

Is Education A Commercial Product? A Comparison between the United Kingdom and Indonesia

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Abstrak

Tulisan ini membahas peran pendidikan dalam era globalisasi. Analisis mengenai bagaimana pendidikan telah berubah menjadi produk komersial dan dampaknya terhadap mahasiswa dipaparkan dalam bagian pembahasan. Selain itu, makalah ini memberikan usulan terhadap peran yang perlu dibawakan oleh mahasiswa maupun pihak akademik untuk pengembangan industri pendidikan di masa yang akan datang. Kasus-kasus yang terjadi di Inggris Raya dan Indonesia menjadi bahan analisis dalam tulisan ini.

Kata kunci: pendidikan tinggi, konsumen, konsumerisme

Introduction

Globalisation affects almost every aspect of lives, from commerce to movement of resources, which includes people. With the increasing globalisation, many activities are no longer restricted by national boundaries. Various international organisations are managed through a specific concept to achieve their goals to become global organisations. The increasing number of organisations that work internationally on humanitarian grounds, such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace International, International Red Cross and

many more, are the examples of organisations which have international operations in many nations. Similar to those, education has the same experiences, as we can see many international education institutions run their international programmes in the places other than their home countries, in which they establish their satellite campuses.

For decades, education has been believed as the foundation of the success of today's increasingly global market place. The increasing globalisation in many areas such as in communication, commerce,

technology, or politics, is the evidence of the role of education in globalisation. In return, more people tend to strongly consider education important to participate in and be affected by this globalisation. This creates competition among education providers to obtain not only higher qualified students, but also number of students enrolled in their programmes offered. As a consequence, the potential students demand for higher "quality programmes", which sometimes disregard the quality itself.

This paper discusses the role of education, especially higher education in the society, how higher education becomes a commercial product and the impact of the changing roles of education to the society. For the purpose of the study, it uses examples from the UK and Indonesia.

The Role of Education

Education is recognised as a global commodity. The WTO (World Trade Organisation) has included services including education under the Central Product Classification System since 1995. Under this system, education is classified into primary, secondary, higher education, adult and others (Canadian Education Statistics Council, 2005). The higher education according to this classification incorporates university, college, vocational and technical education. Many developed countries, such as the UK and Canada, acknowledge the importance of higher education as it is expressed by their

national leaders to achieve as many as 50% of their population to have a university degree (Freeman and Tomas, 2005).

The United Nations Development Program (1998) recognises the importance of education to the promotion of human rights, increasing the standard of living, and preservation of the environment. Furthermore, it is argued that education is seen as the foundation for the economic growth. With education, standard of living, greater capacity and willingness to involve in giving critical opinions and arguments contributing to a more democratic society will be achieved through the development of creativity, skills and talents (Freeman and Thomas, 2005). This finally will lead to stronger economy and social harmony. In the same study, the authors states that higher education is regarded as a tool to upgrade people's ability to enter and compete in the job market. Therefore, a society with higher education will have greater probability to increase their economic prosperity and opportunities.

In line with the increasing need of the society to have the opportunities of higher education, a proliferation of universities and colleges in many parts of the world has taken place. There are 172 universities in UK, 134 of which are in England, 13 in Wales, 4 in Northern Ireland and 21 in Scotland. The total number of the students is 2,086,075, with the majority of them as undergraduates and aged be-

tween 18 - 21 years. The student composition includes 1,225,555 full time and 830,520 part time students in 2001 - 2002. It increased about 8.7% from the previous year compared to a 54% growth in the number of higher education institution (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2002, in Freeman and Thomas, 2005). In England, the government support to higher education, especially universities, is from Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The government funds £ 3,071 or \$ 7,468 per student. The total government fund is £ 6,406 million or \$ 15,579 million and increase to £ 7,599 million or \$ 18,480 million in 2005 - 2006. The total number of academic staff in UK is 119,900 which provides a student to academic ratio of 6.2:1.

Indonesia as a less developed country has a total population of 26.98 million people with their ages between 19 - 24 years (Data Statistik Indonesia, 2005). Out of the number, only 4.05 million people are enrolled as students of higher education institutions. This number increased from 3.1 million in 2000. The majority of the students are full timers, only small proportion is considered as part time students. The student to academic staff ratio is unclear; the government standard is 20:1. However, many higher education institutions have the ratio of 30:1. There are 81 state universities and more than 2,500 private universities in Indonesia and are mostly located in the big cities (Dikti,

2004). The Government fund for education is allocated up to 20% of the state budget or 224 trillion rupiahs (\$ 23.5 billion). However, fifty percent will be allocated for the improvement of teachers' welfare, school facilities and funding the 9-year study program (VHR Media, 2007; VHR Media, 2008). In his speech, the president of Republic of Indonesia, Soesilo Bambang Yudhoyono, has proposed 200.3 trillion rupiahs for education in 2009. Similar to the budget in 2008, it will be allocated more to the development and improvement of facilities. The fund provided is far from sufficient to facilitate people to study in the universities. Although the Government has the regulation of 9-year study for free for its people, many people cannot afford to go for their education, as people usually have to pay for transports, books and other fees.

How Education becomes Commercial

The UK government funding per student has decreased by 36% as a result of Tony Blair's government, the British prime minister, decision to remove free tuition for higher education students (Anonymous, 2007). This was worsened by the very low growing number of students enrolment, with only 6% compared to the growth of HEI (54%). This creates competition among the HEIs to recruit their potential students.

It was clearly stated that the UK government would like to be a leader in

the provision of education of international students to gain 25% of the global market share of higher education students by 2005, with the longer term goal of 50% (Freeman and Thomas, 2005). Therefore, the UK government has identified that international student population is the source of fund for paying UK students. International students might improve the financial situation as it contributes to £ 8 billion per year (\$ 19.4 billion) or £ 32,954 (\$ 80,141) per student to the UK economy coming from the costs of living and tuition fees (Freeman and Thomas, 2005; Anonymous, 2007). Other resources come from exported programmes through satellite campuses overseas.

In Indonesia, since 2001, the foreign universities have been allowed to deliver their programmes through a cooperation with their local partners, both state and private universities. As a result, many foreign universities in cooperation with local university have delivered programmes in Indonesia. The Government has also allowed the major players, the state universities, such as Universitas Indonesia (University of Indonesia), Institut Teknologi Bandung (Bandung Institute of Technology), and Universitas Gadjah Mada (Gadjah Mada University), to manage their own education funds. Due to these changes, private universities are not only competing with themselves but also with prestigious state universities and foreign universities operating in

Indonesia to gain the prospective students (Sriyanto and Wismiarsi, 2008).

The changing situation where students need to pay their way in pursuing their degree in college or university has resulted different roles of HEIs play, from a more academic to a more utilitarian function. It is now common to see that HEIs apply marketing strategies to attract students to join their programmes. They recruit students through different approaches and demand fees to be paid. In return, this situation creates market for students who are able to pay more to enter those universities. On the other hand, students who pay their education demand for better education service. The application of student fees in UK cause greater consumerist behaviour, as students realise they need to pay to get what they want from the higher education institution (Maringe, 2006; Anonymous, 2007).

In respond to the changing environment, established education institutions are expanding enrolments, increasing the variety of courses offered in established programmes. When they do not respond quickly to the needs of their consumers, i.e., students, other HEIs or the new one with the entrepreneurial spirit comes to introduce new programmes, which then acts as one factor in established education institutions being forced to enter the advertising and publicity arena to attract the best students. Through developing

programmes that respond to these, in fact the educational institutions' engagement in the competition contributes to the changes in the consumer's attitudes. These changes are cyclical in that the educational institution promotes the acquisition of knowledge, which changes consumer attitudes, which then change the perceptions of required knowledge, which changes the consumer attitudes (Freeman and Thomas, 2005).

Previous studies have looked at the reasons behind the student's choices as including financial matters, access to graduate schools, school reputation, job placement, the school's reputation, and the school's social reputation (Spiegler, 1998). This findings are similar to recent study which explores the factors considered important to students when they choose the universities or courses of study reveals that programmes offered, price, location and prominence (Maringe, 2006). Other factors that influence the student's choice include future career opportunities, the influence of teachers, and the students' own interests. Students do not have a perception that difficulty of a course or subject affects their decision to choose the subject. They will choose a course of study, if this means a suitable and attractive qualification in their future job.

The student's composition in the UK consists of 88.4% from the UK, 4.3% from other EU countries, 7.3% from international not including EU countries. The stu-

dents from non-EU countries include China, Africa, North America, and Asian countries (Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan and India) (Freeman and Thomas, 2005). The increase in the number of students is directed not only to "home" students, but also international students to improve the financial situation of funding the UK students. The HEIs in Indonesia mostly have Indonesian students, whereas international students are very limited in number. Only expatriates who have children with the range of 18 - 21 years will enter HEIs in Indonesia. Many HEIs including state universities now are working with overseas universities, mostly from Australia, to attract potential students in their international programmes running in Indonesia. These programmes are more expensive compared to the regular programmes. The tuition fees are ranging from \$ 2,500/ year to \$ 2,700 per semester, compared to only \$ 150 per semester of tuition fees in the state universities (Sriyanto, 2006). Best students normally enter the state universities through a national test. However, with the Government deregulation, state universities also recruit students through their own enrolment system. The students recruited through this system are willing to pay more compared to the national regular recruitment system. Therefore, state universities may have at least three different recruitment programmes, the regular (national), recruitment through

special tracks, and recruitment for international programmes.

The Ivy Leagues universities in the UK such as Oxford and Cambridge are known, recognised and admired around the world because of the branding it has been built over decades (Freeman and Thomas, 2005). Other educational institutions that do not have the image of the 'Ivy Leagues' brand are now developing their brand image. Branding strategies is important when all universities have to compete to attract the potential students. Similar to the UK, the state government enjoy their higher level of brand image as they are already in the market ages ago before the private institutions enter the same market. Hence, the private HEIs in Indonesia are also working on building their image. This policy sometimes invites critique, as it needs huge amount of money and may raise the tuition fees paid by the students.

The rising of consumerism in education has negative impacts for educational institutions. The students who enter their tertiary level of education expect that they will have better job or increase the probability of having better career. A decision of some HEIs in the UK not to guarantee students to achieve a certain grades for future employment indicates that education has become a commodity of remaining true to the understanding of professorialism (Freeman and Thomas, 2005). According to Michael (1997)

professorialism is defined as the authority of professors to monitor themselves in when, how and what to offer to students for their consideration. This is because education is 'a knowledge industry' aiming at educating the students and this sometimes needs conditions or ways which are not comfortable or acceptable to the students.

Other authors argue students are not capable enough to be considered as consumers, as their limited knowledge of the 'product of the education', where a university will take them. Their immaturity is also their weakness to be treated as customers (Freeman and Thomas, 2005). It is questionable to consider students as customers, since they do not know or understand what they should have to achieve their career (Cheney et al., 1997). They enter the university to gain the knowledge and do not focus only on the knowledge for their employment. Furthermore, when measuring the customer satisfaction in university, people should not be confused with providing a high-quality educational experience or with ongoing educational improvement. Academics need to find the necessary methodology so that education is entertaining. However, entertainment is not a sufficient criterion for enlightenment. Educational improvement should not be simply targeted to popularity as the main means of determining what is taught. The contemporary marketing strategies are built

based on the student's preference or intention to buy. However, for education, this is not necessarily true. Students become more passive if we are treating them as customers, just like when customers buy what they want. In education, we need students to participate or provide collaborative efforts with academics, administrators, staff, other students and the general public to achieve or create something in the process of education.

Where We should Go?

Based on the discussion in the previous sections, there must be a new direction which may accommodate both students as well as academics to meet different perspectives of where education should go. In the changing environment where information and the development of new information and knowledge are the based of the economy, students have their rights to receive quality education that will sufficiently and suitably prepare them to enter the workplace and achieve their future career. On the other hand, academics have the rights to keep the academic integrity and freedom to organise the course content, the classes, assignments, exams and research to meet the underlying premise of humankind, including universities (Freeman and Thomas, 2005). Cheney et al. (1997) suggest to acknowledge the student's role in participating actively in the educational process. In this way, students are the co-creator in the educational endeavour. Uni-

versities have to empower students to be involved not only in academic philosophies and practices held by universities, but also taking ideas from the society and universities to challenge and change the world through investment in life-long learning and the human community.

Other aspects to be identified by universities are their innovations to respond to the changing environment. Several examples from what have been done by educational providers might be a good one to learn. First, Sprint organisation offers both programmes in the brick and mortar traditional learning environment and a virtual e-learning atmosphere (Johnson, 2003). The virtual programmes give access to students who are unable to travel to the traditional campuses due to their family, work or other commitments without degrading its quality. Second, the teaching methodology including how to convey the teaching materials should get the attention from the universities. Various tools such as observation, role-playing, coaching, story telling, discussion which use critical thinking and logical arguments, and jokes, including the use of communication and information technology, are among the methods which might be used to deliver what should be taught (Badley, 1999). Third, it is necessary for HEIs to explore all untapped or unacknowledged areas based on academic freedom. This can be maintained if the HEIs have strong communication skills, such as use of interactive style in the learn-

ing process, asking thought-provoking questions and using technology which may enhance the teaching and research capabilities of the academics (Freeman and Thomas, 2008)..

Conclusions

The globalisation put education to have a more critical in the society. Within this role, universities are responsible for providing quality education to students and also to the society. From the discussion, it is noted that students are more demanded as they now have to pay for their education. This leads them to be more critical when they decide to enter the HEI. On the other hand, HEI needs to put more efforts to treat students as their customers to compete with other HEIs, since the educational fund depends on the tuition fees paid by the students. However, with different characteristics of education industry, students alone cannot be treated as consumers. Students are considered not to have the capacity to provide the direction of better quality education.

A new perspective which can be of service both students and academics, is the best approach to pursue a high quality education. The involvement of students in the educational process seems to promote innovation and better response to the rapid changing environment of the globalisation. □

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