Abstract

Internationalisation 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.

Keywords: International Student; Program; Support; Experience; Kyushu University; UKM;

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 clime on campus which promotes and supports international/intercultural initiatives.
4. Process: Integration 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 may be 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 home countries 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
University is one of them. The target of this project is to achieve 300,000 international students in total, an increase of nearly 300% from the current numbers. By doing so, MEXT aims to increase competitiveness of Japan’s higher education and provide internationalised environment in campus for its students and researchers to prepare themselves in the globalised era. Selected universities are given priority financial assistance of 200 to 400 million yen per annum over the period of 5 years. Endowed with this aid, each university will make effort to recruit 3000 to 8000 international students; an increase of about 300% minimum for the case of Kyushu University (Kyushu University, 2010).

To achieve this target, Kyushu University, like other selected universities, will work on the action plan that has been outlined to reduce anxiety and develop a comfortable educational environment for international students. (Figure 1).

Previously, all degrees can only be obtained by passing courses that are taught in Japanese language (except for linguistic classes). Foreign students especially those who come from outside Kanji-based countries such as China and Taiwan, (Kanji is a Japanese writing originated from China and also outside from South Korea which language has major similarity with Japanese in terms of grammar) had to struggle in mastering the language before they can understand what is being taught in class. This has refrained prospective students from coming to Japan to obtain their degree. Under this action plan, Kyushu University now is offering degrees in English at the School of Agriculture (Bioresource and Bioenvironment) and at the School of Engineering (Applied Chemistry; Civil Engineering; Mechanical Engineering; Aerospace Engineering). By the expiry of the 5 year grant, Kyushu University will have founded a new interdisciplinary department in 2020, tentatively named “International School of Arts and Sciences”.

5. Internal Mechanism

The internal support for foreign students is encored by the Kyushu University International Student and Researcher Support Center (ISRSC) under the International Affairs Department. This center provides various kinds of services to international students even before they arrive to Japan.

5.1. Tutor system

Considering the fact that international student may have no friend during their first months in Japan, ISRSC has established a ”Tutor” system that will assist each international students in their new campus life. Three months
before the new semester begins, the centre will offer the current local students to become a tutor for a period of six months. Upon selection, the tutors will be briefed on what to do to help the new foreign student each of them are assigned to. Their first task is to welcome the foreign students at the airport and bring them to the International Student House (where the international students are allowed to stay for a maximum of one year while finding their own apartment to rent). The tutor will also attend the orientation week with the international student. During the orientation week, the group of international students will be taken to the Ward Office to complete the registration of Alien Card, health insurance, handphone and utilities. Then, they will be taken for a trip around the campus and International Student House, introducing them important places such as libraries, supermarkets, police stations, hospitals and greet their supervisors. They will also be taken to the nearest town centers using public transportation to inform them the procedures and rules of riding a bus. The tutors will also help them buy necessary things, such as bicycle, clothings, beddings and such for them to start their new life in Japan.

Foreign students are also free to consult their tutors whenever they encounter problems in studies. As taking notes in the class during the early months is a difficult task for a foreign student, they can share notes and exercises. Usually, the tutor will also introduce the foreign student to his/her friends, hence the foreign students will learn how to mix around with other Japanese students while sharpening their Japanese language ability.

As a token of appreciation and motivation, tutors are given an allowance of assistance up to 48000 yen. This is to ensure the quality of service given by the tutors, who are indirectly representing the International Affairs Department (Takamatsu, 2010). Tutors also have the priviledge of learning and practising English through frequent contacts with the foreign students.

5.2. Housing Guarantor

After six months to one year of stay at the International Student House, the international students would have to find their own apartment to live in. Previously, it was difficult for the international students to find housing because they have to find somebody (a Japanese national) who agrees to be their guarantor. To help the students, ISRSC has agreed to become the guarantor for all international students of the university who want to find their own housing. It also eases the process because the guarantor is a very trusted entity by the local community.

5.3. Language and cultural activities

The university has also pledged to provide more opportunities for the foreign students to learn Japanese language and culture. Apart from the "tutoring" system, the International Foreign Student and Researchers Department also provides free Japanese conversational and cultural classes to foreign students conducted by local volunteers. Apart from these activities are field trips, festivals, homestays, sports competition, dinner with local business circles and many others backboned by the Kyushu University Foreign Student Association (KUFSA) that receives continuous financial support from local banks and business entities.

5.4. Career services and entrepreneurship support

ISRSC provides information on part-time jobs and internships through advertisement from time to time and organizes career fair to match local companies with international students. Similar to exercise on local students, international students are also recruited during their final year before graduation. Not only that, ISRSC also provides support should the international students are interested of opening a business in Japan. This again, reduces the students’ anxiety over their path after graduation.

6. External Mechanism

Besides internal support from the university, the foreign students are also being supported by external parties (organizations outside of the university). There are 2 government-linked bodies, namely Fukuoka International Association and Fukuoka International Exchange Foundation that basically helps foreigners to adjust dan assimilate with Japanese culture and promote exchanges with the local people.
Fukuoka International Association offers various services, which includes free consultation services, counselling services by bilingual professionals to foreign nationals and their families regarding legal, personal and health issues, financial support for international students and exchange programs with sister cities of Fukuoka (FIA, 2010).

Fukuoka International Exchange Foundation which was established in 1987 provides platform for the local people and foreign residents to get engaged with internationlization activities (FIEF, 2010). The foundation gathers a pool of volunteers to teach free Japanese classes to foreign residents or even tourists, provide homestay to visiting foreigners, and invites talented foreign residents to volunteer to teach the locals about their culture, language, arts and music, and also translation and interpretations. The international students are usually engaged in such activities by giving talks about their homeland and culture at participating primary schools.

Besides these, there are many Fukuoka Friendship Association by country that promote exchange activities with international students. For example, Fukuoka-Malaysia Friendship Association organizes various events relating to Malaysia and Japan throughout the year. The newly enrolled Malaysian students are greeted in a Welcome Party and dressed in kimonos and hakamas (kimono for men) during the Coming of the Age Festival. All Malaysian students receive annual invitations to join cooking festivals, bowling tournaments, Commemoration of Malaysia’s Independents Day Party, primary school sports day and to represent Malaysia in Hakata Dontaku Festival, the third largest festival in Japan.

To further engage international students with local and global community, they are also invited contribute as volunteers in international events, such as Asia-Pacific Children’s Convention in Fukuoka (APCC). APCC is an exchange activity organized by a non-profit organization since 1989 which participants are children from countries all over Asia-Pacific regions. APCC aims to promote peace by inculcating the value of friendship across the region (APCC,2010). Although the event only lasts for a month during summer every year, all participants, including volunteers of this event are regarded as alumni. After returning home, they will form a “Bridge Club” that will continuously promote the activities of APCC at their home country on a volunteer basis. Having consistently in contact with the headquarters in Fukuoka, volunteers in Japan will offer help such as collecting donations and volunteering mission whenever receiving news from their Bridge Club about natural disasters and such at their homecountries.

7. Conclusion

The case of internationalization in Kyushu University reveals that selling such program need detail planning and follow-up. The program is supported in an integrated manner; by the university staff and students representing the internal mechanism, government-linked organizations and society as a whole representing the external mechanism in response to the Global 30 Program initiated by the Japanese government (Figure 2). The concerted effort by various parties are helping Japan to attract a pool of quality international students to study and work in the country. This case gives a general foundation for comparison to UKM model which will be included in the next study.
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Reference