

# International mobility programme participation in diversifying students' learning experience and strengthening graduate attribute development: a case study

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## Abstract

Students participating in international mobility programmes obtain international perspective, develop higher degree of openness and acceptance to diversity. This paper presents a case study on the implementation of international mobility programme in a Malaysian research university. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia implemented Global Outreach Program (GOP), a short-term international mobility programme where participants interact with partner institutions and organisations abroad and learn valuable skills in managing their study abroad experience. This programme aligns with the vision of the university in diversifying students' learning outside of lecture halls and the university's graduate attribute development among its students.

*Keywords:* Graduate attributes, international mobility, study abroad

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## 1. Introduction

International mobility is the main indicator of the internationalisation of higher education. It has significant economic and academic implications, and is expected to grow considerably during the coming years. Students going abroad for international mobility programmes are exposed to cultures, working ethics, social environment and world view that differ from their home countries. This enables the students to obtain international perspective from experiences abroad and developing higher degree of openness and acceptance to diversity. Important life skills, including maturity, confidence, communication skills, cultural sensitivity and adaptability are being put to test and enhanced as the students immerse themselves in academic, cultural or industrial-based mobility programmes (Bakalis and Joiner, 2004; Jahr and Teichler, 2007). Such qualities in students participating in international mobility are highly valued by multi-national firms seeking individuals that are functional and adaptable in cross-border working environments.

International mobility also benefits universities when adapted as an institution-wide internationalisation strategy (Murphy, 2007) as it builds the universities' intercultural contacts and social networks for the future. The showcase of a university's talent i.e. students through mobility programmes is an example of internationalisation occurring through the 'bottom-up' approach where the real processes of internationalisation are taking place (Knight, 2007). At the national level, international mobility is an alternative source of revenue generation in the form of education, besides communicating the higher education sector's strength and essence through interactions between outgoing students with their foreign cohorts.

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## **2. Structure and context of paper**

Given the increase of student participation in international mobility programmes, the benefit derived from such implementation merits investigation. This paper presents a case study on impact of international mobility programme implementation in a Malaysian research university.

This paper intends to be neither comprehensive in its coverage nor exhaustive in its content. It seeks to illustrate a functional model of international mobility programme implementation of the selected institution since each university has a different focus and direction on the implementation of international mobility programme. While there exist different implementation strategies, the underlying principle of international mobility programme are students' experience abroad; their experiences might impact personal and professional development in similar ways. As such, an increased understanding of the students' experience will help universities better articulate and impact institutional policy related to international education. The understanding will also allow faculty and third party providers to appropriately plan curricula that would bolster diversity and international engagement in learning.

The paper will begin by introducing the international mobility programme in question, including its mode of operation and implementation aims towards student development. Next, a research on the perceived impact on students' international experience on their personal and professional development is presented. This will be followed by discussion and recommendation on international mobility programme implementation based on the case study presented. It is hoped that the case study will shed light on the value of international experience to the individual students' learning, personal and career development, as well as the role of universities in enabling international mobility opportunities to its student body.

## **3. Global Outreach Programme: An introduction**

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) is a research university focusing on engineering, sciences and technology, and graduate education located both in Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru, Malaysia. The student population consists of more than 12,100 full-time undergraduate students and more than 10,888 postgraduate students in various fields of specialization, supported by more than 2,000 academic staff. Internationalisation has been one of the institutional focuses of the university since 2009, based on documented university planning strategies outlining the university's implementation of internationalisation activities, its increased attention on recruitment of international talents into its campus and the intensity in forging international collaboration with foreign organizations and universities. To date, the university plays host to more than 4,400 international students and 150 international academic staff in 2011.

Global Outreach Programme (GOP) is introduced in 2009 as part of its institutional internationalisation strategy. It is coordinated by faculties in collaboration with the Office of International Affairs, UTM. In this programme, students spend one or two weeks abroad to gain new academic, cultural and industrial experience. There are three modes of GOP: A technical-based, experiential approach that exposes students to real-world settings of communities, workplaces, organizations, and natural environments; cultural immersion through cross discipline experience and local assimilation that stimulates students' academic progress, personal growth, and intercultural understanding as well as service learning that integrates community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, nurture civic responsibility, and strengthen community engagement of UTM students.

GOP is opened to all university students. Students work with academic staff in preparing a working proposal which integrates academic, cultural and community elements into a one or two-week's worth of itinerary abroad in a country of choice. The working proposal is subject to evaluation and revision before it is granted approval. Each participating student is given an allocation of RM 1,000 as partial financial assistance; the remaining operating expenditure has to be sourced externally by the students, either through self-funding, corporate sponsorship or fund-raising activities organised within or outside of the university.

GOP aims to increase access of international mobility to the whole student population. Although there is extensive advocacy from international educators on the benefits of international mobility to students' personal and professional development, there are still concerns on the access towards international mobility programmes, which appears to be advantageous to groups that could afford such opportunities. There is a growing trend among universities to develop programmes that are of shorter duration. The elimination and/or reduction of barriers in international mobility programmes commonly cited as key inhibitors of participation, particularly those related to financial and time constraints, offers more flexibility and greater equity to all students who are interested in the programme (Sindt, and Pachmayer, 2009). Through GOP, participants gain global perspective through interaction with partner institutions and organizations abroad, learn valuable communication skills and project management skills such as planning, executing and crisis management and gain awareness and understanding towards other cultures and beliefs. The skills are important in increasing the students' employability upon graduation.

The university is committed in producing competent, creative and versatile professionals who are guided by high moral and ethical values in the service of God and mankind, in line with the vision and mission statements of the university. The design of the programme enables diversification of students' learning beyond lecture halls and conventional interactions with academic staff and fellow peers. The programme is also aligned to the seven attributes required from each graduate, as illustrated in the table below:

Table 1. UTM Graduate Attributes

UTM graduate attributes	Activities in GOP that would contribute to UTM graduate attributes
Communication Skills	Communication with foreign universities / organizations, students, local community
Critical Thinking And Problem Solving Skills	Solving problems / challenges that arise during GOP implementation overseas
Team working Skills	Planning for GOP, fund raising activities
Information Management And Lifelong Learning	Obtaining information on opportunities available in foreign universities / organizations
Entrepreneurship Skills	Fund raising activities
Leadership Skills And Proactiveness	Leading team members in itinerary
Ethics And Integrity	Following through with learning objectives planned for GOP

Source: Modified from Centre of Teaching and Learning (CTL), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (2010)

#### 4. GOP and its impact on student development

A study is conducted in 2010 and 2011 on the impact and outcome of international mobility on students' career development. The sample is drawn from UTM students who have participated in GOP and are currently employed. Two sets of questionnaires are constructed for both the graduates and their employers. In the questionnaire for the graduates, the subjects are given questions related to their experience abroad during GOP. A different set of questionnaire is also constructed for the graduates' employers, concentrating on the employers' experience with the graduates that have gone abroad. The study involved a sample of 42 students and 10 employers.

The respondents were asked on the country of which the GOP took place. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of countries visited by the respondents. Most respondents travel within East Asia, visiting Japan (21.82%), China (7.27%), Taiwan (7.27%), South Korea (1.82%) and Hong Kong (1.82%). This is followed by South East Asia (37.27%), visiting Indonesia (18.18%), Singapore (10.91%), Thailand (7.27%) and Cambodia (0.91%). The remaining 11.81% of respondents visited the U.K, Germany and Italy, while 10.9% visited India and the US.

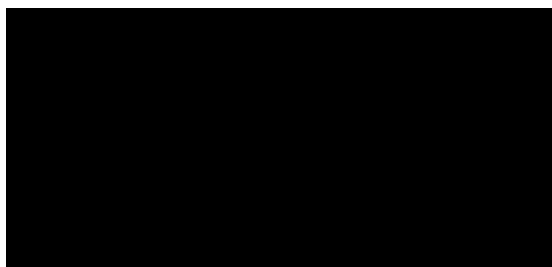


Figure 1. Countries visited by the respondents

The respondents were also asked of the challenges faced during their stay overseas. Figure 2 summarised the challenges faced by the respondents. Most respondents cite language (22.67%) as a major challenge faced. This is followed by challenges in adapting to the food (16%), the community (13.33%) and different living environment (11.33%). It is interesting to note that only a small percentage of the respondents face major challenges in paperwork or assignment. The challenges cited by respondents are typical of challenges cited by international students as they try to adapt to their host countries (Goe, 1998; Qing Gu, 2001; Yeh, 2003). Such challenges present opportunities for the respondents to find solutions to the challenges in a new environment, hence developing themselves personally and professionally.

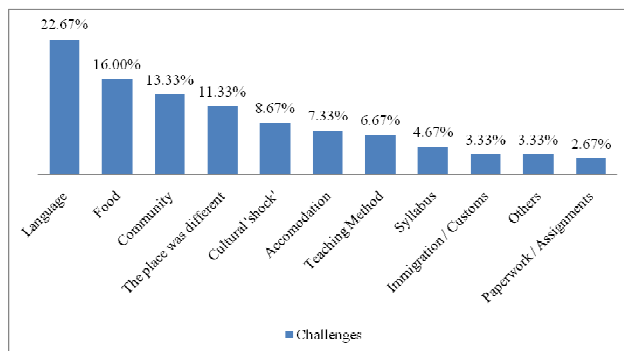


Figure2. Challenges Faced By UTM Students During Their International Mobility Experience

The last section of the questionnaire deals with the respondents' perception on their personal growth after their GOP participation. The growth is measured through four categories i.e. the respondents' personal development, academic commitment, intercultural development, and career development. The table below details the respondents' perception.

Table 2: Students' Perception

CATEGORIES	SUB-CATEGORIES	PERCENTAGE
<b>Personal Development</b>	Increase Self Confidence	79.25%
	Increase Maturity (ability to tolerate & accept other points of view, & ability to think before you act or speak)	82.31%
	Had a lasting impact on world view	84.69%
<b>Academic Commitment</b>	More interested in academic studies	73.81%

	Influenced subsequent educational experiences	79.59%
	Reinforced commitment to foreign language study	74.83%
	Get to know the global education scene & job available internationally	82.65%
<b>Intercultural Development</b>	Helped me better understand my own cultural values & biases	82.31%
	Influenced me to seek out greater diversity of friends	83.67%
	Continues to influence interactions with people from different cultures	85.03%
<b>Career Development</b>	Acquired skill sets that influenced career path	77.21%
	Ignited an interest in a career direction pursued after the experience	77.89%

In general, the respondents' participation in GOP has lasting impact on their personal growth. A higher percentile of respondents reported increasing maturity (82.31%) and world view (84.69%) on top of developing an understanding of the global education scene and job availability internationally (82.65%). The respondents also reported a positive growth in self confidence (79.25%) besides having increased interested in future career direction (77.89%) and acquisition of skill sets for future career path (77.21%).

At the point of writing, a data set consisting of 10 employers were submitted and analysed. As such, the results presented will only be representative of the available data. Respondents were asked on their preference of employing graduates with international mobility experiences. The figure below summarizes their responses.

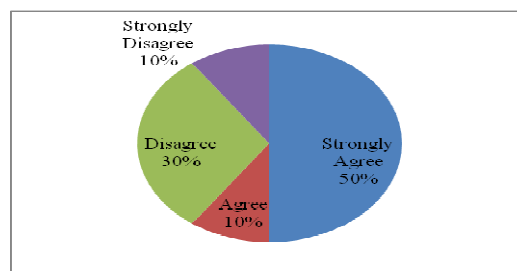


Figure3. Employers' preference on employing graduates with study abroad experiences

The employers' perception on UTM graduates who have been on international mobility programmes are summarized as follows:

Table 3. Employers' perception on UTM graduates

CATEGORIES	SUB-CATEGORIES	PERCENTAGE
Communication Skills	Able to speak good English	73.33%
	Willing to learn other languages	66.67%
	Able to write & handle business with international partners	68.33%
Work Quality & Efficiency	Dedication to work	81.67%
	Integrity to perform task work with honesty	76.67%

	Ability to work independently & ability to work as a team	80.00%
	Able to view issues in a broader perspective	71.67%
	Willingness to learn new skills	80.00%
Personality	Demonstrate strong leadership	75.00%
	Very resourceful and possess initiative	75.00%
	Willingness to travel abroad	76.67%
	Able to take challenges	76.67%
	Have a good attitude	78.33%

Generally, the respondents have fairly positive perception towards UTM graduates with international mobility experiences. Items under two categories, namely work quality and efficiency, as well as personality scored, on average, more than 75%. The employers are satisfied with the graduates' dedication to work (81.67%), ability to work independently and ability to work as a team (80%) and willingness to learn new skills (80%). They are also satisfied with the graduates' integrity (76.67%), willingness to travel abroad (76.67%) and their ability to take on challenges (76.67%). It is presumed that similar results will be obtained from employers, supporting previous studies on employers' perception towards students with study abroad experiences (Orahoo, Kruze and Pearson, 2004; Trooboff, Vande Berg and Rayman, 2008; Detering, 2010).

## 5. Discussion and recommendation

International mobility is accorded considerable importance in the internationalisation of higher education, as the cross-border movements not only benefit the students, but also the universities at large. The importance of this dimension has been supported by annual studies conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as well as reports from International Association of Universities (IAU), Association of International Education (NAFSA), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and other relevant international organizations concerning international education.

An important push factor that needs to be in place is students' own initiatives to take part in international mobility programmes. Students need to be aware of the benefits of such programmes and look forward to participate in at least one programme throughout their studies. Participation in international mobility programmes should be made a norm in the academic culture, similar to that implemented by universities abroad, where students are given credits and acknowledgement for their international experiences.

The study is a positive indication towards implementation of international mobility programme in the institution. Based on evaluation forms submitted by the students, they are excited with their GOP experience, albeit the short duration of the programme. For some students, GOP provides their first experience abroad, and this serves as motivation for them to look forward for similar experiences in the future. The exposure encourages reflective learning and provides opportunities for the students to learn outside of their classroom. Some students have also express interest in pursuing their postgraduate studies abroad after their GOP experience. From the results above, it can be generalised that students benefit the most out of their experiences abroad, in terms of personal development, academic commitment, intercultural development and career development, while employers prefer to engage with graduates with the right attributes to act and function effectively at work. More data and follow up should be carried out to verify this generalisation in the future to understand not only the impact and outcome of study abroad programmes on the students' career development, but also the characteristics required by the employers, which could be developed through students' participation in study abroad programmes.

In the first year of its implementation, a total of 81 GOP programmes were implemented, involving 1311 students. By 2010, the number of GOP implanted increased to 140, involving 2370 students, amounting to a total of RM 3,618,000 in seed fund provided to participating students in 2 years. Such achievement is made possible with collaboration of faculties and relevant departments in encouraging students to participate in the programme. This also shows the university's inclusiveness in internationalisation by engaging its students and staff in value-driven internationalisation activities which is beneficial for personal and professional development of its community, as well as increasing the visibility of the university abroad.

GOP can be considered as an effort towards democratizing international mobility programmes. This programme is opened to all students and is only executed within a short period of time, typically one to two weeks. Such implementation has similar impact to that of long term programmes, referring the studies conducted by Detering (2010), Orahod, Kruze and Pearson (2004), Trooboff, Vande Berg and Rayman (2008), where students are involved in programmes with a minimum duration of one semester. The outcome highlighted through this study shows that students' international experience, regardless of duration, will have an impact towards students' personal and professional development.

This study also calls for more support and initiatives to encourage student participation in international mobility programmes. Currently, students taking part in GOP are given RM 1,000 seed fund each, while the rest of the funding derived from students' own contribution, such as external sponsorship and fund raising activities. Numerous student groups and organisations have come out with innovative ways to generate revenue for GOP. Some student bodies under faculties such as the Faculty of Built Environment utilises the skills and knowledge they have learnt in lectures in managing an exhibition by the Housing Development Association, generating RM 160,000 for their GOP abroad. The projects that the students carried out for fund raising activities not only assist them in reducing the travelling expenses to be covered, they also benefit the local community in the long run, such as a computerised system of local private clinics developed by students from the Faculty of Computer Science and Information Systems, as well as religious teaching programmes for mosques by students from the Faculty of Education. More collaboration with universities from neighbouring countries, especially in Eastern Asia should be done in enabling international mobility programmes within this region in the areas of short-term study attachments, one semester exchanges abroad and short term study trips, since this is a favourite region for students for international mobility programmes. On top of that, students should also be exposed of available international associations or funding bodies that support international mobility to gain access to funding opportunities available through these associations.

There is still room for improvement for implementation of GOP programmes in the future. Firstly, students must be guided in their planning of GOP. There should be a general timeline for students to plan and submit proposals, assisted with templates for planning, such as proposal template, planning templates, and budgeting templates. As students need to raise funds to cover their participation, it is important for them to estimate the amount of time needed to raise the funds and the commitment required in running fund raising activities. Students should also be guided in planning and running fund raising activities. In terms of variety in GOP executed, more service-learning based activities should be included to encourage greater engagement between the students and local community.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper presents a case study of Global Outreach Programme (GOP), a short term outbound mobility programme initiated by Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) as part of its institutional internationalisation strategy. This programme provides opportunities for students to spend one or two weeks abroad in academic, industrial or cultural based activities, enabling the students to gain international perspectives abroad, at the same time, becoming ambassadors of the university in forming and strengthening international linkages and collaborations with foreign universities and industries. The programme is also a platform to expose students to diversity,

leadership, teamworking skills and other skills which are crucial skills for their career advancement in the future. Drawing from the case study presented, it is important for universities to enable participation of students in international mobility programmes in diversifying and maximising their students' learning experience and development, producing a cohort of global-ready graduates who are able to compete in a competitive global labour market.

## Acknowledgements

This publication is supported by Ministry of Higher Education and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (No: 4B045).

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