

A background photograph of laboratory glassware, including a round-bottom flask and a beaker, with a gloved hand visible on the left. The image is framed by a dark blue gradient at the bottom and a pink gradient at the top.

Assoc Prof Dr Fawnizu Azmadi Hussin

UTP Transformation Journey

Insights on UTP Transformation Journey

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Contents

Pg.

- 3 Introduction
- 4 Challenges
- 5 Transformation Plan
- 6 Impediment of Transformation
- 7 Implementation of Strategies

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Interview with Assoc Prof Dr Fawnizu Azmadi Hussin



The transformation happened in 2008, I was lucky enough to be one of the few people who were again selected to be involved in the next face of transformation which we called a 'Pacesetter Transformation' that happened in 2017. We had 12 people sat together for about 6 weeks to define the transformation with a sort of engagement with various people.



Introduction

When I left the University in 2005 to pursue my further study for Ph.D., at the time the university had only started to be involved in research. So, for the next three and half years I was doing my research actively at one of the universities in Japan. So, when I came back at the end of 2008, I was approached by the current vice-chancellor who was The Director of the Research and Information office to be a part of the transformation plan team to develop the transformation for the university also to go from the very early stage of research to something more like Stanford, MIT, and Imperial College.

Those were our aspirations at that time. So, when I joined the transformation plan team, my first impression was the excellent time for me to apply the knowledge that I've gained from my experience of researching at the university in Japan which was a research-active university. Then, to bring the knowledge, culture, and the whole eco-system to a university that was only about 10 years old at the time. Next, to make sure that we can quickly bring ourselves to a level where we can be proud of, as one of the top universities in Malaysia, if not in the region.

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CHALLENGES TOWARDS TRANSFORMATION PLAN

When we started to deploy the transformation plan under the 'Pacesetter Action Lab', the first challenge that we faced was to take some of the people who are doing something else and make them realign their research to something that the university wants to focus on.

That was the main challenge that we faced. In terms of resistance, I think it is there at the beginning whereby many of the researchers feel like they don't buy the whole idea of getting together as a research institute. Eventually, everyone has the DNA of being adaptive and resilient, they sort of realigned towards the research focus that we have defined for the university and currently everyone is driving towards a single direction. The first phase of UTP transformation towards research and development was very successful due to a couple of reasons. The first reason was a very strong buy-in and leadership from the top management of the university. As an example, when we deploy the transformation plan in 2009 the first thing that the management did was to appoint nine research directors who were given a lot of empowerment and financial resources to drive the UTP research community towards building a very strong research culture.

From my point of view, the single biggest reason why the transformation plan is very successful in terms of the impact is when we can see the growth of UTP in 2009 from a very low rank to the current ranking that the university has achieved. As we went to the second phase of the transformation, we saw a slightly more challenging task. In contrast, when we looked at the second transformation plan under the 'Pacesetter Action Lab' journey, we were facing a different challenge. The first one being, many people were not strong enough in their research centers and groups, their silo mentality was also very difficult to break. In my point of view, the second transformation that we are going through now has yet to achieve its objective. Anyway, it is only in the first year that we started to roll up the pacesetter initiative starting from October last year. So, we are now roughly one and half years, we have yet to see an actual impact from those transformation journeys, but if I go back to the time that we did the transformation 'Pacesetter Lab', the vision and the mission were set forth by the leadership to lab members were very much insurmountable.

Transformation Plan

The two transformation exercises that I went through were very different, the first transformation plan which took place in 2008 and 2009 was mostly to transform the university from a very focused team of departments to the start of multi-disciplinary research activity. This is to enable researchers from various faculties and departments to work together. Hence, they can start addressing a bigger challenge that requires multi-disciplinary research.



Since the researchers did not have full-blown research in their areas, the transformation journey was much easier because most researchers did not have the strength in a way. So, they sort of adopted and choose a specific area of research based on what we define from the transformation journey.



In the second phase of the transformation plan, it was a bit more challenging because, at the time, most of the researchers already established an area of research under their groups, centers, and center of excellence. So, most of them are already driving in one direction. When we started the pacesetter action lab in 2017, one of the aims was to get everybody to be more focused. So, the university can deliver a much bigger impact on the community, industry, and the whole world in general.



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IMPEDIMENT OF TRANSFORMATION

When we started to deploy the transformation plan under the 'Pacesetter Action Lab', the first challenge that we faced was to take some of the people who are doing something else and make them realign their research to something that the university wants to focus on. That was the main challenge that we faced. In terms of resistance, I think it is there at the beginning whereby many of the researchers feel like they don't buy the whole idea of getting together as a research institute. Eventually, everyone has the DNA of being adaptive and resilient, they sort of realigned towards the research focus that we have defined for the university and currently everyone is driving towards a single direction.

Execution of Plan

The first phase of UTP transformation towards research and development was very successful due to a couple of reasons. The first reason was a very strong buy-in and leadership from the top management of the university. As an example, when we deploy the transformation plan in 2009 the first thing that the management did was to appoint nine research directors who were given a lot of empowerment and financial resources to drive the UTP research community towards building a very strong research culture. From my point of view, the single biggest reason why the transformation plan is very successful in terms of the impact is when we can see the growth of UTP in 2009 from a very low rank to the current ranking that the university has achieved. As we went to the second phase of the transformation, we saw a slightly more challenging task.

In contrast, when we looked at the second transformation plan under the 'Pacesetter Action Lab' journey, we were facing a different challenge. The first one being, many people were not strong enough in their research centers and groups, their silo mentality was also very difficult to break. In my point of view, the second transformation that we are going through now has yet to achieve its objective. Anyway, it is only in the first year that we started to roll up the pacesetter initiative starting from October last year. So, we are now roughly one and half years, we have yet to see an actual impact from those transformation journeys, but if I go back to the time that we did the transformation 'Pacesetter Lab', the vision and the mission were set forth by the leadership to lab members were very much insurmountable.

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IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIES

We wanted to bring the university from where we were in 2017, to a level where we can outmatch the universities such as those in Japan, MIT, and Stanford. So, when we made the suggestions, there were a lot of bold statements and strategies. But one year after the implementation, my observation showed that a lot of initiatives have been stalled down. For example, instead of having a proper location for our research institute, we are now having a stalled down implementation with officers for our research directors. But with many of the research centers and research groups are still within their place, the integration has yet to make a full impact.

My wish would be if I were to go back to the action lab days, what we should have done is basically to look at the implementation details and detail out as much as possible including all of the activities that we need to do and to define all of the resources that we need, to implement the strategies and initiatives, at the same time we should try to secure approval from the board of director. To commit the resources and financial that we need to bring in university to a level where we aspired when we defined the pacesetter recommendations.

What does it take to change an organization? People say, three areas should be focused on, there are people, technology, and process. There is only one criterion in my point of view which is people. If we can have the right leadership to drive the transformation, with the right team to undertake the journey from state A to state B, including required resources, technology, and processes that will be needed, most definitely the transformation will happen. So, the most important thing is to have the right people to be appointed to lead the transformation events and transformation journey that the organization should go through. In developing a transformation plan, the most important thing for an organization to consider is to avoid limiting the resources that would be required to develop a full prove of transformation recommendation. UTP in 2008 as an example, when we developed the transformation plan, the university allocated a lot of resources for the team to go and do a proper benchmarking. To elaborate more, many of our team members visited top universities such as MIT, Stanford, and University of California in Berkeley. We also visited Imperial College and a few other universities in Japan and Korea to learn how they do things directly from the host, rather than learning from books and references. The same happened in 2018 when we did the 'Pacesetter Lab' transformation. The university allocated some resources for us to talk to our stakeholders. For example, we engaged with more than 300 people during the development of the transformation recommendation. We also talked to a lot of industry players and stakeholders including the board members, our students, and internal staff. In short, to make a very impactful transformation that can be deployed is very important. So, having a sufficient resource, buy-in, and support from the leaders are very important to make the transformation become something that we can be proud of, and achieve the target that was set at the beginning.