# **OBOR:** China's Challenge to Western Hegemony in Higher Education and Implications for Malaysia Universities

Yu Sing Ong, HELP University, Malaysia

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#### Abstract

The One Belt One Road initiative is seen as China's challenge to Western hegemony in higher education. The strength of OBOR is that it has no formal institutional structure. Projects are negotiated on a bilateral arrangement between government entities at all levels and also between government and private sectors. OBOR is multifold, encompassing economic, political and social aspects of cooperation. As such, a multi-pronged approach is needed to reap the full benefits of education cooperation within the framework agreement on OBOR. The promotion of educational exchanges will be further deepened with the opening of Chinese universities branch campuses or provision of scholarships to international students. The deepening of educational exchanges between China and participating countries can be viewed as a threat to Western universities interests in Asia despite China's assurance that it adopted the attitude of no challenges to the existing world system. This paper covers the efforts of China to internationalize its educational system, with an emphasis on collaboration with Malaysian universities. It concludes that Malaysian universities have much to gain from the OBOR initiative, not only in terms of academic exchanges, investments, co-operations in projects but also in the influence of Confucian value systems.

Keywords: OBOR, Western hegemony, China, world-class universities

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#### Introduction

The Chinese government introduced Project 21-1 in 1993 to elevate the educational and scientific levels of 100 universities to global standards. These universities were provided with extra financial support with the investment of approximately USD2.2 billion between 1996 and 2000 to enhance their competitiveness in the world. The Chinese government started another project in 1998 to accelerate the building of a few famous universities to be world-class universities. "Project 98-5" was introduced by President Jiang Zemin on May 4, 1998. A total of 34 universities were selected for Project 98-5 and they were given greater autonomy, including new levels of academic freedom and quality control processes. In November 2015, China State Council released a statement to "Coordinate Development of World Class Universities and First Class Disciplines Construction Overall Plan" to improve the status and international competitiveness of China's universities. This statement set the direction for China to develop six top universities in the world by 2020 and fifteen top universities by 2030 under the "World Class 2.0" project. This latest project is a continuation of Project 98-5 and Project 21-1.

The One Belt One Road initiative is seen as China's challenge to Western hegemony in higher education. The strength of OBOR is that it has no formal institutional structure. Projects are negotiated on a bilateral arrangement between different levels of government as well as both state and private sector players. OBOR is multifold, encompassing economic, political and social aspects of cooperation. As such, a multipronged approach is needed to reap the full benefits of education cooperation within the framework agreement on OBOR. The combination of foreign investments in setting up overseas branch campuses together with academic partnerships will lead to a broader level of bilateral relations between China and its partners, spanning academic, research, and cultural ties.

Under its "One Belt, One Road" initiative, China seeks closer student and faculty exchanges with countries along the proposed route. Another strategy which China has adopted is establishing educational institutions overseas to promote its programme abroad. The establishments of Xiamen University's campus in Malaysia and Soochow University campus in Laos are examples of China's universities growing presence overseas.

The establishment of the Global Business College of Australia by the Huashang Education Group of China is an attempt to capture a share of the large Chinese student population in Australia. Federal government data showed that there were 148,689 Chinese students enrolled in Australia in February, 2017. Chinese students constitute almost 30% of total foreign students studying in Australia. The Huasheng Group also owns the Guangdong University of Finance and Economics, a private institution based in Foshan, Guangdong.

Ningbo University opened a branch campus in Florence, Italy, in 2012. However, the campus does not have the Italian ministerial authorization as official campus is regulated under Italian higher education rules. Despite this, Italy is an important country as it is located strategically at the intersection of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Economic Belt.

Another Chinese university, Shanghai Tonji University, has also established a Sino-Italian campus in Florence and is cooperating with famous universities such as Politecnico di Milano, Politecnico di Torino, University of Bologna, Venice International University, University of Florence, and University of Roma La Sapienza. Other Chinese universities which have expanded their operations overseas include Zhejiang University's establishment of a Joint Lab for Applied Data Science with Imperial College London, Tsinghua University partnering University of Washington to create a Global Innovation Exchange research institute in Seattle, Beijing Language and Culture University campus in Tokyo and Tanjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine campus in Kobe.

## **Massification of Higher Education**

The massification of higher education in Asia has generated high unemployment rates among universities graduates. The quest for world class university status has led to a stratification of universities. Many critics have argued that universities have forgotten the purpose of higher education in their quest for world class status and that they lack the soul and humanistic value.

World class universities call for world class management. Although China's universities may have adequate education funding, they are in need of first class management who understand advanced management concepts and systems. Universities leaders have to struggle between pledging allegiance to the Chinese Communist Party and promoting academic freedom and free speech which may at times be critical of government policies. The degree of transformations in the education landscape varies among countries in Asia due to their differing economic and social developments.

China's education reforms have transformed the higher education system in China from one that emphasises elitism to one that promotes mass education. However, this process also results in higher unemployment among university graduates (Bradenburg & Zhu, 2007; Bickenburg & Liu, 2011). Many Chinese students prefer an overseas degree, especially from an English speaking country, as they believe there may be better employment opportunities for them. The Chinese Ministry of Education reported that over 523,700 Chinese students went overseas to study in 2015. Chinese students accounted for 31 percent of international students in the United States and 20 percent in the United Kingdom in 2015. In Australia, the figure was 27 percent in the same year.

Inbound students into China amounted to 212,836 in 2015. Of this figure, 131,227 were studying undergraduate degrees and 53,562 were pursuing postgraduate degrees. The interests in Chinese education signal the growing internationalisation of China's higher education. A number of universities from Europe, United States, Australia and Singapore have established branch campuses and research institutes in China. For example, University of Nottingham set up a foreign campus in Ningbo with cooperation from Zhejiang Wanli Education Group. New York University has a Shanghai campus in partnership with East China Normal University. Liverpool University is cooperating with Xian Jiatong University while Duke University is collaborating with Wuhan University. For these collaborations to be sustainable, it is

important that the partners understand the intended benefits and outcomes, and recognizing that the each partner brings different resources to the joint venture.

# Influence of Confucianism in Higher Education

The teachings and value systems of Confucianism is the key to China's challenge to Western hegemonism in higher education. Confucianism emphasises an orderly society and stresses loyalty, duty and public service (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Confucianism Oriented Society

To achieve an orderly society, one needs to be aware of his position in the society. Confucius believed that an orderly society could be achieved by example. Leaders will have to lead by example and be role models for others to follow. A key element of Confucius teaching stresses on the goodness of human nature and it is the leaders' fault that made his people bad.

Confucius also stressed the importance of filial piety to respect one's parents, superiors and siblings. Being honest and caring for others is one way to bring order to society. This will lead to harmonious relationships among group members. Society could have a stable and enduring social order if people conform to proper standards of behaviour or social mores.

To achieve an education oriented society, Confucius maintained that education should be made available to all, irrespective of social class. With good knowledge and education, one is able to achieve self-cultivation first. Only when character is cultivated can harmony in family exists. Only when families are harmonised, can a state be regulated orderly. The role of education is important to produce good and capable men to serve in government. The role of higher education in projecting China's soft power is receiving a lot of attention as the country raises its economic and political clout. Values espoused by Confucius such as humility, trust, honesty, respect and openness have impacted Chinese society and gained the attention of Westerners. These values are reflected in the behaviours of students as well as staff and leaders of higher education institutions. The Confucian moral philosophy, primarily the Analects, provide a guide to managers to regulate their own behaviour and to maintain a high moral and ethical standard. Self-regulation is a continuous process towards self-cultivation and refinement of one's character.

Confucius would explain to his students how virtuous actions bring success and happiness to one's life. Self-control of desire is a key virtue and through recognizing the values of the virtue, one can improve the quality of one's life. Wisdom for Confucius includes goodness, friendship, self-control and propriety. The people we associate with will have a significant impact on our personal development.

The six Confucian virtues that contribute to self-regulation include benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (yi), ritual propriety (*li*), wisdom (*zhi*), trustworthiness (*xin*), and filial piety (*xiao*).

Globalisation has transformed the learning environment of China's higher education institutions. As Chinese universities seek to compete with Western institutions, they have to adopt the best practices according to international standards. The new Confucian model for Chinese universities incorporates Western modernization and characterized by improving quality of teaching, research and institutional governance.

#### Potential benefits to Malaysian universities

Malaysian universities can benefit from the internationalisation of Chinese universities. The competition for admission into Chinese universities is so high that many families decide to send their children overseas for education. Culturally, Malaysia with its diverse ethnicity, is more attractive to Chinese students than some Western countries. The proximity of Malaysia compared to the United States or Australia is another advantage. In addition, there are at least 70 Malaysian universities and universities colleges recognised by China's Ministry of Education. The affordability of a Malaysian education as compared to a United States or Australian education is another incentive for Chinese parents.

Many Chinese universities are willing to collaborate with Malaysian universities in academic mobility through student and faculty exchange, cooperative program offerings and research projects. The Chinese Ministry of Education recognises the need to reform curricula, teaching methods and assessment tools by incorporating international approaches to teaching.

The Malaysia government could consider supporting a small number of private universities that have the potential to become world-class universities. Smaller institutions could be encouraged to merge and transform into larger universities with more abundant resources. While there may be challenges in assimilating the cultures of different institutions in a merger exercise, there are also opportunities in creating a new culture of excellence in a newly merged institution. For example, in China, the merger of Beijing Medical University with Beijing University in 2000 and the merger of four universities to create Zhejiang University in 1998, have created stronger institutions with teaching and research capabilities.

Malaysia universities could ride the OBOR wave and develop a few world class private universities through closer collaboration with their Chinese counterparts. Collaboration in "talent", faculty and staff mobility will encourage more knowledge exchanges between the institutions. There could also be more recognition of course credits taken by students in partner institutions. International collaboration of research projects is not without challenges. Researchers have to overcome the cultural differences and bureaucracies of the participants in the projects. However, international collaboration of research projects propels the researchers into a much larger global community. To achieve world class status, universities have to successfully encourage their academic staff to maximise their research capabilities. Globalisation brings the academic community closer through collaboration of research activities. At the same time, it also encourages institutions to be more competitive and develop the aspirations to become world class universities.

Malaysian universities have moved up in the global ranking of world's top universities. In the latest 2018 ranking by QS World University, five Malaysian universities are among the top 300 best universities. This is an encouraging sign as it signifies the improvements made by Malaysian universities in terms of academic and employer reputation as well as research outputs (Table 1).

| 2018 Ranking | Institution Name               |
|--------------|--------------------------------|
| 114          | Universiti Malaya              |
| 229          | Universiti Putra Malaysia      |
| 230          | Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia |
| 253          | Universiti Teknologi Malaysia  |
| 264          | Universiti Sains Malaysia      |

Table 1: QS World University Rankings 2018

Visionary leadership is critical in creating world class universities. The environment has to foster creativity, innovation and academic freedom. University leaders need to have a strong strategic vision and practice a philosophy of excellence. Effective leadership is important in setting strategic goals and policies in higher education institutions (Bennette et al., 2003, Jonese et al. 2014). In today's competitive environment, university leaders must also possess good commercial sense to address the demands of various stakeholders and be financially prudent in the management of their institutions. They have to reassess the 4Ps of higher education: policies, programmes, pedagogy and partnerships. With globalisation and increased student and staff mobility, education policies need to be reviewed for universities to overcome the various challenges they face.

Globalisation has also created awareness for Malaysian and Chinese universities to benchmark their best practices with each other partners. These include areas of teaching pedagogy, course curriculum, quality assurance, quality of faculty, facilities and academic support. While they collaborate on one hand, they also compete on the other. Chinese universities are competing with Malaysian universities to attract international students. Governments have realised that globalisation of education creates national wealth and attract foreign exchange.

The trend of tertiary-level international students worldwide is expected to continue to increase over the next few years as student mobility remains strong. Data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics showed the number of international students increased from 2.8 million in 2005 to 4.1 million in 2013. As at end 2014, Malaysia hosted around 135,000 international students studying in higher education institutions as well as international high schools. The most popular countries of origin were Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Nigeria, India, Pakistan and Yemen. With the establishment of EduCity Iskandar and Kuala Lumpur Education City, together with the various education hubs in Nilai and Cyberjaya, Malaysia is well poised to be a strong competitor to Singapore and Taiwan. International universities such as Monash University, Curtin University, Swinburne University, University of Nottingham, Herriot-Watt University, Raffles University and Xiamen University, have opened branch campuses in the country.

The Malaysian government hopes to place at least one Malaysian university in the world's top 50 by 2020. The highest ranked Malaysian university, Universiti Malaya, is ranked 114 in the 2018 QS World University Ranking. China produced the most number of rising stars among universities in Asia with three universities in the top 50. Tsinghua University, Peking University and Fudan University were ranked 25, 38 and 40 respectively by QS in its 2018 Ranking.

### **Resources for building world class status**

The management styles of university leaders have been widely researched. Leadership styles influence employees' well-being (Nyberg et al., 2011; Tafvelin et al., 2011) and job satisfaction, organisational commitment and turnover intention (Aydin et al., 2013). University leaders, therefore, have to explore the effects of their leadership styles and the organisational outcomes. World class universities are cradles for nurturing creativity and innovation. University leaders need to recognise the professional development needs of professors through research projects and not overburden them with administrative or teaching tasks. They have to understand that the purpose of educational development is to help create learning environments that enhance educational quality.

For private universities to achieve world class status, they must have abundant financial resources to fund their operational expenditures as well as research projects. The institutions have to be successful in their fund-raising exercises which could come from endowments and government research funding. Faculty members of private universities often have to compete for government research funding to supplement the resources provided by the universities. Private universities have more difficulties attracting professors with PhDs as they may lack the resources to support professors' research activities and the environment to champion academic freedom.

Technology is a game changer. The use of technology in e-learning addresses some concerns related to budget cuts in universities. E-learning is shifting the paradigm of higher education and the way we understand the system. The technological resources

must be aligned with the university goals if universities wish to maximise the potential of technology. The higher education environment is characterised by growing Volatility, Uncertainty. Complexity and Ambiguity (VUCA). Universities are facing challenges on how to deal with changes and disruptions. New technologies can disrupt the manner of traditional course delivery and make teaching more challenging to instructors who have to learn to deliver content online. A gradual adoption of blended program offerings may reduce the disruptions of delivery modes and lessen the negative learning outcomes which may result from a rapid implementation of fully online delivery of programs. Blended learning allows students to reduce trips to campus while still have access to face-to-face instructions. Institutions can also use classroom space more effectively and to reduce costs.

In the 2016 Malaysia-China Digital Economy Forum, Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak encouraged Malaysian companies to learn from China's advancement in internet technology. Mobile learning is gaining popularity in China with education providers such as Education First and Hujiang investing heavily in mobile applications for teaching. The latter provides over 20,000 courses to over 110 million users, and in cooperation with over 500 schools and organizations. Online education is unlikely to totally replace traditional teaching methods but will be mutually complementary.

University lecturers need to be equipped with the 4Cs of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills. At the same time, they have to be able to impart the 4Cs to their students. The elements are *Critical Thinking*, *Creativity*, *Collaboration*, essential and Communication (Figure 2). They have to be lifelong learners themselves and be provided with opportunities and support from universities to upgrade their professional development. Enhancing lecturers' critical thinking include developing their systemic thinking skills to gain a better understanding of challenging situations and developing effective interventions for transforming them through collaboration and open communication with colleagues. Systematic thinking involves combining analytical thinking with synthetical thinking. Analytical thinking involves thinking about the parts or elements of a situation while synthetical thinking refers to thinking about how these parts or elements work together. Lecturers are role models to students and they have to exemplify the collaborative learning styles to their students who in turn are able to demonstrate their ability to collaborate and make their own contributions.



Figure 2: 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning skills

Systemic thinking has a powerful influence on organisational improvement. It offers strategies that can help in restructuring the way we think about organisational change. Systemic thinking focuses on the interconnectedness of all things and sees change as a natural process. Fullan (1993) noted that the problem in public education is not resistance to change, but the presence of too much innovations and the fragmented nature of these innovations. System thinking in education encourages a coordinated change effort in the entire education system: curriculum development, instructions, assessment and professional development.

In systemic curriculum evaluation plan, universities should aim to design high quality curriculum which respond to the needs of students and which reflect the best educational practices. Very often, there are gaps between the written curriculum and what is actually taught by teachers in the classrooms. The implementation monitoring process should give attention to learners' outcomes to determine the curriculum effectiveness. Students need to develop the mindset that promotes logical reasoning and problem solving instead of pure memorisation of text materials. In the context of internationalisation, universities have to develop curriculum with intercultural perspectives to prepare students in an increasingly interdependent world (Francis, 1993; Chichton & Scarino, 2007).

Non-classroom learning is as important as classroom learning. Student learning is not bounded by the classroom but by the whole institutional environment which is referred to as the "hidden curriculum" (Palmer, 1981). The hidden curriculum encompasses the way the institution functions, the social engagement and the students' experience within the university environment (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Student Learning Experience

Globalisation pushes universities into a borderless network. Globalisation leads to real and virtual mobility of people and also leads to tension between national and international forces (van Damme, 2001). Marginson (2004) noted that the development of e-distance learning is driven by technological changes rather than educational changes or changes in government policies. Technology has facilitated the offering of distance learning courses across borders. In Malaysia, 20 public universities have launched more than 60 Massive Open Online Courses (MOCCs) for free and are open to students and members of the public. The hegemony of higher education by Western institutions is being challenged (Daniel, Kanwar & Uvalic-Trumbic, 2006), prompting Western universities to look at new partnership strategies. Liyanagunawardena et al. (2013) defined MOCCs as online courses which have a wide appeal to people interested in learning about specific subjects. These courses are guided by facilitators who are experts in the various subjects offered. McAuley et al. (2010) and Waard et al. (2011) defined these courses as both open and online and may be free.

The MOCC courses in Malaysia cover a wide range of topics and are free on OpenLearning.com. They are delivered in Malay language, English or Arabic, depending on the subject. To coordinate the implementation of online learning for public universities, the Malaysian government set up the Malaysian e-Learning Council for Public Universities (MEIPTA). With MOCCs, Malaysia hopes to increase the quality and accessibility of higher education to the larger population. The real value of universities will be realised when they are able to build creative solutions. Leveraging on big data networks through multi-communication channels, universities are in a position to facilitate a deeper understanding of human needs and promote social capital.

Malaysian universities could partner with top Chinese universities to develop MOCC courses in multiple languages to overcome cultural barriers in various ASEAN countries. MOOC movement needs to be aware of the value of cultural and linguistic diversity and not focusing on excessive profits if they wish to widen their access to a larger learner base. The increasing academic link between China and Malaysia in the form of joint programs will become part of a broader pattern of collaboration in the OBOR initiative. Figure 4 illustrates the elements of a world class university in 4 broad categories: Talent; Favourable Governance; Resources; and Openess.



Figure 4: World Class University

With increased Chinese investments into Malaysia, there is a possibility that other Chinese universities may follow Xiamen University's decision to open a branch campus in Malaysia. The massive residential and commercial development projects by Chinese conglomerates will attract more Chinese nationals into the country. The RM100 billion Forest City Project by Country Garden in Johor and the proposed RM160 – RM200 billion Bandar Malaysia Project in Kuala Lumpur are just examples of China's interests in property projects in the country. Any future move by Chinese universities to establish branch campuses in Malaysia is likely to be a foreign-policy move rather than based on pure economic reasons as most Chinese universities received their funding from the state government. Due to the relative similarities of Chinese and Malaysian cultures as compared to Western culture, Chinese students may find Malaysia a more hospitable destination for pursuing their higher education. Western academics often stereotype Asian students as lacking critical thinking and obeying authority (Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Ha, 2006). As such, many Chinese students may choose to study in Malaysia.

# Conclusion

The OBOR initiative brings many opportunities for Chinese universities to expand overseas. Universities in Malaysia and the rest of South East Asia could tap into the myriad of opportunities by collaborating with their Chinese counterparts. It is important to consider the geopolitical implications of OBOR apart from the higher education implication. China is using OBR as a foreign policy tool to strengthen its influence and cooperation with the international community. International faculty has to be realistic in their expectations about new education settings and challenges that are frustrating due to different cultural forms. On the other hand, international collaboration brings about knowledge transfers, intellectual friendships and management improvements. The pursuit for excellence requires universities to adopt multidimensional approaches to teaching and research which include localisation of foreign programs to suit the needs of the local education system.

Globalisation also aggravates the brain drain situation of a country when students decide to stay in the host countries instead of going home and contributing the knowledge gained to their own countries. The influx of Asian students into the United States, United Kingdom and Australia also raises xenophobic feelings towards foreigners. Malaysia may benefit from this prejudice against students from Muslim countries as the Western world grapples with fear of terrorist threats. At the same time, Malaysia continues to be an attractive destination for students from Asia due to the affordability and quality of its education system. With the increase in trade and investments between Malaysia and China, both countries have a formed a special relationship in the areas of educational and cultural exchanges. The interaction of Malaysian students with Chinese students opens up opportunities in research collaboration as well as future business and cultural relationships when the Chinese students return home to their country.

Malaysia continues to attract foreign direct investments in education with the establishments of foreign branch campuses. While many Malaysian private universities aspire to achieve world class status, they may be far from their goals without some participation or collaboration from other high ranking universities or the government. While China offers many examples of developing world class universities, its universities are mainly publicly funded and receive special support from the central government as evidenced in the Project 985 and Project 211 universities.

China is using OBOR as a soft diplomatic tool to strengthen its influence with countries along the Belt and Road region. Economic development is also achieved by boosting exports, enhancing access to natural resources and supporting local industries. This strategy complements the formal political and trade relationships between China and other countries. Malaysia is an important node for China along the OBOR route. While most discussions of collaborative projects are infrastructure related such as ports and railroads, collaboration in higher education in the form of investments to date have been limited to the establishment of Xiamen University branch campus. Malaysia universities should consider forming formal strategic partnerships with Chinese universities to nurture research and innovation. Both parties could benefit from the sharing of advanced technology, knowledge and experience.

For Malaysian private universities to become world-class universities, they have to implement a number of strategies including investing in quality teaching and research faculty, offering quality and industry relevant programs, recruiting qualified students, promoting academic freedom, improving corporate governance and attracting inspiring university leaders. Perhaps the best model for Malaysia private universities is a private-public partnership with government budget funding for research and consultancy. Policy makers have to decide to what extent they will invest in a small number of private universities to make them world class. It is important for Malaysia to develop a few world class private universities which are at the forefront of science and technology research. The outreach of a world class university to international faculty and students will position Malaysia as an education hub. Smaller private universities could also explore the possibility of merger with other institutions to become more formidable as seen in the formation of Zhejiang University. Mergers of universities will enhance the breadth and depth of academic disciplines, develop critical mass of researchers, and improve efficiencies in non-academic areas. Alongside growing competition in the higher education sector, there is also a growing tendency of cooperation between universities. There is much to gain for Malaysian private universities to collaborate with their Chinese counterparts.

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