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Azilah Anis, Rafikul Islam, Nur Anisah Abdullah,

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# Challenges faced by Malaysian private HLIs in providing quality education: a thematic analysis

Malaysian  
private HLIs

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Azilah Anis

*Department of Business Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA,  
Puncak Alam, Malaysia*

Rafikul Islam

*Department of Business Administration, Kulliyah of Economics and  
Management Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia,  
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and*

Nur Anisah Abdullah

*Strathclyde Business School, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The paper aims to identify the emerging themes on the challenges faced by the Malaysian private higher learning institutions (HLIs) in the provision of providing quality education.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Semi-structured interviews were purposively conducted with 29 of the Malaysian private HLI internal and external stakeholders ranging from the relevant personnel of the institutions (the quality director, administrators and senior academics), regulatory agencies, prospective employer, students and parents. Thematic analysis was then applied to analyze the participants' responses in determining and clarifying the challenges faced by the Malaysian private HLIs in the issue of providing quality education.

**Findings** – Eight overarching themes were identified, namely, Academics, Facilities, Students, Programs and curriculum, Competition, Accreditation, Finance and Research. Academics represent the most frequent challenge raised by the participants, whereas Research emerged as the least mentioned challenge during the interview sessions.

**Research limitations/implications** – The present paper focused solely on Malaysian private HLIs, and thus, the findings may not be applicable to the foreign private HLIs that are operating in Malaysia as well as to the public HLIs.

**Originality/value** – The findings are expected to provide valuable guidelines to the Malaysian Private HLIs in areas where resources need to be critically disbursed. To the regulatory agencies and policy-makers, the findings could enlighten them on the difficulties faced by these privately funded institutions so that further policies can be designed and implemented to assist these institutions in their operations and long-term survival.

**Keywords** Challenges, Thematic analysis, Malaysian private higher learning institutions, Quality of education

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Specifically, the emergence of Malaysian private higher learning institutions (HLIs) in the late 1990s stems from two main factors. The first was seen as a complementary move to assist the public HLIs in their role as the nation's main education provider (Li, 2014). The increase in the nation's population paralleled a similar increase in the demand for tertiary education, which could not



be absorbed by the 20 public universities, 33 polytechnics and 91 community colleges. Thus, the responsibility of providing tertiary education is shared with private HLIs, comprising the 70 private universities (including Malaysian private universities and foreign branch campuses), 34 university colleges and 410 colleges in Malaysia ([Malaysia Education Blueprint \(2015/2025\)](#) (Higher Education). Second, the private HLIs emerged as a direct result of the enactment of the National Council on Higher Education Act 1996, the [Private Higher Educational Institutional Act \(1996\)](#) and the National Accreditation Board 1996. These three Acts were instrumental in establishing private HLIs as an important, alternative source of the nation's tertiary education ([Shin and Harman, 2009](#)).

Besides complementing the public HLIs in providing tertiary education to the public, private HLIs are also recognized as contributors to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and economic growth ([Arokiasamy, 2011](#); [Becket and Brookes, 2008](#); [Fahmi, 2006](#)). The nation has capitalized on the new private HLIs, garnering an estimated RM1.3bn in revenues to the national economy, derived significantly from the growing international student body ([Abu Bakar et al., 2009](#)). [Yen et al. \(2015\)](#) further predicted that these revenue contributions produce a 2 per cent rise in the near future.

The pertinent roles played by these private HLIs have provided the impetus for several studies on private HLIs in Malaysia. Some of the popular research areas included service quality ([Abdullah et al., 2015](#); [Chong and Ahmed, 2014](#); [Kong and Muthusamy, 2011](#)), especially from the students' point of view, as the main recipients of these educational services. Other related issues are the lecturers ([Long et al., 2014](#); [Arokiasamy, 2011](#); [Arokiasamy et al., 2009](#); [Arokiasamy and Ismail, 2007](#)), factors that influence student enrolment in private HLIs from both local ([Osman et al., 2013](#); [Hassan and Sherif, 2006](#)) and international students' perspectives ([Migin et al., 2015](#); [Padlee et al., 2010](#)), knowledge sharing ([Rahman et al., 2017](#); [Yuen et al., 2015](#); [Chin et al., 2014](#)) and others. Yet, few researchers ([Anis et al., 2014](#); [Tang and Hussin, 2011](#); [Anis and Islam, 2011](#); [Jaladin et al., 2010](#); [Fion, 2010, 2008](#); [Ahmad et al., 2007](#); [Sohail et al., 2006](#); [Sohail et al., 2003](#)) have attempted to investigate quality issues. Among these names, none investigated the challenges faced by the private HLIs, particularly Malaysian private HLIs, in the provision of quality education. Indeed, providing and maintaining quality has been acknowledged as one of the toughest challenges for HLIs worldwide to remain sustainable in a highly globalized environment ([Mohsin and Kamal, 2012](#); [Belle, 2009](#); [Eric, 2007](#); [Donald 2003](#)). For Malaysian private HLIs, providing and maintaining acceptable quality as required by the regulatory agencies namely, the MQA (Malaysian Qualification Agency) and MOHE (Ministry of Higher Education) appears even more challenging. They not only face stiff competition within the industry but are also struggling with limited resources in achieving the regulated quality standards ([Yaakob et al., 2009](#)).

This paper, thus, aims to discuss various challenges faced by the Malaysian Private HLIs in the provision of quality education from the perspectives of its internal and external stakeholders. The remaining parts of the paper proceed as follows: Section 2 will examine the challenges faced by private HLIs in providing quality education (LITERATURE REVIEW). Section 3 will explain the methods used in obtaining participant responses. The responses will then be elaborated in section 4 (RESULTS) and followed by Section 5 (DISCUSSION). The conclusion (Section 6) recapitulates the main findings of the present study.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 The education system in Malaysia

At present, public HLIs and private HLIs are the two types of institutions in the Malaysian tertiary education sector. Among the salient features of these institutions are their

regulation by the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act 1996, the National Council on Higher Education Act 1996 as well as the National Accreditation Board Act 1996, which was later subsumed by the Malaysian Qualification Agency Act, 2007. Additionally, of particular significance is the establishment of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in 2004, an important milestone in Malaysian higher education ([www.malaysiastudyguide.com](http://www.malaysiastudyguide.com)). Public institutions HLIs, also known as state funded HLIs, comprise the various universities, polytechnics and community colleges that are fully reliant on government funding.

In contrast, a private HLI is “an educational institution, including University or University College or a foreign branch campus, approved and registered under this Act, which is not maintained or established by the government” (Malaysian Private Higher Learning Educational Institutions Act 1996, Act 555, page 12). In essence, the Act describes private HLIs in Malaysia as established companies governed by the Companies Act, 1965 and thus, operating as business oriented organizations that aim for profit and generally funded by private entities (Sivalingam, 2006). These private HLIs are also required to collaborate with the MOHE to drive the government’s mission in transforming Malaysia into Asia’s center of educational excellence by 2020 (Grapragasem *et al.*, 2014). Several initiatives were also established by the Malaysian government in tandem with this national aspiration. Among others, the formation of Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) in 2005, the establishment of the Education National Key Economic Area (NKEA) in 2010 as well as the launch of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) in 2013. These initiatives acknowledged private HLIs as indispensable partners in promoting Malaysia as a quality education hub in the Asian region.

### *2.2 Studies on private higher learning institutions in Malaysia*

There is an increasing trend to study matters related to quality education since 2008 in private HLIs in Malaysia. This might be attributed to the awareness of the private HLIs in Malaysia on the importance of providing quality education so that they remain sustainable in the market place.

While numerous issues have been highlighted and measured with regard to quality education in private HLIs in Malaysia, one that gained the attention of previous researchers is that of service quality (Abdullah *et al.*, 2015; Ansary *et al.*, 2014; Chong and Ahmed, 2014; Husain *et al.*, 2009; Kong and Muthusamy, 2011; Kwek *et al.*, 2010). The researchers were also inclined to measure the level of satisfaction among students as evidenced from the works of Yusoff *et al.* (2015), Long *et al.* (2014), Seng (2013) as well as Zakaria and Yusoff (2011). It is also observed that business process reengineering (Ahmad *et al.*, 2007) and practical aptitude (Singh *et al.*, 2010) are some of the issues pertaining to quality education in private HLIs in Malaysia that are rarely discussed.

With respect to the respondents, majority of the studies utilized either local or international students as their main source. Feedback from the management was only obtained in studies conducted by Ahmad *et al.* (2007) and Fion (2008, 2010). Only few researchers such as Tang and Hussin (2011) managed to obtain the inputs from multiple groups of stakeholders of HLIs. Overall, the majority of the studies related to quality education in private HLIs in Malaysia measured the service quality of the institution followed by evaluation of student satisfaction.

### *2.3 Conceptual framework*

This study adopted the absence of problems model, one of seven quality education model introduced by Cheng and Tam in 1997. According to Cheng and Tam (1997), quality of

education exists at a higher level with the absence of problems and troubles. This model is proposed as it is often easier to recognize problems in an educational institution rather than to identify its quality. This is because appropriate indicators and measurement techniques that can provide concrete evidence of quality are normally difficult to obtain (Cameron, 1984), thus encouraging an educational institution to look into their problems and rectifying them, rather than focusing on quality programs.

The absence of problems model assumes that if there is an absence of problems, troubles, defects, weakness, difficulties and dysfunctions in an educational institution, the institution is perceived to have a high standard of quality education (Cheng and Tam, 1997). Problems occur when some aspects of quality education are lacking. As such, if no apparent problems arise in the educational institution, then it is assumed that the operations of the institution can run smoothly, which in turn, allows its educational objectives to be achieved easily. This model also demands for problems and defects of an educational institution to be carefully and thoroughly analyzed so that strategies for improvement can be accurately identified. This model is useful when the criteria for quality education are unclear but strategies for improvement are needed.

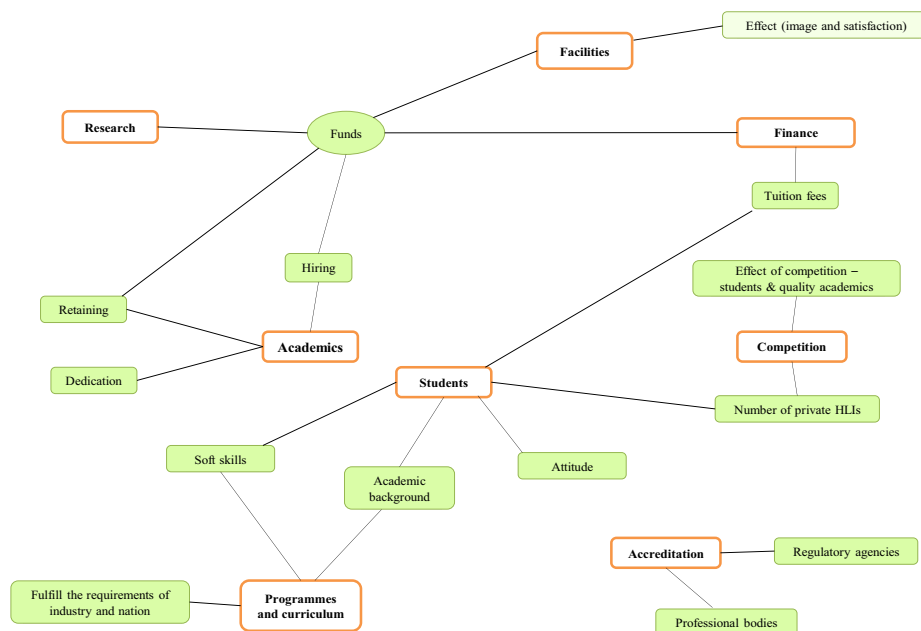
The absence of problem model is applicable to this present study as it fulfils two important criteria highlighted by Cheng and Tam (1997). First, because of unavailable consensus for criteria of quality education as the concept of quality education is rather vague and controversial in research and policy discussion. As such, each person will define or perceive quality education differently, which in turn produces various indicators to describe quality education (Tang and Hussin, 2011; Waaty, 2005; Harvey and Green, 1993).

Second, the model is also related to Cheng and Tam (1997) who place considerable emphasis on analyzing the problems of educational institutions as a determinant of effective strategies for improvement. In this light, the challenges faced by the Malaysian Private HLIs in the provision of quality education are identified and analyzed. The identified challenges for the present study are illustrated in the form of thematic mapping as presented in Figure 1.

#### *2.4 Challenges in providing quality education in higher learning institutions*

One of the critical challenges facing private HLIs is to provide quality education in serving their students and the public and its provision has been the subject of much research in recent years. The literature shows that quality education strategy has been practiced by HLIs worldwide and has influenced the extent to which they profit and remain sustainable. (Li, 2014; Haider, 2008). It has further emphasized that their sustainability is highly dependent on their ability to provide quality education and this serves as a key success factor (Aly *et al.*, 2014; Belle, 2009; Cornuel, 2007; Donald, 2003). While there is growing consensus that quality education is critically important, the challenges encountered in efforts to maximize quality by the HLIs and private HLIs in Malaysia, remains unclear (Phin, 2015; Aly *et al.*, 2014; Haider, 2008). The literature has highlighted the importance of quality education strategies, but until recently, has neglected the challenges faced by these institutions. To guarantee the success of their programs, it is imperative that the practitioners identify and consider these challenges through good quality planning. (Terry and Stanley, 2002). Once the challenges are critically analyzed, this should ensure that improved and informed strategies can be provided (Cheng and Tam, 1997). Accordingly, various researchers have taken steps to explain the challenges faced by HLIs, particularly the private HLIs, in the provision of quality education as discussed in the following paragraph.

Accreditation poses as one of the main challenges in delivering quality education, as evidenced from the work of Baumgardt and Lekhetho (2013) who examined the views of



**Figure 1.**  
Thematic mapping  
for the challenges and  
Sub-challenges

stakeholders in South African private HLIs. An initial online survey as well as the mixed method design was used to obtain data from authorized personnel of professional accreditation bodies, accreditation agencies and members of Skills Universe Forum. Next, focus group discussions were conducted with the authorized personnel of private HLIs, specifically those who are responsible for the institution's accreditation activities. The findings suggest that quality assurance requires proper accreditation mechanisms and the authors spell out the need for other stakeholder groups to be continuously engaged in the accreditation process so that future regulatory policies by authorities can be developed in an informed and complementary manner.

Similarly, [Puteh et al. \(2009\)](#) confirmed accreditation as a challenge in delivering quality education through the verified views of internal and external assessors who claimed that Malaysian HLIs do not measure up to the standards of international competitors. For example, they observed the heavy demands placed on the Faculty of Electrical Engineering in meeting the requirements of national accreditation (MQA) and engineering professional bodies (Engineering Accreditation Council). Moreover, academics had to adapt to constant changes in the accreditation process as well as the conflicting requirements between national and professional bodies. The accreditation process also required academics to compile various related documents, thus consuming much of their time.

Further, [Mpezamihigo \(2012\)](#) shared his personal experience as the Vice Rector of academic affairs in a private Islamic university in Uganda to describe the challenges faced. The challenges cited include the governance of the private HLIs, heavy academic teaching workloads, research activities, programs and curriculum as well as facilities, particularly ICT infrastructure. [Mpezamihigo \(2012\)](#) also validated university financing as an important predictor for the successful provision of private university education, followed by the university's governance and management.

Prior researchers such as [Altbach and Levy \(2005\)](#), [Haider \(2008\)](#) and [Oketch \(2003\)](#) have included quality as one of their identified challenges. [Oketch \(2003\)](#), for instance, posited the quality of students as a challenge, as most private HLI students in Kenya possessed lesser academic qualifications compared to their public HLI counterparts. This is compounded by the changing entry requirements stipulated by the government that inadvertently impacts the quality of graduates produced. However, the lower entry requirements have resulted in higher student numbers for these private HLIs.

In contrast, [Altbach and Levy \(2005\)](#) focused on the quality of academics in their discussion. To ensure that quality education is provided, it is vital that the standard of teaching, admission and infrastructure must also be of high quality and maintained. Other challenges highlighted include the relevance of national and international accreditation bodies in ensuring high standards of quality education.

Consistent with this view, [Haider \(2008\)](#) also verified the quality challenge as the quality of academics. The author cites the faculty improvement programs undertaken in Pakistan and other developing South Asian countries and the substantial amount of funds invested. Academics benefit from such practices, as they not only keep abreast with the latest developments, are active in research and are able to network with experts within their subject area and related fields.

### 3. Research methodology

This study used mainly qualitative methods. The qualitative approach was imperative to gather initial knowledge, particularly in identifying the specific challenges faced by the Malaysian Private HLIs in the provision of quality education. This approach was deemed appropriate for the exploratory research in this study and in exploring the under-phenomenon ([Creswell, 2014](#); [Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011](#); [Collins et al., 2006](#)). Experts were solicited to provide opinions on quality education with regard to the issues they considered to be challenging.

The challenges were obtained from the 29 respondents. These respondents were carefully selected through purposive sampling and comprised the stakeholders of Malaysian Private HLIs ranging from the regulatory authorities of higher education, that is, MQA and MOHE, relevant personnel in Malaysian Private HLIs (the quality directors, administrators and academics), regulatory agencies, prospective employers, parents, students and a relevant member of NAPEI (National Association Private Educational Provider) ([Tang and Hussin, 2011](#); [Arokiasamy, 2011](#)). For the Malaysian Private HLIs, only the institutions rated in SETARA 2011 were selected, as these institutions had taken several initiatives to overcome difficulties in providing quality education, thus achieving a Tier 4 and 5 rating in the exercise. Their ability to improve and maintain their performance in SETARA 2011 establishes their capacity for responding to the challenges of providing quality education.

Interviews with different groups of stakeholders for Malaysian Private HLIs were conducted so that multiple perspectives on the challenges in providing quality education can be identified and clarified. The diverse responses of the various stakeholders resulted in strengthening the explanations of the results of the study. Refer to [Table I](#) for the distribution of stakeholders.

The majority of the respondents comprise personnel holding top and middle management positions in Malaysian Private HLIs. This group was selected, as they are the responsible parties in the education system process, with direct involvement in providing quality education and thus the most qualified to discuss the challenges ([Sahin, 2009](#)). [Table II](#) provides information about the Malaysian Private HLI respondents.

Table II shows that the highest officer from the Quality Assurance Department, that is, the Director or Head, form the biggest percentage as they are heavily engaged with their institution's quality efforts. Also, they play a major role as the middle person between the institutions, the Malaysian tertiary education regulatory agencies as well as professional bodies. Table III provides detailed information on participant profiles.

The participant responses were collected through in-depth semi structured interviews. Overall, the average time for each interview session lasted about 35 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded except for one participant who disallowed recording. Notes were taken for this participant instead. In the interview sessions, participants were requested to respond to the following questions:

- Q1. From your experience as a regulator/quality director/academic/administrator/prospective employer/parent/student: can you identify the challenges faced by the Malaysian Private HLIs in providing quality education?
- Q2. Can you elaborate on the challenges that you have previously identified?

Probing questions were also posed whenever appropriate during the interview sessions to obtain in-depth understanding of the responses. The participant responses were immediately transcribed after each interview session.

Data from the interview sessions was then analyzed via thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is utilized, as it allowed themes that are related to the problem to be captured and as they represented some levels of patterned responses or meaning within the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2012). These six stages were also applied in the present study because of their wide application in various contexts including in HLIs as found in Kirkwood and Price (2014), Hemmings *et al.* (2013) and Schroeder *et al.* (2010). The qualitative data analysis software named *Atlas.ti* was employed to facilitate the analysis process. In particular, the current study applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis in exploring

Type of stakeholders for Malaysian Private HLIs	Frequency	(%)
The institution: quality director, administrators and academics	16	55.17
Regulatory agencies	3	10.34
Parents	3	10.34
Prospective employer	3	10.34
Students	3	10.34
Relevant member of NAPEI	1	3.47
Total	29	100

**Table I.**  
Distribution of stakeholders

Item	Frequency	(%)
<i>Types of respondents in Private HLIs</i>		
Quality director	8	50.0
Administrators	6	37.5
Academics	2	12.5
Total	29	100

**Table II.**  
Information on Malaysian private HLI respondents



QAE 26,3	Type of stakeholder	Position	Gender	Race	Age (years)	Education level	Years of service
<b>356</b>	Malaysian Private HLIs – Quality Assurance Department	Senior Executive (R1)	Female	Malay	21-30	Bachelor	4
		Quality Director (R15)	Female	Malay	41-50	Master	6
		Quality Director (R5)	Female	Malay	51≥	Professional	8
		Senior Manager (R4)	Female	Malay	41-50	Bachelor	17
		Quality Director (R13)	Male	Malay	51≥	PhD	4
		Quality Director (R8)	Male	Malay	51≥	PhD	8
		Quality Director (R11)	Male	Indian	31-40	Master	15
		Senior Executive (R3)	Male	Malay	21-30	Bachelor	2
	Malaysian Private HLIs – Administrators	Dean of a faculty (R18)	Male	Malay	41-50	PhD	2
		Dean of a faculty (R16)	Male	Malay	51≥	Master	6
		Admission & Record Manager (R17)	Female	Malay	31-40	Bachelor	11
		Group Marketing Director (R19)	Male	Malay	41-50	Master	5
		Deputy Dean for R&D and post graduate program (R9)	Male	Chinese	51≥	PhD	7
		VC for Research & Commercialization (R10)	Male	Chinese	51≥	PhD	5
	Malaysian Private HLIs – Academics	Senior Lecturer (R21)	Female	Indian	31-40	PhD	10
		Senior Lecturer (R24)	Male	Malay	51≥	Master	5
	Government Agencies	Principal Senior Assistant Director: Govt. Agency 1 (R2)	Female	Malay	31-40	Master	11
		Director: Govt. Agency 2 (R12)	Male	Malay	41-50	Master	10
		Director: Govt. Agency 1 (R7)	Male	Malay	31-40	Master	12
	Prospective employer	CEO for productivity corporation (R22)	Male	Malay	51≥	Master	3
		CEO of a SME (R23)	Male	Malay	51≥	Bachelor	19
		General Manager for Research and Development of a private organization (R26)	Female	Chinese	51≥	PhD	3
	Student	Student Bachelor (R25)	Male	Chinese	21-30	STPM	
	Student Master (R29)	Female	Indian	31-40	Bachelor		
	Student PhD (R27)	Male	Others	41-50	Masters		
Parent	Parent 1 (R14)	Male	Malay	51≥	Master		
	Parent 2 (R20)	Male	Malay	51≥	Master		
	Parent 3 (R28)	Male	Others	51≥	Masters		
Non-Profit Organization that related to Malaysian private education	President (R6)	Male	Indian	51≥	Master	30	

**Table III.**  
Detailed information on participant profiles

the challenges and sub-challenges faced by the Malaysian Private HLIs in providing quality education. Details of the six phases are as follows:

- (1) Phase 1: familiarizing yourself with your data.

Familiarization of the data for this study is achieved through repetitive reading of the 29 participants' transcriptions.

- (2) Phase 2: generating initial coding.

Initial coding is systematically carried out by the researcher which resulted in generating 135 codes from the entire data set.

- (3) Phase 3: searching for themes.

Codes were arranged and sorted into potential themes. Then, all related coded data was classified within the identified themes so that overarching themes could be formed. At this phase, the 135 codes that were initially identified in phase two were classified into 21 potential themes (refer to [Table IV](#) for the 21 initial themes).

- (4) Phase 4: reviewing themes.

Themes that were identified in phase three were reviewed and revised. This phase required a process of reviewing and refining a set of potential themes in which some of the potential themes are combined, while others are expanded or discarded. The purpose is to obtain meaningful themes and sub-themes which accurately describes the data set.

For this study, all the 21 potential themes that were identified in Phase 3 were rigorously reviewed and revised. The process of combining, expanding and discarding, has reduced the 21 potential themes to eight relevant identified themes as shown in [Table IV](#). The identified themes and sub-themes of the present study, namely, the challenges and sub-challenges are also depicted in [Table V](#). Thematic mapping that illustrates the structure of the final

The 19 initial themes	The final identified eight themes
Academics	Academics
Accreditation	Accreditation
Balance between profit and quality	Competition
Branding	Facilities
Competition	Finance
Employee	Program
Entry requirements	Student
Facilities	Research
Finance	
Industry perception	
Islamic values	
Ministry	
Monitoring	
Parents	
People awareness	
Programme	
Research	
Students	
Student finance	

**Table IV.**  
The initial and final identified themes

QAE 26,3	The final theme	Sub themes
<b>358</b>	Academics	Hiring Retention Dedication
	Accreditation	Regulatory agencies Professional bodies
	Competition	Number of competitors Students Staff: hiring and retention
	Facilities	Big investment: Physical, non-physical facilities and maintenance Satisfaction and perceptions
	Finance	Cost of operating and setup Tuition fees
	Programmes	Students development Relevant to the industry's and nation's needs
	Research	Funds
	Students	Academic background Basic skills

**Table V.**  
Themes and  
Sub-themes

identified themes and its corresponding sub-themes for the present study was also constructed in this phase (Figure 1).

(5) Phase 5: defining and naming themes.

At this stage, the eight identified themes were defined and named as presented in Table VI. The process of defining and naming the themes is guided by the themes (challenges) and sub-themes (sub-challenges) that were identified in Phase 4.

(6) Phase 6: producing the reports.

This phase entails the final analysis and write-up report for the eight identified themes.

In the following section, the challenges and its corresponding sub-challenges is described together with verbatim tape scripts of the participants.

#### 4. Results

Data analysis of the previous section has contributed to the identification and exploration of eight challenges namely; *Academics, Facilities, Students, Programs and curriculum, Competition, Accreditation, Finance* and finally *Research*.

Themes	Definition
Academics	Hiring and retaining dedicated academics
Accreditation	Complying with rules and regulations of regulatory agencies and professional bodies
Competition	Gaining competitive advantage in a highly competitive environment
Facilities	Providing facilities to ensure a delivery of quality education
Finance	Establishing financial capabilities for the institution's self-sustainability
Programs and curriculum	Offering programs and curriculum that are able to develop the students and remain continuously relevant to the needs of industry and the nation
Research	Cultivating a research culture among academics
Students	Molding and transforming students with poor academic backgrounds and low soft skills

**Table VI.**  
Challenges and its  
definition

#### 4.1 Academics

*Academics* obtained the highest number of occurrences during the interview sessions. This might be attributed to their prominent role in delivering knowledge and skills as well as imparting specific values to the students. The following is an example of the participants' concerns:

The challenge is how to control your staff both academics and non-academics staff. But the most important is the academic staff as our business is education. So, the mechanism to deliver is the lecture, the main tool is the lecturer. (R13)

A variety of perspectives were obtained about *Academics* in Malaysian Private HLIs and can be grouped into three main categories, which are hiring, retaining and dedication. The challenge of hiring qualified candidates and retaining existing academics accrues from the high salary and attractive benefits demanded by both parties. It is hard to meet the prospective and existing academics' demand because of the financial constraints faced by the Malaysian Private HLIs that operate as private fund-generated institutions. An attractive remuneration package is a central discussion in hiring *Academics* particularly in bringing in qualified candidates with substantial industrial background and possessing PhD qualifications to teach critical programs such as engineering and medical programs. The participants' complaints on this are recorded below:

The experience, I think the only challenge may be in terms of benefit and salary. Because of course, the very experienced may demand more. So, probably that is only the challenge. (R8)

We are facing a problem especially in critical areas such as engineering and law because they are practicing professionals, and they earn much higher. (R4)

So, it is very difficult for us to get PhD candidates but there is a clause saying that you must have a certain number which of course we hire them, certain number that we wanted, but the things is we need more. (R11)

With respect to retaining *Academics*, sometimes the salary offered by one Malaysian Private HLIs is comparable to the other Malaysian Private HLIs or probably higher than public HLIs. However, other attractive benefits offered by the other institutions, particularly public HLIs, indirectly act as a push factor for the *Academics* to leave:

Like us, as a private HLI, to sustain the good lecturers is a bit difficult because in public HLIs, even though the salary is a little bit lower for the same position but there are a lot more perks from the public HLIs. With sabbatical, many research grants and lower workload. (R4)

Dedicated *Academics* is another issue highlighted by the participants. Malaysian Private HLIs require dedicated *Academics* because of the average or below average academic performance of their students. As such, *Academics* are expected to put in extra hours for guiding the students by continuously conducting coaching, mentoring, remedial classes and other related academic activities for students to succeed. As a result, student failure rate can be reduced and this will positively impact the institution's finances. Student numbers are crucial as some of the Malaysian Private HLIs are heavily dependent on student fees for their continued survival and sustainability. The importance of dedicated *Academics* and the consequences is evidenced from R16's excerpt below:

If we don't do that, so chances are a lot of students are going to fail. So when they fail is going to affect us again in the sense that most of these people are financing their education by PTPTN loans (government loan for Malaysian students). (R16)

4.2 Facilities

*Facilities* is the second challenge that gained the participants' attention during the interview sessions. As a private based institution, funding issues represent one of the major obstacles in providing facilities, particularly to their students. This obstacle is not only highlighted by the internal stakeholders who directly benefit from the provision of facilities, but also by the external stakeholders such as regulatory agencies and prospective employers. The employers' concern is also reflected in institutions offering science and technology programs, as these programs require scientific and sophisticated tools that need huge amounts of investment:

Their infrastructure is not as good as public HLIs. Honestly, they don't have sufficient funds. They require big funds especially for technical subjects [. . .]. I doubt if they have very complete full facilities, I don't think so. (R23)

The huge investments required for *Facilities* is illustrated by the information provided in Figure 2 below. Huge funds are required in preparing internet access, hostels as well as books and journals which were specifically mentioned by the participants. Classes as well as teaching and learning facilities as observed by four participants, also demand substantial fund allocations.

Apart from physical and non-physical facilities, huge spending is required for their maintenance. This is particularly for institutions that have old campuses as well as institutions that offer science and technology programs. Allocation from the annual budget has to be provided for maintaining and upgrading buildings, laboratory equipment, machines as well as tools for the teaching and learning process:

Some of our campuses are very old already. So the problem related to the facilities is the age of campuses. We also have equipment at hostels that need to be maintained and upgraded. Facilities also included maintenance of facilities and I think in terms of lab equipment too. (R8)

Besides being perceived as vital in ensuring the delivery of quality education, the participants also stressed the importance of *Facilities* with regard to the institution's image and student satisfaction. The *Facilities* provided can hugely influence parents' and students' perceptions towards a particular institution and developing a strong image and brand will invariably attract a pool of potential students:

For example, we don't have a swimming pool compared to the other universities; we don't have a futsal court or whatever inside. So these are the things that are our constraints, I would say not proper, those facilities that attract certain people to come. (R11)

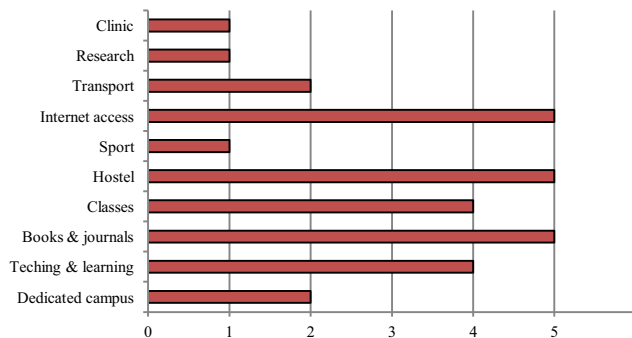


Figure 2.  
Types of facility

*Facilities* is also seen as one of the essential elements that contribute to student satisfaction at Malaysian Private HLIs. Generally, students have to pay slightly higher if they choose to pursue their studies at private HLIs. Although the fees across Malaysian Private HLIs vary depending on the subject area and institution, it is still considered costly compared to the fees charged by the public HLIs. As a result, parents and students anticipate the best services, including the provision of maximal *Facilities*, as a return on their investment:

The students that are studying here, logically they can talk, they can see and they can analyze. Although they are not paying because they got the PTPTN but today their mind-set is they are paying. And they expect some returns, so the facilities should be there. (R24)

#### 4.3 Students

*Students*, as the by-products of Malaysian Private HLIs, are perceived as another challenge. The theme emerged as the participants realized that the students in Malaysian Private HLIs are lacking in essential qualities namely; academic background, basic skills and attitudes. The common view voiced about *Students* in Malaysian Private HLIs was centered on their poor academic qualifications, often considered as average or below average. Nevertheless, some claimed that the students' academic qualifications is not a major issue as it has been clearly prescribed as the entry requirement by the ministry. The real challenge to the institutions is to mold as well as transform these average and below average students into employable graduates:

No doubt, our students' background their SPM or STPM is not really good. If they are cream students then they will go to the public HLIs, those who are not good, they will throw them to us, the private HLIs [. . .]. The real challenge is how to mold these students from zero to hero because, what we are getting here most of them are SPM with three credits of C, D and E. (R18)

Lack of basic soft skills, that is, language skills, particularly English, communication and thinking skills is another issue of concern amongst the participants though these elements are not captured in the students' academic transcripts. Participants also found that some of the students do not perform during their bachelor degree courses because they do not possess the necessary thinking skills such as critical and analytical skills though they were categorized as good students at school. Complaints from employers on the students' soft skills, particularly their poor communication and thinking skills, underlie greater concerns:

I think they are not forthcoming you know, they are not out spoken enough, they are not thinking out of the box and they are very stereotyped. (R23)

Not having the right attitude is another quality shared by some of the participants. One obvious example is the preference to be spoon-fed because of their low academic qualifications. Additionally, spoon-feeding is considered the norm by the students as they presume that the high fees imposed by the institutions entitle them to the best services. Reluctance to learn beyond the subject is another student attitude as their main focus is to obtain good grades and pass the examination. It is quite difficult to alter the students' attitudes towards knowledge exploration as they had been trained for years (i.e. from primary to secondary school) to be exam-oriented. This deep-rooted exam-oriented attitude can be seen as a contributing factor to the lack of soft skills, particularly the students' thinking skills as previously highlighted:

The attitude of our university students is 'Tell me about what come out in the exams, that's all I want to know'. So, this attitude comes from the primary, secondary school and not from university anymore. When they come to university, you can't even change it anymore. For the university it's difficult [ . . . ] when you have already molded some students until the age of 17 and you expect them to change after that, is very difficult. (R21)

#### 4.4 *Programs and curriculum*

*Programs and curriculum* is another important challenge highlighted by 11 participants during the interview sessions. In essence, two main ideas were digested from the participants' feedback. First, the potential of the *Programs and curriculum* to develop and prepare the students for their future career and second, the extent to which the *Programs and curriculum* offered by the Malaysian Private HLIs are able to fulfil the requirements of the industry and needs of the nation:

I am not very sure with the most suitable curriculum that should be provided by the private HLIs to the students. I look into the subject that are offered to us, I am not very sure why they exist. We are not really sure if the subjects are really important or necessary to be taught. Meaning, it is a challenge for the private HLIs to provide relevant curriculum and continuously ensure that the curriculum is really required by the nation, industry as well as students who take these subjects. (R27)

In developing the students, *Programs and curriculum* should be critically examined so that two main qualities are developed in the students. First, the *Programs and curriculum* should facilitate the students to acquire the relevant knowledge and skills in their area of studies. This is an important pre-requirement from prospective employers. Second, the *Programs and curriculum* should also develop the necessary soft skills i.e. communication and thinking skills, as these will complement the technical knowledge and skills that the students have acquired. Having adequate knowledge and skills as well as possessing the necessary soft skills will enable students to adapt faster in a competitive and challenging working environment:

Another thing is how to produce an adaptable student? And this is very much related with the output based of the program. So for me that is one of the issues that has to be seriously looked into and solved by the Malaysian Private HLIs. (R7)

The function of *Programs and curriculum* in fulfilling the requirements and needs of the industry and nation is even more challenging for Malaysian Private HLIs. The *Programs and curriculum* are not only vehicles for producing graduates and earning profit but most critically, to produce human capital equipped with specific characteristics consistent with the requirements of industry and the nation. Despite various efforts such as conducting curriculum reviews and obtaining accreditation of professional bodies, there is still a mismatch between the products of Malaysian Private HLIs and the industry's demands. From the participants' feedback, the mismatch can be attributed to two important factors. Firstly, it is because of the dynamic nature of the industry and the capacity of Malaysian Private HLIs to produce graduates in related fields, which often takes three years. Within three years, unpredictable changes can occur that might affect the industry's and nation's requirements. Secondly, program selection by students and parents are probably shaped by lower academic fees. This has led to overproduction of graduates in certain areas such as business and accounting compared to the sciences and technology related programs which are more expensive, but also highly demanded by industry and the nation:

Everybody is talking about producing students that is not accepted by the industry. Personally, it is impossible for the curriculum itself to cope with the constant changes that occur in the industry. (R7)

So we have been telling the parents and the applicants students 'You should consider if you are in science stream, you should sign up for engineering' as the program is more demanded by the industry, but they refused. Of course, the government hopes that we can play a role in helping the country to develop all the manpower required and we wish to do this but the problem is the input side to the university which we cannot control, so that's the challenge. (R10)

#### 4.5 Competition

*Competition* is another challenge faced by the Malaysian Private HLIs in providing quality education. The two main emerging ideas from the participants' responses are namely, the main cause of *Competition*, being the number of private HLIs and secondly, the effects of *Competition*. The majority of the participants agreed that the huge numbers of private HLIs was the main contributor of *Competition*. Their views can be illustrated by the current number of private HLIs as to date, there are 70 private universities, 34 university colleges and 410 colleges in Malaysia ([Malaysia Education Blueprint\(2015/2025\)](#) (Higher Education):

Another one is competition; this is our greatest challenge as there are many universities that we have to compete with. We also have foreign universities that have established with their world ranking in our country. This is a challenge for us. (R18)

*Competition* has forced Malaysian Private HLIs to compete specifically in two main areas; firstly competing in obtaining quality academics to ensure that quality education is delivered. Secondly, *Competition* has forced Malaysian Private HLIs to obtain a continuous stream of students as it will guarantee the sustainability of the institutions:

Challenge in getting quality students and quality lecturers because of the competition. (R4)

In terms of academics, *Competition* has created obstacles for Malaysian Private HLIs in hiring and retaining quality academics, as more attractive remuneration packages in terms of salary and benefits are offered by the private HLIs. Getting a continuous stream of students is another consequence commonly raised amongst the participants. For private HLIs, greater student enrolment numbers will result in bigger incoming funds which will be used to cover the institution's operating costs:

The challenge is the student number because we are going into very big investments and we need more students to survive. We need more students because we don't get any funding from any sources except from the students. (R6)

#### 4.6 Accreditation

The participants focused on the two major areas in *Accreditation* which are obtaining accreditation from Malaysian regulatory agencies and getting accredited by the professional bodies. Despite their misgivings on the procedures and documentations, Malaysian Private HLIs have to comply with the requirements of government accreditation, which act as a national measure that the institutions have the capacity to provide the stipulated standard of quality education:



Some of them even said that our requirements are too high, some said that the requirements stated in COPPA are too many. So you have to fulfil them because one of the yardsticks in higher education is through MQA accreditation. So, probably a challenge for them is to obtain MQA accreditation based on the requirements set. (R7)

Acquiring accreditation from professional bodies is not as critical as obtaining accreditation from the regulatory agencies. However, programs such as engineering and medicine are obliged to obtain accreditation and recognition from the respective professional bodies. The recognition from professional bodies will not only be utilized as a marketing tool but most importantly, to guarantee that students of medicine and engineering programs satisfy the minimum requirements for them to be registered with the Board of Engineers and Malaysian Medical Council, respectively. As such, frequent visits will be conducted by the professional bodies to confirm that the institution's curriculum and programs are in-line with the latest industry trends, and that they fulfil the prescribed requirements:

For Engineering Accreditation Council (EAC), currently we only get a maximum of 3 years. Some of the programs get only 1 year. So when you get one year accreditation, it means every year you will have an accreditation exercise [...] so you have to work extra hard for the engineering program. (R4)

#### 4.7 Finance

Participants' responses ranked *Finance* second last on the list of challenges, indicating that the *Finance* challenge did not concern the participants much. This may be attributed to existence of a multitude of private HLIs in the country, making the participants somewhat blasé about the nature of self-funded institutions. Nonetheless, two main participant views were captured during the interview sessions pertaining to this challenge. First, the start-up and operating costs, and second, the student fees as the main source of income to Malaysian Private HLIs. High stakeholder expectations require Malaysian Private HLIs to invest millions for the institution to be established, particularly in preparing its infrastructure and facilities. However, the start-up costs depend on the size of the institution that range from small, medium to large. On top of start-up costs, they incur huge operating expenditure especially in paying staff salaries and maintenance of facilities:

As the years pass, the operation cost increases. Majority of the cost covers the staff salary, I think more than 50 per cent goes to the staff, as they matured and the equipment expenditure also increases every year. So, of course we need more money to maintain these operations. (R8)

Notably, tuition fees charged by the Malaysian Private HLIs is another *Finance* issue as the institutions depend on these fees for their operating costs. The fees cannot be too high as it will deter prospective students. Yet, it cannot be too low as the institution will then, not have adequate funds to run their business and provide high quality services. Nonetheless, the government's intervention in the tuition fees of Malaysian Private HLIs caused dissatisfaction to some of the participants. This is because, in some circumstances, the tuition fees approved by the government were insufficient to cover the costs invested in preparing the infrastructure and facilities for the students:

Why the government want to regulate the fees? If my fee is very high the students don't come, so I know what to do. So, why the ministry must approve the fees charged to the students? (R6)

On the other hand as emphasized by *R12* as an authority in the regulatory agency, the intervention is needed to ensure that the tuition fees are affordable and to ensure tertiary education access for everyone. This reflects the National Higher Education Strategic Plan's aim to place a specific percentage of young adults aged between 17-23 years in higher education institutions.

#### 4.8 Research

Only a small number of those interviews suggested *Research* as a challenge in providing quality education by Malaysian Private HLIs. Despite its lack of prominence in the interview data, *Research* is still important particularly for private HLIs with university status as the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has introduced a measurement rating called MyRA (Malaysian Research Assessment), for assessing research activities of HLIs in Malaysia. A focus on research will not only build the capabilities and reputation of the academics but also serve as another marketing strategy to prove their stature as a quality education provider. However, funding is a challenge experienced by most of the Malaysian Private HLIs intending to focus on research. Obviously, they have to reduce the academics' teaching workload so that they have time for research. On the other hand, as a self-funded institution, the lecturer to student ratio has to be effectively managed for them to be cost-effective:

If we want to reduce teaching work load we have to increase teaching staff or reduce the students. In order to do that we need more funds. That is why I said the challenge is research because the staffs do not have time to do research because of the high teaching loads, normally about 20 contact hours per week and sometimes can go up to 25. I think with this teaching load they don't have time to do research and also consultancy. So, that is the main challenge at the moment because student-staff ratio has to be maintained. That is why it still comes back to the issue of funding. (R8)

### 5. Discussions

The challenge *Academics*, seems to be consistent with the findings of other researchers who also identified *Academics* as one of the main challenges faced by HLIs (Li, 2014; Bunoti, 2011; Jaladin *et al.*, 2010; Sarker *et al.*, 2010; Haider, 2008; Cornuel, 2007; Teferra and Altbach, 2004). The central issue of hiring and retaining of dedicated academics was highlighted in prior research (Altbach, 2014; Cornuel, 2007). The main reason underlying this issue could be the existence of the many private HLIs that not only compete for students but also in hiring the best academic staff (Sarker *et al.*, 2010; Cornuel, 2007). Furthermore, the attractive remuneration packages including other benefits and career advancement opportunities offered by public or private HLIs as well as from the industries are factors beyond the Private HLIs' control (Mukherjee and Mukherjee, 2013; Yan and Lin, 2010; Cornuel, 2007; Teferra and Altbach, 2004).

The challenge *Facilities*, observed by a sizeable number of the participants during the interview sessions, agreed with the findings of other studies (Otto and Musinguzi, 2013; Mpezamihigo, 2012; Bunoti, 2011). Participants categorized the *Facilities* into three groups; physical facilities, non-physical facilities and maintenance. Physical facilities include the buildings, classes, equipment and other physical services whereas non-physical facilities include locally and/or internationally recognised accreditation of the programs, curriculum and other non-physical services (Soomro and Ahmad, 2012). Despite the huge amounts of investments required in preparing these types of facilities, it is one of the elements that will influence public perceptions on the commitment of

HLLs in providing quality education. The Malaysian private HLLs' main customers, i.e. parents and students anticipate the highest level of services as a return of investment for the considerable amounts of tuition fees paid (Abdullah *et al.*, 2015).

The challenge *Students*, uncovered concerns about the qualifications of Malaysian private HLLs students which can be considered as either average or below average. This reflects the findings of Altbach (2014), Li (2014) as well as Otto and Musinguzi (2013). The admission of average students has inadvertently resulted in the enormous task faced by the Malaysian Private HLLs in molding and transforming students with average abilities into employable graduates. It was also highlighted that the students' soft skills, particularly their English language skills, communication and thinking skills were considered low to ensure their survival in the higher education setting (Bunoti, 2011). The lack of these necessary skills has impaired their chances of securing a job upon graduation, potentially increasing the un-employability rate of the nation (Kuncharin and Mohamad 2014; The National Graduate Employability Blue Print, 2012/2017). The deep-rooted factor that may have contributed to this problem is the decline in the quality of teaching and learning at primary and secondary levels (Altbach, 2014; Otto and Musinguzi, 2013). Moreover, as also observed by Bunoti (2011), the students' immature character has a direct influence on the students' thinking and emotions, thus impacting how they behave and react towards certain issues.

The challenge *Programs and curriculum* also highlighted by participants during the interview sessions, reflect those observed in earlier studies of Baumgardt and Lekhetho (2013), Sarker *et al.* (2010), as well as Haider (2008), Cornuel (2007), as well as Altbach and Levy (2005). Two prevailing issues surfaced in the discussions of this challenge. First, the capacity of these *Programs and curriculum* to develop and equip students with adequate knowledge and skills for their careers (Mukherjee and Mukherjee, 2013; Sidhu and Singh, 2009) and second, the extent to which they can remain relevant and fulfil the needs of industry and the nation (Yoong *et al.*, 2017; Mukherjee and Mukherjee, 2013; Al-Atiqi and Alharbi, 2009; Haider, 2008; Cornuel, 2007; Altbach and Levy, 2005). Although the HLLs have made great strides in both aspects, there is still a mismatch between the HLLs' products and the industry demands (Haider, 2008). The participants offered two main reasons for this, namely the nature of the industry that is dynamic and unpredictable and also, the program selection by the students and parents who prefer the social sciences. The latter is very much influenced by the lower academic fees as compared to the science and technology programs that are in higher demand by various industries, particularly with regard to nation-building.

The challenge *Competition* emerged largely due to the participants' perceptions on the increasing number of private HLLs in Malaysia, due to tight competition among the private higher education providers, that the participants identified the challenge of obtaining a continuous stream of students, thus concurring with the suggestions by Evelyn (2016), Li (2014) Sarker *et al.* (2010) and Oketch (2003). This view is augmented by the changing role played by these Malaysian Private HLLs that are also self-fund-generating institutions, forcing them to rely heavily on student fees to cover the institution's operating costs. Very little attention has been given to the challenge *Competition* in prior research (Li, 2014; Shin and Harman, 2009; Oketch, 2003) and this is an important omission that may be attributed to the fact that *Competition* has largely been classified as the external factor for quality assurance in education (Baumgardt and Lekhetho, 2013; Becket and Brookes, 2008).

The challenge *Accreditation* which recurred moderately during the interview sessions, was also emphasized as one of the challenges in previous studies (Baumgardt and Lekhetho, 2013; Puteh *et al.*, 2009; Sarker *et al.*, 2010; Al-Atiqi and Alharbi, 2009). A

possible explanation might be the role of *Accreditation* as a general indicator to verify the Malaysian Private HLIs' capability, capacity and competency to effectively provide high quality education (Puteh *et al.*, 2009; Al-Atiqi and Alharbi, 2009). In this case, accreditation by government agencies, that is, Malaysia Qualification Agency (MQA) and MOHE is said to be the most instrumental means for quality education compared to other external bodies (Li, 2014; Puteh *et al.*, 2009) although programs such as engineering and medicine are obliged to be accredited by the professional bodies (Puteh *et al.*, 2009). This serves as a practical and strategic response to the latest industry trends as well as to fulfil the prescribed requirements. Besides functioning as a measurement for the delivery of quality education, *Accreditation* is also utilized as a marketing tool in attracting local and international students. Moreover, federal students' aid funds (PTPTN) are only available to students if the institutions and programs are accredited by a recognized accrediting body, that is, MQA (Sivalingam, 2006).

The challenge *Finance*, appears to be in tandem with the findings of other researchers that observed it as one of the major challenges in managing the private HLIs (Li, 2014; Otto and Musinguzi, 2013; Mpezamihigo, 2012; Bunoti, 2011; Sarker *et al.*, 2010; Haider, 2008; Teferra and Altbach, 2004; Oketch, 2003). Previous studies emphasize the importance of *Finance* in assuring a satisfactory level of quality education by the Malaysian Private HLIs (Cornuel, 2007; Teferra and Altbach, 2004). This is vital as quality education demands huge financial commitments from the private HLIs such as providing competitive staff remuneration, preparing adequate and up-to-date facilities to support the teaching and learning process, besides covering administrative costs and others (Halai, 2013; Mpezamihigo, 2012; Sarker *et al.*, 2010). This enormous expenditure compels Malaysian Private HLIs to closely monitor the students' tuition fees that serves as their predominant financial source (Li, 2014; Altbach and Levy, 2005). The tuition fees cannot be too high as this will act as a deterrent to prospective students, yet it must also not be too low as the institution will then not have adequate funds to run the institution. As most of the private HLIs rely heavily on funds generated by students' tuition fees, caution has to be taken, so that an increase in the number of students is matched with a similar increase in the capacity of the institution's infrastructure and staff availability (Li, 2014).

The challenge *Research*, although not particularly obvious in the interview data set, still received the attention of several participants. The absence of *Research* specifically in private HLIs, was significantly highlighted in prior studies by Altbach (2014), Otto and Musinguzi (2013), Mpezamihigo (2012) as well as Altbach and Levy (2005). While it is a difficult scenario, there is a high possibility that it might be related to the institution's financial capabilities as argued by Mukherjee and Mukherjee (2013), Soomro and Ahmad (2012), Oketch (2003) as well as their lack of experience and expertise in research (Halai, 2013). Obviously, beyond providing research facilities such as laboratories, equipment to create a research culture, the Malaysian Private HLIs also have to consider reducing the academics' teaching work load so that more time can be designated specifically for research (Mukherjee and Mukherjee, 2013; Teferra and Altbach, 2004). However, this may be a considerable cost that is too expensive to be tolerated as these HLIs are self-funded institutions. This circumstance caused some of the Malaysian Private HLIs to be placed at the lower rank in the Malaysian Research Assessment or Myra, an assessment launched by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) to evaluate research activities of public and private HLIs in Malaysia. At all costs, however, Malaysian Private HLIs have to concede that maintaining high

standards of research is a necessity if they wish to be recognized locally and internationally as well as to compete with the other HLIs in the truest sense of quality education (Sidhu and Singh, 2009).

## 6. Conclusion

The provision of quality education is a critical element that can guarantee the sustainability of Malaysian private HLIs in this highly competitive era. However, with their limited resources, providing and maintaining acceptable quality standards poses a stiff challenge. This present study is intended to identify and elaborate the challenges faced by the Malaysian private HLIs in providing quality education from the multiple perspectives of its internal and external stakeholders. The stakeholders identified eight challenges namely *Academics, Facilities, Students, Program and Curriculum, Competition, Accreditation, Finance and Research*. Notably, the majority of the challenges uncovered in this study such as *Academics, Facilities, Programs and curriculum* as well as Accreditation reflect the very same areas of evaluation as prescribed in the Code of Practice for Program Accreditation (COPPA) of the MQA (Malaysian Qualification Agency).

The study extends existing work on the provision of quality education by adopting the absence of problems model. The absence of problems model is one of the seven quality education models proposed by Cheng and Tam (1997) that places considerable emphasis on analyzing the challenges faced by educational institutions as a determinant of effective strategies for improvement. In this light, the challenges faced by the Malaysian Private HLIs in the provision of quality education are identified and analyzed. A direct implication of the findings is that the administrators of Malaysian Private HLIs will know where to emphasize more in course of providing quality education.

The identified challenges can be utilized as a guidance in directing the Malaysian private HLIs so that the provision of quality education can be enhanced. Also, the findings enable making inform decisions about the areas that require more resource allocation in addressing the identified challenges. This is important as HLIs need to be selective as to how to fully use their limited resources and internal expert to be cost effective and maximize profit.

For policy-makers, the evidence collected has showcased the complex and peculiar difficulties encountered by Malaysian private HLIs in providing quality education. Nevertheless, the findings can create further opportunities for relevant policies to be designed and implemented. This is important in assisting the operations of these privately funded institutions which perform identical functions as the public HLIs in producing human capital for the nation.

Future work needs to be done to ascertain the practical solutions for each identified challenge. A list of practical solutions for each identified challenge will provide much needed guidance to the top management of Malaysian Private HLIs in determining the best practices in context of their institutions. Moreover, it is also recommended to quantitatively measure the importance of the challenges either in a case study or in a larger sample size. Special tools for ranking called the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) and Analytic Network Process (ANP) can be employed in ranking the importance as well as determining the relationship of the identified challenges.

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### Corresponding author

Rafikul Islam can be contacted at: [rislam@iium.edu.my](mailto:rislam@iium.edu.my)

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