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What Makes Studying Overseas unforgettable? The case of undergraduate program support at Kyushu University

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Abstract

Internationalization of tertiary education has become an important agenda of the Malaysian government. As one of the public universities in Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) has been offering international student program at undergraduate level in two faculties since 2007. As a foundation to review the setting of the program in UKM, this paper examines the case of international program support in Kyushu University, Japan, by identifying the underlying elements that help enrich international students' experience. The case showed that internationalization effort in Kyushu University is initiated and executed in a concerted manner, with very careful planning from the government, internal department and various local parties.

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1. Introduction

The economic impact by the enrolment of international students has changed its orientation from being an independent purpose of a university, to become an important agenda of a country. Countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, China, Thailand and Qatar are working towards branding the country to be international education hubs. In the case of Malaysia, internationalisation of tertiary education has become one of the demand generation initiatives in Education National Key Economic Areas (NKEA) as a part of Economic Transformation Programme that aims to significantly increase individual willingness to pay for high-quality course offerings as well as to export education by developing Malaysia as a regional education hub. It is expected that the country will increase foreign student enrolment at tertiary level to 200,000 by 2020 with a differentiation of fees for locals and internationals by up to 50% (Prime Minister's Department, 2010).

Supporting the national vision of becoming an international education hub, UKM has started offering international students program at undergraduate level at two of its faculty, namely Faculty of Economics and Management and Faculty of Technology and Information Science since 2007. 95% of total undergraduate international students are from China and the rest are from Indonesia and Middle East countries. However, there have been complaints from both students and faculty sides on the difficulties arising while practising this program.

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Students are facing problems of adjusting with local culture and mixing with local students (UKM News Portal, 2010) while the faculties are striving to deal with various conflicts with the international students especially those from China.

2. Definition and Purpose

Internationalisation in the context of tertiary education has various definitions according to the approach(es) of a university in practising it. The approaches may come in four ways (Knight, cited in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1999);

1. Activity : categories or types of activities that describe internationalization such as curriculum, student/faculty exchanges, technical assistance, international students.
2. Competency : Development of new skills, knowledge, attitudes and values in students, faculty and staff.
3. Ethos : Emphasis is on creating a culture of climate on campus which promotes and supports international/intercultural initiatives.
4. Process : Intergration or infusion of an international or intercultural dimension into teaching, research and service through a combination of a wide range of activities, policies and procedures.

While the practised approach maybe different for each institution, internationalisation should aim to create values, beliefs and intellectual insights in which both domestic and international students and faculty participates and benefit equally. They should develop global perspectives, international and cultural and ethical sensitivity along with useful knowledge, skills and attitudes for the globalised market place (Elkin & Devjee, 2003).

The purpose of this study is to examine the case of international program support in Kyushu University, Japan. Kyushu University was selected for this study because it is located in Fukuoka City which has successfully positioned herself as an international city with Asian focus. Besides, Japanese higher education is very challenging for foreign students where language and culture are huge barriers to knowledge and comfortable living.

3. Kyushu University and Internationalisation from the International Students' Perspective

Kyushu University is located in Fukuoka City, Kyushu Island, south of Japan. Founded in 1911 as Kyushu Imperial University, it is the 4th oldest national university in Japan. This research university has 18 graduate schools and 16 faculties, 11 undergraduate courses and 1 program, 3 research institutes, a hospital and 32 institutes for joint use of Kyushu University education and research. Kyushu University, like other imperial universities is well-known for its advanced research in science and technology, and has excellent reputation in university-industry collaboration. The university has also established its International Students Center in 1985.

Despite all these, the enrolment of international students was considerably low, which is 1.23% from a total of 19233 students (Kyushu University, 2010). This is an alarming fact considering the younger population, who will be the feeder to undergraduate programs in Japanese universities are decreasing every year (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication of Japan, 2010). The low enrolment to Japanese undergraduate programs is due to two significant factors; language and culture. Traditionally, all courses were taught in Japanese language except for foreign language courses. Prospective foreign students had to sit for Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) and Examinations for Japanese University Admission for International Students (EJU), while the private students were required to sit for the entrance examination of the university they wanted to enrol in. Once the students are qualified to enrol, they must now adjust themselves to the culture of Japan. In fact, their anxiety starts even before they come to Japan. The failure of adjusting and adapting to the Japanese culture resulted in stress that eventually affects their studies. In the worst scenario, some students had to return to their homecountries without graduating.

4. The Global 30 Program

To overcome this problem, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (MEXT) has initiated a project named Global 30 Program to enhance the internationalization in selected core universities. 13 public and private universities have been chosen to participate in this program and Kyushu

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