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Essay

Academic Exchange between Malaysia and Japan toward the Prosperous Global Collaborations of Universities in Asia-Pacific Region



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The Asia-Pacific region covers 60.7 percent of the world population, 41 out of 196 countries in the world. Regarding the number of Internet users representing the recent ICT, it reaches 43.6% of the world's Internet users. Under the current environment, it is exactly expected to promote the higher education and research in collaboration with those universities toward the prosperity of the region.

The pursuit of knowledge has been likened to a dwarf standing on the shoulder of giants—metaphorically implying that the seeker of knowledge is able to develop the future intellectual pursuits by understanding research and works of notable thinkers of the past. At the University of Malaya (UM), we recognize that the pursuit of knowledge is not only dependent upon the understanding of past intellectual works, but also achieved by standing shoulder to shoulder with other contemporary intellectual giants. Consequently, the University of Malaya realizes the value of bilateral academic exchange with notable academic institutions worldwide, especially with its neighbors in Asia. Whilst UM has signed many Memorandums of Understanding with Asian universities—in China, Taiwan, Korea, and other ASEAN countries, UM's relationship with Japan is perhaps the most unique and well structured.

UM prides itself on being a pioneer in Malaysia-Japan collaborations in higher education, through the "Look East Policy" which was conceived in 1982. In 1984, UM's Japanese Preparation Centre started conducting a two year preparatory program specifically to prepare students for entrance into Japanese Universities. This preparatory program to Japan has the distinction of being the only program in UM which prepares its students for university enrolment in a foreign country. The success of this program has resulted in its model being emulated by other similar preparatory programs in Malaysia. This program is based on the collaboration between the University of Malaya, Japanese Government and Public Services Department of Malaysia. An important feature of this program is the involvement of Japanese Language Teachers and Science Teachers from Japan, in ensuring complete immersion into the Japanese syllabus through teaching in Japanese. As a result, to date, this program has produced over 5000 graduates from Japanese universities, who are employed in industry and academia. The majority of these graduates are in the field of Engineering and Technology, although a significant proportion also possess degrees in Management, Medicine and Biotechnology. Many of them have returned to Malaysia and contributed as professionals or experts in their specific fields. The educational experience of these graduates in Japan has also brought a new scheme of work ethics for the Malaysian work force.

Following on the postgraduate level academic staff, if the staff who experienced the academic training scheme spon-

sored by either UM, or various Japanese-based companies, or Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) are taken into account as well, the presence of Japanese trained academics in UM is considerable now. On a formal level, internationalization efforts by UM is managed by UM's Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic and Internationalization issues. In addition, its International and Corporate Relations Office is responsible for building, expanding and improving UM's relations with its international counterparts through exploration of collaborative efforts in research, academia and cultural exchanges. UM's international student community has also grown exponentially in the last few years. UM's International Student Centre was established as a one-stop centre to address the international students' needs, both at the undergraduate and postgraduate level. Whilst the majority of these long term undergraduate or postgraduate students are from Indonesia, China, Bangladesh, and the Middle East, UM has had the pleasure of hosting short-term exchange students from Japan and hope to host many more Japanese students in the future. On an equal level of importance to the institutional support provided by UM for collaborative efforts, is the personal effort in teaching and research between academics in UM and those of its collaborating institutions.

A current example of successful collaborative networks is the AUN/SEED-Net, which involves the University of Malaya, other academic institutions in ASEAN and Japan. Based on the intention of developing human resource capital for ASEAN Region, the AUN/SEED-Net organization provides another valuable channel for postgraduate students and academic researchers intending to further study in Japan or other ASEAN countries. It was initiated by Japan during the ASEAN-Japan Summit in 1997, with the objective of developing human resources in engineering within the Southeast Asian region. Mainly supported by the Japanese Government through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the ASEAN Foundation, AUN/SEED-Net comprises of 19 leading universities in the Southeast Asian region, supported by 11 renowned Japanese universities. Its core programs are to provide scholarships at the Master's and Doctorate level at the member institutions in Southeast Asia or Doctorate level only in Japan. For example, UM hosts a Master's degree program in Manufacturing Engineering under the auspices of AUN/Seed-Net, and has attracted a diverse group of students hailing from Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos and other countries. Such programs are complemented by the Collaborative Research Program in which the postgraduate research is co-supervised by academics from the Member Institutions and Japan. Other support programs such as the Japanese Professors Dispatch Program and Short-term Study Program are devised to allow visits of Japanese professors to Member Institutions and visits of doctoral students at the host institutions to Japan, respectively, in order to strengthen academic and research capabilities. The Short-Term Visit Program in ASEAN and Short-Term Research Program in Japan are also provided to enhance and upgrade the capacity of the Member Institutions through assistance from Host Institutions and Japanese Supporting Universities. All these efforts amply allow sustainable collaborative efforts between all the participating institutions, in order to ensure successful academic exchange.

