

HIGHER ED

Internationalisation of universities

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INTERNATIONALISATION of Malaysian universities has grown in scale in the past decade. This is in line with "global prominence", a major shift in the Malaysia Education Blueprint for Higher Education 2015 to 2025 (MEBHE) that aims to enhance the end-to-end international student experience, increase brand visibility, and strengthen existing and new markets for international students.

Generally, the process of internationalisation includes fostering cross-border academic and research partnerships, exchange programmes, global-focused curriculum and recruitment of foreign students and academics to meet the demands of a globalised world.

The Education Ministry, through its Higher Education department, seeks to boost the national higher education brand from being known for its affordability to being recognised internationally for its academic and research expertise.

According to Universiti Malaya (UM) deputy vice-chancellor (Academic and International) Professor Dr Kamila Ghazali, internationalisation has transformed the Malaysian higher education system in many dimensions.

"It is very important not only for the nation but also for our students. The international exposure undoubtedly accords them a much wider worldview."

The Malaysian community would also benefit from the initiatives, she added.

"Universities use their international resources to strengthen social inclusion processes, offering mutual benefits and learning for all stakeholders.

"For example, a UM researcher is working on the Malacca Portuguese community's language documentation and revitalisation efforts, in collaboration with a UK university."

Taylor's University vice-chancellor Professor Michael Driscoll said: "Learning and the development of knowledge as the core mission of higher education should go beyond national boundaries.

"Apart from attracting international staff and students, institutions should actively encourage local staff and students to gain experience at universities abroad."

Malaysian private higher education sector has adopted a strong international outlook from the outset, he added.

"The future for all respectable universities is to strengthen their international dimension. Without this, they will lose the ability to provide quality education for a globalised world," said Driscoll.

Leading global universities are highly international in nature, said Sunway University Malaysia vice-chancellor Professor Graeme Wilkinson.

"These universities bring together talented academics and students from different backgrounds from across the globe. The mixture of ideas helps drive innovation and ultimately stimulates global businesses operating at the leading edge of scientific and technological fields. Hence, it's important for Malaysian universities to be international," said Wilkinson.

A meaningful internationalisation approach is based on values, according to International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) deputy rector (internationalisation and global network) Professor Dr Nor Faridah Abdul Maraf.

"Education at IIUM is about grooming future leaders with values and integrity that excel in their field of expertise. It is not so much about making profit.

"In transforming a life, we help transform a country. IIUM aims to service students from all walks of life and different parts of the world, especially from conflict zones like Palestine and developing countries in Asia and Africa," she said.





Sunway University houses nine research centres across various fields of studies which enhances its international reputation.

In the Malaysia Education Blueprint for Higher Education 2015 to 2025, a target was set to place two universities in the Global Top 100 by 2025.

Meanwhile, two targets in the blueprint have been achieved, namely, having one university in Asia's Top 25 and four in the Global Top 200.

Following its success of placing 70th in the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings 2020, UM was recently ranked 58th in the Times Higher Education (THE)'s ranking of the world's most international universities 2020, the only Malaysian university to join the list.

The four metrics assessed were proportion of international staff, students, research co-authorship and reputation.

According to Kamila, the UM's internationalisation strategies span six critical sectors.

They are student mobility, staff mobility, academic programme, research and development, governance and autonomy, social integration and community engagement.

"We have 5,000 international students from over 90 different countries, which is 20 per cent of the total student population. Recognising the importance of international experience, UM sends around 2,000 students abroad for mobility programmes annually.

The university's international faculty members make up 13 per cent of the population, she added.

"Our academic programmes are on par with international standards. For example, our Business and Accountancy programmes are accredited by the professional bodies. We also undergo the Asean University Network — Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) assessment," said Kamila.

Ranked 12th in the World and 1st in Malaysia for QS 2020 Top 50 Under 50 universities, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) has more than 100 international academics.

UPM deputy vice chancellor (academic and international) Professor Dr M. Iqbal Saripan said that studying with international students and learning from faculty members from other countries will help local students broaden their life perspectives.

"We have 1,556 international undergraduate students on campus. Meanwhile, at the postgraduate level, there are 3,733 international students, making up 36 per cent of the student population. They will normally bring their families here as well."

To enhance its global reach, UPM academic programmes are internationally accredited.

"UPM is the first Malaysian university and sixth in Southeast Asia to receive the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business Accreditation (AACBA). Other accreditations include International Engineering Alliance (IEA) and Royal Society of Chemistry," said Iqbal.

For private universities in the country, international twinning programmes are a strong feature of internationalisation, said Driscoll.

"Taylor's University sends and receives students from across the globe, including sending

students to the top 100 universities in the world in North America and Europe.

"Ranked in the global top 20 for Culinary and Hospitality Management, we have had a very productive partnership with Toulouse University, France, in this field for over 20 years."

International academics make up 22 per cent of the Taylor's University faculty while 30 per cent of undergraduate cohort are international students.

"The number of international students, including postgraduate students, has been growing rapidly in recent years," said Driscoll.

Wilkinson said Sunway University has always aimed to attract the best academics including from abroad.

"Having excellent academics enables us to deliver top quality education to our students and carry out leading research. Around 15 per cent of our academics are international. At the more senior level, around 50 per cent are from overseas."

The university has 1,000 international students which amounts to 12 per cent of their student body.

"The presence of international students helps our domestic students become more aware of different cultures and understand the world better, thus becoming better global citizens.

"Ultimately, this promotes social harmony and international collaboration between graduates which can eventually lead to international business opportunities," said Wilkinson.

RESEARCH AND ACADEMIC ALLIANCES

Malaysian universities are also increasingly forming international research collaborations and joint academic programmes.

Wilkinson said Sunway University formed cooperative research centres with international universities.

"We established a joint Future Cities Research Institute with Lancaster University, a top 10 UK university, as well as a Joint Research Centre on Information Technology with Huizhou University, China.

"Our academic staff have co-authored research papers with international academics. Topics included vaccine development with Oxford University



Professor Dr M. Iqbal Saripan



Professor Graeme Wilkinson



Universiti Putra Malaysia encourages international research collaborations. Professor Dr. Raja Noor Zaliha Raja Abd. Rahman (right) is pictured conducting space research in Russia.



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PROFESSOR DR KAMILA GHAZALI

Universiti Malaya deputy vice-chancellor (Academic and International)

researchers, and improving solar energy systems with researchers from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore."

Sunway University students also benefit from obtaining Lancaster degrees while studying in Malaysia, he added.

"Our academic programmes are jointly approved by two international universities," said Wilkinson.

Kamila said UM is continuously partnering with top universities to enhance teaching and learning, multidisciplinary research and capacity building.

According to the 2020 Education Mandate, public universities should focus on strengthening collaborations with the Top 100 universities in the world.

"Since 2014, we have produced over 15,000 co-authored articles from our international collaborations.

"We have developed ties with over 40 of the top 100 universities in the QS World University Rankings 2020. UM is a member of over 30 global networks, such as the Asian Universities Alliance and the Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU).

"Through these networks, we bring experts together to exchange ideas and collaborate on effective solutions to global challenges affecting the region.

"Our researchers actively collaborate with counterparts in prominent institutions such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Yale University and Peking University."

"Currently, UM has two double undergraduate degrees, six dual Masters and 22 dual and joint Phd programmes with its international partner institutions in fields namely medicine, science and engineering," said Kamila.

In facilitating international experience, UPM offers 17 collaborative programmes with 13 international institutions, said Iqbal.

"For example, we established a jointly awarded PhD with University of Newcastle, Australia and University of Sheffield, UK."

UPM is also globally recognised for its groundbreaking research, he added.

"From 2013 to 2018, we acquired RM284,724,541 of grants for research projects. To date, we have filed over 2,500 Intellectual Properties (IP) and had 171 IP commercialised with gross sales of over RM61 million," said Iqbal.

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Universiti Malaya enhances its research and development as part of its internationalisation strategies.

At the core of internationalisation

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The "global prominence" shift in the Malaysia Education Blueprint for Higher Education 2015 to 2025 was a continuation from the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2007 to 2020, said Dr Wan Chang Da, deputy director of the National Higher Education Research Institute (IPPTN).

"Across these policy documents, internationalisation serves to position Malaysia as an international education hub, or more specifically, an international student hub.

"The objectives were to promote the brand of Education Malaysia and reap the economic benefits of international students. However, this approach may not be sustainable.

"Malaysia is known for its affordable education and an alternative avenue for students from countries that have difficulties entering other more developed systems. Relying on this may not sustain Malaysia to become an international education hub," said Wan.

While in theory, universities can improve through internationalisation, such is not the case if they focus solely on international student enrolment, he said.

"We have not looked into developing the substantial aspect of our curriculum and pedagogy to fully unleash the potential of internationalisation.

"The simplistic nature of counting international students and academics gives an overly simplified picture of what is international in higher education," said Wan.

International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) deputy rector (internationalisation and global network) Professor Dr Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf said a myriad of factors led to the slight decrease from 24 to 23 per cent in international student intake at IIUM in recent years.

"With the global economic crisis, fee hikes and virus scare, we see a drop in students coming to our shores. New competitors have also emerged, such as Indonesia and New Zealand."

According to MEBHE, rankings can serve as a benchmark to see the strengths of an education system and how it can improve.

While the merit of a university lies in its knowledge development and academic community, rankings play a role in putting institutions on the map. However, they should not be the definitive measure of quality.

Wan said: "University rankings may be a misleading indicator of internationalisation. If we are serious about improving the quality of teaching and learning for Malaysian universities, we should not



Taylor's University Culinary and Hospitality Management programme, which is ranked among the top 20 in the world, attracts students from all over the world.



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DR WAN CHANG DA
National Higher Education Research Institute deputy director

play the ranking game.

"Playing it means having international students and academics just because of their passports, not because of their expertise and capability. Students and academics became mere numbers to institutions, for the sake of chasing KPIs.

"We have not fully appreciated the diversity these individuals bring to our institutions and look into ways of integrating them to become a part of our institutions."

The true motivation for universities to hire international academics must be explored, he added.

"From an academic viewpoint, every student and academic should be equal. Why do we treat international students as cash cows just because they pay more or treat international academics as second class citizens on a contract basis?"

Similarly, Faridah said that universities must not exist to fill the quota set by any international rankings, especially with financial limitations.

"IIUM forms collaborations with institutions in 39 countries, from America to Oceania. But we can't expect what is right for universities in affluent countries to be right for us. Financial means are required to employ the best international academics or have the right number of staff for us to make time for research.

"In some Malaysian universities, we are still dealing with long hours of teaching thus having time to write is a luxury. The situation is evident from the number of teachers opting for early retirement, dying young or leaving academia for a greener pasture.

"We can attract international students if we have a good pool of excellent professors. Unfortunately, many of them are often promoted to the top executive positions," said Faridah.

THE WAY FORWARD

Malaysian International Higher Education policies must be driven by long term goals, said Taylor's University vice-chancellor Professor Michael Driscoll.

"We need to find ways to attract international students, such as providing post study work opportunities. Joined effort in crafting the government policy is crucial as immigration should be on the same page with higher education institutions.

"We also need to be open-minded towards hiring non-Malaysians to attract the best staff from around the world," he said.

Faridah echoes the importance of having a more accepting society.

"If we want to attract more students, we have to make it easier for them in terms of job opportunities, scholarships, enrolment and visa application.

"Our general population must also be welcoming of international students especially those from developing countries. There are cases where students would get harassed for being different," said Faridah.

Financial limitations can be overcome with scholarships, stronger alliances and edutourism, said Universiti Malaya (UM) deputy vice-chancellor (Academic and International) Professor Dr Kamila Ghazali.

"While many of our students are interested in mobility programmes, we could only sponsor a limited number. To overcome this, we try to negotiate and work together with our partners for sponsorships and cost waivers."

"The Malaysian International Scholarship, for instance, attracts the best brains from around the world to pursue advanced academic studies in Malaysia. It can be extended to more countries to attract more students.

"Youths are also more receptive to the idea of study beyond the classroom. Through edutourism, international students can learn in natural, historical and multi-cultural environments."

Highly accessible university websites are the driving force to enhance global appeal, she added.

"UM has an optimised website that makes it easy and enjoyable for site visitors. While our official website is in English, our Marketing and Recruitment Center's website is available in 10 different languages."

Curriculum internationalisation is another way forward.

Kamila said: "UM is in the midst of a curriculum review process. We are constantly striving to improve our curriculum, making sure that our courses are up-to-date and meeting the market needs of current times."

To strengthen global reputation, universities need to develop their international research collaborations, said Sunway University Malaysia vice-chancellor Professor Graeme Wilkinson.

"We must ensure that the research impacts global problems. They need to attract the attention of academics and major companies in other countries.

"This is easier said than done, but having talented academics working on global problems and coming up with credible solutions would get us noticed internationally."

Malaysia needs a more supportive regulatory framework for international students, he added.

"Allowing international students to work during their studies to help cover their living costs and providing post-study work visas for one or two years for them to gain valuable experience. Countries that permit these seem to attract more international students."



Professor Dr Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf



Innovative design solutions created by Universiti Putra Malaysia students.



International students at Sunway University make up 12 per cent of the student body.