

## Internationalization of Higher Education in a Flat World: A Malaysian Perspective

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper outlines Malaysian perspectives and responses to the global needs of higher learning in a “flat world” (Friedman, 2006). In Malaysia, internationalization is contextualized within a comprehensive, long term national strategic plan for the development of higher education. Hence, while strategies for internationalization may differ, public higher education institutions work towards common goals. The paper reports national level rationales and strategic objectives for the intensification of internationalization. It highlights how these have been translated by Universiti Utara Malaysia to increase its international visibility, enrich the experiences of its students as well as strengthen curricular standards. Challenges in internationalizing higher education are also discussed.

Key words: internationalization of higher education, strategic plan, public/national universities, Malaysia.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The metaphor “flat world” (Friedman, 2006) describes the world in the 21st century, in which technology fuels global collaboration and competition across geographical locations. It is a world of ‘uploading’ and ‘in-forming’, where national borders are blurred, and success and opportunity for advancement are determined not by nationality or origin, but by talent, innovative spirit, and the individual’s ability to compete in the global marketplace. It is also an era where repositories of knowledge connect easily across continents, challenging higher education institutions (HEIs) to transform in order to remain relevant and competitive, and to earn global recognition and respect.

### **Globalization versus internationalization**

Globalization has been defined as “the flow of technology, economy, knowledge, people, values and ideas...across borders” (Knight & DeWitt, 1997, p.8), which results in global linkages between individuals, institutions and nations.

Internationalization, on the other hand, is a response to the impact, challenges, as well as opportunities brought about by globalization (UNESCO, 2004). With regards to HEIs, internationalizing is likely to involve reexamining curricular relevance for global market needs, improving access to and mobility of information, encouraging innovation, and extending efforts to enhance global visibility (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007).

For public HEIs in developing countries, the enhancement of “international interconnectedness” (Brennan, 2008), which is crucial for the development of a knowledge economy would need to be reconciled with social responsibility and nation building goals such as ensuring as equity of access to higher education among its own people. UNESCO, in its position paper on higher education in a globalized society reiterates that it is important for “...governments to maintain their role in defining policies of higher education, assuring its quality and ensuring it performs all its missions and functions in society” (UNESCO, 2004, p.10). This suggests that internationalization efforts may be better strategized within the larger framework of a national education development plan. Clearly defined national targets and expected outcomes would facilitate internationalization-related pursuits of HEIs, so that such endeavors, regardless of institutional variations, would ultimately head toward the common goal of nation building.

This paper provides an overview of Malaysia’s perspectives and responses to the global needs of higher learning, with specific reference to internationalizing its public HEIs. It will also highlight the progress and strategies of one Malaysian public HEI, Universiti Utara Malaysia, that has recently embarked on intensified internationalization efforts.

## **INTERNATIONALIZATION OF PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA**

From the Malaysian perspective, globalization, which calls for preparedness and the capability to face diverse challenges, is better addressed systematically through a strong system of higher education (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007). The intensification of internationalization is a strategic thrust in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan Beyond 2020 (henceforth, NHESP), alongside several other thrusts such as widening access to and increasing the quality of higher education, enculturation of lifelong learning, and the enhancement of research and innovation. The primary goal of this long term plan, beginning 2007, is the development of knowledgeable, skillful, creative, innovative, competitive and highly ethical human capital to realize the national aspiration of a sustainable and prosperous economy. The NHESP also incorporates a vision to establish Malaysia’s international reputation as a center of higher education excellence (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007).

To realise the goals of internationalization, short and long term strategic objectives are set, and key performance indicators are negotiated, formulated, and periodically revised in consultation with HEIs. Public HEIs in particular are delegated the task of shaping their own strategies and activities to bring to fruition the outcomes collectively agreed upon. The Ministry plays a facilitative

role. Information and communication between the Ministry and HEIs are supported by a dedicated website, while progress, issues and achievements are fed back to the Ministry in meetings or via a centralized online system. In many cases, public HEIs have also created formal and informal platforms to discuss issues and best practices, and establish smart partnerships as they head towards their common goals.

The next section presents some rationales and strategic objectives for internationalization from the Malaysian perspective.

## Rationale

The discourse justifying internationalisation in the official NHESP document (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007) suggests a mixture of types of rationale defined by Qiang (2003), namely economic, academic and political. These are exemplified in the quotations below.

### 1. Economic: reasons that relate to economic benefits in the long term

- “The efforts at internationalization ..will help *generate income and foreign exchange savings...*” (p.119)
- “...to be recognized as producer of human capital of the highest quality...*equipped to thrive in an increasingly global and competitive environment* ( p.2)

### 2. Academic:

a) international standards and global interdependence in teaching and research

- “To enhance competitiveness and strengthen Malaysia as a global player... *to adopt and implement practices that are on par with the best practices through intensifying internationalization efforts.*” (p.33)
- “...the *curriculum* adopted must therefore be *highly relevant and internationally recognized.*” (p.24)

b) preparing students to be both national and international citizens.

- “... international students...local students will benefit from the interaction, exposure and exchanging of experiences. They will *become open minded, competitive and have a global outlook.*” (p.33)
- “.. a relevant and competitive higher education system ...must be *capable of contributing to universal development.*” (p.116)

### 3. Political: promotion of national culture and identity

- “...research centres...established to *promote...research on languages, and national and regional cultures...*” (p.117)
- “...international students...*play the role of [Malaysian] ambassador in their respective countries....especially through the sharing of their enriching and valuable learning experiences...*” (p.119)

### **Strategic Objectives**

Several strategic objectives have been formulated in relation to the internationalization of higher education, including:

- to increase the international visibility of the Malaysian higher education sector
- to increase the diversity in expertise among academic staff
- to enrich the learning experiences of students
- to benchmark programs offered to international standards

These long term targets would contribute towards enhancing the international reputation of public HEIs. They are expected to improve the marketability of graduates, increase collaboration and knowledge sharing among academics, as well as attract foreign students and academics to study and work in Malaysia ([www.psptn.net](http://www.psptn.net)).

In the foundation (2007-2010) phase the transformation plan, key performance indicators were formulated from an “activity approach” (Qiang, 2003, p. 250), describing internationalization in terms of “specific activities and programs” such as international enrolment, number of students involved in mobility programs, and number of accredited programs and international linkages.

### **Progress in Internationalization: The Case of UUM**

Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) is a public HEI established in 1984 primarily to develop and promote management education in the country. With a vision to become a globally recognized management university, and guided by the above mentioned national-level strategic objectives and agreed-upon targets, Universiti Utara Malaysia has strategized to meet its internationalization goals in a focused manner, and results have been encouraging. This section will discuss some strategies and outcomes related to the above objectives.

#### **Increasing international visibility**

##### *International students and staff*

Among the key performance indicators related to global visibility at the foundation stage of the NHESP are the number of international teaching staff

and students. Table 1 shows several strategies drawn up by UUM. While the majority are concerning international promotional activities to attract students and staff, the development of adequate infrastructure, as well as cultural adjustment programs are also deemed necessary.

International academic staff of high calibre bring with them substantial and diverse teaching and industrial experience of a global nature. They enrich students learning experiences, just as the local students and culture enrich theirs. They also add an international dimension to the university's research and development efforts. Last year, UUM attracted 53 international academic staff, from 17 mainly Asian nations. The number is expected to double this fall, based on job applications received in recent recruitment efforts.

Recruitment of international students and staff usually involve promotional trips abroad. Advanced planning is required, including identifying target groups and countries. Trips may be organized by the institution or in cooperation with the higher education ministry or relevant agencies. International alumni are also usually willing to assist in arranging promotional activities in their countries.

Table I: Strategies for increasing international visibility

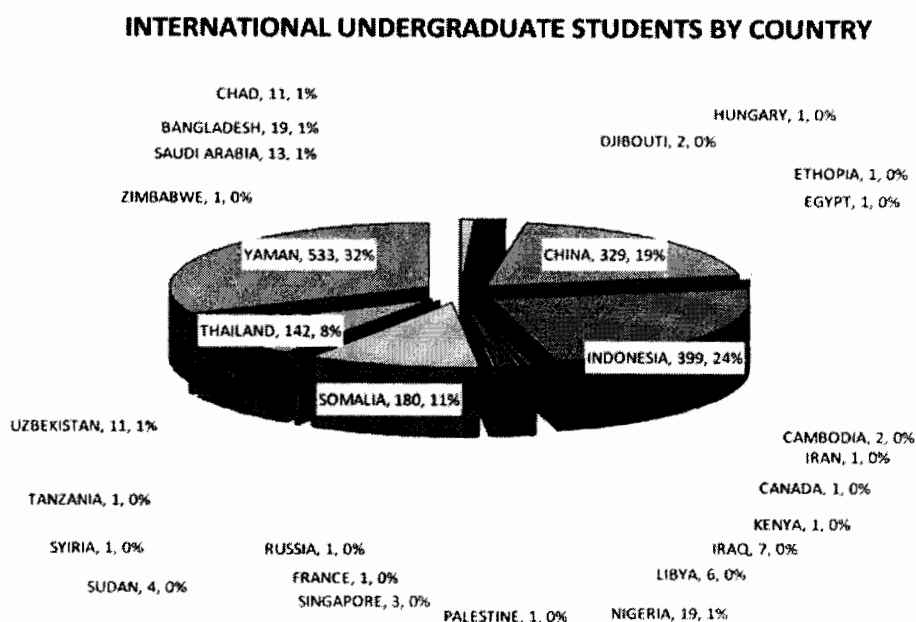
Activities include:

- Developing and documenting long and short terms plans, including implementation, monitoring and improvement processes
- Allocation of resources specifically for promotional activities abroad
- Setting up a promotions office at the university.
- Appointment of officers responsible for promotional activities and monitoring of progress
- Appointment of external agents for identified international market segments
- Intensification of promotional activities in identified segments
- Creating and promoting a directory of expertise of academic staff
- Increasing accommodation for international students, especially postgraduates
- Disseminating information and processes relating to financial aid and incentives for qualified international students, including fee waivers, teaching assistantships
- Identifying, enhancing, and monitoring institutional linkages to promote research, publication and consultation activities among academic staff
- Planning language and cultural adjustment programs for incoming international students and academic staff

As of 2010, more than 2500 international students from 42 countries chose to study in UUM (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011) (see Figure 1 for undergraduate distribution). About half of the total number are graduate students in UUM's College of Business, College of Arts and Sciences, and College of Law, Government and International Studies. The majority are from neighbouring Indonesia and Thailand, as well as the Middle East, which are

currently the targeted areas for intensive recruitment activities. By 2015, 30% of postgraduates would ideally be international students.

Figure 1: Composition of UUM international undergraduates



Source: UUM Centre for International Affairs & Collaboration <http://ciac.uum.edu.my>

### *International Linkages*

For universities that have yet to establish a strong reputation overseas, institutional linkages and memberships in international higher education organizations are necessary to increase visibility. Over the years, UUM has established more than forty linkages worldwide, with HEIs in Australia, China, France, Hungary, Germany, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and others (see also Table 2). These partnerships may be initiated via institutional and personal networking, or by engaging the assistance of education-related agencies such as Education Malaysia, which is the country's global educational promotion arm.

Affiliations with university networks such as University Mobility in the Asia Pacific Region (UMAP), Commonwealth Universities Study Abroad Consortium (CUSAC), the Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning (ASAIHL) and regional economic bodies such as the Indonesia, Malaysia Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) are also instrumental in the development of our partnerships.

We are currently exploring reciprocal mobility with our strategic partners, including joint degree programs, credit-bearing student mobility, and joint research in management and the social sciences.

Table 2: A sample of UUM's collaborative partners

Australia	Murdoch University; Monash University; University of Adelaide; Curtin University of Technology
China	University of Hong Kong; Hebei University
France	Le Harve University
Mexico	University of Colima
Nigeria	The Capital Science Academy
Philippines	St Mary University, St Louis University
Thailand	Bangkok University; Prince of Songkla University; Thailand City University
UK	University of Nottingham
USA	University of Alabama; Midwest Universities Consortium for International Activities (MUCIA); Keuka College
Yemen	University of Science and Technology

The UUM Centre for International Affairs and Cooperation acts as an intermediary for international collaborations and partnerships, and assists in the management of international staff and students.

### **Enriching the learning experiences of students**

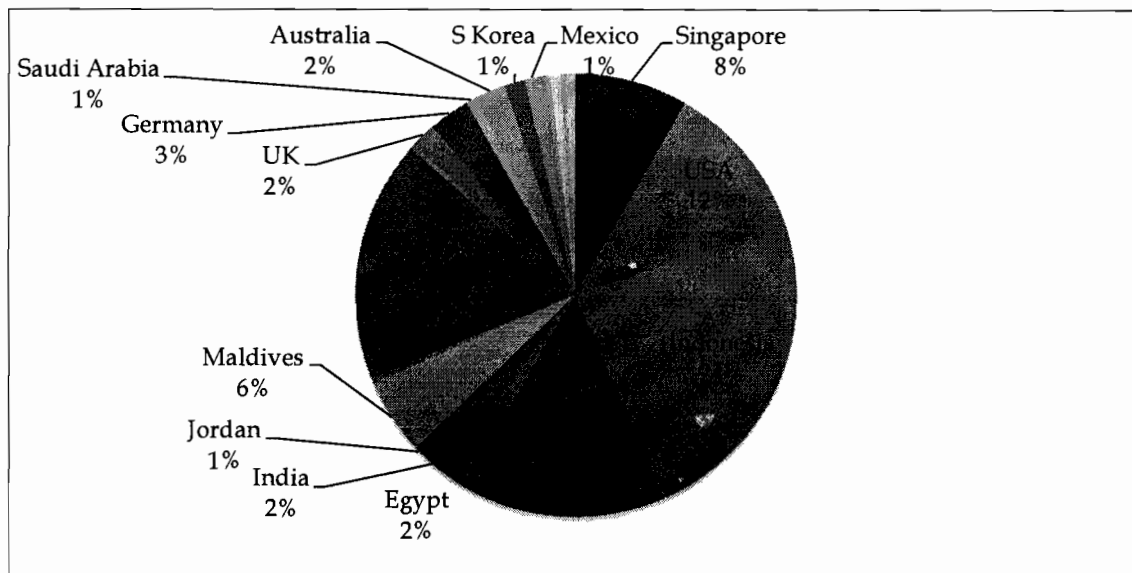
Collaborative partnerships pave the way for universities to enrich the learning experiences of students. Mobility programs, whether non-credit academic and cultural visits or credit-bearing internships, broaden horizons, encourage new perspectives and build global competencies, benefiting students on both sides of the exchange. These cross-cultural experiences offer unique opportunities for our students to experience other cultures, beliefs and practices first hand, explore different educational and work cultures, strengthen their global survival skills and create life-long friendships. International exposure increases students' level of preparedness for global working environments, and improve interpersonal skills, independence and self motivation (Mughtar, Omar & Hunger, 2009).

International collaborations as well as industry recognition of UUM's curricular strengths have contributed to our success in placing 252 students in

internship and exchange programs in 25 countries across East and West Asia, Europe, Australia, USA and Africa from 2008-2010 (see Figure 2). While the numbers are relatively small, the diverse target countries nevertheless reflects the global nature of the knowledge and experiences gained. This supports the assertion that in a flat world, internationalization of education is no longer merely a one-way movement of people from less developed to more developed countries (Saat, 2007).

The largest percentage of UUM students participated in exchange and internship programs in universities and industries in Indonesia and Thailand, as well as in China and the USA. Factors affecting students' choice of destination include affordability, available opportunities, distance, proficiency in the language of the host country, and relevance to the field of study.

Figure 2. Global spread of UUM students in internship and exchange programs (2008-2010)

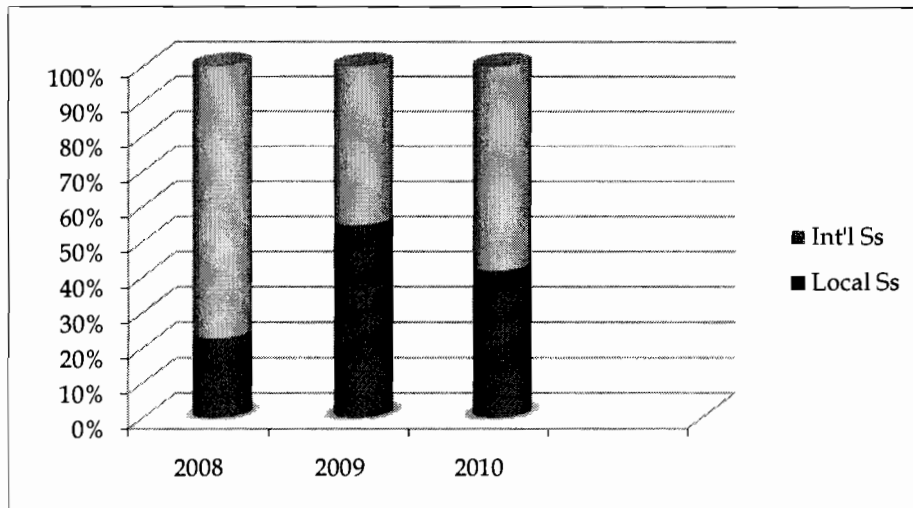


International mobility programs remain rather inaccessible to a majority of interested local students due to high costs. Records show that the bulk of students in early mobility programs were mainly returning international students. However, there has been a slight increase in local student participation in such programs over the past three years. Figure 3 shows a change in the composition of international mobility participants. The increase in local student mobility has been made possible by government funding as well as scholarships and waivers from participating international bodies such as the Korean AUN-ROK scholarship and ESSCA-Budapest. This year about 200 students plan to engage in extracurricular mobility programs alone, and the numbers are expected to exceed 400 by 2015.



Malaysian public HEIs hope to attract 49000 international students by 2015 ([www.psptn.net](http://www.psptn.net)). To this end, a landmark decision has been made at the national level to streamline the Malaysian HEI academic calendar with the international calendar. Effective this year, Malaysian universities will begin their academic session in September instead of July. This will not only facilitate international admissions but will also allow greater and more efficient participation by Malaysian HEIs in international knowledge sharing, research collaboration and student mobility programs (Nordin, 2011).

Figure 3: Proportion of local and international students in UUM mobility programs



### Standards and Accreditation

Since its inception in 2004, the Ministry of Higher Education has vigorously embarked on initiatives to elevate the standards of Malaysian higher education. The Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) has been implemented as a platform for quality assurance and a reference for standards of programs and qualifications. The framework is within the purview of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), which accredits academic programs, conducts institutional audit and reviews, and maintains a register of programs, qualifications and education providers. The MQA also cooperates with accreditation bodies outside the country. No Malaysian academic program is accredited unless it complies with the framework. As quality of delivery and qualifications awarded by HEIs are benchmarked against international best practices, the MQF instills confidence in the education system and in graduates' ability to compete in the international job market.

Academic staff affiliations to international professional bodies, as well as international auditing of teaching and learning also contribute to the recognition and value of degree programs. International professional bodies that have

accredited UUM accountancy programs are the Association of Chartered and Certified Accountants (ACCA) and the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA). UUM's Business programs are currently working towards accreditation by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), Association of MBA (AMBA) and the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS). Table 3 shows some strategies for obtaining accreditation.

Table 3: Strategies for obtaining accreditation

Activities include:

- Setting up an accreditation task force at the relevant faculties
- Developing implementation and monitoring activities to set in motion plans to obtain accreditation
- Obtaining and disseminating information about specific accreditation processes and procedures
- Setting up pre assessment review committees to check that the program concerned meets the required criteria

## **Challenges**

The internationalization process has not been without challenges. Among them are:

- Benchmarking and regulation of qualifications of incoming international students: While the MQA facilitates with international equivalency information, the wide range of international pre-university qualifications and standards are not always easily verified.
- English language entry requirements: As international academic programs are conducted in English, international students who meet the minimum entry qualifications may be denied entry if they do not fulfill English language prerequisites. Pre-sessional intensive English courses that are conducted in a second language environment take longer to produce results compared with immersion in a native English speaking country.
- Providing adequate support for student mobility: Although more Malaysian students should be encouraged to participate in international mobility programs for the added value, funds are rather limited at present.
- Attracting outstanding international staff: While many foreign academics may be interested in teaching in Malaysia, local HEIs are challenged to compete with universities of high global repute for outstanding staff .

*Paper presented at the Summer ASAIHL Leadership Summit, June 19-22 2011, Niagara Falls, New York.*

- High costs of international auditing: For example, the initial application fee alone for the AACSB business and accounting accreditation may be as high as USD 18500.
- Ensuring international linkages remain active: While it may not be difficult to establish international linkages, sustaining meaningful win-win partnerships requires careful planning and monitoring.

## **Conclusion**

The internationalization of higher education should ultimately result in higher quality education and the democratization of knowledge. For the past few years, Malaysian HEIs have systematically embarked in intensifying internationalization within the framework of its National Higher Education Strategic Plan, with positive results. September 2010 figures (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011) showed more than 24 000 international students pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate studies in Malaysia's public HEIs, almost 3000 of whom were sponsored by their government or overseas agencies. Malaysian students in international mobility programs exceeded 6400. Nearly 2000 international academic staff taught and researched in Malaysia's multiracial and increasingly multinational HEIs, and more than 200 programs have been accredited by international bodies. The numbers are expected to grow steadily, reflecting our serious commitment to internationalization and to contributing towards the advancement of the global community. For many public HEIs, the formula of contextualizing the internationalization of higher education within a larger national strategic plan for educational transformation has effectively guided efforts to forge ahead globally without losing sight of other equally important obligations and priorities in the national agenda for capacity building.

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# 2011 ASAIHL LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

55<sup>TH</sup> YEAR ANNIVERSARY



*Capacity-Building Global Partnerships for Leadership and Excellence*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Using Thomas Friedman's 2005 framework of a flat world in the new millennium, we have put the major themes of the internationalization process in the higher education sector of Malaysia into perspective. We have focused especially on the specific policy trends and program initiatives at both the national and institutional levels, and have examined their impact within our shores and beyond. It is in this context of an apparently "level" global playing field that we examine how Malaysian institutions of higher learning in general, and Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) in particular, position themselves. By putting in place specific global strategies, UUM has enhanced international engagement in the areas of student/faculty mobility, curricular standards, international accreditation, institutional cooperation, networking, and transnational research collaborations.

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