

“The Changing Role of Higher Education: Learning to Deal Wicked Problems” by Judith Ramaley: A Critical Review

(“Peranan Pendidikan Tinggi Berubah: Belajar Mengatasi Kesukaran”
oleh Judith Ramaley: Satu Tinjauan Kritikal)

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Abstract

The essay is a position paper written by Ramaley (2014), looking at the widening definition and scope of stakeholders in higher education. Since then, many things have progressed and may not be so accurate anymore. As fluid as it seems, no one would have predicted that the pandemic would happen and cause a big disruption to the world and impact every industry, including the higher education industry was badly affected. This article discusses the relevance and application of the author’s discussion in the Malaysian context. The article concludes the role of HLIs is definitely changing. In the 21st-century setting, HLIs are expected to be sustainable and resilient.

Keywords: Higher education, wicked problems, engaged learning, building capacity, boundary spanners

INTRODUCTION

The essay entitled "The Changing Role of Higher Education: Learning to Deal Wicked Problems" by Judith Ramaley is a position paper, exploring the role of an emerging group of individuals bridging between the academic and community as well as the rest of the world (Ramaley, 2014; Ramley, 2014). Basically, it is looking at the widening definition and scope of stakeholders in higher education. The title clearly stated that learning to deal with wicked problems, but the reality is that wicked problems are constantly evolving. In our daily lives, problems whether wicked or not exist and co-exist with us and our surroundings.

Before we move on further, let's ask ourselves; What is a wicked problem? and why is it happening? Some see it as opportunities, while some see it as challenges. In a nutshell, regardless of how you treat it, those who can adopt, adapt, and remain agile will be able to stay competitive. However, for those who fail to identify and act fast, and remain as laggards, they will be left behind. This was evident during the pandemic when all higher learning institutions (HLIs) quickly adopt online learning and teaching (Sharp et al., 2021). In every HLI, a seamless shift can happen due to the collaborative efforts of various stakeholders. Therefore, it is very crucial for HLIs to be able to know and manage the correct stakeholders (Eskerod & Huemann, 2016).

Who are the stakeholders? They are comprised of a diverse group of individuals who are administrators, faculty members, staff, students and community members. For the macro level and effectiveness of the process, the inclusion of community members is also very crucial as learning outcomes are mostly to solve real-world problems and education is about producing graduates who will contribute to society. This can be achieved by building a culture of engagement by being informed and collaborative interactions with the broader society. Is it this simple? On paper, the mechanism seems simple and easy to execute, however, technology and social media changed how we interact and caused differences in interactions. In reality, we are constantly designing solutions to problems facing now and about to face in the future. Therefore, as the world is rapidly advancing and becoming borderless; predicting, solving and preventing problems are crucial (Mihir, 2022; Yeung, 1998).

As coined by the author, these stakeholders are embarking on a new working relationship and they are called the boundary spanners (Ramaley, 2014). They are also dubbed as the trans academic interface managers, providing linkages between the institution, group and individuals. This is very much evident in HLIs across the globe whereby academic staff are taking up leadership and administrative roles (Henkel, 2002; Honkimäki et al., 2022). On the other hand, practitioners are shifting to second-career researchers or academics. This paradigm shift from academic to community and from community to academic is timely and relevant. It is believed that the changing of the roles of stakeholders including students will assist in achieving bigger educational goals (Honkimäki et al., 2022). Therefore, this discussion will investigate how stakeholders can build a culture of engagement to deal with and manage wicked problems in higher education.

SUMMARY

Higher Education in the 21st Century: Learning to Deal with Wicked Problems

As the essay was written by the author in 2014, many things have progressed ever since and may not be so accurate anymore. As fluid as it seems, no one would have predicted that the pandemic would happen and cause a big disruption to the world and impact every industry. The education industry, even more so the higher education industry was badly affected (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). Many authors have predicted wicked problems like war, decline in enrolments and even financial instability, however, none predicted the

Covid-19 pandemic and its impact (Almazova et al., 2020). When it happened, it forced many to quickly adapt, adopt and shift. It was all back to trial and error again.

As part of learning to deal with wicked problems, collaboration is a new way of learning and a new way of working together. Teamwork can be achieved through collaboration in the workplace as well as classroom practices (Bravo et al., 2019). This is especially accurate as collaboration is very apparent in higher education and research and has become the new measure of progress and success (Haas et al., 2002). Students are assessed through group projects in ensuring the attainment of the intended learning outcomes. In addition, it is believed that engagement can tap and optimize resources through inclusivity and diversity in-group members. Through a pool of working group members representing tacit knowledge, expertise is accumulated. Therefore, engaged work opens many perspectives, explores wider options and is able to develop and apply solutions (Calleson et al., 2005).

From collaboration and engagement, teamwork became a form of community engagement, whereby it is a collaboration between HLIs and the larger community. This bond or engagement is not mutually exclusive but mutually beneficial, providing a platform for the exchange of knowledge and resources between HLIs. This is very much evident in today's higher education industry, whereby research collaboration penetrates beyond countries and continents (Smith et al., 2022). HLIs from across the globe are sharing equipment and even laboratory testing, both remotely and physically. In addition, teaching collaboration has become common as well, whereby HLIs are sharing their expertise through cross-teaching, both remotely and physically as well (Cozza, 2010). This is also very much evident through the appointment of visiting or adjunct lecturers. Without a doubt, all this networking became an impactful collaboration that can then lead to partnership and reciprocity (Fitch, 2022). With collaboration from different players complying with different regulators, these engaged scholarships and engaged learning must meet the standards of academic expectations of community partners and representatives. So, who set the standards? Which regulators or frameworks are to be complied with? In a perfect world, this form of engagement allows the same decision-making and solution-finding path for HLIs. However, the difference now is that who plays what roles? and how different stakeholders interact among themselves?

Education in Today's World: Engaged Learning

According to the author, it is believed that an educated person is known by how they interact with others as by what they know (Ramaley, 2014). This trait is essential in engaged learning, whereby the ability to comprehend and communicate ideas will ensure mutual understanding and sharing of knowledge that can benefit both sides. The author further supported this claim through William Cronon's list of characteristics of educated people, which was written in the year 1998. The characteristics included the ability to listen and pay attention to others' ideas; the ability to read and understand; the ability to talk to anyone; the ability to write clearly, persuasively and movingly; the ability to look at something complicated, figure out how it works; ability to respond to complex and changing problems; ability to focus on other people's ideas, not own mental landscape; humility; understanding; self-criticism; ability to get things done; nurturing; and encouraging of others (Cronon, 1998). In addition, an educated person has the ability to see the connections to make sense of the world and to act within it in creative and responsible ways. This is still relevant in today's world and is definitely an important element in dealing with wicked problems.

Dealing with Wicked Problems

In ensuring engaged learning, it is very crucial for stakeholders to be able to read the environment to create public problem-solving solutions in a healthy democracy. As the environment and our surroundings continue to change as study them, we need to remain

agile constantly. Situations are fluid and problems are essentially unique, tangled up with other issues and may be interrelated and grouped to be larger and more complex issues. To deal with wicked problems, collaboration allows sharing of exposure to risk, the opportunity for the benefit and the willingness to learn as the problem occurs and changes. Hence, being reflective practitioners in the higher education industry allow the integration of research, education, and application of professional practice in preparing students to be boundary spanner (Bray & Fotheringham, 2022; Ramaley, 2014). In contrast, it is also noted that not all stakeholders can agree with each other every time. The greater the disagreement among stakeholders, the more wicked the problem. However, it is believed that not all are problems. It is caused by confusion, discord and lack of progress. In other words, if ignorance is bliss, then why do we seek knowledge?

Building Capacity to Manage Wicked Problems

To deal with wicked problems, HLIs are building up the capacity to manage them. To prepare more people, the group gets bigger and results in disagreement. Oftentimes, too many stakeholders with different values and priorities make it very difficult to achieve a united front. The wicked problem ended up becoming a tangled knot. Hence, too many chefs spoil the soup. On the brighter side, in the 21st-century education context, the educational environment is no longer fully within our control (Ramaley, 2013). This has enabled the world itself to be a classroom and laboratory. Anyone (with the right resources) can learn at any time, in any setting and for any reason. As the world is quickly becoming borderless, more and more HLIs are focusing on the mobility of students (Hou & Du, 2022). The models of intermittent enrolment allow students to transition from one HLI to another; gaining experience and knowledge. HLIs are signing partnerships to allow the co-enrolment of students, which can promote sharing of resources.

Even with such opportunities, the author also discussed the disadvantages of mobility. As the nature of mobility requires physical movement and presence in several locations, there is criticism from external stakeholders on the cost of education and the economic value of the qualification (Ramaley, 2014). Students are required to spend extra money on living expenses, and it is also said to be the contributing factor to low graduation rates. In addition, the author also highlighted that there are different success rates across social and economic groups. This means that, with the rising cost of education and currency exchange rate between countries, students who are from high-income groups have a better chance of finishing their studies. In the past decade, higher education has been greatly impacted by technology enhancement in learning and teaching practices (Sharp et al., 2021). As technology is changing how we communicate with others, it is also changing how we learn and where we learn. However, in order to build capacity to manage wicked problems, we must know what we want to know, and how we can use the knowledge acquired to solve problems.

As the world is progressing rapidly, there are also global challenges and pressing matters that are hindering higher education such as climate change, clean water, health issues, energy sources, peace and conflict. Marginalized students are disadvantaged from achieving their full potential due to these challenges. Hence, HLIs are urged to look into the democratization of sustainable development, and all these are in line with the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (López, 2022). As we are moving into globalization, the author also discussed the criteria of future leaders being educated in the broadest possible sense; adaptable and creative workforce; aware of national security; have strong cultural understanding; have high knowledge of social dynamics; and have high language proficiency. These criteria are very important in ensuring that HLIs are producing future leaders who are ready, forward-thinking, and able to lead the future community. In addition, HLIs must learn how to work in a solution-finding mode and to develop new ways to model, foster and assess the knowledge, skills and inclinations that are needed by productive, creative and responsible people in today's world. These can be done through reflective learning and practice shaped by paying attention to real-world

problems. In many HLIs, students are already taught reflective learning skills to instil continuous improvement skills on top of critical thinking and analytical skills. Hence, in 21st-century classrooms, HLIs are focusing on several signature themes that reflect both academic interests and characteristics of the community; building extensive collaborative partnerships; and innovative technology-based and experiential teaching methods (Ramaley, 2013, 2014).

The Role of Boundary Spanners

Stakeholders must have collective behaviour and all goals must be institutionalized. These days, teaching and research represent aspects of the same complex process of making sense of the world and are equally important in HLIs. Academicians are not only expected to teach but must be research active as well. This is very much evident worldwide whereby HLIs are pushing for publications and research collaboration (Wan et al., 2022). In order to stay relevant, stakeholders' involvement and engagement are very crucial. Feedback must include the work of students, professional staff as well as members of the broader community. Leading a university is likened to learning how to play together. So, how do we build a culture of engagement? It is about engaging a broader community to create a working environment in engaged forms of scholarship, teaching and learning (Ramaley, 2013, 2014). Is it that simple? What are the challenges? To be fully engaged, stakeholders must learn to work with scarce resources, a crowded schedule, limited authority and several layers separating them from the senior leaders.

Creating a Culture of Engagement in the Academy

Information and knowledge are assets of HLIs. In order to properly manage this asset, HLIs must create new forms of infrastructure to provide the platform for integrative and collaborative opportunities. At HLIs, engagement is often found in pockets through reflective practitioners and problem-based work. However, creating a culture of engagement at the institutional level can be challenging. A fully realized culture of engagement requires access to innovative and relevant educational programs and research and information resources. Engagement is more than working together, it is about building partnerships while addressing social, economic and environmental issues, which is in line with United Nation's SDGs (López, 2022). The benefits of a fully bloomed culture of engagement promote the well-being of stakeholders in a healthy environment; having distinctive perspectives and expertise of all fields; recognizing and supporting engaged scholarship, learning, and teaching (Sharp et al., 2021); and investing in collaboration.

In a perfect world, the components of engaged culture are shaped by educational mission and design, delivery and expectations in the curriculum; integrating themes from different disciplinary perspectives; addressing larger questions; nature and purpose of collaborations; other interactions between HLIs and community; and infrastructure holding integrative models together. In layman's terms, it takes a village and its efforts to create a culture of engagement (Abdullahi et al., 2021; Santosh & Prajapati, 2022).

ANALYSIS

RELEVANCE AND APPLICATION IN THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

As the world is becoming borderless and seamlessly integrated, most industries are interconnected and interrelated. This is no exception for the higher education industry (Borgos et al., 2022). What is happening in other countries is relevant and applicable in Malaysia as well (Tee, 2022). As mentioned earlier, the essay was written by the author in 2014, many things have progressed ever since and may not be so accurate anymore. In this section, the relevance and application of the author's discussion in the Malaysian context are discussed.

Higher Education in the 21st Century: Learning to Deal with Wicked Problems in Malaysia

Malaysia, as a nation, has its fair share of wicked problems as well. Over the years, since independence, the education and higher education systems have shifted progressively. The government has put in place the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025, trying to highlight and address wicked problems like predicted risk, social gap and digital gap amongst the Malaysian communities (Omar et al., 2022). This is done in the hope to provide equal access to quality education for all Malaysians. As geographically diverse as Malaysia, equal access to quality education is something very difficult to achieve especially in the rural areas of the nation. In 2020, the situation was worsened by the pandemic. When learning and teaching shifted to online, students in rural areas with no access to the Internet were disadvantaged (Ma et al., 2022). Digital gap and disparity grew bigger and greatly affected students as well as teachers. As the world shifted to the endemic stage, wicked problems such as this continue to be the main dividing issue between the communities (Krause, 2012).

As part of the higher education regulator in Malaysia, the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) as an agency under the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) is constantly engaging with the community and relevant stakeholders in developing and reviewing its quality standards and documents (Tee, 2022). This is part of its continuous quality improvement commitment to remain agile, relevant and timely to meet global needs. In addition, HLIs are also constantly engaged in sessions with the industry players as well as conducting knowledge transfer programs for the local community. This is monitored through the institutional rating, SETARA, as well as the research rating, MyRA, conducted by MoHE (Wan et al., 2022). HLIs are encouraged to be research-active and industry-driven to provide solutions to real-world problems and to produce graduates who can solve real-world problems (Wan et al., 2022; Yusof & Salleh, 2013). This is very much evident in today's HLI's vision, mission and educational goals, whereby the emphasis is on collaboration, engagement and networking with all levels of stakeholders (Beaulieu & Roberge, 2022). The future of higher education is about working together and riding on each other's expertise to produce the best solution for a particular issue.

Education in Today's World: Engaged Learning in the Malaysian Context

In this era of disruption, where uncertainties are the only constant, engaged learning is a very powerful tool in today's education world. The question here is it enough to just be an educated person? Will education alone provide a person with the ability to survive in the real world? In the Malaysian context, MQA and MoHE are emphasizing the importance of having soft skills. It is believed that having technical skills alone is no longer sufficient to survive (Nasir et al., 2011). Therefore, the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) has been reviewed and improved to incorporate soft skills such as collaborative learning and teamwork (Balasingam, 2014; Kaprawi et al., 2019). The five learning outcomes clusters were developed to ensure that every graduate is well-equipped with the right knowledge and skills needed by the workforce (Balasingam, 2014; Kaprawi et al., 2019).

As the higher education industry is moving towards technical and vocational skills (Minghat et al., 2022), it is also important to look into soft skills. As more repetitive and administrative jobs are getting replaced by robots or computer software, the lack of human touch or presence is causing people to be out of touch and lack empathy and a sense of awareness toward others' feelings as well as their own surroundings. Hence, people are getting more self-centered and less engaged. For a seamless and integrated community, engaged learning is needed to ensure that students develop the ability to read the environment and surrounding, predict what is happening or about to happen and able to react accurately by providing the right solution that is beneficial to the entire community (Cavicchi et al., 2013).

Dealing with Wicked Problems in the Malaysian Higher Education

The main aim of higher education is to produce graduates who are able to contribute back to society, in every sense (Cavicchi et al., 2013; McCune et al., 2021). As mentioned MQA and MoHE as the regulators of higher education in Malaysia are constantly shaping and reshaping the higher education system and framework. In one of its efforts to ensure that students and graduates of HLIs in Malaysia are prepared and able to deal with wicked problems, MoHE introduced the compulsory subjects that must be taken by undergraduate students (Saleh et al., 2022). The learning outcomes are to assure that graduates in Malaysia have a high level of awareness of their surroundings and environment. In addition, they are also expected to have high empathy for their community. Therefore, with the introduction of compulsory subjects, the *Matapelajaran Pengajian Umum* (MPU), graduates are expected to not only have cognitive and technical skills but soft skills too. These soft skills cover entrepreneurial and community engagement and services and are believed to be able to increase graduate employability (Saleh et al., 2022).

In 2021, MoHE announces that three new compulsory subjects will be introduced for the cohort effective year 2022 and 2023 onwards (Soh & Ismail, 2021). This effort is done as part of a review and improvements in response to the current happenings. The three new compulsory subjects are *Falsafah dan Isu Semasa* or Philosophy and Current Issues; *Penghayatan Eitka dan Peradaban* or Appreciation of Ethics and Civilization; and *Kursus Integriti dan Anti Rasuah* or Integrity and Anti-Corruption (Marinsah et al., 2021). These three new compulsory subjects are expected to be able to prepare graduates to be more responsible and equipped global citizens who can contribute to the community (Saleh et al., 2022; Soh & Ismail, 2021).

Building the Capacity to Manage Wicked Problems in Malaysian Higher Education

People are assets. We all know that, but are we doing enough to train and prepare more talents? How do we capture and retain tacit, implicit and explicit knowledge? Why is brain drain happening? In any industry, including the higher education industry, having a strong foundation is not about having a long history or reputation only, it is about the ability to prepare for the unpredictable future (McCune et al., 2021).

With the rapid advancement of technology, anything is almost possible now. Many HLIs have been utilizing innovative technology-based and experiential teaching methods in their classroom (Azman, 2021). Traditional classroom with one teacher and twenty-five students has been obsolete. In the modern classroom, everyone including the teacher are learners and teachers. Learning and teaching are conducted remotely or flipped; broadcasted, streamed or recorded (Hutchings & Quinney, 2015). This allows students with all types of learning styles to learn at anytime and anywhere through one single learning platform (Azman, 2021; Mohamad et al., 2010). Knowledge can be kept and stored for multiple and future consumptions.

Not only that but with technology, HLIs are able to build extensive collaborative partnerships with other HLIs across the world (Smith et al., 2022). This is very much evident in Malaysia whereby both public and private HLIs are signing Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) and Memorandums of Agreement (MoA) with HLIs from other countries to promote students' mobility and research activities (Cozza, 2010; Haas et al., 2002). Over the years, the effort of building the capacity to manage wicked problems in Malaysian higher education is getting more apparent. This is evident through the increase in rankings of HLIs in the QS world ranking as well as other rankings (Fauzi et al., 2020; Tan & Goh, 2014). Therefore, come what may, with a strong foundation in capacity building as well as support from the regulators, HLIs in Malaysia have proven to be resilient and able to weather any storms. So, who are the people behind this? They are boundary spanners.

The Role of Boundary Spanners in Malaysian Higher Education

In order to reinstate, it takes a village to progress and make the change. So, who are the main stakeholders? Boundary spanners are stakeholders who can take up the role to initiate collaboration with external parties (Ramaley, 2013, 2014). According to MQA, for continuous quality improvement, feedback must be collected from students, alumni, and industry players as well. That way, the loop will be able to close in its entirety as it covers a more wholesome approach (Chin, 2018). Drawing from the standards in the Code of Practice for Institutional Audit (COPIA) by MQA, goals and efforts must be institutionalized and all stakeholders must sing not only the same song but in harmony and synchronously as well (Chin, 2018; Hou et al., 2018). However, the real question is how best this can be managed. Is it from the middle of an organization? Top-down or bottom-up approach? The simple answer is through a culture of engagement, where everyone plays an impactful role collaboratively for one common goal (Santosh & Prajapati, 2022).

Creating a Culture of Engagement in the Academy in Malaysia

In any setting or even culture, working together has been always an important element in ensuring progression and success (Perrault et al., 2011). There is no exception for higher education in Malaysia as well. The culture of engagement is not only encouraged but has been in practice (Abdullahi et al., 2021). This is evident and in line with MyRA's requirement, whereby university, industry and community engagement are measured and monitored (Abidin et al., 2017; Yusof & Salleh, 2013). The culture of engagement is expected to go beyond between HLIs, it must involve and reach other industries and the community as well. HLIs are expected to not only produce graduates who can contribute back to the community but HLIs must also look at how they can contribute or provide solutions to real-world problems that can benefit the community (Yusof & Salleh, 2013). As a village or community living together, any goals can only be achieved only when every stakeholder can move forward together. This is also in line with the Malaysian educational goal of "no one is left behind" (Omar et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

Wicked problems are very much complicated and hard to comprehend. Dealing with wicked problems involves cross-discipline engagement and multiple stakeholders (McCune et al., 2021). As to conclude, the role of HLIs is definitely changing. As the world is changing rapidly and problems are getting more complex, expectations are higher and causing higher requirements. Many see this as an opportunity to grow and improve, while others see this as a burden and are turned away by the cost implication. However, in the 21st-century setting, HLIs are expected to be sustainable and resilient. In addition, in this era of disruption, learning outcomes should reconsider practical versus theory; and the importance and relevancy of technical and vocational skills. Some say it's the time for skills. What say you?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This is only a review paper examining the relevance and application of the original author's discussion in the Malaysian context. For future research, researchers can look into studying this subject in their own contexts. In addition, researchers can also study the similarities and differences between the Malaysian context and their own contexts. Furthermore, researchers can consider a more in-depth analysis of what are the toughest challenges of wicked problems that HLIs have faced during the Covid-19 pandemic and explore effective strategies and tips on how they overcame the challenges along the way and how they got to adopt a new culture.

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