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EDUCITY, JOHOR: A PROMISING PROJECT
WITH MULTIPLE CHALLENGES TO
OVERCOME

CHANG-DA WAN AND
BENEDICT WEERASENA

ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK
INSTITUTE

Trends in Southeast Asia



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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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EduCity, Johor: A Promising Project with Multiple Challenges to Overcome

By Chang-Da Wan and Benedict Weerasena

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- EduCity, built as an integrated learning hub, is a constituent part of Malaysia's general programme to enhance its reputation as a regional centre for higher education.
- Located in Iskandar Malaysia, Johor, on a 305-acre catalyst development housing seven higher education institutions, EduCity aims to become a best-in-class higher education destination and at the same time provide talent to support economic activities in Iskandar Malaysia.
- With over 3,500 students currently enrolled, EduCity is moving towards its goal of having 16,000 students by 2025. Its proximity to Singapore and Kuala Lumpur provides it with a large population of potential students, although attracting academic staff to work there remains a challenge.
- Other challenges that EduCity faces revolve around the provision of facilities and support services, coordination of courses on offer, and coordination between the entity that runs the site — EduCity Iskandar Sdn Bhd (EISB) — and the universities.

EduCity, Johor: A Promising Project with Multiple Challenges to Overcome

By Chang-Da Wan and Benedict Weerasena¹

INTRODUCTION

Private higher education in Malaysia has seen robust growth since the introduction of the Private Higher Education Institutions Act (1996) (Act 555), which legalized these institutions. To transform Malaysia into a global higher education hub, as first outlined by the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (2007–20), the government has sought to offer a wide range of courses and programmes through private universities and colleges as well as international branch campuses with competitive tuition fees.

This paper examines the development of EduCity, an integrated learning hub situated in Iskandar Malaysia in the state of Johor. The idea for an integrated learning hub built around multiple universities was first hatched in 2007, and in 2011 the first institution moved in. In exploring the challenges and underlying issues involved, this paper aims to shed light on the private higher education sector in the country in general.

Several site visits were made to the EduCity campus and to the temporary city campus. On 17–23 August 2017, we conducted interviews with academics and administrators in the various universities and

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with policymakers. In addition, policy documents from the Malaysian government, Johor State government, Iskandar Regional Development Authority, and the respective universities were consulted.

The paper first outlines how EduCity was conceptualized and discusses the role of EduCity Iskandar Sdn Bhd (EISB) as the “driver” and “owner” of EduCity. It then studies the huge challenges that the creation of an integrated learning hub involves.

JOHOR AND ISKANDAR MALAYSIA

Over the past five decades, the economic structure of Johor has evolved substantially. Johor started off as an agriculture-based economy: its flat and fertile land was well suited for the production of primary products for export such as palm oil, rubber, pineapple and coffee. But faced with volatile commodity prices, since the 1970s Johor state chose to invest in the manufacturing sector (Hutchinson 2012).

The Economic Plan for Johor (1990–2005) advocated greater commercialization of agriculture and encouraged more knowledge- and capital-intensive industries (UPEN Johor 1989). In the subsequent Johor Operational Master Plan (1996–2010), the service sector was added as a target growth area. This highlighted strategic investment in infrastructure and skill provision to foster high-value services (RMA Perunding Bersatu 1996).

The Iskandar Malaysia Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP) was launched in 2006, with the aim of creating “A Strong and Sustainable Metropolis of International Standing”. The CDP covers the southern region of Johor, and it sought to advance the economy from being manufacturing-based to being services-based (Hutchinson 2012). Electrical and electronics, petrochemical, oil and gas, food and agro-processing, logistics and tourism were selected as core sectors. Finance, insurance, real estate and business services (FIREBS), the creative industry, health services and education services were identified as major emerging sectors. The horizontal and vertical linkages across these industries were to constitute a complete economic ecosystem for Johor.

To correspond with the federal administration’s Government Transformation Programme and Economic Transformation Programme

and to factor in the challenges raised by the 2007 global financial crisis, the CDP was reviewed; and CDPII 2014–2025 was subsequently launched. According to a review of performance indicators within this framework, education services contributed 2 per cent to gross output, 5 per cent to value-added services and 5 per cent to employment by 2011 (Iskandar Regional Development Authority 2014). Iskandar Malaysia is being marketed as a regional education hub with twenty colleges and institutions of higher learning within EduCity, Bandar Seri Alam and Bandar Dato’ Onn. The latter two hubs are predominantly made up of local colleges and institutions of higher education, while EduCity is an integrated learning hub with branch campuses of international colleges and universities.

IMAGINING EDUCITY

EduCity, developed by EISB, also promotes Malaysia as a centre of educational excellence in line with the main objectives of the Ninth Malaysian Plan. In addition, it is considered an Entry Point Project (EPP) under the Economic Transformation Programme. As the 11th EPP for the education sector, EduCity is expected to contribute RM1 billion to the Gross National Income, and is projected to create 1,100 jobs by the year 2020 (*The Edge* 2011).

This 305-acre fully integrated education hub is located within Nusajaya (Flagship Zone B of Iskandar Malaysia), adjacent to Medini Iskandar which is the central business district of Iskandar Puteri. EduCity is accessible via the Coastal Highway that links Medini to Johor Bahru city centre and to the Tuas Customs, Immigration and Quarantine Complex (CIQ) in Singapore. Iskandar Malaysia as a whole seeks to become a “Strong and Sustainable Metropolis of International Standing” by leveraging on its close proximity to Singapore, and EduCity tries to make the most of its strategic location. In fact, EduCity is situated less than 30 minutes away from Singapore via the Tuas Second Link, and is also within a six-hour flight radius of major Asian cities.

EduCity aims to become a best-in-class higher education destination, providing an avenue for local Malaysian students to pursue tertiary education and obtain foreign qualifications at an affordable price without

leaving their home soil. Indirectly, EduCity can potentially slow the flow of Malaysians going overseas for their tertiary education and remaining abroad.

EduCity is also meant to become a feeder system for the economic pillars of Iskandar Malaysia, and contribute to Malaysia's aspiration of becoming a regional hub for education by providing relevant talent for economic activities in Iskandar Malaysia. High-tech companies based in Johor, such as Dyson, Lloyd's Register and BAE Systems, are being encouraged to employ students from EduCity institutions. Furthermore, EduCity is also intended to be a catalyst for the development of Iskandar Malaysia, once its economic and demographic impact spills over to surrounding areas.

Currently, EduCity comprises the following higher education institutions:

- Kolej MDIS Malaysia (MDIS)
- Multimedia University (MMU)
- Netherlands Maritime Institute of Technology (NMIT)
- Newcastle University Medicine Malaysia (NUMed)
- Raffles University Iskandar (RUI)
- University of Reading Malaysia (UoRM)
- University of Southampton Malaysia Campus (USMC)

When the idea of EduCity was first suggested, different institutions were to offer programmes in an area of specialist expertise, with a pre-agreed exclusivity clause. In other words, certain institutions were to enjoy a monopoly on delivering EduCity-based programmes in a particular subject area for a number of years. For instance, only NUMed was permitted to offer programmes in medicine, and only the USMC may offer courses in the engineering sciences.

THE ROLE OF EDUCITY ISKANDAR SDN BHD

EISB was incorporated in 2007 and is solely owned by Iskandar Investment Berhad (IIB), while IIB is co-owned by Khazanah Nasional

Berhad, Employees' Provident Fund and Kumpulan Prasarana Rakyat Johor. Khazanah Nasional Berhad is the biggest shareholder. IIB was established in 2006 as a catalytic developer for Iskandar Malaysia, while EISB functions as the catalytic driver for education.

EISB seeks to create a superior urban environment to attract local and international students and visitors (Iskandar Investment n.d.; Zazali 2009). As such, they see themselves as a facility provider first and foremost. In 2008 when the project first took off, EISB was predominantly development-driven. They built and completed the roads, street lighting, turfing and landscape, and constructed some of the buildings. Kolej MDIS Malaysia and Raffles University Iskandar (RUI) bought land from EISB to construct their own buildings and facilities, but the buildings used by other institutions are leased. EISB constructed buildings according to specifications provided by each institution, and leases them out over a period of twelve, fifteen or thirty years. The management and operation of each building is left to the institution concerned.

EISB is also responsible for the outer structures and shared facilities between institutions, and hence EISB sees itself as a facility driver, providing the necessary real estate and amenities for the smooth running of EduCity. Among the shared facilities under the management of EISB are an international student village, student accommodation, a sports complex featuring a 6,000-seat stadium with a Grade 2 International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) track and football pitch, a 1,500-seat indoor arena, a 500-seat aquatic centre with an Olympic-sized swimming pool, and several outdoor courts.

However, as the infrastructure development of EduCity reached a relatively mature phase, EISB began to see itself as a partner to the institutions in bringing in students, and to ensuring that students receive a good learning experience. In this respect, EISB is focusing on promoting a livelier social environment and on creating spaces for students from the different institutions in EduCity. Among the key initiatives undertaken by EISB are being the liaison for the EduCity Student Council, which has representatives from all the student councils on the campus, as well as creating a common student area or complex within EduCity.

The role of EISB, ideally, is also to act as a base to unite all the institutions in the campus. In addition, EISB coordinates the marketing

and promotion for EduCity where EISB strives to advertise EduCity as a whole without focusing on individual programmes offered or institutions present. To achieve this, EISB invites all partners to participate in its promotional activities and ensures information on each institution is available for the international marketing fairs in which they participate, such as the ones conducted in China, South Korea and Kazakhstan. The belief is that when one institution prospers, the whole of EduCity will attain a greater level of success. As part of its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, EISB provides monetary incentives amounting to RM1,000 to the best student in each programme across EduCity.

After almost a decade, EISB has seen its role evolve from a mere facility and infrastructure developer into an entity that both shapes the learning experience and environment for students in EduCity and manages a multi-institution organization of higher education. Hence, the current roles of EISB are somewhat blurred, overlapping and difficult to define, and in a state of flux. Nevertheless, the ways in which the roles of EISB evolve will have an important bearing on the future direction of EduCity in moving forward.

THE CURRENT STATUS OF EDUCITY AND THE INSTITUTIONS

EduCity targets having 16,000 students by 2025; and as of January 2017, it has more than 3,500² students enrolled. For comparison, only 530 students were enrolled in 2012. Of those enrolled in January 2017, about 2 per cent are international students, mainly from the ASEAN region, South Asia and selected countries in Africa. Most of the Malaysians who make up 98 per cent of the student population are from Johor.

Newcastle University Medicine Malaysia (NUMed) is the branch campus of Newcastle University in Malaysia, specializing in medicine and biomedical sciences. NUMed was the first institution to move into

² This figure does not include primary and secondary school students from Raffles American School and Marlborough College Malaysia.

its own campus in EduCity, which it did in 2011 on a lease agreement from IIB. It is wholly owned by Newcastle University. Currently 670 students are enrolled in the institution, 550 of whom are in the medicine programme. To date, NUMed has had four cohorts of medical students and two cohorts of students in the biomedical sciences. Of the students enrolled in NUMed, 10 per cent are international students. NUMed has about eighty academic staff members, almost a quarter of whom are from the United Kingdom while 15 per cent are from Malaysia. The rest of the academic staff are most notably from the Philippines, Myanmar and India.

Netherlands Maritime Institute of Technology (NMIT) is a joint venture between a local entrepreneur and the Dutch government, and specializes in the “dry side” of the maritime industry, such as port management, logistical support and law. It welcomed its first intake of 240 students in 2011 at its temporary city campus located in Johor Bahru. By 2012, the institution had moved to its permanent campus in EduCity’s Multi-Varsity Complex. This complex houses several institutions, each with its own building with joint facilities. In other words, it is an integrated mini-campus within EduCity. As of 2017, NMIT has supported nearly 2,000 students in their pursuit of maritime education.

Multimedia University (MMU) Faculty of Cinematic Arts is another institution located in the Multi-Varsity Complex. This MMU branch campus houses a single faculty, unlike its two other campuses in Cyberjaya and Melaka. Due to the fact that it is only a single faculty with two programmes and that the faculty specializes in a highly niche area, the student population has been growing at a much slower pace. However, the relocation of this faculty from its Cyberjaya campus to EduCity has been driven by a strategic consideration: that of being located nearer to the creative industry in Iskandar Malaysia which comprises leading players like the Pinewood Iskandar Studios. Currently, MMU in EduCity has 170 students, of whom twelve are international students. There are eight academic staff members, of whom four are Malaysian.

University of Southampton Malaysia Campus (USMC) is also housed in the Multi-Varsity Complex. It is wholly owned by University of Southampton in the United Kingdom and offers only programmes in engineering. This institution has 250 students with an estimated twelve to

fifteen international students. The relatively smaller number of students is due to the fact that USMC only has students pursuing the foundation programme and the first two years of the undergraduate programmes. For the remaining two years, students of USMC move to University of Southampton in the United Kingdom. It has twenty-five academics with six international lecturers, of whom three are seconded from the United Kingdom.

University of Reading Malaysia (UoRM), like NUMed, has its own campus within EduCity through a lease agreement with IIB. Like the other two U.K. universities, UoRM is wholly owned by its mother university, in this case the University of Reading. This institution started out in the temporary city campus and only moved to EduCity recently. At the moment, UoRM is the most comprehensive institution in EduCity offering programmes in sciences, applied sciences and social sciences. It also has a branch of its business school on site. In addition, it is the only institution in EduCity to offer doctoral programmes in four areas of study. Currently it has about 550 students and this number is expected to increase to 900 by 2018. Out of the 550 students, 95 per cent are Malaysian, two-thirds of whom are from Johor. Of the sixty academic staff, 40 per cent are from a range of countries including Iran, Italy, France, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and the United Kingdom (specifically Reading).

Kolej MDIS Malaysia (MDIS) and Raffles University Iskandar (RUI) are the two institutions which have purchased part of EduCity to construct their own full-fledged campus. The construction of the MDIS campus in EduCity is almost complete and the institution is expecting 2,000 students when it moves into the new campus with its own accommodation and sports facilities. In the meantime, it operates in the temporary city campus. MDIS is owned by a Singapore corporation and the campus in EduCity is its second international branch campus outside Singapore. MDIS's niche is in providing professional and lifelong education in applied areas of management at the diploma level. It offers a franchised Bachelor's programme of the University of Wolverhampton in EduCity.

RUI is a joint venture between Raffles Education Corporation Limited from Singapore and EISB (Raffles University Iskandar 2017). It is one of the two institutions operating in the temporary city campus

and has purchased a piece of land in EduCity on which to build its own campus. Construction of the RUI campus in EduCity has not started and the institution seems likely to continue its operation from the temporary city campus, with recent initiatives to upgrade existing facilities such as studios and laboratories. Currently, RUI has an enrolment of 400 students. Most of them are from Johor. Only 10 of the 400 students are foreign. RUI has twenty-two academic full time academic staff members and thirty part-timers.

Tables 1 and 2 list the programmes offered by institutions in EduCity as well as their fee structure.

EDUCITY@ISKANDAR MALAYSIA — A STRATEGIC LOCATION?

One major benefit of the close proximity to Singapore is the possibility of tapping into the Singaporean student market. At EduCity, it is possible for students to obtain a British qualification with lower tuition and living costs due to the favourable exchange rate of the Malaysian ringgit in relation to major foreign currencies. In addition, institutions in EduCity can also leverage on Singaporean companies and industries to offer training, consultancy and short courses at a more reasonable cost and with the benefit of geographical proximity.

However, for some of these institutions the close proximity poses a challenge, since they have to compete for students and academic staff with the two top universities in Asia, namely the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU). This makes it particularly difficult to attract students into programmes with high academic entry requirements.

Apart from Singapore, EduCity also has to contend with competition from private higher education institutions in Kuala Lumpur. Given the concentration of private institutions in the capital of Malaysia, which offers students a better social environment outside the classroom, the less vibrant social environment in EduCity has, to some extent, been an obstacle to student recruitment. There remains a lack of food and beverage options and entertainment outlets in EduCity and in Nusajaya in general. Limited connectivity, due to the absence of public transportation, has

Table 1: Programme by Level across Institutions in EduCity

Institution	Foundation	Certificate	Diploma
Kolej MDIS Malaysia	Business & Technology, Science	English	Business Management, International Business Accounting, Marketing, Mass Communication, Information Technology, Tourism Management
Multimedia University	Cinematic Arts	Nil	Nil
Netherlands Maritime Institute of Technology	Nil	Nil	Maritime Transportation Management, Shipping Management, Port Management, Maritime Law, Maritime Occupational Safety & Health
Newcastle University Medicine Malaysia	Biological & Biomedical Sciences		Nil
Raffles University Iskandar	Business, Liberal Arts	Nil	Business, Interior Design, Visual Communication
University of Reading Malaysia	Business, Science	English	Nil
University of Southampton Malaysia Campus	Engineering	Nil	Nil

Notes: Nil = No programme offered.

a. Offers by University of Wolverhampton, U.K.

b. This programme is a four-year (2+2) twinning Bachelor's degree.

Source: Websites of all institutions

Bachelor	Postgraduate Certificate	Master	Doctorate
Event Management, ^a Business Management, ^a International Business ^a	Nil	Nil	Nil
Cinematic Arts	Nil	Nil	Nil
Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Medicine & Surgery, Biomedical Sciences	Cancer Studies, Medical Education	Clinical Research, Oncology, Palliative Care, Oncology for Pharmaceutical Industry	Nil
Multimedia Design, Graphic Design, Interior Design, Fashion Design, Business Administration, Accountancy, Supply Chain Management, Psychology	Nil	Business Administration	Nil
Finance & Business, Management & Business, Accounting & Finance, Real Estate, Quantity Surveying, Construction Management, Psychology, Pharmacy ^b	Nil	Investment Banking & Islamic Finance, Business Administration	Built Environment, Pharmacy, Psychology, Business & Management
Aeronautics & Astronautics Engineering, ^b Mechanical Engineering, ^b Electrical & Electronic Engineering ^b	Nil	Nil	Nil

Table 2: Fee Structure of Programmes per annum across Institutions in EduCity for 2017/18

Institution	Foundation	Certificate	Diploma
Kolej MDIS Malaysia	NA	NA	NA
Multimedia University	RM13,200 (RM16,500)	Nil	Nil
Netherlands Maritime Institute of Technology	Nil	Nil	RM21,200– RM35,200
Newcastle University Medicine Malaysia	RM26,000 (RM29,380)		Nil
Raffles University Iskandar	NA	NA	NA
University of Reading Malaysia	RM19,000– RM21,650 (RM22,000– RM24,875)	NA	Nil
University of Southampton Malaysia Campus	RM27,200 (RM32,100)	Nil	Nil

Notes: Figure in parentheses for international students; Nil = No programme offered; NA = Not available.

a. Fees for twinning programme in Malaysia. For the second part of the programme, students will pay international fees in GBP.

All fees have been converted to “per annum”, and if there is more than one fee-structure for multiple programmes at the same level, a range will be reported.

Source: UoRM website, NUMed website, MMU website, USMC booklet, Edverty.my website for NMIT.

Bachelor	Postgraduate Certificate	Master	Doctorate
NA	NA	NA	NA
RM20,000 (RM25,000) <i>Additional RM2,700 (RM14,925) as admission fees</i>	Nil	Nil	Nil
Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
RM40,240–RM95,000 (RM44,100–RM105,000)	GBP2,700	GBP4,980 – GBP5,400	Nil
NA	NA	NA	NA
RM36,750–RM37,900 (RM43,500–RM54,000) RM46,250 (RM52,500) ^a	Nil	RM44,750– RM77,250 (RM51,500– RM77,250)	RM48,000 (RM52,250) 45% discount if students pursue the course on part-time basis
RM48,700 (RM55,400)	Nil	Nil	Nil

also been a challenge for EduCity in its bid to live up to its selling point of providing a holistic educational experience for students.

Attracting academic staff to work in EduCity has also been a challenge for some institutions. Like the challenge of attracting students, EduCity's close proximity to Singapore can be a disadvantage in terms of the more favourable Singapore dollar as compared to the Malaysian ringgit. Furthermore, some academic staff also have difficulties adjusting to life in Nusajaya, an area still undergoing major development. Particularly for foreign academic staff, the lack of expatriate clubs and associations has further added to the difficulties in making these academic staff feel at home.

Thus, like a double-edged sword, the location of EduCity poses some strategic advantages to institutions in terms of recruiting students and academic staff, but there is also the challenge of providing an urban environment.

EDUCITY AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

EduCity has been relatively successful in providing opportunities for Johoreans to access not only higher education but, more specifically, foreign higher education without leaving the state. This has been reflected in the fact that across all the institutions, Johoreans make up the bulk of the students.

In this regard, it is important to highlight the efforts that have been made by NMIT. This institution mainly focuses on diploma-level programmes in the maritime field, specifically the dry side of the industry. Therefore, it has invested in recruiting students from rural Johor, particularly targeting the ethnic Malay community. With financial support from Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA) and the National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN), these students obtain the necessary qualifications for them to work in the two international seaports of Johor, namely Johor Port and the Port of Tanjung Pelepas, and in other parts of Malaysia and in Singapore.

The development of Iskandar Malaysia comprises nine pillars — agro-processing, oil and gas, electrical and electronics, education, finance, healthcare, creative, logistics and tourism. The most direct contribution

that EduCity can make may be in education but the individual institutions can also leverage on these sectors to play a bigger role beyond just talent development. For instance, NMIT can leverage on its Dutch connection to develop the logistics sector, given that the Netherlands is a world leader in logistics. Through its niche in engineering and British connection, USMC is well positioned to develop closer collaboration with leading British businesses like Dyson and Lloyds' Registrar. As illustrated earlier, MMU Faculty of Cinematic Arts is also posed to work more closely with Pinewood Iskandar Studios as the leading industry player for the creative sector in Iskandar Malaysia. While NUMed currently has clinical arrangements for its students with public hospitals in Johor Bahru and neighbouring districts, there is potential for it to extend beyond teaching and clinical training into research and development with hospitals and healthcare providers in strengthening the healthcare sector underlined by Iskandar Malaysia.

Although there is vast potential for institutions in EduCity to play their part beyond education and talent development, it is important to point out that many of these institutions are still young and in the midst of developing their academic programmes. For instance, USMC has just graduated their first cohort of students, and some programmes in UoRM are just about to begin recruiting the first cohort of students. Thus, the research and service component across these institutions are understandably underdeveloped, and research and development as well as industrial collaboration and community engagement remain secondary priorities.

MARKET FORCES AT PLAY

While EduCity is intended to be a catalytic driver for the economic development of Iskandar Malaysia, through talent development as well as benefits accruing from the spillover effect of an education hub, it is in turn also susceptible to market forces. The development of EduCity, especially with regard to its facilities and infrastructure, has to be sensitive to both demand and supply. EISB and the institutions can project certain levels of demand and supply, but utilization and sustainability undoubtedly will depend on actual demand.

The development of facilities in EduCity, such as accommodation, is also highly sensitive to demand. At the moment, the occupancy rate for the 800-bed accommodation has been approximately 75 per cent. And even while there are plans in the pipeline to construct another accommodation block to house the projected increase of students enrolling in EduCity, many of the current students are already opting to stay in the surrounding areas, including the neighbouring zone of Gelang Patah, due to lower prices and fewer residential requirements.

Thus, as a whole, the provision of facilities and support services faces a Catch-22 situation. Should these provisions be supplied to anticipate the projected demand, or should supply only be provided when the demand is present? At the moment, the situation seems to be the latter, and as a result there have been some complaints from students and staff concerning facilities and support services, such as the lack of variety in food and beverage outlets, accommodation, space for social activities and so on. Even with a well-equipped sports complex that opens once a week for free to the students, the relatively high costs for utilizing the facilities have been a barrier to some students and staff. For EduCity to become a complete integrated learning hub, the provision of facilities and support services is as crucial as the quality of academic programmes provided. There is tremendous room for improvement in the former.

ACADEMIC COORDINATION

Ideally, EduCity should be seen as a comprehensive university and the various institutions as faculties or schools. In this “university”, the Faculty of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences is operated by NUMed, the Faculty of Engineering by USMC, the Faculty of Business and Social Sciences by UoRM, the Faculty of Design by RUI, the Faculty of Maritime by NMIT, the Faculty of Arts and Cinematic by MMU, and the Faculty of Foundational Studies by MDIS. Importantly, for this ideal concept to become a reality, some form of coordination is needed, especially across the institutions.

However, such coordination is missing. EduCity may not be a higher education institution with award-granting authority as each of the institutions based there award their own respective diplomas and degrees.

All that is needed then, is a common academic direction and coordination if EduCity is to develop as a whole.

Currently, whatever academic coordination there is in EduCity is rather ad hoc. The relationship between EISB and the individual institutions is similar to a partner relationship — or, more specifically, a landlord and tenant in terms of the academic facilities. All academic matters are left purely to the institutions. Furthermore, the inter-institution relationship is also conducted on a piecemeal basis, and almost every representative of the institutions has highlighted some degree of difficulty in terms of academic coordination.

One of the main issues concerns the exclusivity clause. While every institution in EduCity has been invited to become part of this project in a particular niche area, there remain a number of niches and specializations that are undefined. For instance, UoRM, RUI and MDIS offer programmes in business (see Table 1). Both UoRM and RUI offer Foundation in Business, while MDIS also offers Foundation in Business and Technology. At the degree and postgraduate levels, these three universities also compete with one another for prospective students in the field of business. UoRM offers BA Management and Business, RUI offers Bachelor of Business Administration (Hons.), while MDIS offers BA (Hons.) Business Management through twinning arrangements with the University of Wolverhampton. This overlap in programmes also happens at the postgraduate level between RUI and UoRM's Henley Business School, where both offer a Master's degree in Business Administration.

It is unclear if the exclusivity clause has been breached, because although each institution signed individual agreements with EISB in an agreed area of expertise, the details of the arrangements are not made known to the other institutions. If they were, then it may have been an easy matter for the institutions to agree on an initial course offering, with leeway given to the offering of other programmes further down the road. Furthermore, it is unclear to what extent EISB has legal authority and right to act when there is a breach of the exclusivity clause, due to the fact that programme registration is agreed to between the institution and the Ministry of Higher Education and Malaysian Qualifications Agency, and not with EISB.

At present, there is a sense of competition between the institutions, making academic coordination almost impossible on many different levels. Institutions have become divided into cliques, to the point that some have chosen to stay away from collaborative marketing fairs and ad hoc partners' meetings because they have begun to see other institutions in EduCity as competitors.

As a result, several institutions are now embarking on their own promotional activities, holding open days and participating in educational fairs as individual universities and not as part of EduCity. This is problematic. EduCity is supposed to be a destination, and all marketing and promotional efforts should be anchored under the EduCity brand, and not occur in a piecemeal fashion. Intensified individual promotional efforts will only reinforce stronger competition between the institutions, making the learning experience a far cry from the initial ideals of EduCity.

The lack of coordination has also pushed institutions to focus on their own academic direction. Students as well as academics are unable to cross their disciplinary boundaries to learn and conduct research. For instance, an engineering student at USMC will not be able to attend any courses in cinematic arts at MMU or maritime-related courses at NMIT. No doubt, there have been some positive changes in this respect ever since the three British institutions began to explore some forms of collaboration such as allowing students to do language courses at UoRM, with NUMed and USMC not needing to duplicate these courses.

Having initially secured the commitment and participation of world-renowned universities, EISB seems at this moment to be taking a hands-off approach towards coordinating these institutions. But as noted by an institutional leader, the absence of an active umbrella body to coordinate the direction of the institutions towards a common goal will remain the biggest obstacle to EduCity becoming the "best-in-class" higher education destination it set out to be.

A DIVIDED AND REGIMENTED ENVIRONMENT

Another issue to consider is the fact that the environment and landscape on the campus is also fairly divided. Institutions that have their own

compounds have fenced them off. One must first pass through a security barrier when entering the EduCity campus, and then through another layer of security as one enters the compound of each institution. Vehicles have to be registered at each point. At some institutions, security guards will escort the visitors' vehicles to designated parking spaces. In other institutions visitors are either escorted by a security guard to the specific meeting venue, or they have to wait for their host to meet them. The general feeling is similar to that of a military camp or high-security prison.

While the institutions may exercise tight security, the common area within the EduCity campus provides a contrasting experience. As parts of the campus are still under construction, there are many areas which are not fenced off, which are dusty and seem abandoned, and which do not promise safety or comfort, especially for students who have to walk around the campus. There is also a lack of connecting walkways between buildings to shield pedestrians from the rain or sun. Connectivity within the campus is also a problem. There is no public/common transport or facilities and support for those with limited mobility.

FINAL THOUGHTS

While EduCity has been successful in providing educational opportunities, especially for Johoreans, its future development cannot be taken for granted. As highlighted, the need for coordination between the institutions is crucial. The branding and solidarity of all institutions under the umbrella of EduCity need to be strengthened, and importantly the sense of competition among institutions needs to be transformed into a spirit of collaboration. More specifically, the role of EISB must also evolve, from constructing and setting up EduCity to managing and governing EduCity like a university (although without the authority to award qualifications).

Looking into the future, the concept of EduCity may be further enhanced through the provision of an even more diversified and holistic learning experience for students. Situated as it is in the heart of Southeast Asia, EduCity should consider expanding beyond Western higher education institutions. As pointed out in the Johor Development

Report 2015, Asian and Islamic higher education institutions are needed to complement the existing Western institutions (Wan et al. 2016). Major universities in China, Japan, Korea, India, Turkey and Iran can be brought in to work alongside the existing Western-based institutions from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Singapore.

Not only should different types of institutions be considered, EduCity should also put in place structures and mechanisms to allow and encourage students, who may be enrolled in one particular institution, to expand their learning across EduCity. Only when this happens will EduCity live up to its claim to be the “best-in-class” integrated higher education hub.

Having articulated the challenges and issues underlying the development of EduCity, we would like to point out some limitations of our study. Due to constraints on time and access to participants, we are not in a position to shed light on the learning experience of students, specifically the quality of education in lecture halls, classrooms and laboratories as such a focus would require an ethnographic study. Our limited insights on the learning experience have mainly been confined to the views of academics and administrators. We are also unable to devote more attention to specific areas such as research and development activities, industry collaboration, community service, or governance, management and funding of these institutions. These specific areas about the institutions within EduCity are, nonetheless, interesting and important and should be taken up by future research.

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