

Empowering Outbound Mobility Students towards Future Talents: Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Experience

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Abstract: Providing market-ready talent is challenging. Education needs changes to facilitate the current and future needs of market development in education, a growing and vibrant field. Previous studies have proven that international student mobility is one of the key changes for future education in higher learning institutions. This paper demonstrates the findings of international outbound mobility affecting future employability, career development, and marketability. It is a qualitative study in nature, and the Putra International Centre (i-PUTRA), Universiti Putra Malaysia, has been the chosen institution for this paper. Student Mobility Program provides opportunities and benefits to the students and the institutions. The results indicate that the outbound mobility is enough to maximize benefits for many students. Other factors influencing students to partake in mobility programs include verbal motivation. The study recommends students to enhance their full potential on equipping internationally oriented labor market as global citizen.

Keywords: cultural immersion, inbound, outbound, student mobility program, talent development

Introduction

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) is a multi-disciplinary university in Asia, ranking second in Malaysia. As one of Malaysia's largest and premier universities, UPM has a long-standing reputation for teaching and research excellence; thus, it becomes an established, favored choice for students worldwide. Currently, UPM hosts approximately 28,000 students, and over 7,000 international students from 80 countries (UPM, 2022).

This is also a response to the higher education strategic document, the Malaysian Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2020 (MOHE, 2014), in which the efforts of internationalisation became subsumed under Shift 8 Global Prominence, where student mobility is one of the outcome-based measures for global prominence aside from the numbers of international students. Since 1994, UPM has established offices to manage internationalisation and has perfected its importance throughout the years. Presently, Putra International Centre (i-PUTRA) is a center that handles student mobility, visas, and passes for students, expatriates, dependents, welfare, academic cooperation projects, and other matters about cross-cultural issues.

A mobility program at UPM is a door to opportunities and possibilities that benefits various parties: students, the economy, local communities, and universities especially. Mobility is where the university becomes the melting pot for the community in cultural exchange. At UPM, two student associations cater to international students: the UPM International Students (UPMISA) and the UPM Buddies Association (Buddies). These two associations have similar objectives but different patrons.

UPMISA is an association comprising international students from various countries who act as mini ambassadors to represent their countries. Over the years, the association has promoted their culture to the local students and hosted multiple cultural events. Meanwhile, the Buddies Association, comprising local and international students enrolled at UPM, welcomes the inbound exchange students, and assists them in assimilating and acclimatizing to Malaysia's university and life. They must befriend the international students; provide support and share experiences and insight into life on campus. They also organize programs and events to achieve their objectives, which helps them increase interaction and connect with local and international students.

To optimize internationalisation, the student's mobility program benchmarks international standards in terms of the delivery of educational and student services and the teaching of courses and degree programs.

Introducing these programs aims to expose students globally and improve the quality of UPM graduates each year, including the university's internationalisation, making studying-abroad programs an essential part of university life.

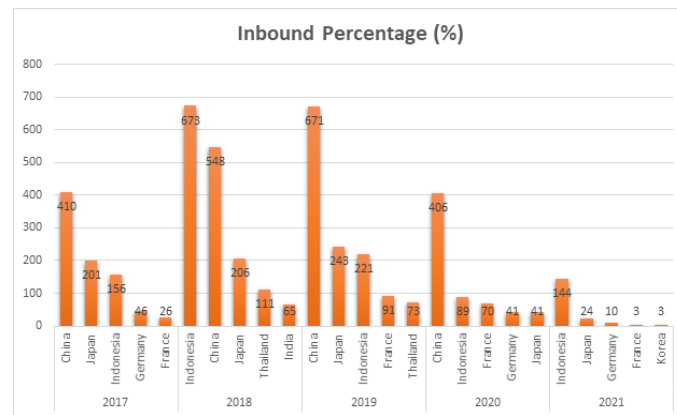


Fig. 1 Inbound students to Universiti Putra Malaysia 2017–2021

Figure 1 shows the number of inbound students at Universiti Putra Malaysia from 2017 until 2021. According to Figure 1, inbound students were mainly from Indonesia. The highest number is in 2018 from Indonesia with 673 students. However, throughout the years, the number dropped drastically due to Covid-19. The pattern also applied to outbound students.

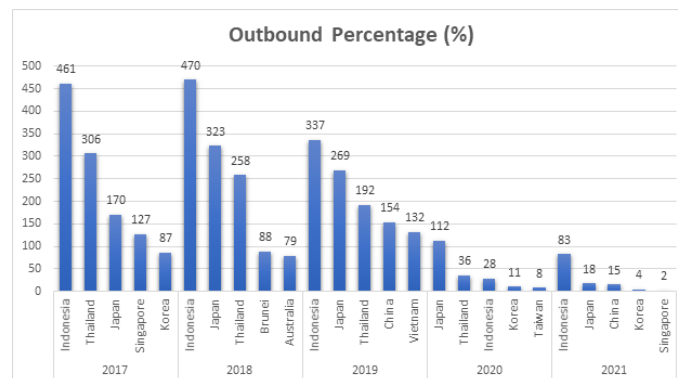


Fig. 2 Outbound students of Universiti Putra Malaysia 2017–2021

Figure 2 presents outbound students from 2017 to 2021. The outbound mobility patterns were taken from the top five countries. The outbound number of students to Indonesia was the highest in 2018 with 470 students. In 2021, the number of outbound students to Indonesia decreased to 83 students. Like the pattern of inbound students, the number of students decreased due to Covid-19.

From the figure, we may see the numbers of mobility students coming in and out of UPM rapidly, encouraging more students to participate in this program.

The paper seeks to fulfill the literature gap by examining the outcomes of outbound student mobility on the value of international experience outside UPM to other countries. Student mobility programs refer to outbound mobility program activities.

Literature Review

The outbound mobility student program has received an enormous response among university students in the last decade. Internationalisation has been related to different fields worldwide, including cultural, societal, and economic. Higher education institutions have increasingly grown their interest in student's employability skills as part of their curricular activities and improved their chances of entering the employability market (Maina et al., 2022). Despite having an education, students face difficulties landing a job as fresh graduates. Even so, the lack of quality graduates with soft skills made higher institutions implement the necessary skills for undergraduates. Fresh graduates are less attractive to employers as employers criticize higher education for not preparing students for the labor market and continuously highlight student's lack of skills (Hurrell 2016). Additionally, the conventional curriculum provided by higher education is less favorable due to neglecting the necessary knowledge for the current and future job market. Higher education has responded to this issue by having various skill programs, one of which is mobility, which allows a student to explore knowledge beyond traditional classrooms. Mobility programs also encourage students to increase the probability of employability.

Succi and Canovi (2019) define employability as an achievement and understanding that prepares students to be employed and successful in their chosen career, benefiting the society, economy, and workplace. Hillage and Pollard (1998) supported the statement, as graduates are expected to perform and demonstrate what they have gained from higher education. Several past literatures have actively explored continuous changes in the environment on graduate employability in the job market. Meanwhile, marketability refers to competencies a graduate must demonstrate in a particular work involving communication skills, problem-solving skills, and teamwork (Sheppard & Unsworth, 2011). Past studies have neglected the effects of graduate employability and marketability by participating in student exchange programs for outbound mobility programs.

Student mobility entails exchanging students between two mutually agreeable universities in a semester. The student mobility program has strengthened political and economic relations globally, and the program has become part of nine Higher Education Institutions global agendas. Government universities in Malaysia include Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, University Utara Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Universiti of Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative method. Participants were six (three males and three females) outbound students from Universiti Putra Malaysia to universities outside Malaysia. All the outbound students were undergraduates, pursuing a degree in engineering, medical, agriculture, and social sciences. The average length of stay during outbound mobility was one month. The interviews were conducted online since students must upload pictures and share their experiences, outcomes, and challenges by uploading Microsoft Word Files to Google Forms. The Google Forms were sent after the students arrived in Malaysia. Atlas.ti was used for the analysis of the study.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the qualitative research method, following written testimonies adopted and conducted in English. The participants were UPM students, and the qualitative data examined why the students chose an international university for the mobility program.

In total six outbound mobility students were identified and chosen for testimony. They were encouraged to express any issues and experiences (good and bad) while having their mobility program

outside UPM. The interview took place via uploading the questions and answers to Google Forms and email.

Using Atlast.ti, the testimony was read several times, and themes were identified from the received data. The coding of the themes was pieced together by various respondents to form a comprehensive picture from their uploaded data. The analysis was made to connect ideas between respondents from similar responses. There were six different themes extracted from the analysis (refer to table 1)

A total of six (6) themes were identified, focusing on student mobility from the investigation. They were (a) communication skills, (b) employment opportunity, (c) exposure, (d) intercultural skills, (e) language proficiency, and (f) new skillset found from 12 testimonies that we gathered.

Table 1. Themes and coding in outbound student mobility testimony

No.	Themes (coding)	Total usage coding in Atlast.ti
1	Communication skill	2
2	Employment opportunity	5
3	Exposure	21
4	Intercultural skill	12
5	Language proficiency	7
6	New skillset	3

Students highlight that with outbound mobility program, it improved their communication skills. Scharoun (2015) supported that statement by saying, “Study mobility is certainly different from in-class learning that should be experienced by all the students and create ‘work ready’ graduates.” During our analyses, one of the most frequently expressed views was that students would very much like to gain communication skills through teamwork and learning about the daily lives of locals. This is best captured by respondent six, who said:

“Different work and communication cultures are not a barrier to me to carry out the entire tasks well.”

Also, the outbound student mobility program forces students to interact as their survival method in a foreign country. They also get to experience culture by just communicating with the locals. Aside from improving communication skills, it also creates employment opportunities. Past researchers also have begun to examine the influence of student participation in international mobility programs on employment and career-related outcomes. Students in mobility programs are more exposed to the new environment and find themselves adapting to any kind of situations.

Respondent one stated,

“It was really a new environment to us, as we needed to learn some new coding systems to collect the environmental data in the real field using the customized sensor that we created to read the soil moisture and take the average count, which could then be linked to Arduino software to record the massive data.”

One of the highest themes during our analyses was exposure with the highest mean (mean = 4.5). Approximately 90% of the respondents said that exposure is higher as outbound mobility programs encourage students to expose themselves to different situations. In our findings, the students have been exposed at the beginning of the student’s mobility stage, such as preparing documentation for a student visa, purchasing travel insurance, telecommunication network, money exchange, limitation of finance, and adjusting to the new climate. Although this situation brings anxiety to the students, it prepares them for the real world. Exposure to different academic cultures can change the perspective of returning students and academics. In our findings, it is recorded that exposure has the highest number of coding among themes.

Respondent two stated,

“We also had the chance to bathe the baby elephants, and it was definitely a great experience. In the evening, we went to the night market to buy dinner. The delegates were able to get a first-hand experience of the night market’s ambience.”

The result should come without surprise because different countries have their own cultures that expose our students to a new perspective. The interview data agrees with what we found in past studies. As supported by past literatures, it can be debated that the duration of student outbound exchange, which lasted a few weeks, will not give as much cultural exposure as a semester tour. However, it shows that graduates who studied abroad are more adaptable to other cultures and could work more effectively than students without experience (Scharoun, 2015). Most respondents spoke highly of exposure, especially those who have never experienced traveling outside the country.

After the students have been exposed to various unfamiliar environments, they also developed intercultural skills. Intercultural skill is the second-highest coded after exposure. Scharoun (2015) claims the importance of experience outside classroom can be more mind-opening, resulting from idea exchange. Therefore, students will have a strong knowledge on dealing with and understanding the external environment for career success before graduation.

Respondent one stated,

“We did exchange our food with other students coming from Thailand, Cambodia, United States, Indonesia, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Iran, etc. Some of the students also took the opportunity to perform their traditional music, where we enjoyed listening to other languages songs.”

Cultural skills about lunch timings:

“Interesting culture that we have to blend in France is about their lunch break that is always on time (12–2 pm), and proper from the appetizer, main course, to dessert” - Respondent one.

Respondent three also mentioned, *“I got to experience different cultures, different food, and different languages. Learning about their history, culture, food, language, are all very exciting to me, however, the memorable part of my experience is the people that I have met along the way.”*

Respondent six said,

“Involvement in society and collaboration with local universities, private organizations, and institutions have significantly improved their confidence and social skills.”

Along with intercultural skills, language proficiency, and new skillset aspects, these were highly rated by all respondents. Many respondents expressed that language proficiency is needed for preparing themselves in future world. It challenges the students to converse in different languages, adapt to other cultural backgrounds, and unlock communication for career success (Scharoun, 2015). Roy et al. (2018) found that students better demonstrate linguistic skills when participating in the same language program in class.

Respondent three mentioned,

“Intercultural skill makes me able to communicate without speaking the same language, a very valuable skill to have that I have greatly improved upon.”

Many respondents emphasized the importance of language proficiency of student mobility during their studies in university. As illustrated earlier, gaining international experience is important to UPM students, besides in-class learning. A new skillset is another main reason student engage with outbound mobility programs. Many respondents believe that with outbound mobility programs, students will also gain a new skillset applicable in classroom and employment.

Respondent five commented,

“Many locals are breeding their native Thai Ponies in the way of backyard farming, and we had the opportunity to learn pregnancy diagnosis using ultrasonography during one of the farm visits.”

Conclusion

The outcomes of this research suggested that outbound mobility students have a clear association between positive outbound mobility and global citizen graduates. The outbound mobility program supported gaining new skills, intercommunicating, adapting to the new environment, and enhancing graduate readiness in the labor market. This research identified key themes, such as communication skills, employability skills, exposure, intercultural skills, employability skills, and new skillsets. The findings of this study are relevant to academicians, students, and employers.

Outbound mobility program does enhance outside classroom learning, developing soft skills, and overall employability. It will initially give a positive impression for the employers but not for long-term career progression. Universities are encouraged to take advantage of outbound student mobility to non-English speaking countries as it can develop a strong graduate portfolio, especially for employers. This study provides insightful knowledge on preparing graduate students for a career and how universities support this process.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research may explore the acceptance of employers to the skills experienced by students through outbound mobility programs. This can indicate the impact of the program on graduate marketability. Concurrently, future research may also explore a comparison outcome on the nature of graduate employability skills gained by students with international experience and those without experience in student mobility programs. This could be done by examining all the skills gained through international outbound experience by students. Lastly, international experience is a broad concept; it would be useful to know how the benefit of outbound mobility experience relates to graduate employability and other factors.

Co-Author Contribution

The authors confirmed no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1 set the direction of the study and prepared the literature review. Author 2 collected and gathered data from outbound students. Author 3 determined the research methodology, including identifying potential respondents. Author 4 wrote the research methodology and did the statistical analysis and interpretation of the results.

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