

Knowledge Management Practices in Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions: A Review on Selected Cases

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Abstract

This article underlines the fact that Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions (MHLI) are seriously geared in approaching its academic excellence status, becoming an international education hub attracting students from different parts of the world by offering a comprehensive list of programmes and specialisation. This is due to the fact that knowledge is viewed today as the most important factor in realizing actual growth, creating new values and advantages in a globalized economy. The focus here is on the important of knowledge management (KM) practices within MHLI with the argument that academic institutions should always manage knowledge properly and effectively to allow them to succeed and flourish. However, there is uncertainty about whether the use of KM can be competitive in which it is capable of helping the institution's approaches and strategies to obtain the quality of education mentioned. This justifies the aim of the present study to review the KM practices in MHLI in order to highlight the functional features of its application. The method

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applied here is purely qualitative whereby five selected cases were viewed and analysed in identifying the KM elements that had been practiced by the institutions under study. The findings of the study indicate that KM practices in MHLI have not yet become formative and capable of standing alone without unwavering support from the top management. There is a need to create a formative standard of KM practices in MHLI to enable a systematic realignment of practices within their infrastructure and strategic activities.

Keyword: Knowledge Management, Higher Learning Institution, and Competitive Function

1.0 Introduction

Malaysia, with its reputation for academic excellence, is an international education hub attracting students from many different countries around the world as it offers a comprehensive list of programmes (MUP, 2013). The Department of Higher Education is the one which regulates the nation's higher educational institutions' (both public and private) affairs and manage the vital processes to gear Malaysian higher learning institutions (MHLI) towards excellence, high quality and international standards through the coordination of policies, funding and activities. Therefore, MHLI have to transform in achieving the objective to become a leading international educational centre in the Asian region. Among the many approaches that the government has undertaken to achieve such a feat is the application and implementation of an excellent knowledge management (KM) system as a step toward education transformation and 'knowledge revolution' as suggested by Burton (1999:1) which refers to the current significant change from an industrial economy to a knowledge base economy (where service and expertise are the main business outcomes) (Debowski, 2006: 3) and the function of KM becomes important in effectively using resources and expertise in any organization. This is due to the fact that KM is a process of transforming information and intellectual assets into enduring value. It connects people with the knowledge that they need to take action (Jillinda, 2000: 28).

Consequently, most organizations are convinced that KM is the key to achieving opportunities for better decision-making and gaining competitive advantages. In the context of academia, the academic sector has ample opportunities to apply KM to their mission. Moreover, the market for higher education institutions is increasingly becoming global as universities try to internationalize their curricula and provide students with unparalleled high quality programmes. Universities are expected to produce leaders, intellectuals, visionaries and innovators. Hence, they have a key role to play in preparing people to go beyond their abilities in order to be ready for an uncertain future. In this situation, KM may be invaluable in higher education institutions as it improves their organizational mission. It may be also able to preserve the organizational resources by leveraging organizational knowledge, encouraging a knowledge-creation process and using knowledge for both teaching and learning. This is mirrored by the Malaysian Ministry of Human Resources' (2011) statement that almost all the universities today focus on how to maximize students' quality and skills through university and industry collaborations as the ever-changing nature of work adds to the need for 21st century skills preparation (Ramakrishnan&Yasin, 2012; Martin, 1999).

In sum, several factors including business operations, changing organizational structures, new workplace characteristics and the increasing globalization of the marketplace have all added to the growing interest in KM. In the specific context of MHLI, knowledge management practices have been examined in studies by Ramakrishnan&Yasin (2012), Suhaimee, Abu Bakar& Alias (2005) and Velmurugan, Kogilah&Devinaga (2010). However, the comparison of specific case studies of MHLI is still limited. Thus this study aims to contribute to literature by highlighting the types of KM practices in the specific case studies, to elaborate on their functional features and to compare some of their findings.

2.0 Issues in Knowledge Management Practices

The issue of knowledge is very fundamental in human existence. Based on the present situation and development, both wealth and power are not only related to the ownership of tangible resources but rather its notion has shifted toward intangible and intellectual resources called knowledge capital with the advent of KM (Burton, 1999: 1). Meanwhile, Townley (2001) points out that research and scholarship are tangible assets of an academic institution. The problem however, lies in pinpointing such assets as a tacit one and has to be made explicit before it can be evaluated, enhanced and shared. Explicit knowledge is articulated knowledge (knowledge that has been formalised by way of speech, text, visual graphics and compiled data). While tacit knowledge includes the intuition, perspectives, beliefs and values that people form as a result of their experiences. It is the management of tacit and explicit knowledge that permits enterprises to find ways of making meaning from knowledge (Barclay & Murray, 1998). Recognising knowledge as an asset and using it creatively does not always occur in an obvious manner; it sparks curiosity in trying to answer the following questions:

- a) What type of KM is practiced by MHLI?
- b) How much of KM has been practiced by MHLI?
- c) Why does it differ from one institution to another?

By answering these questions we will be able to determine the aspects of KM that are being practiced by certain MHLI and identify the level of effectiveness obtained by these institutions in managing its valuable knowledge assets. In the end we will also be able to deduce clear comparisons from one institution to another.

3.0 Significance of the Study

The present study is very much significant to the current development of MHLI. It lies in the clarification of the strengths and the weaknesses of KM practices which are invaluable in the development of a suitable KM framework of practices. It is also significant for other non-educational institutions that are looking to benchmark KM practices that are effective for their organizations.

4.0 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework which refers to the agenda, outline, and theoretical construct of a research method and it often refers to the literature review and is described as the structure that supports the

study's theory and acts as a lens that a research utilizes to investigate a specific aspect of the subject matter (Ocholla & Le Roux, 2010). On the basis of the literature reviewed, the research questions and the objectives of the article, the following study framework is developed:

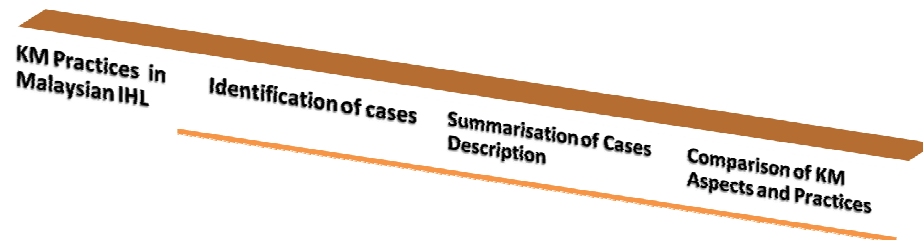


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of KM Practices in MHLI

Based on the above framework, the study aims to scrutinize five selected case studies and discuss the KM practices employed by the MHLI in light of the strengths and weaknesses of the practice. The paper proceeds to compare and contrast the findings concerning the employed KM practices in these institutions to provide a more summarized and consistent conclusion. The findings of the study aim to contribute to literature by highlighting the requirements and the modifications of the present KM practices in MHLI for the ultimate purpose of developing a suitable KM framework and providing recommendations on how to go about developing such a framework.

5.0 Research Methodology

The nature of this study is purely qualitative and interpretive type of research where five selected cases are reviewed. These cases are gathered through extensive literature review from academic papers representing an output of previous studies conducted by various researches concerning KM practices within MHLI. From this revision, some features of KM practices are identified and analysed. In qualitative research as suggested by Leedy and Ormrod (2001: 147) numerous forms of data are collected and examined from various angles to construct a meaningful picture of a multifaceted situation. Qualitative research focuses on phenomena that occur in natural settings and involve studying those phenomena in all their complexity.

6.0 Data Collection

As mentioned above, data for this article are gathered from prior case studies, papers and researches concerning KM practices, especially those related to MHLI. These cases have been published in relevant websites over the Internet. Primary data used are taken from five case studies that examined the nature of KM practices while the secondary data are taken from literature reviews of relevant studies concerning the application of KM practices. Data consisting the strengths and weaknesses of KM practices employed are highlighted. With these data, the researchers proceed to explore the similarities and differences between the case study findings.

7.0 Data Analysis

Data analysis is conducted based on the theoretical studies as details provided below and by using three major elements gathered within the KM practices in the selected MHLI.

7.1 Method of Analysis

With a firm theoretical basis in place for KM practices as discussed above, this study focuses on identifying the elements of KM that have been practiced by five selected MHLI. Based on observation, some important elements and features are highlighted after giving a brief description to the case background such as title, type of study and other related information. Then those features are organized and classified as a step towards obtaining new findings and making remarks.

There are three major elements of KM practices within MHLI as detailed below:

- i) The element of identification and enhancement of the knowledge artefact within the organization in which it represents the macro-system of KM practices.
- ii) The element of archiving and controlling the knowledge within the organization in which it represents the micro-system of KM practices. This is to include KM strategies in upgrading knowledge system and identifying the most suitable and most effective one to the organizational context and needs.
- iii) The element of utilizing and activating knowledge effectively within the organization in which it also represents the micro-system of KM practices. This aspect also covers the comprehensiveness of organizational community mind-set and cultural norms, such as trust, sharing, caring, having common goals, lust for learning and acceptance of change.

7.2 Description of Analysis

Referring to the above discussion about KM practices, this study outlines in table 1 the detailed description of the cases and their aspects of practices:

Table 1: Detailed Description of Cases and Aspects of Knowledge Management Practices

No.	Description of the Case	Aspects of KM Practices
Case 1.	Ramakrishnan and MohdYasin (2012) conducted a case study entitled "Knowledge Management System and Higher Education Institutions" as an attempt to explore the application of KM. The study is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Questionnaires were distributed to 20 academic staff and 11 non-academic staff in one Malaysian public university as well as structured interviews with staff, focusing on the importance of KM implementation.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Describing KM practice as exhibited and supported by staff. 2. Examining the significance of KM in bridging the gap between present and prior contexts of knowledge creation, sharing and application and the alignment of KM processes within the organization's goals, social culture, behaviour and organizational strategy. 3. Observing KM impact of practice on educational delivery, especially with the support of KM technology.

Case 2.	Hashim and Taib (2012) conducted a study entitled, "Training and Development for Knowledge Workers – Malaysian Scene". This case study focuses on KM aspects in the Faculty of Information Management of the university which has been assigned to play its role in taking measures in reviewing its effectiveness within Malaysian K-economy strategic plan.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identifying knowledge creation activities within the process of teaching and learning and its relation to academic enhancement and educational development as a whole. 2. Identifying factors of success in KM practices in knowledge acquisition, utilization, sharing, and retention.
Case 3.	Mohayidin and others (2007) studied "The Application of Knowledge Management in Enhancing the Performance of Malaysian Universities". Here, Malaysia is described as facing some challenges in making its universities (public and private) as leading International Educational Centres in the Asian region. For that reason, KM has been applied and implemented. A set of questionnaire was distributed in eight universities.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identifying the scope and level of KM practices in MHLI and its appropriateness to teaching and learning. 2. Identifying the contributing factors such as infrastructure and technology to the effectiveness of KM practices on individual as well as community levels. 3. Focusing on knowledge generating, acquisition, storing, and disseminating as the contributing factors of KM initiatives.
Case 4.	Ismail and Young (2006) made an "Analysis of Knowledge Management Impact in Higher Learning Institutions" in Cyberjaya and Malacca. The data were gathered through a questionnaire for the purpose of identifying the type of KM system and its functional features such as culture sharing in which it leads to increased work process efficiency. Internal knowledge has been categorized systematically into clusters to enable academicians to join forums, discussion groups and other academic activities.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identifying the development of knowledge assets and its strategic plan in enhancing realization and sharing. 2. Inculcating the culture of knowledge sharing. 3. Establishment of a KM Centre and Portal called Share-Net. 4. Appointment of KM Chairperson, its chief officer and auditor who monitor and review the quality of knowledge within the institution, its developments and utilization, especially in terms of reward system, and public awareness.
Case 5.	Sirajuddin and others quantitatively studied "Knowledge management implementation in Malaysian Public Institutions of Higher Education" in 2005. This study focuses on measuring the significance and effectiveness of Strategic Information System Planning (SISP) used as KM enabler in various PIHE.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Evaluating SISP as a method of KM practices. 2. Describing the seriousness of managerial participation in KM practices. 3. Identifying the loop hole in formulating KM strategic planning and consultancy, especially in inculcating culture of knowledge sharing, incentives and motivation. 4. Measuring level of knowledge culture sharing.

8.0 Findings and Remarks

From the case analysis in number 1, we find out that the applications of KM leading towards institutional efficiency and effectiveness together with improvement in graduate quality, satisfaction and high employability. However, lack of KM infrastructure such as technology weakens the ability

to align KM activities with organization's vision and mission especially in terms of learning and sharing. Case analysis number 2 shows that it encapsulates the role of KM in MHLI in helping Malaysia in achieving its K-economy strategic plan. However, the most potential challenges and obstacles came from human aspect, bureaucracies, infrastructure and an inadequate KM model. Case analysis number 3 highlights about the most challenging obstacles in KM practices in MHLI are personal behaviours and cultural structures. The role of managerial support is very vital in determining the success of KM practices especially in updating technical facilities and stimulates knowledge sharing. Case analysis number 4 prompts various issues and problems are prevalent in KM practices in MHLI. However, the role of a managerial body is very significant in KM practices such as putting an integrated policy, effective strategy, and suitable cultural structure and infrastructure development even though they may incur higher costs for the MHLI to bear. Case analysis number five discover that even though SISP is regarded as an appropriate KM method to be practiced, the use of combined methods by several universities together with SISP indicates the ineffectiveness of this system, especially with the lack of specific operational steps in activating knowledge, information, communication technology and planning (KICTSP) especially in encapsulating tasks to establish comprehensive strategic planning and documentation.

Hence from the detailed description of cases and aspects of KM practices in MHLI in table 1, it appears that although KM is prevalent in MHLI, no standard KM framework has been developed. The most significant factor that a KM framework in MHLI should consider is the managerial comprehensive strategic plan. It is important for the policy maker to take an interest in the KM practices involved, how they are employed and provide support in the form of the facilitation of a good KM culture, innovation and creativity. The policy maker should also provide employees with training and continuous learning opportunities in the form of conventions and programmes. In addition to this significant factor is the technical aspect of KM processes which should be sufficiently equipped to create an effective knowledge utilization to help keep track of knowledge created, shared and outdated which would greatly improve the employees' creative and innovative ideas.

9.0 Research Limitations

Although the article included cases of both private and public institutions of higher learning, it is confined to studying only a few specific cases while other cases are not included. Therefore, generalization to the whole population should be done with caution. This study is confined only to describe the cases in their original copies; no in-depth empirical analysis is done with the help of quantitative method of revision. Future studies may use other types of research methods to extensively analyse the subject matter in order to shed more light on the issue and come up with justifying evidence to support the present findings. The limitation also lies in the limitation of the cases to the field of MHLI.

10.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

Knowledge management is not a solitary activity instead it is a strategic one that involves close association with the strategic plans of the organization to enable knowledge activities to add to

profitability and strategic advantage. This contention is evident in the above reported weaknesses of the misalignment of KM practices together with infrastructure lacking that cause the ineffective application of KM activities in MHLI. Indeed, KM in this context of study is a strategic activity that involves knowledge creation, sharing, storage and dissemination in which it develops a comprehensive knowledge community culture in the form of daily practices. This knowledge culture is observed in the unified interests of community members who meet to share their experiences and insights for the development of better solutions to issues or challenges in their work place in which the value of KM practices, particularly knowledge sharing is acknowledged. Therefore on the basis of the above discussion concerning MHLI practices, the following points are considered:

- i) KM is not a separate practice on its own and hence, it needs the unwavering support of managerial strategies and planning.
- ii) KM practices should make employees become aware of its principles and additional values gained by the organization, especially in terms of innovative enhancement.
- iii) A suitable infrastructure support should be constructed and maintained instinctively within the organization such as IT infrastructure, documentation accessibility and so on.

It is observable from the above discussion that to manage the above mentioned valuable knowledge assets of an academic institution appropriately, a holistic management approach is recommended. Such an approach encompasses the creation of a KM strategy that is synchronised with the organisation's mission and strategy, and the development of an appropriate mind-set that creates cultural norms – trust, sharing, common goals, lust for learning and acceptance of change, that represent every aspect of the institution. The current set up of MHLI has significant opportunities in applying and practicing KM to support every part of MHLI's mission. Indeed, KM practices should not be regarded as contribution towards MHLI's radically new ideas rather it is a new spin on their reason to maintain its sustainability and future expansion. Indeed, KM enrichment theories and practices are substantial opportunities to contribute to the success and advancement of academic institution and the society at large. In this study, KM features of practices have provided an essential introductory text to discover the foundations of the field and the opportunities to practice KM within organizations. Although it lacks some attention to the critical social and humanistic issues that knowledge managers should reflect upon, it is otherwise a valuable resource for both new and experienced knowledge managers alike.

Acknowledgement

This research is conducted with the grant awarded by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (IIUM/504/RES/G/14/3/2/1/FRGS 11-008-0156) entitled "Modelling Islamic Knowledge Management (IKM): Theories and Practices in Malaysian Public Universities (MPU)".

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