

# Political Policy of Singapore's World Class University

## *What Islamic Higher Education In Indonesia Can Learn*

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to mainly explore challenges faced by Singapore government in creating a global-competitive university called 'a world class university'. By taking political policy of education implemented in National University of Singapore (NUS), this paper shows that several strategies have been implemented by Singapore government to make NUS as a globally oriented university. Recruitment of highly qualified lecturers and talented students, well autonomous and funding supports as well as well equipped facilities of teaching and research are among the main strategies of Singapore government and NUS to make the university as a world class university. This study is a qualitative approach with a case study method. To collect the data, this research reviews documents and literatures related to Singapore policy on education as well as NUS annual reports and also make personal interviews with students and lecturers of NUS to strengthen the argument and to confirm literatures' findings. The result shows that Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia could follow the same steps to make their educational institutions are globally recognized.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the higher education system, the world class university plays an important role in training the professionals, scientists, researchers needed to support the national innovation system. It is in this context that many countries and governments are emphasizing priorities to ensure that top universities in their countries can actually create scientific progress. Jamil Salmi (2009) refers to the characteristics of a world class university as a university that has a world-class research reputation and has primary responsibility in developing new science especially innovations in science and technology. Globally indeed, higher education has strategic value when it is associated with economic development and its contribution to the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of a nation.

The main objective of this paper is to examine the challenges facing by Singapore in building a globally competitive university, or 'world class university' by taking the case of 'education politics' policy applied at the National University of Singapore (NUS) is trying to answer the following question: what is the 'politics of education' policy undertaken by the Singapore government to develop a world-class university? What significant decisions did NUS make in selecting

students and lecturers? Does NUS have financial guarantees for the continuity of its faculty research activities? How far the success of NUS's strategy in internationalizing its students and faculty? The end of the questions above is, what lessons can be taken from what has been done NUS for the development of universities in Indonesia, especially the colleges of Islamic Religious College (PTKI) in Indonesia.

To answer the above questions, the method used is a qualitative approach with case studies. The data collection technique of this research is by reviewing the documents and literature related to the education policy of Singapore along with the NUS annual report and personal interviews with some lecturers and students to confirm the findings of the literature.

## 2 DEFINE 'UNIVERSITY WORLD CLASS'

In this decade, world class university terminology has become a phrase that attracts a lot of attention (Albath 2003; Li 2012; Simmons, 2003). This is because becoming a world-class university is not just about improving the quality of learning and research in universities but also more importantly is developing

the capacity to compete in the global market of education. It's just that the paradox as mentioned by Altbach (2007) that everyone wants a world-class university, but no one knows what kind of creature it is and how to achieve it. To be a member of one of the world's exclusive university groups is not something that can be achieved simply by declaring yourself. However, the university status of the world is an elite status labeled by the international recognition out there.

At least some of the characteristics of a university are said to be world-class as qualified professors and professors, have distinctive features in research, guaranteed teaching quality, high government participation and non-governmental institutions as financial resources, have high-talented students including international students, have academic freedom, university structure with high autonomy, excellent facilities in terms of teaching, research, administration and student life facilities on campus (Niland, 2000, Salmi 2009).

### **3 SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT SUPPORT THROUGH THE POLITICAL POLICY**

Beginning in the 1970s intensive strategy has been undertaken by the Singapore government by making the university as a tool to achieve the technological progress of a nation. Therefore, since 1962, quality teaching and research have been the focus and priority of NUS, and since the 1980s NUS has made excellent research the university's primary mission.

NUS implemented an educational development policy based on a meritocracy system and prepared alumni who could develop Singapore's economic growth (Ramakrishna, 2012). As Singapore's economy continues to increase and change within a few years from manufacturing activity to science-based economic activity, NUS's role has become more significant especially its focus on research since the late 1980s and the commercialization of technology since the 2000s. Furthermore, NUS's mission is also wider than just a local higher education that prepares the workers to become a global-oriented university, competes to become the best faculty and seeks talented students from different parts of the world, and strives to become a beneficial university and have positive implications for the world through the development of science (Seah, 1983). To support NUS in that direction, and to enable NUS to transform Singapore's economy, the Ministry of Education of

Singapore made NUS a corporate university in the mid-2000s.

The granting of greater autonomy in 2006 by making NUS a corporate institution enabled NUS to accelerate organizational transformation to better address the challenges of global competition (Wong, 2007). The granting of greater autonomy to NUS also allows the university to respond to new and more proactive opportunities in responding to market demands. NUS can respond and develop it quickly. For example, NUS responds to market demands by opening new, interdisciplinary majors such as nanotechnology and digital interactive media. To support a more varied educational approach, NUS opened a new medical school (in collaboration with Duke University of America) by taking an educational model in post-American model, without eliminating British-style medical education models at the undergraduate level (Mukherjee, H., and Wong, P K, 2011).

In addition to government policies that make NUS a corporation, the Singapore government at the beginning of NUS, implemented a policy on language use in educational institutions. In addition to maintaining local languages in schools in Singapore, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in early independence paid special attention to English as a medium of instruction that could connect the people of Singapore consisting of various ethnic backgrounds with the world economy. The number of language lessons at the middle school level, and making English as the language of instruction, is able to prepare candidates for students and NUS graduates who are ready to compete at the world level.

In addition to language policy, Singapore's government finance policy also supports NUS's reaching its goal of becoming a world-class university. One of the characteristics of a world-class campus is having a stable and large financial support. The Singapore government's commitment to support education in the country is great. Since 1962, the government has allocated three percent of the country's GDP for education -the financial proportion for university-level education has risen from 10.8 percent to 19.8 percent between 1962 and 2007 and has continued to increase until now (Mukherjee, H. and Wong, PK, 2011).

The government support is that makes NUS get the rank in the world-class university. Between 2004 and 2009, according to Times Higher Education University Ranking (THE-QS 2008, 2009) NUS was among the top 20 universities in the world (2004, 2005 and 2006), and ranked 30th in the world in 2008 and 2009 and last year 2015 NUS is ranked 12th in the

world and the number one university in Asia. In terms of absorption of alumni in the world of work, NUS also managed to occupy the order of seventeen in the world.

#### 4 EXCELLENT STUDENTS AND LECTURERS

Among the significant factors for a world class university is the state of input of students and lecturers. The world-class research university is known for its selective university in accepting students and lecturers both locally and internationally. NUS is well known for its highly selective policies in accepting students both locally and internationally. Meritocracy system is really applied, not only in selecting prospective students but also prospective lecturers.

The NUS tradition of accepting undergraduate students is those who have graduated from high school with a special exam (in Singapore known as A-level examination result). Although the entry requirements of each department and faculty differ depending on the popularity of the majors, but certainly the trend of NUS entry competition continues to increase from year to year, especially in high-demand majors such as medicine, law and business.

Several innovation programs were also introduced by NUS to introduce students to the practical world of industry, involvement in international research and socialization. In 1999, the NUS curriculum adopted the Harvard University curriculum model. International exchange program cooperation is also well planned by NUS. NUS cooperates with the world's top universities such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the University of Pennsylvania, Stanford University, the Royal Institute of Technology Stockholm and the Australian National University (Mukherjee, H., and Wong, P. K., 2011).

In addition to international cooperation programs, NUS issued a program to attract talented students from abroad to study at NUS. NUS provides a large scholarship for talented students from abroad. So is the talented lecturers from reputable universities abroad to teach permanent lecturers in Singapore with high salary offerings. With the goal of making NUS a world-class competitive university, NUS continues to develop the way of recruitment of qualified lecturers with very high salary compensation. Therefore, since the 1990s, NUS has issued a policy related to the strategy of attracting and maintaining the

internationally acclaimed talented lecturers 'at home' teaching in NUS.

#### 5 LESSONS FOR PTKI IN INDONESIA

Of course what is disclosed above is only part of the process and policies undertaken by NUS in achieving the achievement of a world-class university. There are still many other aspects that have not been presented and photographed in this short article about how NUS can be perched in 12 world in 2015. It's just that there are some notes that can be learned and applied in Indonesia, especially in the campuses of Islamic Religious Higher Education (PTKI), which led to world-class Islamic universities.

The first lesson is to realize the world-class PTKI cannot be done by campus institutions themselves without the support of various parties, especially the government. Singapore government policy that views Human Resources as the most important asset in nation's economic development needs to be replicated.

Singapore government policy to make English as the language of instruction in teaching and learning in NUS as a step towards the university world needs to be imitated by PTKI. If the government has not issued the policy, the campus in each PTKI may be able to make the first step to make English or Arabic as the language of instruction by making a special class flagship with the introduction of both languages.

*Second*, just as the Singapore government encourages funding for campuses, the Indonesian government has also been quite supportive in terms of funding with a twenty percent education fund from the State Budget (APBN). If the funding given by the government is not maximized, it is the duty of the campus officials and other stakeholders to actively participate in obtaining funds outside government funds to support the campus activities.

*Third*, NUS experience shows that in terms of cooperation with the international campus, they have a mature plan and strategy. They chose cooperation with internationally reputable campuses such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the University of Pennsylvania, Stanford University, the Royal Institute of Technology Stockholm, the Fudan University of Shanghai and the Australian National University. Apparently, PTKI need to follow the steps taken NUS in cooperation. In this case, PTKI campuses are good enough in exploring cooperation with outside campuses. It's just how to improve the cooperation so that not only limited to Memorandum

of Understanding (MoU) on paper without follow-up to conduct activities both exchange students and lecturers. It is needed to start exploring the cooperation of exchange of faculty and students with universities of the world.

*Fourth*, among the criteria to become a world university recognized by the international community is the result of research conducted by the lecturers. In this case, PTKI campuses through research center institutions under each LP2M in PTKI campuses need to review the research funding scheme for lecturers. It is important to consider that research funding is only assumed to be an annual 'share of livelihood' for lecturers so that it is considered less competitive. Research funding schemes with very small nominal individual research financing need to be reviewed. The research incentive is not only in the form of cost and research funding. Learning to the case in NUS, they give appreciation to lecturers who have more skill and high willingness to perform and produce monumental research results. NUS provides dispensation to lecturers who diligently research with less burdened by the overload of teaching loads. In addition to the lack of teaching load, there is a special scheme for lecturers to conduct research activities with sabbatical leave program. *Fifth*, among the success of NUS to become a world-class university is due to the lecturers and students who are talented. It seems that this can be imitated by PTKI campuses mainly because enthusiasts enter the PTKI in Indonesia continue to increase from year to year. A truly credible and accountable recruitment system for prospective students should be undertaken by PTKI. Of the many interest, it is possible for the campus to recruit prospective students. If NUS makes a Residential College System program, then in some PTKI in Indonesia already has a forerunner to the program through Ma'had Al-Jamiah. The gifted students are prioritized to stay in the dorm or Ma'had so they can learn their foreign language skills.

In addition to talented student candidates, NUS also has internationally reputable lecturers. To improve the quality of existing lecturers, a well-designed strategic program is needed to improve the quality of lecturers. Assessment is required for the existing lecturers from the *Tridharma Perguruan Tinggi* side. If one aspect is lacking then the campus should facilitate how the lecturers improve the aspect of the weakness. An institution at the university level is required to assess and develop the capacity of lecturers.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The NUS case above shows that strategic thinking directed towards national development and economic progress can be a 'driver' for academic progress that allows a university to become a world-class university. NUS's experience in progressive transformation makes this university a world-class university worthy of being imitated by countries in Southeast Asia including Indonesia in general and religious campuses such as Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN), Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) and Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri (STAIN) in particular. The hope to build a world class Islamic campus should be supported by all parties. Like NUS in Singapore, both central and local governments, university leaders, lecturers, students, administrative staff and all the academic community of PTKI must step together and join hands to create that expectation. If policies, strategic plans, real programs to a world-class university start from now, it is not impossible that the hope can be realized in the near future.

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