Attracting International Postgraduate Students: The Pulling Factors

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ABSTRACT

A university has to carry out various marketing strategies and efforts to recruit international students as many as possible in order to fulfill one of the criteria for a world-class university status. However, to attract quality candidates with the desirable profile is becoming increasingly difficult especially when the university has to compete internationally and nationally with the existing and new emerging universities. This paper discusses the findings of a study carried out to establish the factors considered by international students before they decided to come to Universiti Teknologi Malaysia for their postgraduate studies. A total sample of 896 international students from various fields of studies for three different intakes was used in the study. The result shows that the main factors considered by them are the availability of the programme, reputation, the conduciveness of the campus environment for teaching and learning, and the location of the university. Most of them agreed that internet and education fairs or expositions are effective marketing medium for the recruitment of international students. This study provides an evidence-based framework to be considered by the University in formulating strategies and efforts to become a global player in higher education.

Keywords: Campus Environment, International Students, Marketing, Pulling Factors, Recruitment

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has targeted an enrolment of over 200,000 postgraduate students in its higher education system in the year of 2020. Among the outlined strategies includes the idea of bringing in influx of international students into Malaysia. The task has become easier since the aftermath of Sept 11, 2001 since Middle Eastern students have been facing visa restrictions to enter countries of a more favourable destination in higher education, such as the
United States of America (Yeager & Kargbo, 2007). In year 2010, according to the statistics released by the Ministry of higher Education Malaysia (MOHE), more than 24,000 students from countries around the world have enrolled in Malaysian Public Higher Education. Beside that, more than 58,000 have also enrolled in the Malaysian Private Higher Education Institutions (MOHE, 2010). Currently, Malaysia has also achieved a world ranking of 11th place in terms of total international students population around the world. However, the higher education population’s number is still below the targeted number proposed by the MOHE. Thus, universities are urged to double the initiatives needed in order to attract more students to fill the vacant in various programs offered in different fields.

As a Malaysian premier Research University (RU), UTM has also involved in attracting international students population especially in the field of higher education. So far the number of international students at UTM is considerably high as compared to its rival from other Research Universities. If compared to private and newly developed government funded universities, the number is sufficient enough to support the nation’s target in higher education, as well as generating income for the university.

Nevertheless, the demanding task now is to recruit quality students from a diverse population from around the world and not concentrating on certain nation and region for its prospect students. Right now, more than half of the students come from countries like Iran, Indonesia, Libya, etc. From higher education perspective, the ideal is that post graduate education should encompass a diverse background of students to support the multicultural growth of its student body, and to lessen the domination of certain nation or region in the student population strata. Because of these two main reasons, UTM Marketing Unit has employed various strategies such as (1) doubling the promotion to abroad region and countries (2) working with international promoters in their expos and marketing efforts (3) organize visits to foreign universities, and (4) using students body to help promote UTM.

The Current Statistics of UTM Post-Graduate Students

In 2012, UTM was the first Research University in Malaysia where the postgraduate student population surpassed 50% of its total students’ enrolment. In the same year, UTM also became the most populated university with international students in Malaysia, where 80% of them (5,043 students) were postgraduate students. UTM had also contributed for the highest number (33 percent) of nation’s engineering and technology students’ enrolment, with all Malaysian universities combined. UTM also recorded the highest number in term of enrolment of doctoral students (4,455 students) in Malaysia, even high if compared with prominent universities like Harvard, MIT, and Imperial College of London (Zaini, 2012). For the next agenda, UTM is focusing on the number and quality of Ph.D. students to boost research and publications especially in the field of engineering, science and technology.

In UTM, local students make up less than a third of the total number of full-time Ph.D. students’ enrolment due to their professional commitment. And in academia, the students’ full time status has great influence on the publications and research activities in a university. These full-time students are heavily relied on especially for their research and publications. In other words, it is almost impossible for a university to reach the research and publication targets if it solely relies on the part-timers. The same scenario with UTM, quality research and the impact factor journals’ publication are significantly contributed by full-time students, where international students significantly make up a majority of them, therefore the quest for attracting a larger and of higher quality international students population is really an endeavour.
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