International Review of Management and Marketing

ISSN: 2146-4405

available at http: www.econjournals.com

International Review of Management and Marketing, 2016, 6(S7) 326-329.

Special Issue for "International Soft Science Conference (ISSC 2016), 11-13 April 2016, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia"

Academic Programme Internationalisation: The Setting up of Guidelines for International Students Admission Requirements to Universiti Utara Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to find out the various academic systems adopted by other countries and to develop standardized admission requirements for international students aspiring to further their studies at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). To gather its data, this study used three data collection methods which are document analysis, face-to-face interview and focus group interview among international students studying in UUM and Embassy officials of countries which have students studying in UUM. The study found that most universities adopt three systems: British, French and the US system. In terms of grading system, it was found that three assessment systems were used, namely average grade point, percentage and cumulative grade point average. These three grading systems were key factors in the setting up of standardized admission requirements for international students to UUM to ensure each application receives proper consideration by the university. It was also hoped that the grading system created based on this study would make it possible for international applicants to make an online check whether they meet the requirement of the university before submitting their applications.

Keywords: Internationalisation, Student Admission, Academic Program
JEL Classifications: O32, P27, M16

1. INTRODUCTION

Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) has been moving towards expanding its focus from local aspects to various internationalization efforts. These include the empowerment of its social responsibilities and collaborative academic programmes and partnerships with other institutions of higher learning in line with the global development of knowledge. In terms of its academic collaborative programmes, UUM has inked 38 MoUs and MoAs with strategic partners around the globe which include the international institutions are Midwest Universities Consortium for International Activities, USA, London Business School, Leeds University, United Kingdom, India Business School, National Institute for Financial Management in India, Bahrain Institute for Banking and Finance in Bahrain, AlHosn University in UAE, and leading universities in Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Brunei. In short, after 31 years of existence as a higher learning institution, UUM has made many significant contributions in the development of knowledge in the country.

Issues related to student applications and differences in education systems are not new to educational institutions in Malaysia. With the introduction of the Education Act in 1996, the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) has changed the landscape of higher education in Malaysia by aiming to attract more foreign students to pursue programmes in Malaysia (MOE, 2015). The ministry has since taken appropriate steps to achieve its goal of increasing the number of foreign students in local universities by 10-30%. In line with the vision of MOE to make Malaysia a regional centre for academic excellence and increase its international student intake, local universities have seen an upward trend in the admission of foreign students. The influx of international

students to local universities has benefited the country in many ways. From the economic point of view, not only the countries which send their students abroad would benefit, but the hosting countries would also be able to benefit economically (Pandian, 2008). In addition, the blending of local and foreign students would create various positive learning cultures among students. Having more international students in the university reflects international recognition of the quality of courses offered by UUM and this would enable UUM to build its own brand internationally. With a modern and complete infrastructure provided by UUM, these foreign students would be comfortable pursuing their studies at the university (Utusan Malaysia, 2008). All these efforts taken by UUM show the university's determination to be competitive in attracting international students.

Universities in Hong Kong and Singapore, in their internationalization efforts, have shifted their priorities from academic scores to other aspects including leadership, community service and talent (Mok and Tan, 2004). Hence, a student who is not excellent academically is still able to secure a place in his/her chosen university based on other criteria set by the university. By taking this step, these universities are able to attract more students. It is projected that by the year 2020, Malaysia will see a substantial growth in the number of foreign students in the country. MOE's Internationalization Programme for Higher Education consists of six core aspects of internationalization which include student mobility, staff mobility, academic programmes, research and development, governance and autonomy, as well as social integration and cultural engagement locally and also internationally. In line with the MOE's internationalization policy to increase the number of international students in the country from 150,000 in 2015 to 200,000 in 2020, UUM, through its internationalization programme, has begun to open its door to international students to various courses offered by the university.

However, applications that come from various countries which adopt different grading systems have proven to be a big issue for UUM in processing the applications of foreign students. There were many applicants who failed to secure a place in UUM even though these applicants have excellent qualifications by the standard of the grading system used in their own countries. This is caused by inadequate information regarding the grading systems adopted by the origin countries of the applicants. Therefore, this study was carried out to find out the differences in the grading system used locally with the systems adopted by other countries. Based on the findings of this study, a standardized admission requirement would be created and proposed to be used by all graduate schools in UUM.

The admission of international students to UUM, besides bringing in positive impacts, has also proven to be challenging. This is due to the fact that the arrivals of these international students have opened the doors to cross-cultural learning experience among various cultures, religions and nations. However, the differences in the grading system and assessment system between the home country of the applicants and the hosting country have somehow disrupted the process of student admission. The University Senate has approved the implementation of its Doctoral and Master's programmes since 1991 and 1997 respectively. Current data (Student Affairs Department UUM, 2011) indicate that UUM offers 75 post-graduate programmes for its aspiring students. Of these 75 programmes, College of Arts and Science is currently offering 32 programmes, College of Business 29 programmes, while College of Law, Government and International Studies 12 programmes. The growing number of programmes offered by the university clearly indicates that UUM is prepared to receive more international students.

In 2015, there were a total of 2349 international students enrolled in different programmes in UUM. Majority of these students come from Indonesia, Nigeria, China, Iraq, Somalia, Yemen and Thailand. The statistics indicate that UUM has been receiving students from different academic grading systems. One of the issues which has been identified in UUM is administrative issue in dealing with the admission requirements of international applicants from countries such as China, Nigeria, Turkey, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, and Kurdistan. These countries academic systems are totally different from the system used in Malaysia, thus their admission to UUM is subject to certain requirements set by the university. Hence, there is a need for a standardization mechanism in processing all the applications from international students.

Currently, admission requirements for international students are as follows:

Master's programme:

1. A bachelor's degree with honours from UUM or any other institutions of higher learning recognized by the University Senate with a cumulative grade point average (CGPA) of at least 2.75; or
2. A bachelor's degree from UUM or any other institutions of higher learning recognized by the University Senate with a CGPA of <2.75 and working experience in a related field; or
3. A diploma with 10 years of working experience and minimum age of 35 years old; and
4. Fulfill the English language requirement.

Doctoral programme:

1. A master's degree from UUM or any other institution of higher learning recognized by the University Senate; or
2. A bachelor's degree with honours from UUM or any other institution of higher learning recognized by the University Senate with CGPA of at least 3.50; and
3. Fulfill the English language requirement.

The applicants must also fulfill English language requirements set by UUM. The above requirements are not exclusive to UUM as many other local universities are imposing the same requirements for their potential students. The Table 1 shows admission requirements currently used in UUM:

The data in Table 1 display considerable diversity in the academic grading systems used among countries. Hence, there is a need for UUM to create standardized guidelines which can be used to examine all applications from international students. This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the academic systems, including the grading systems and admission grade for academic programmes for higher

Table 1: Admission requirements for post graduate programmes in UUM

Grading system/score	Minimum qualification	Example of countries
Percentage	65%	Saudi Arabia, Jordan
Score 1 to 20	11	Algeria
CAP (maximum 4.00)	2.75	Malaysia
CAP (Maximum 5.00)	3.4375	Saudi Arabia
Degree classifications (1st class, 2nd class upper, 2nd class lower and 3rd class)	At least 2nd class lower	Malaysia
Pass or fail	Pass	Egypt
Grade A, B, C, D, E, F	C (Overall grade)	Nigeria, Pakistan

CAP: Cumulative average point, UUM: Universiti Utara Malaysia

learning institutions, adopted by the countries with potential students?

2. What are the similarities and differences among all the systems?

The objectives of this research are to find out the academic systems used by countries with potential students and to set up standardized guidelines regarding the admission requirements of international students which are equivalent to UUM admission requirements for degree and post graduate programmes. The findings of this study could be used to provide information about the academic systems used by countries with potential students and to set up guidelines which can be used to assess international applicants' academic qualifications. Furthermore, the standardized guidelines set up based on this study would help graduate schools UUM administer the applications from international students more efficiently. This study focused on identifying and understanding the education system used in countries which maintain formal diplomatic relations with Malaysia and to see the compatibility of the systems with the admission requirements to UUM. Aspects which were looked into include the background of the academic systems, admission requirements to institutions of higher learning and the grading systems adopted by the countries. Secunder data were collected from several sources which were students' transcripts, application forms, university websites and interviews.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using three research designs: Document analysis, focus group interview and face-to-face interview.

2.1. Document Analysis

The first stage of the data collection was the document analysis of academic certificates, application forms and websites of several universities which was done to gather information about grading systems used by universities and higher learning institutions in the home countries of applicants who applied for the post-graduate programmes in UUM. These application forms were obtained from all graduate schools in UUM which receive applications from international students. These data were then tabulated in Excel database which contains backgrounds of universities, type of universities and grading system used based on countries. The data collected from the analysis of the documents were verified by looking at the websites of respective university. Additional information regarding the background of the university was also obtained from the websites. Based on the gathered information, proposed guidelines of admission requirements were drafted.

2.2. Focus Group Interview

The second stage of data collection was the verification of the information in the drafted guidelines through structured interview. 36 international students, who are currently studying in UUM from Algeria, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, The Philippines, Iraq, Somalia, Libya, Palestine, Oman, Jordan, India, and Eritrea, were selected for the interview session. The questions asked were related to the education system and grading system of the countries where they came from. The students were notified of the focus interview sessions through emails and telephone calls. There were a total of six interview sessions which were carried out in 3 days. Each session took 1½ h and was administered by the researchers.

2.3. Face-to-Face Interview

The third stage of data collection was the face-to-face interview with Embassy Officials from various foreign embassies and consulates in Malaysia. 86 embassies and consulates in Malaysia were contacted through emails and telephone calls for interview appointments. After receiving the agreement for interviews, the researcher visited the respective foreign embassies and consulates to carry out the interview sessions. During the interviews, the officials from these embassies and consulates were provided with information from the drafted guidelines for international students' admission requirements to UUM for verification. Discussions with these officials covered the aspects of educational system, academic requirements and university admission in their respective countries.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Overall, the findings show that there are three academic and grading systems which are common in universities around the world: British, French and the US system (Tables 2-4). In terms of the grading system, three systems were dominant, namely the average grade scale, percentage and CGPA. Majority of the countries have stringent admission requirements for medicine and engineering courses, while being lenient on social science courses. Most Bachelor's Degree programmes offered by the universities take 3-6 years to finish. Science Social courses take a minimum of 3 years to finish. In contrast, medicine and engineering courses take 6 years to finish.

4. RESULT

The findings of this study also show that academic grading is characterized based on the university, not the country. This

Table 2: French academic grading

Scale	Label	International scale
20-16	Trés bien	A (excellent)
14-16	Bien	B (very good, with few errors)
12-14	Assez bien	C (good, with some errors)
10-12	Passable	D (satisfactory, with many errors)
10-12	Passable	E (sufficient)

Table 3: US academic grading

Percentage	Grade	Percentage	Label	Grade
90-100	A	94-100	Excellent	4.0
80-89	B	86-93	Good	3.0
70-79	C	78-85	Average	2.0
60-69	D	70-77	Difficulties	1.0
0-59	F	0-69	Failing	0

Table 4: British academic grading

Percentage	Label
70-100	Distinction
60-69	Merit
50-59	Pass
40-49	Tolerated fail
0-40	Fail

means that not all universities from the same country adopt the same grading system. Hence, it is important that the applications by international students are categorized based on individual university, not based on the country of origin. It was also found that the language of instruction used in the universities were either the official language of the country or the English language.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, this study has successfully identified the academic requirements of international applications for post graduate studies in UUM. Several countries use the average grade scale, while others use the percentage and CGPA grading. As far as the language of instruction is concerned, countries use either the English language or their official languages. Thus, based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that all applications received by UUM are considered based on a standardized grading system which is equivalent to the academic requirements set by UUM. In addition, foreign embassies and consulates should be roped in to check and verify all the certificates submitted by applicants from their respective countries. This study also proposed that an online grade conversion tool is developed to compare international applicants' grades to those required by UUM. For future research, it is proposed that a group of experts is gathered to develop the online grade conversion tool.

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