



Exploring Critical Success Factors in the Governance of Malaysian Public Universities

Soaib Asimiran^{a*}, Ismi Arif Ismail^b, ^aFaculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, ^bResearch Centre of Excellence in Innovative Teaching and Learning (INNOVATE) & Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Email: ^{a*}soaib@upm.edu.my

Universities are corporate bodies and as such the success of university governance will also depend on those critical success factor dimensions. It is hypothesised that critical success factors comprising information, communication, governance board policies, individual board members and governance processes affect the success of university performance. This research explores how these factors are implemented and affect the performance of public universities in Malaysia. In this paper, governance philosophy, framework and operational mechanisms are examined to explore how critical success factors in university governance are practised in Malaysian public universities. The required data was obtained by utilising a qualitative approach for data collection through in-depth interviews with key players including the Deputy Vice-Chancellors, selected Senate members, the university registrar, senior academicians and selected Board members as well as documentary analysis on universities' important publications such as strategic plans . In this paper, the arguments focus on the interplay between the understanding of critical success factors, the framework and the question of how critical success factors in governance are carried out by those involved in the governance process. The emerging themes indicate that the key players have a thorough understanding of the meaning and philosophy of university governance and critical success factors, which are seen as crucial in steering the governance of Malaysian public universities. To date, the five critical success factors, including information, communication, governance policies, board members and governance processes have to a certain degree efficiently and effectively lead to positive outcomes affecting the performance of Malaysian public universities. Both the framework and operational mechanisms are clear, demanding a committed and dedicated governance team to ensure the functions of Malaysian public universities in supporting



national education blueprint and relevant policies. Overall critical success factors in governance practice also bring to light the need for more responsive and autonomous practices and the emergence of the corporate model as the much favoured mode for university governance in Malaysia.

Key words: *University governance, critical success factors, public universities, corporate model.*

Introduction

The reliance on universities to achieve national aspiration has created a strong emphasis on ensuring the status of universities as guardians of knowledge, governed according to the philosophy, governance and operational framework appropriate for such ambition. Successful governance in the corporate sectors depends on how effective those critical success factor dimensions including information, communication, governance board policies, individual board members and governance process are implemented (Needy, Cleland, et. al., 1999). Universities are corporate bodies and as such the success of University governance is also assumed to depend on those critical success dimensions. Therefore, it is hypothesised that critical success affect the success of university performance. It is timely that improved governance especially regarding success factors and university governance practices can contribute significantly to university success (Shattock, 2010).

Fundamentally, a University is made up of a community of scholars and the basic idea of a University is to discover, disseminate and protect knowledge in the true sense (Eustace, 1987; Soaib & Sufean, 2012). Histories, laws, models found in the literature, and University practices around the world affect how Universities are governed. There have also been debates regarding the most important factors affecting university governance (Kezar, 2008). Universities are established based on various charters and constitutions and in their operational functions and roles, they are guided by their constitutions or charter of establishment. In this paper, governance philosophy, framework and operational mechanisms are examined in order to find the ways critical success factors contribute to University governance within Malaysian public Universities. The arguments focus on the interplay between the understanding of critical success factors and University governance, its framework and how University governance is being practiced in selected public Universities by those involved in the governance process.



University Governance

University governance provides institutional directions and sets the link between University aspirations and their fulfilment (Austin & Jones, 2015; Keller, 2001; Shattock, 2008, Soaib & Sufean, 2012). By definition, University governance is defined as the framework by which authority, power and influence are distributed amongst various players in the University community and in the functioning of the University (Alfred, 1998). Hence, governance describes University functions which implies that there is a consistent and systematic way to organise and manage Universities . Although it does not guarantee University success, governance practices contribute towards the achievement of institutional missions and objectives. Globally, Universities are asked to respond to changes in technology, competition, funding patterns, increased societal demands, greater government expectations and globalisation, despite retaining their core functions to continuously champion the advancement of knowledge (Locke, Cummings & Fischer, 2011; Sufean & Aziah, 2010; Shattock, 2008).

Universities' functions begin at the institutional governance level where frameworks are set, policies are made, rules and structures guide implementation and the ideal of a University is turned into reality (Geurts & Maassen, 2005). Marginson and Considine (2000) examine governance in terms of the interactions between the internal and external university environment as well as stakeholders and the intersection between them. Thus, an understanding of existing governance arrangements is relevant. Various theories raise questions about which are relevant to public Universities and which describe governance practices and most importantly whether the framework actually reflects relevant theories.

Governance also subscribes to the political theories' assumptions. Sources of political theory: conflict theory, community power theory, and interest group theory (Baldrige, 1971) become the foundation for theoretical arguments regarding the political dimension. Political manoeuvres frequently occur in Universities (Gayle, et al., 2003). Political theories put the emphasis on the human side. People are central under the political framework, they are the key variable because they influence the governance process, which plays a critical role in any policy formulation cycle (Kezar & Eckel, 2004).

Critical Success Factors

The definition or description critical success factors in University governance is not clearly defined., Critical success factors are defined differently even across applications. Hence, for the purposes of this study, they are synthesised from various practices such as the application of corporate governance in engineering management (Needy, et. al. 1999), sustainability management of industrial performance (Leidecker & Bruno, 1984), critical success factors in



e-learning (Alhabeeb & Rowley, 2016) and energy management (Alia, Abdul Hakim, & Mat Naim, 2015) and administrative processes (Newcastle University, 2018). On the other hand, success factors are defined as attitudes and behaviours that result in effective job performance (Newcastle University, 2018). They describe the most important behaviour for all staff across administrative and support service areas in the University, emphasising behaviours (or competencies) that have been identified through research which could make a difference in job performance.

Leidecker & Bruno (1984) examine critical success factors (CSF's) as those characteristics, conditions, or variables which when properly sustained, maintained, or managed can make a significant impact on the success of a firm competing in a particular industry. These may include price advantage, capital structure or advantageous customer mix, and structural characteristics of industry. They also contend that these variables are important determinants of organisational success and they are subject to change. The identification of critical success factors will help strategic planning activities and the business strategy development plan. By identifying critical success factors, a business organisation can assess its strengths, threats and opportunities in its environment.

Alia, Abdul Hakim & Mat Naim (2015) relate critical success factors to the management of energy towards a sustainable University. Considering critical success factors as variables that must be implemented for Organisations to be successful in a specific field, they categorize critical success factors into five sustainable clusters. These include top management support, a comprehensive energy management team, stakeholders' involvement, awareness and risk management.

Needy, e et. al. (1999) identify potentially critical factors for successful corporate governance including : Information, Communication, Governance board policies, Individual board members and Governance processes. Information covers aspects such as quantity, quality and timeliness; communication focuses channels and protocol; Governance board policies include the selection and tenure of board members; Individual board members concentrate on participation, commitment and characteristics and finally Governance processes focus on committees, board meeting procedures and decision-making processes. The authors applied these critical success factors in engineering management and argue that it is essential and timely that the engineering management recognises the importance of corporate governance in enterprise success. This context of critical success factors is assumed to be relevant and consistent with the practice of university governance. From the various descriptions presented above, we synthesise that the critical success factors defined by Needy, et. al., (1999) are suitable for this study. Therefore, we conducted a study based on the five critical success factors namely Information, Communication, Governance board policies, Individual board members and Governance processes.



The Research Problem

Previous studies have found that governance processes in Universities were ambiguous or not wholly effective (Kezar, 2005; Benjamin & Carroll, 1998) or there were significant controversies over the parameters and distribution of power among those involved in the governance process (Gayle, Tewarie & White, 2003; Mok, 2010; Soaib, 2012). One of the most cited models in University governance is the political model of University governance (Baldrige, 1971). This model served as a basis for other models such as bureaucratic and collegial models introduced in later years. Kezar and Eckel (2004) noted that these three models may describe and explain how universities are governed. Gayle, Tewarie and White (2003) argue that a model could not describe governance practiced, but a combination of few models could provide a better description. For example, Soaib & Sufean (2012) argue that Malaysian public Universities are governed according to a mixture of several models, with one model more likely to dominate over others. However, University governance is not a clear-cut issue (Elena and Sanchez, 2013) due to the complex nature of Universities.

Despite numerous models in the literature, it is important to note that there is still a lack of empirical research available to portray the interplay between the understanding, framework and question of how governance is being carried out by those involved in the process. This could be partly attributed to the general view of governance as being under the purview of government and hence the assumption that discussions and directives around it are centrally uniform.

Studies on critical success factors conducted by researchers such as Needy, et. al. , & Cohen (1999), Leidecker & Bruno (1984), Alhabeeb & Rowley (2016), Alia, Abdul Hakim, & Mat Naim (2015) and Newcastle University (2018) focus on various aspects of the problem and similar studies in the Malaysian higher education environment have been found to focus on aspects other than University governance. A study by Alia, Abdul Hakim & Mat Naim (2015) focuses on University sustainability from an energy management point of view, emphasising the importance of practising energy management effectively. Therefore, a study that explores the issue of University governance as a critical success factor is essential.

This research will explore how these critical success factors are implemented in the governance of public universities in Malaysia. The Malaysian Government has launched the National Higher Education Strategic Plan and the National Higher Education Action Plan 2001-2010 as well as the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015 – 2025 (Higher Education) as foundations for the success of the national higher education system. The phase of laying foundations has now passed, the emphasis is now on Universities embarking making shifts.



Research Questions

The aim of this paper is to offer further insights about how critical success factors affect the success of University performance. It also discusses governance mechanism in steering the University and the interplay between understanding critical questions on how governance is being carried out by those involved in the governance process.

This study attempts to answer the following two questions:

1. What are the interpretations on critical success factors and governance practices as perceived by those involved in University governance?
2. How how are the five critical success factors (implemented in the governance of Malaysian public universities)?
3. What are the challenges encountered in the implementation of the critical success factors and how do those involved in University governance overcome the identified challenges?

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach paradigm. The data collection was employed through the following:

1. Documentary analysis on Universities' strategic plans, National Higher Education Strategic Plan, National Higher Education Action Plan, constitutions, statutes, rules and regulations, reports, calendars, speeches, ISO documentations and major policies
2. In-depth interviews with key players including academics at top management level such as deputy vice-chancellors, registrars, experts in higher education governance, senior academicians and members of board of directors.

This study employs purposeful sampling. The selection of informants was based on their willingness to be interviewed and recorded as well as their availability. Reviewing the nature of their job specification and roles, it is considered that they are suitable participants who possess the relevant information and can provide meaningful responses to research questions. All participants have vast experience either in the academic world by working in the University environment or in corporate sectors. Altogether, 10 participants were interviewed for this study. Letters were sent and phone calls were made prior to the interview's sessions. Once the participant agreed, follow-up procedures were made, and interviews were conducted. Each interview session lasted between 1 – 1½ hours and was recorded with the participant's permission.

For the purposes of document analysis, documents were gathered from University constitutions, rules and regulations, annual reports, calendars, New Year messages from



Vice-chancellors, University websites and policies. The National Higher Education Strategic Plan and the National Higher Education Action Plan are readily available for access via the relevant websites.

Discussion and Comments

The results indicate that the key players have a good understanding of the meaning and philosophy behind University governance as well as critical success factors. The theoretical framework is based on relevant theories such as political theories, system theories and structural theories which were explored during the interviews. Despite constitutional arrangements, there is an accepted understanding that the government possesses a certain degree of monitoring functions over Universities, pointing to the fact that being a Government established organisation, Universities have an obligation to support Government aspirations. Nevertheless, there are needs for more responsive and autonomous practices. The framework and operational mechanisms are also provided, demanding a committed and dedicated governance team to ensure that University function support national education blueprint and relevant policies. The current performance of public Universities was the result of an effective combination of critical success factors. However, according to some critiques Universities as guardians of knowledge need to be given more autonomy.

We present our findings under the themes of ‘legal authority of university governance’, ‘university power’ and ‘critical success factors.’

Legal Authority of University Governance and Critical Success Factors

Based on interpretations, the understanding of the establishment of Universities and are strengthened by proper legal provisions through relevant constitutional arrangements, subsequent revisions of constitutions, board policies and relevant University policies. The idea of establishing Universities is tied up with expectations for Universities to meet the nation’s needs for human capital. The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015 – 2025 (Higher Education) provides the framework to ensure universities’ roles support national aspiration. In order to carry out University functions, a Vice-Chancellor is appointed and considered as the principal executive and academic officer of the University. Thus, the Vice-Chancellor must ensure that the provisions of the University constitution and statutes, acts and regulations are observed and implemented. The Vice-Chancellor also must exercise general supervision over the arrangements of instruction, research, finance, administration, welfare and discipline in the University. In sum, we can infer that the University is entrusted with a great responsibility to help national development and functions, as internal University functions align with national development. At the same time, students’ development must



inculcate the knowledge as well as attitudes required for developing professional careers and contributing to positive citizenship.

Public universities subscribe to the national agenda and strategic vision and mission towards the achievement of Vision 2020. The interviews indicate that despite the constitutional arrangements and subsequent revision towards an autonomous system, there is clear indication that the Government has a responsibility to monitor Universities. Based on documents analysis, we can say that public University constitutions are the legal basis for their establishment. In Malaysia, Universities are governed by Educations Acts, Universities and University Colleges Act, University Constitutions, Statutes, Rules and Regulations and Procedures. Each University Constitution begins with the provision for the incorporation and establishment of the University. Every University has its own constitution, stipulating certain powers and purposes of establishment as well as the appropriate framework for administrative affairs. The University Constitution describes the provisions for a proper governance framework and function of the University. A University constitution is regarded as a legal University document, which provides the basic definitions and purposes of the University including governing bodies.

Critical success factors are regarded as those variables which if implemented successfully will offer advantages to Universities and foster a more globally competitive environment. As one of the most important criteria, information can make a strong impact on University performance. Based on interviews, participants highlighted the importance of the right flow of information, the quality of information and the time taken to deliver the information. These factors affect the decision-making process and the commitment of those affected by the decisions. Communication is another factor that affects the success of Malaysian Universities. Once policies are created, they should be transmitted to the proper levels so that those involved in their implementation will be able to understand them. Various interpretations have been found among participants regarding this subject. Clear communication exists in certain Universities as claimed by several participants. However, shortfall in communication also exists in certain situations. For example, practice of strategic planning took a great deal of time from senior University management team, but whether it trickled down to implementers remained unknown. In many instances, it was assumed that implementers, especially academics were assumed to follow the policies because they translated into key performance indexes.

University Power and Governance Trust

A University is regarded as a corporate body. Hence, it can be assumed that it is a self-governing community following the definition of a University and laid down by the Constitution. For instance, general powers as stated under Section 3 of the Universiti Putra



Malaysia Constitution, state that the University shall have the power “to purchase any property, movable or immovable, and to take, accept and hold any such property which may become vested in it by virtue of any such purchase or by any exchange, grant, donation, lease, testamentary disposition or otherwise” (Universiti Putra Malaysia Constitution, 2010). In addition, a University is permitted “to sell, lease, exchange or otherwise dispose of any such property not inconsistent with any condition or restriction as may be imposed by the Constitution.”

Several powers are related to academic functions of Universities. These include the power to : provide courses of instruction, hold examinations, conduct research, confer degrees, diplomas and honorary degrees, grant certificates, recognise degrees and diplomas of other Institutions of higher learning, institute,; establish a University printing press, publish books, erect, equip and maintain libraries, laboratories, museums, lecture halls, halls of residence and other buildings and to institute and award fellowships or scholarships, exhibitions, bursaries, medals, prizes and other titles, distinctions, awards and other forms of assistance towards the advancement and dissemination of knowledge.

Based on some views, the power distribution in governance mechanism was quite ambiguous. This leads to differences in interpretation and understanding, which is acceptable he university itself is a place where paradigms are challenged, theories are refuted, and new knowledge is discovered. Nevertheless, e ambiguity does not hamper the governance process and the relationship between Universities and Board of Directors. The board plays a significant role in aligning University roles and functions consistent with government aspirations. Relationships built on trust between University communities with board members as well as the concept of shared governance practiced so far have been able to improve University performance (Pope, 2004). The roles of Board members are recognised and appreciated even though there are instances where Board members feel that top management of University teams must be more open to external criticism and suggestions. The Board plays a more pivotal role in the governance process especially with regards to University direction and issues surrounding graduate employability.

An issue regarding Board power was discovered. We cited a quote from a report by the Committee to Study, Review and Make Recommendations Concerning the Development and Direction of Higher Education in Malaysia (2006):

It is clear that the Board is vested with all powers of the University, which are not already expressly vested in any other authority, body or officer of the University. The vesting of the powers of the University is not only prescribed under the University Constitution but also under the subsidiary legislative instruments, namely, the Statutes, Rules and Regulations. Thus, where any



power of the University is expressly vested under any provision of the University Constitution or any of these instruments in any particular body, that power can only be exercised by that body and not by the Board. On the other hand, where any of the powers of the University are not expressly vested in any body or person whether under the University Constitution or otherwise, the Board will have the right to exercise such power.

(Report by the Committee to Study, Review and Make Recommendations Concerning the Development and Direction of Higher Education in Malaysia, 2006, p.59)

When linked with the issue of power for Board of directors, it was felt that in practice, the Board has less power and much of this power was executed or delegated to University Vice-Chancellors. The debates were about who has the power, the Board or the Vice-Chancellor. University constitutions have allocated powers to their Boards and regarded them as the highest authority in Universities. The issue regarding the Boards' present and University functions is limited to attending Board meetings or official functions such as University convocations which must be expanded beyond current structures covering other crucial areas. A bigger role should be given to Boards so that they can contribute more to Universities development. Indeed, university leadership, relationships and trust are remarkably like critical success factors.

In the governance process, the public Universities are significantly influenced by government policies, strategic plans and national aspirations with particular emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness. This is due to the increase in demand for accountability. Amendments to Universities and University Colleges Act in 1997 have provided a new emphasis on governance. Through these amendments, Universities are to be governed like business organisations, but must also maximise their ability to create not for profit benefits. They are expected to follow the business models of corporate governance.

The appointments of Vice-Chancellors, Deans and Heads of Department are more stringent and based on academic performance and the credential of candidates not only in the academic world, but also within the entrepreneurial setting. The Board has been asked to play a more significant and influential role in the development of strategic plans by providing more input through various relevant mechanisms. At the same time, Boards monitor and assess University progress in relation to Government policies, initiatives and strategies. Universities are expected to be forward-looking, have more viable functioning structures and a more responsive curriculum catering to the demands posed by the industrial sectors.



External governance relates Universities to various national policies, strategies and initiatives. Universities are given a certain degree of operational autonomy, but this comes with accountability measures. Universities as guardians of knowledge need to be given more freedom despite increase demand for accountability. Indeed, through relevant overseeing agencies, the Government monitors University performance and outcomes. Universities are expected to have a more responsive measure in addressing not only higher education issues, but also national and social issues. Public Universities have multiple functions and are expected to serve various purposes in the political life of ruling governments. To a certain extent, the education system maximises advantages which are beneficial to the local and national agenda (Lombardi et al., 2002).

Public Universities and their governing boards are regarded as political institutions. Policymaking is viewed as a political action, and members of public governing mechanisms structures are political actors, often seen as protecting the political interest of the ruling government. In a sense, many policies must consider the survival of the present ruling government, because the responsibility for the country's higher education lies in the hands of the Minister of Education by law. Elsewhere, governance practices are regarded as a result of conflicts. One example is the study conducted by Ordorika (2003) about politics in University governance in Mexican universities.

Representation in Governance Structure

One of the challenges regarding governance is representation. Many members of the Board of Directors are from outside the academic community. They represent the government, the community, the industrial sectors, the alumni and they are assumed to have the knowledge and experience to contribute to the Board. The arguments maintain that the core business of Universities is basically academia; therefore, it is felt that those who know most about the academic world should be given and have more representation, meaning that academics must have more representation in the governance process. Members appointed are assumed to have an interest in defending academic freedom and the pursuit of truth. In certain instances, academic activities may not be in tandem with the views and stands of the Government. Therefore, being members of the University governance mechanism, those appointed were expected to defend the ultimate pursuit of knowledge for the sake of knowledge.

We observed that the governance process in Universities works through functional representation which was legalised through constitutions. Appointments were made with reference to the provision provided by the law (University constitutions). Those appointed normally had a political inclination to ruling in government. They were either politicians or retired senior civil servants, having strong connections with the government. In Malaysia, despite the nature of governance state control of public Universities, key appointments are



still made by the Ministry of Education. The tendency is more towards encouraging institutional autonomy and policy pronouncements are guided by policy action in the form of a guide to good governance by Universities.

The understanding is that University governance can be considered as subscribing to a political system due to the existence of interest groups, conflicts, contested values, competing power and influence, negotiations and bargaining activities (Balridge, 1971, Soaib & Sufean, 2012). The issue of representation is stipulated in the constitution whereby certain members are representing specific parties in Universities. Wisdom and integrity as pointed out by several participants emerged as the two catalysts that can strengthen critical success factors to ensure the increased success of Malaysian public Universities.

Conclusion

Various critical success factors comprising of information, communication, governance board policies, individual board members and governance processes have been able to effectively enhance the performance of Malaysian public Universities. Malaysian higher education is guided by the National Philosophy of Education (NPE). Universities are established by relevant laws. Ultimately, Universities are expected to contribute to national development by providing quality academic programs relevant to current demands and needs. Despite constitutional arrangements provided by the constitutions, there is an accepted understanding that the government has a certain degree of control over Universities pointing to the fact that being government established organisations, Universities have an obligation to support Government aspirations.

In principle, those involved in governance have significant roles and responsibilities provided by University Constitutions while their understanding and interpretations are crucial for the fulfilment of policies (Keller, 2001; Farhani, 2013). In addition, academics participation also remains an integral part of formulating policies (Minor, 2004). Policies derived from governing activities have future implications for quality decisions, which eventually lead to improvement in action plans and a better understanding of governance. Improved governance framework through viable structures and practices give added value to policies developed to support shifts in higher education as stated in the education blueprint. niche areas of policy making practices can be developed and above all good governance has significant consequences for the sustainability of Universities (Minor, 2004).

There is also need for more responsive and autonomous governance mechanisms in steering universities. The emergence of the corporate model as the much-favoured mode for university governance in Malaysia has now become crucial. Above all, Malaysian public



Universities are on the right track to be more competitive in the global teaching and learning environment.



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