

Building Global-Ready Institutions: A Conceptual Framework for Enhancing Internalisation Capacity in Malaysian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Internationalising higher education is a strategic goal for Malaysia in its pursuit of becoming a global education hub. However, internal capacity constraints within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) hinder these efforts. This conceptual paper presents a framework to help the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) strengthen institutional capacity for sustainable global engagement. Grounded in the Resource-Based View, Organisational Learning Theory, and Institutional Theory, the framework outlines key capacity domains of human resources, infrastructure, governance, culture, and finance needed to develop “global-ready” institutions. It emphasises strategic processes such as diagnostics, professional development, policy alignment, peer learning, and continuous feedback. Strengthening these internal factors will enhance international student recruitment, research collaboration, and global rankings, supporting Malaysia’s higher education aspirations. This study offers practical insights for policymakers and institutional leaders aiming to improve internationalisation outcomes.

Keywords: Internalisation, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), international student

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the internationalisation of higher education has emerged as a pivotal strategy for countries seeking to enhance their global competitiveness, attract international students, and foster cross-border collaborations in research and innovation (Knight, 2015; de Wit, 2020). Malaysia, positioned strategically within Southeast Asia, has articulated ambitious goals to become a regional education hub, as outlined in its Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (MOHE, 2015). The country’s higher education institutions (HEIs) is tasked with not only increasing the quantity of international students but also improving the quality and sustainability of internationalisation processes. However, despite numerous policy initiatives and investments aimed at outward expansion, many Malaysian HEIs face significant internal capacity constraints that undermine their ability to fully realise these objectives. The research problem centers on these internal capacity limitations include inadequacies in human capital, infrastructure, governance, institutional culture, and financial resources necessary for effective internationalisation (Brewer, E., & Leask, B. (2023).

While external factors such as global competition and regulatory environments are critical, the internal organisational factors often receive less attention in policy discourse and academic research, yet they fundamentally shape the capacity of institutions to engage in and sustain international activities (Knight, 2012). Malaysian HEIs frequently struggle with limited faculty international experience, insufficient student support services for international cohorts, and fragmented governance structures that inhibit cohesive strategic planning for internationalisation (Othman, 2018). This paper adopts a multi-theoretical lens to conceptualise internal capacity as a multifaceted construct vital for building “global-ready” institutions. Drawing primarily on the Resource-Based View (RBV), which emphasises the strategic importance of valuable, rare, and inimitable internal resources in achieving competitive advantage (Barney, J. B. & Arikan, A. M., 2005), this study also integrates Organizational Learning Theory to highlight the processes through which institutions develop and adapt their capacities over time (Argyris & Schön, 1997).

Furthermore, Institutional Theory provides insight into how external policy environments and normative pressures shape organisational behaviour and capacity development (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This theoretical foundation enables a holistic understanding of the internal and external dynamics influencing internationalisation capacity in the Malaysian higher education context. The main argument advanced in this paper is that to transform Malaysian HEIs into truly global-ready institutions, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) must prioritise the systematic diagnosis and enhancement of internal capacities through a comprehensive, integrated framework. Such a framework should address human resource development, infrastructural modernisation, governance realignment, cultural change, and sustainable financial models, while embedding continuous feedback mechanisms for ongoing improvement. By doing so, Malaysian HEIs will be better positioned to attract and retain international students, foster impactful research partnerships, and enhance their global standing ultimately contributing to national development goals and regional leadership in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia has garnered significant attention as the nation aspires to become a global education hub. While external strategies and policies have been extensively discussed, internal capacity constraints within higher education institutions (HEIs) often impede the effective implementation of internationalisation initiatives. This literature review examines key scholarly sources that address these internal challenges, providing a theoretical and empirical foundation for developing a conceptual framework to enhance internationalisation capacity in Malaysian HEIs.

Munusamy & Hashim (2019): Internationalisation Rationale and Networking

Munusamy and Hashim (2019) identify the multifaceted rationales for internationalisation in Malaysian HEIs, including economic, socio-cultural, political, and academic motivations. Their study highlights the importance of international networking and cooperation in strengthening the internationalisation agenda. However, they note that while networking is emphasised, the internal capacity of institutions to engage effectively in such networks remains underexplored. This gap underscores the need for a framework that addresses internal constraints to leverage external opportunities.

Wan & Abdullah (2021): Sustainable Development Goals and Internationalisation

Wan and Abdullah (2021) examine the alignment of internationalisation practices in Malaysian HEIs with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Their research reveals that while there is a growing awareness of the SDGs, the integration of these goals into institutional practices is inconsistent. The study suggests that internal factors, such as governance structures and resource allocation, play a crucial role in the effective integration of SDGs. This finding points to the importance of enhancing internal capacities to achieve internationalisation objectives aligned with global agendas.

Tham (2013): Government Policies and Institutional Responses

Tham (2013) explores the relationship between government policies and institutional responses in the internationalisation of Malaysian HEIs. The study highlights the role of policies in shaping institutional strategies

but notes that the capacity of institutions to respond effectively varies. Factors such as institutional autonomy, leadership, and resource availability are identified as critical determinants of institutional responses. This underscores the necessity for a framework that enhances internal capacities to align institutional actions with policy objectives.

Hassan et al. (2015): Networking and Staff Competence Development

Hassan et al. (2015) discusses the role of networking and internationalisation in developing academic staff competencies in Malaysian technical universities. The study emphasises the importance of international collaborations in enhancing staff skills and competencies. However, it also points out that the effectiveness of these collaborations is contingent upon the internal readiness of institutions, including staff preparedness and institutional support systems. This highlights the need for a framework that addresses internal capacity to maximise the benefits of international networking.

Theoretical Perspectives

The reviewed literature collectively underscores the significance of internal capacity in the internationalisation process. The Resource-Based View (RBV) suggests that institutions possessing valuable, rare, and inimitable resources can achieve sustained competitive advantage (Barney, J. B. & Arikan, A. M., 2005). In the context of internationalisation, these resources include human capital, organisational culture, and institutional infrastructure. Organisational Learning Theory posits that institutions must adapt and learn to enhance their capabilities over time (Argyris & Schön, 1997). Institutional Theory highlights how external pressures and norms influence organisational behaviour and capacity development (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive lens to understand the internal constraints faced by Malaysian HEIs in their internationalisation efforts.

Gaps in Literature

While existing studies provide valuable insights into various aspects of internationalisation, several gaps remain. First, there is limited research focusing on the internal capacity constraints of Malaysian HEIs, particularly in terms of human resources, governance structures, and infrastructure. Second, existing frameworks often overlook the interplay between internal and external factors in shaping internationalisation outcomes. Third, there is a need for empirical studies that assess the effectiveness of capacity-building initiatives in enhancing internationalisation. Addressing these gaps is crucial for developing a conceptual framework that enables MOHE to enhance the internationalisation capacity of Malaysian HEIs.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The internationalisation capacity of higher education institutions (HEIs) is a multidimensional construct that requires a robust theoretical foundation to understand the internal dynamics influencing global readiness. This paper draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives; the Resource-Based View (RBV), Organisational Learning Theory, and Institutional Theory to develop a holistic conceptual framework for enhancing the internal capacity of Malaysian HEIs to internationalise effectively.

Resource-Based View (RBV)

At the core of the framework lies the Resource-Based View (RBV), which posits that an institution's competitive advantage depends on its unique resources and capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, J. B. & Arikan, A. M., 2005). Within the context of internationalisation, these resources include skilled faculty with international experience, modern infrastructure supporting cross-border education, and effective governance mechanisms (Kraatz & Zajac, 2001). RBV underscores the need for Malaysian HEIs to develop internal assets strategically to support sustainable global engagement, shifting the focus from external pressures to leveraging institutional strengths. The Resource-Based View (RBV) offers a foundational perspective on what internal resources HEIs must possess to gain a sustainable advantage in the global higher education landscape. RBV posits that organisations achieve long-term success by developing resources that are

valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. In the context of Malaysian higher education, these resources encompass human capital, physical and digital infrastructure, reputational capital, and organisational capabilities.

Human capital refers to the international competencies of faculty, staff, and students. It includes the recruitment of academics with global research profiles, participation in international mobility programmes, and the integration of global perspectives into teaching and curriculum. Infrastructure, particularly in terms of research facilities, digital technologies, and international student services, plays a vital role in supporting global engagement. Institutional reputation, shaped by global rankings, international accreditations, and research collaborations, also constitutes a strategic resource. Finally, effective governance structures, transparent leadership, and strategic financial management are essential organisational capabilities that enable institutions to pursue and sustain internationalization initiatives.

Within the RBV framework, MOHE's role is to facilitate the development of these core resources across the sector. This includes providing targeted investments, enabling benchmarking, and supporting resource development initiatives aligned with national and international goals.

Organisational Learning Theory

Organisational Learning Theory complements RBV by emphasising the processes through which institutions acquire, disseminate, and apply knowledge to adapt to changing environments (Argyris & Schön, 1997). Internationalisation demands continuous learning at multiple levels—from individual faculty development to institutional policy adjustments ensuring adaptability and innovation (de Wit & Hunter, 2015). This theory explains how Malaysian HEIs can build capacity over time through experiential learning, knowledge sharing, and reflective practices, thereby evolving into global-ready institutions. While RBV focuses on the "what" of capacity development, Organisational Learning Theory explains "how" institutions develop and sustain these capacities. Internationalisation is not a one-time goal but a continuous process that demands learning, adaptation, and transformation. Through this lens, HEIs are viewed as dynamic learning organisations that evolve through knowledge acquisition and the application of new practices.

Organisational learning occurs at multiple levels. At the single-loop level, institutions refine existing practices, such as improving administrative procedures for student mobility or enhancing support services for international students. At the double-loop level, institutions question their underlying strategies and assumptions, such as redefining the purpose and scope of international partnerships or revising the internationalisation goals in strategic plans. Triple-loop learning goes deeper, transforming institutional values and culture to integrate internationalisation as a core organisational identity.

MOHE can foster such learning by encouraging cross-institutional collaboration, supporting leadership development programmes, and promoting platforms for knowledge exchange. Creating communities of practice, investing in professional development, and supporting innovation in curriculum design are essential strategies for sustaining learning. These processes enable HEIs to move from fragmented efforts to coherent, institution-wide internationalisation strategies.

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory offers a macro-level perspective, highlighting how organisational behaviours and structures are shaped by external norms, rules, and expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008). In the Malaysian higher education context, MOHE policies, accreditation standards, and global education norms constitute institutional pressures that influence how HEIs configure their internationalisation strategies and internal capacities (Marginson, 2011). Institutional theory thus bridges the gap between external drivers and internal organisational change, underscoring the importance of alignment between MOHE mandates and institutional responses. Institutional Theory brings attention to the external environment in which HEIs operate, emphasising the regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive forces that influence institutional behaviour. Malaysian HEIs are embedded in a policy and cultural landscape shaped by national guidelines, quality assurance frameworks, global standards, and societal expectations.

Regulative pressures in Malaysia include national frameworks such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025, along with performance measurement systems like MyRA and SETARA. Normative expectations arise from professional standards, societal demands for employable graduates, and the perceived role of HEIs in national development. Cultural-cognitive influences relate to shared beliefs and international norms about what constitutes a "world-class" institution, including accreditation, academic freedom, and global partnerships.

MOHE, in this context, must ensure that policy instruments and institutional practices are aligned with both national priorities and international standards. This involves harmonising domestic regulations with global frameworks, enabling HEIs to navigate external expectations while preserving their unique missions. Institutional alignment fosters legitimacy, enhances credibility, and supports the broader goal of internationalisation as a means of national development.

Integrative Framework and Application

Figure 1 shows three theories that interconnect to form an integrative conceptual framework. RBV focuses on the internal resources and capabilities HEIs must develop; Organisational Learning Theory explains how these capacities are built and sustained; and Institutional Theory contextualises the external environment shaping these processes. Together, they provide a comprehensive lens for MOHE to design policies and interventions that address internal capacity constraints systematically. In practical terms, the framework suggests that MOHE's role extends beyond policy formulation to include facilitating capacity diagnostics, fostering learning environments, and enabling institutional alignment with national and global standards. For Malaysian HEIs, this means developing human capital (e.g., international experience), upgrading infrastructure, improving governance, and nurturing an organisational culture supportive of internationalisation (Knight, 2015; Leask, 2015).

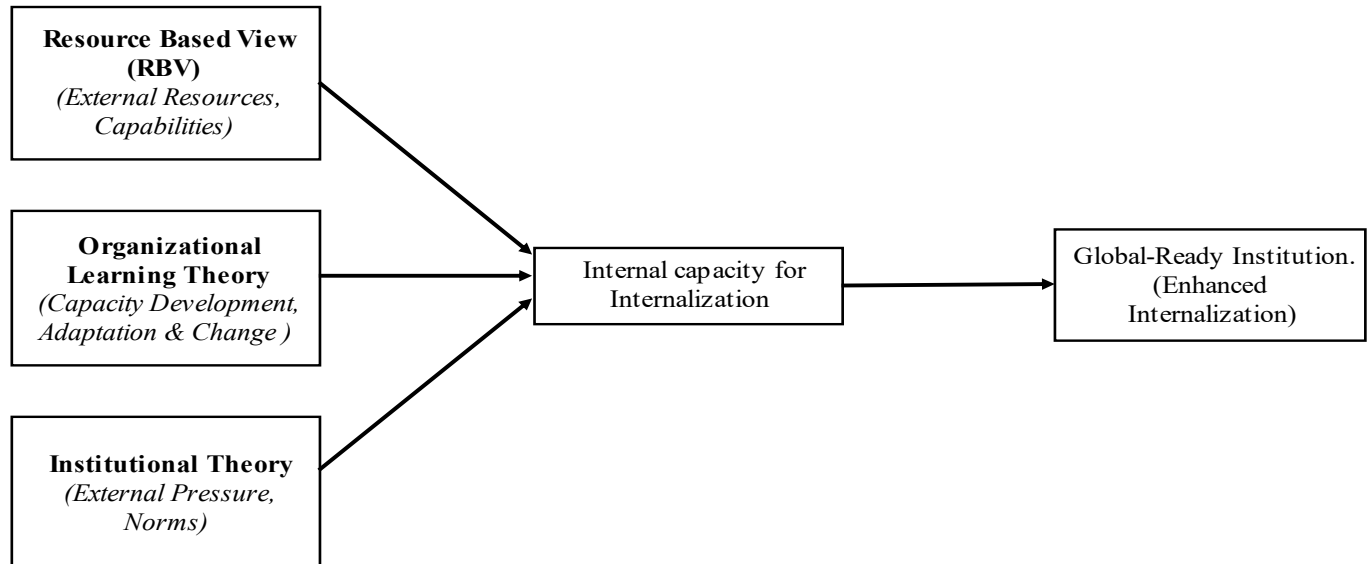


Figure 1: Integrative conceptual framework Building Global-Ready Institutions

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To empirically validate and operationalise the proposed conceptual framework for enhancing internationalisation capacity in Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs), this study employs a mixed-methods exploratory sequential design. This methodological approach is well-suited to the research aim, which is to examine internal institutional capacities and strategic processes through both qualitative exploration and quantitative validation. Grounded in the integration of the Resource-Based View (RBV), Organisational Learning Theory, and Institutional Theory, the research design facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how internal factors influence internationalisation outcomes.

The study will proceed in two phases. The qualitative phase aims to explore the internal dynamics and contextual challenges faced by Malaysian HEIs in implementing internationalisation strategies. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with key institutional actors, including international office directors, deputy vice-chancellors for international affairs, faculty members with international engagement experience, and policymakers from the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). Additionally, focus group discussions will be conducted with staff and students involved in international programmes, and institutional documents such as strategic plans, internationalisation policies, and accreditation reports will be analysed to triangulate findings. Thematic analysis will be employed to identify patterns and themes related to institutional capacity domains, learning processes, and policy alignment, as articulated in the conceptual framework.

Insights gained from the qualitative phase will inform the development of a survey instrument designed to measure key constructs within the framework. This will include items related to human capital, infrastructure, governance structures, organisational culture, financial resources, organisational learning mechanisms, and institutional responsiveness to external policy environments. The quantitative phase will involve the administration of the survey to a stratified random sample of 30 to 50 HEIs across Malaysia, ensuring representation across institutional types (public/private, research/teaching-intensive) and geographic regions.

Quantitative data will be analysed using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis (EFA and CFA) to validate the structure of the theoretical constructs. Additionally, structural equation modeling (SEM) will be employed to examine the relationships among internal resources (as conceptualised by RBV), learning processes (Organisational Learning Theory), and external alignment pressures (Institutional Theory), and their collective impact on internationalisation outcomes such as international student recruitment, research collaborations, and global rankings.

The study will adhere to established ethical protocols, including obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality of data, and securing necessary institutional approvals. The research is expected to produce a refined and empirically validated framework that can guide institutional capacity-building strategies and inform policy development by the MOHE.

By combining theoretical rigor with empirical investigation, this methodology provides a robust foundation for understanding and enhancing the internationalisation capacity of Malaysian HEIs. It contributes both to the academic literature on higher education internationalisation and to the practical efforts of institutions and policymakers aiming to position Malaysia as a competitive global education hub.

DISCUSSION

The proposed conceptual framework for building global-ready institutions by enhancing internationalisation capacity in Malaysian higher education offers a significant contribution to both theoretical knowledge and practical policymaking. By integrating the Resource-Based View (RBV), Organisational Learning Theory, and Institutional Theory, this framework advances current understanding of how internal capacities can be systematically developed to address the challenges of internationalisation within HEIs. This section discusses the framework's theoretical contributions, strengths, limitations, and potential applications in the Malaysian context and beyond.

Contribution to Theoretical Knowledge

The framework enriches the literature on higher education internationalisation by explicitly addressing the internal capacity constraints that often remain underexplored. Traditionally, research has focused on external drivers such as globalisation pressures, governmental policies, and market competition (Knight, 2015; de Wit, 2020). However, the proposed model foregrounds the strategic role of institutional resources and capabilities, consistent with RBV principles, in shaping successful internationalisation (Barney, J. B. & Arikan, A. M., 2005). By emphasising internal resource optimisation ranging from skilled human capital to infrastructural readiness, the framework provides a nuanced understanding of how institutions can develop sustainable competitive advantages in the global education arena. Moreover, incorporating Organisational Learning Theory adds a

dynamic perspective on capacity building. The framework recognises that internationalisation is not a static goal but an evolving process requiring continuous learning, adaptation, and knowledge management (Argyris & Schön, 1997). This aligns with findings from de Wit and Hunter (2015), who emphasise the importance of organisational reflexivity and learning in responding to complex internationalisation challenges. Finally, Institutional Theory's inclusion situates these internal efforts within broader normative and regulatory environments, highlighting the interplay between external mandates and internal agency (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This integrated theoretical approach bridges micro-level institutional dynamics with macro-level systemic influences, offering a comprehensive lens for future research and practice.

Strengths of the Framework

One of the key strengths of this framework lies in its holistic and multi-dimensional nature. By integrating multiple theories, it transcends single-perspective analyses and captures the complexity inherent in internationalising HEIs. The framework's emphasis on continuous feedback loops and learning processes ensures that capacity development is adaptive, responsive, and sustainable qualities essential for thriving in an unpredictable global higher education landscape (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999). Furthermore, the model's focus on internal capacity aligns well with practical realities in Malaysia, where resource constraints and governance challenges frequently hinder internationalisation efforts. This provides policymakers, particularly the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), with actionable guidance on areas requiring investment and reform. By highlighting the interdependence of human capital, governance structures, and infrastructural resources, the framework encourages a balanced approach rather than piecemeal interventions.

Limitations and Areas for Improvement

Despite its comprehensive nature, the framework has limitations that warrant consideration. Firstly, the conceptual model is broad and may require contextual adaptation when applied to specific institutions with diverse missions, sizes, and resource endowments. The framework does not prescribe detailed operational strategies, leaving the translation of concepts into practice somewhat open-ended. This could pose challenges for institutions lacking the capacity for self-assessment and strategic planning. Secondly, the framework predominantly addresses institutional capacity but does not extensively explore the role of external partnerships, such as industry collaborations or international consortia, which have been shown to significantly impact internationalisation success (Knight, 2012). Future iterations could integrate these external dimensions to provide more comprehensive ecosystem view. Lastly, empirical validation of the framework is necessary to establish its efficacy. While grounded in well-established theories, the framework remains conceptual. Longitudinal studies examining its application and outcomes within Malaysian HEIs would strengthen its credibility and utility.

Potential Applications

The framework has significant practical implications for policymakers and institutional leaders in Malaysia and other emerging education hubs. For MOHE, the framework offers a diagnostic tool to assess institutional readiness and identify capacity gaps hindering internationalisation. It can inform policy formulation, targeted funding allocation, and capacity-building programmes aimed at enhancing human resources, governance, and infrastructure. At the institutional level, the framework encourages HEIs to adopt a strategic, integrated approach to internationalisation, focusing on building core capabilities while remaining adaptable to changing external conditions. The emphasis on organisational learning promotes a culture of continuous improvement, essential for maintaining global competitiveness (Leask, 2015). Beyond Malaysia, the framework's integrative approach provides a valuable reference for other countries facing similar internal capacity challenges in higher education internationalisation. Its adaptability allows institutions to contextualise the model according to local environments and policy landscapes.

Future Work

The proposed conceptual framework offers a foundational model for enhancing the internationalisation capacity of Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs), yet several avenues for future research and development

remain. One key extension involves tailoring the framework to accommodate the diversity of Malaysian HEIs, which vary widely in size, mission, and resource availability. Future studies could explore how institutional typologies influence the prioritisation and implementation of internal capacity-building strategies, enabling a more nuanced, context-sensitive application of the framework (de Wit & Hunter, 2015).

Additionally, while this study emphasises internal capacities, integrating external factors such as global academic networks, industry partnerships, and regional collaborations could provide a more holistic perspective on internationalisation ecosystems. Expanding the framework to incorporate these dimensions would address the multi-layered nature of international engagement and offer comprehensive guidance for policymakers and institutions alike (Knight, 2012).

Empirical validation is another crucial direction for future work. Longitudinal and case study research is needed to test the framework's applicability and effectiveness across different Malaysian HEIs. Such research could measure the impact of targeted interventions on institutional capacity and internationalisation outcomes, refining the framework based on practical insights. Mixed methods approaches, combining quantitative capacity assessments with qualitative organisational analyses, would be particularly valuable in capturing the complexity of internationalisation processes.

Furthermore, investigating the role of leadership styles and organisational culture in facilitating or impeding capacity development could enrich the framework's explanatory power. Understanding how institutional actors interpret and enact internationalisation mandates can shape tailored capacity-building initiatives that resonate with local contexts. In summary, future research should focus on contextual adaptation, ecosystem integration, and empirical testing to evolve the conceptual framework into a robust, actionable tool for Malaysia and comparable higher education systems worldwide.

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