controversy, saying:

"Since I came, there has been a period of change – the transition period. Because when I suddenly said I wanted to put the University in the top 200 and the top 100…that's changing the University. In any system, when you change things, there will be problems, there will be turbulence. That is to be expected. If you can change without any problem…that is a miracle." (Vice-Chancellor)

Despite all the challenges, the University has continued to become the most prominent university in Malaysia. Today, it has made its way to the top 150 in the QS World Ranking Universities.

Conclusion

This case study sets out to determine what the University does to upgrade performance in line with the national goal of improving higher education. It starts with the background of the University, followed by the main discussion on initiatives and efforts selected by the University to strengthen its intellectual capital. The discussions are based on the 3Cs – organizational capital, human capital and social capital, which form the intellectual capital as the conceptual framework for the study. To strengthen the organizational capital, the University sets a short-term goal, which is to be the top 100 of QS World University Rankings by 2015. To this end, six initiatives have been identified to upgrade performance: quality staff, quality students, quality facilities and infrastructure, quality support system and services, quality leadership, and healthy endowment. For human capital, the priority areas are recruiting and retaining best talents for the University. There is also an effort to link between reward and incentives to staff performance. New policies such as publishing in ISI journals have become the main criteria for staff. Other than that, training and supports are always available for staff to increase their competency and efficiency. Efforts to strengthen social capital at the University are led by feedback and participation from staff, an internationalisation agenda, a community connection and other related management-employee social factors such as well-being, trust and common values. All these efforts require both staff and the University management to work together, collectively.

Although it is evident that the University has taken initiatives to upgrade performance, there remains considerable room for improvement in the University's progress toward its goals. On the other hand, universities in neighbouring countries are also upgrading their performance in order to achieve world-class university status. Thus, the challenge to compete is becoming more difficult, not only for the University but also for other Malaysian universities. It is certain that in this kind of competition, only the best wins.

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