

The Implementation of Malaysian Higher Education Strategic Plan for International Marketing: A Focus Study on West Asian Students

Siti Rugayah Tibek[1], Wan Kamal Mujani[2], Maznah Hj. Ibrahim Kamaruzaman Yusoff[3], Fariza Sham[4], Mohad Faisal Ashari[5]

U&NIVERSITI KEBANGSAAN
MALAYSIA

Siti_tibek@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Strategic Plan 2006-2010 is a revised edition of the Malaysian's National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020. The UKM Strategic Plan is legislated as a guide to equip UKM with the realities and challenges of education in the new millennium. In the revised UKM Strategic Plan (2006-2010 Perspective), environmental analysis on local and global issues that might influence significant impacts on higher education and UKM in specific, are given special focus. In line with the strategic planning concept, specific processes which include robust revisions, and in depth analysis have been done to ensure maximum achievement and effectiveness of such strategic plan. This paper discusses the impacts achieved in the fifth thrust of UKM International Marketing Strategic Plan 2006 - 2010. Employing both quantitative and qualitative methodological approach, this paper discovers and identifies two major educational issues which are: identifying the influencing factors in higher education's demand among West Asian students and focussing on the challenges faced by public universities and West Asian students in Malaysia. In the conclusion, we suggested various international marketing strategies to activate and boost Malaysia higher education programmes effectively and to position Malaysian educational programmes strategically at a global perspective.

Keywords: West Asian students, strategic planning , International Marketing

INTRODUCTION

The higher education sector in Malaysia is rapidly developing, and this has become most obvious since a decade ago through a variety of reforms in terms of policy and initiative. From a mere 11 institutions of university and university college status in mid-1990s, the number has reached 62 (21 are public and the rest are private institutions of higher learning). This development is designed in line with the intellectual development, human capital and resource needs, not only for local requirements but driven by the concept of making Malaysia the regional hub of excellence for higher learning (Ujang, 2009).

Today, many international students are seen pursuing further education in Malaysia whether in private (IPTS) or public (IPTA) institutions of higher learning. They come from 161 different countries, thus with differing background and culture. Statistics show increase of international students from year to year. There are various factors which motivate them to further their studies in Malaysia, among them the good facilities, low cost of education as well as the opportunity of better employment in their home countries (Hushin and Mahmud, 2010).

The quality of facilities and services provided must take priority and be maintained in order to generally fulfill the needs and satisfaction of students. According to Johnson and Fornell (1991), emphasis on consumer satisfaction is very important to gain consumer confidence in the products and services provided (Che Azemi and Assain @ Hashim, 2011). Facilities and services within this context refer to infrastructural facilities provided and direct or indirect services, whether or not involving individuals. Both these factors point to the level of student satisfaction. An institution of higher learning should maintain the maximum level of satisfaction 397 for the purpose of maintaining

good and consistently quality performance. This is the key factor for an organisation to last longer even though studies conducted show that the quality of services rendered does not necessarily predict the level of satisfaction (Kouthouris and Alexandris, 2005). Changes in quality is a phenomenon which largely influences the management system of an organisation (Ramli et al., 2009). Theoretically, the level of student satisfaction with the facilities and services provided by the institution of learning may be fulfilled when the needs and wants are adequately met. Previous studies also support the finding that the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of a consumer is related to his assessment of the quality of services rendered (Parasuranam et al., 1988). Thus, in this era of globalisation, all aspects of individual consumerism should follow current times and requirements. In this age without borders, modern technology makes man wish for more satisfaction in life. The satisfaction in life yearned for in this context is in terms of the quality obtained. Consumer satisfaction is an important element in determining the quality of products and services provided by an organisation. The emphasis on consumer satisfaction is very important to gain consumer confidence in the products and services provided (Johnson and Fornell, 1991).

In 2007, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education published a blueprint which entitled the National Higher Education Action Plan 2007-2010 to spearhead the transformation of Malaysia higher education. The action plan is the working guide for the period of 2007-2010 which was the agenda of a more comprehensive plan known as The National Higher Educational Strategic Plan launched in August 2007 (Wan Muda, 2008). The Malaysian educational strategic plan is planned and formulated to raise the status of Malaysia higher education programmes at par with the first world countries educational system such as the Americans, British, Japanese and Canadians. The strategic plan have undergone extensive discussions and was formulated based

from numerous government educational policies and educational acts. There are seven thrusts in the strategic plan and they are:

1. Widening access and enhancing quality
2. Improving the quality of teaching and learning
3. Enhancing research and innovation
4. Strengthening institutions of higher education
5. Intensifying internationalization
6. Enculturation of lifelong learning
7. Reinforcing the Ministry's delivery system

The focus of this paper is on the fifth thrust of the strategic plan namely intensifying internationalization. Malaysia is now aggressively promoting to be an international hub for education (refer to Figure 1). However, a very important terminology that needs serious consideration is the concept of 'internationalization' itself which has evolved through time. Prof Christine Ennew from University of Nottingham advocates that 'the environment' should be exploited to encourage the growth of student mobility and research collaboration (Ling and Md Taib, 2011). In addition among other challenges in setting the market for internationalization, universities need to turn into business for the realisation of national goals.

The Malaysian International Marketing Strategic Plan 2006-2010 has formulated seven main approaches as the basic foundation for Malaysian higher education development until the year 2020. The strategic plan is the main document which translates the pathways for Malaysia higher education development into the future. In this plan, special consideration has been allocated specifically for human development and quality intellectual capability to project Malaysia as a progressive, sustainable, and competitive nation. The focus of this present research is targeted to

students from West Asian region. For the purpose of this research, West Asian region covers countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Yaman, Jordan, Libya, Lubnan, Syria, Palestine, Turkey, Egypt dan Sudan.

According to the record from the Ministry of Higher Education, the number of West Asian students studying in Malaysian public higher education institutions has rosed from merely 548 students in 1999 to almost triple, which is, 2756 students in 2006. The average increase is 46 percent with Iranian students as the highest percentage with 200 percent intake per year. This phenomenon undoubtly, has identified Iran among the West Asian countries as the main marker for Malaysian international marketing in higher education institution. This preliminary research relating to West Asian students studying in Malaysia will initiate a conceptual framework that can be utilised for the international marketing strategic plan for Malaysian higher education institutions.

The conceptual framework is created based on data from the Ministry of Higher Education and selected Public Higher Education Institutions. The framework is used as a mechanism to increase the intake of West students to Malaysian institutions, to improve the teaching and learning pedagogy and to improve the quality of service to West Asian students as well as. to improve situations in solving problems faced by West Asian students in Malaysia.

The Research:

This preliminary study is specially focussed on West Asian students studying at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Four other universities were selected and used as comparison to UKM. These universities are namely: Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). These three universities are public-state universities which have the status of research universities (RU). One non-research university is chosen that is, the Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (UIAM) at Gombak, Selangor. UIAM is chosen particularly because of its international outlook and it has the highest number of international students' intake in its learning programmes.

The Research Methodology:

This research study employed two types of approach which are qualitative and quantitative method. The two different approaches are used in order to triangulate and complement each other in analyzing the data. The qualitative method encompasses literature study which use historical method of analysis and content analysis method. These two methods of analysis are used in examining primary and secondary data such as government reports, meeting minutes, workshop working papers, annual reports and monographs. In addition to the literature study, non-structure interviews are employed to elicit richer data and to clarify certain issues. In this research, quantitative method is used to elicit statistical and comprehensive data. A survey method is employed and survey questionnaires were distributed. Two hundred and sixty two respondents (262) answered the questionnaires. These respondents are selected from the five universities namely; UKM, UM, USM, UPM and UIA.

Result and Discussion:

From the survey conducted, it was found that the respondents from Universiti Islam Antarabangsa (UIA) and Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) received the highest min score compared to respondents from UM, UPM and UKM. It can be interpreted that the respondents from UIA and USM relate positive perception of Malaysian education system based from their own experience in their university education system. Respondents from UIA score the highest min for the following statements:

Table 1: UIA Scores Min

no	Statements	Scores (mins)
1	Malaysia provides enough facilities (e.g.: transport, housing) for students' everyday life	3.08
2	Graduates from Malaysia are easily employable	2.82
3	Easy to pass the study course	2.88
4	Malaysia has good relation with respondents' country	3.52

USM respondents score min is as high as UIA. The USM respondents however, score at four different statements given in Table2:

Table 2: USM Scores min

No	Statements	Scores (min)
1	There is no problem in terms of the medium of instruction	2.81
2	Malaysia has good reputation as a Muslim country	3.34
3	There are many tourist attractions	3.52
4	. Malaysia's economy is stable and progressive	3.30

In general, the respondents from USM showed the highest min in the context of students' satisfaction to university infrastructure and learning environment. The statements tabulated below in Table 3 show the range of score:

Table 4: USM Scores Min

no	statements	Score (min)
1	Satisfaction with student management quality and services at faculty/centre	3.04
2	Satisfaction with learning facilities such as seminar/lecture rooms	3.09
3	Feel safe in campus area	3.22
4	Satisfaction with basic infrastructure such as shopping areas and recreation areas nearby campus	3.26
5	Satisfaction in choosing the right university and will recommend to friends to study in this university	3.13

From these statistical findings, UKM stays at the lower end as compared to the other universities in terms of learning facilities and infrastructure quality provided at the university campus. UKM however, is still the choice of university among West Asian students based on the following issues:

Table 5: UKM Scores Min

no	statement	score
1	Student management quality and service at graduate management	3.00

	centre	
2	Internet accessibility within the campus	3.11
3	Satisfaction with the health facilities provided by university	2.87

Based on the analysis of data in this survey research, it can be concluded that to the West Asian students, UKM is the fifth choice of university after the other four Malaysian public universities; UM, UIA, UPM and USM. As being the last choice of university for tertiary education, UKM should make some serious and immediate improvements. UKM should advocate forthcoming strategies to realize the fifth thrust focused by the Ministry of Higher Education in National Higher Education Strategic Plan (2007-2010) which targeted on the globalization of education. Based on the analysis of results above, there are many factors which may influence West Asian students to make the choice of which higher education institutions in Malaysia to further their studies. The influencing factors are as follows: There are many issues and problems related with the learning facilities as seen by the West Asian students. Based on the following results in Diagram 2, some of the facilities at Malaysian universities need serious overhaul.

Some serious efforts should be taken by Malaysian Higher Education Ministry to attract more students from West Asian countries to study in Malaysia. This is necessary to re-position Malaysia as the hub of higher education in the south eastern region. The recommended promotional activities to raise Malaysia's image as the focal point for education are shown as follows:

The Promotional Strategies

- Operate public university branch campus abroad.
- Provide high quality university education.
- Establish cooperative relationship with other international countries.
- Enhance Malaysia Education Promotion Centre.
- Enhance promotion strategies used by MOHE.
- Establish alumni associations as a promotion agent.
- Conduct research on curriculum offered by universities.
- Improve university lecturers' teaching quality.
- Higher education institution practice scheme (SLAI).
- Publish reference book for international student.
- Quality control for support facilities at universities.
- Offer more scholarship for international student.
- Quota for international student enrolment.

Conclusion:

The research done by Institut Penyelidikan Tinggi Negara (IPPTN) on international students for the year 2009 found that there are gaps in academic delivering systems among Malaysian public and private institutions of education. Obviously, there are rooms for improvement to attract more West Asian students to further their studies in Malaysian higher education institutions. Public research university such as Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) should be fully prepared to compete with other higher education institutions. UKM educational system should extend far beyond other Malaysian higher education institutions by offering high quality courses, accommodate global requirements, and provide reasonable student fees. The perceptions solely based on emphasizing financial profits should be re-evaluated since it will affect the quality of education, facilities and services thus, will give unnecessary negative impacts to Malaysian higher education institutions. Such negative perceptions and avocations will deter Malaysia to be the international hub of education in the South East Asian region.

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