

BENEFITING THE EXPERIENCE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: PRINCIPLES AND POLICIES OF INTERNATIONALISATION OF UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

Irma Wani Othman¹
Muhammad Safuan Yusoff²
Abu Bakar Abdul Hamid³
Herlina Jupiter⁴
Hasbullah Awang⁵

¹Centre for The Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah,
E-mail: irma@ums.edu.my

³Putra Business School, Universiti Putra Malaysia, E-mail: abu.bakar@putrabs.edu.my

^{2, 4&5}Labuan Faculty of International Finance, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, E-mail: safuan_y@yahoo.com

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Abstract: *The Strategic Plan of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) 2013-2017 is outlined to highlight seven (7) University's Key Fields that include the UMS-KRAs (UMS Key Result Areas), MMS-KRA3 based on a strategic objective, "Enhancing International Visibility and Reputation" (UMS, 2013). To achieve the motive, UMS emphasised on the needs to increase the quality of higher education in contributing to the development of the country's education. In regard to the proposed goal, the increment of enrolment of international students is deemed necessary to make UMS relevant and competitive. Issues that are brought forward in this paperwork refer to the empirical data of 20 chosen informants from 10 faculties in Universiti Malaysia Sabah. A handful of the respondents were interviewed individually and thoroughly, while the rest were involved in a group discussion. This research focuses on two objectives which are (i) to identify the experience of first year international students in UMS and (ii) to propose the principles and policies of internationalisation of UMS based on the experience of international students. The results obtained have contributed to (i) the understanding of one's self-reflection individual expatriation experience to the international students who wish to further their studies overseas and (ii) the significant input to the university's management team by contributing the empirical data and useful perspectives as regards the intake issues of international students to be implemented specifically into the principles and policies of internationalisation of UMS.*

Keywords: *First Year International Students Experience, Principles and Policies of Internationalisation, Universiti Malaysia Sabah*

Introduction

The global trend phenomenon facilitates expatriates' mobility all across the globe (Freidman, 2005). The obstacles in international mobility that existed before was successfully eliminated. International students are an example of a global higher education reality in this new era because they are able to come and leave in a short period of time depending on their education needs. International students become the choice of higher education institutes not just because of the diversity in the aspect of society, but also from the financial aspect where educational institutions charge international students more for their fees studying in their institutions compared to the local students. For a developing country like Malaysia that practices internationalism in the sector of education, the international students are a part of the higher education community and they are the logical aim to be chosen as a contemporary research subject or topic.

When the Malaysian Government introduced the goal, objectives and internationalism target is the institutions of higher education, a lot of universities had taken an early step in implementing the initiative (Norhisham Mohamad, 2008). It is undeniable that the non-private universities participation in different aspects of internationalization is a part of academic development. However, the internationalization mission for each university is based on aim, the level of priorities and different stages of intensity respectively (MOHE, 2011). Even though the government is doing their best in opening the higher education to all layers of society, the government does not profoundly look into the issue where qualified and experienced offers in effort to expand the international academic staffs needed by the local universities are sufficient of insufficient in order to fill in the critical positions in this country (Norhisham Mohamad, 2008). At the same time, the abilities of Malaysian IPTA are making sure that the intake of international students is their concrete base for the development in their universities especially the ones with high dependency on international students to carry their reputations as international universities (Irma Wani *et al.*, 2013).

Problem Statement

Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) was established in 1994 and when the parliament agreed on the establishment of UMS after being announced by Seri Paduka Baginda Yang Dipertuan Agong under the section of 6 (1) University and College Act 1971 had led to the existence of Centre for International Affairs (CIA) to lead the missions of universities to internationalize their education via stable international relationship, creating a conducive surrounding for international students to study in, smoothen the academic staffs, researchers and students exchanges and increase the promotion as well as the activities of recruitment among academic employees at the international level (UMS, 2018). UMS was established with zeal to achieve excellence in all aspects of knowledge fields for the achievement of global recognition. Indirectly, a few educators in a few schools in a campus consists of international employees with different sociobiological backgrounds, with possessions of critical skills and abilities that are needed by UMS to ensure the students enhancement in their effort to compete globally as well as to increase the university' deviation at the international level. That makes the components of UMS international students vital and it is written under the section of 6 (1) University and College Act 1971, that once witnessed the Pusat Hal Ehwal Antarabangsa (PHEA) taking responsibility in carrying out UMS missions to internationalism.

From the number of international students, the shown statistic depicts that there is an increase in their registrations (refer table 1: International Students Registration in Malaysian IPTA, 2009-2014). In 2009, there were 22,456 students in the local universities and the statistic rose to 27,042 students in 2014. Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (UIAM) usually leads in

the number of international students which proves its worth as an international university with 6500 undergraduates and 2500 postgraduates in the year 2014. However., the 2016 statistic also shows a rocketing increase in the local universities with the status ‘research university’ respectively namely; Universiti Malaya and Universiti Putra Malaysia (Pejabat Pengurusan Program (PMO), KPT: Aims and Achievements of International students in Local Universities (UA) until June 2016). Meanwhile, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) implemented an intake of 665 undergraduates and 145 postgraduates and is on the 10th spot on the list of all IPTA in Malaysia regarding international student intake in 2016.

Table 1: International Students Registration in Malaysian IPTA, 2009-2014

| Years | International Students Enrollment at IPTA |
|-------|---|
| 2009 | 22,456 |
| 2010 | 24,214 |
| 2011 | 25,855 |
| 2012 | 26,232 |
| 2013 | 28,830 |
| 2014 | 27,042 |

Source: <https://www.mohe.gov.my/muat-turun/awam/statistik/2016-statistik/402->

Even though there is an increase in the in the number of international students in Malaysia, research on the experience studying abroad for the international students respectively have not really been explored yet (Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, 2010). Basically, this study is implemented to explore the idea on how a group of international students from different backgrounds, races and countries overcome the obstacles and experiences studying in a different country. Not only that, it is also to observe the experience that could be benefited in the effort to contribute to the rules and regulations concerning internationalism in UMS.

Literature Review

The focus of the past research concerning international students contemporary issue is the relationship between qualification at the international level and the increase in students’ mobility (Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, 2010). The increase in international mobility during the 20th and 21st centuries can also be related to the increase in the intake of international students that is expanding in developing countries (Tham Siew Yean, 2010). There is a vast agreement on the issues; students mobility is not something new (Zuriah *et al.*, 2010). Even though there is an increase in students intake from different countries to another countries of choice by students, the expatriation is not an open choice to everyone. In other words, the tendency comes from the individuals’ situations or choices respectively. The financial status and competitions to gain international level education recognition showed that, it is not something that can be done by everyone (Bodycott, 2009). In addition, not everyone is willing to be separated from their families to study abroad. Language barrier, different cultures as well as the difference in discipline make it difficult for students as they have to step out of their comfort zones and the situation is unlike the norms that they experience in their own countries (Chirkova, 2011). Not only that, even though some students are able to study outside of their countries, sometimes, limitations such as their academic qualification that is not up to the qualification set by the education system of a country will make them not being able to further their studies at the their countries of choice.

There are some identical elements in the internationalism strategy that are implemented by local universities in their effort to integrate the diverse international dimensions in the activities implemented by local universities respectively (Tham, 2010). This is because, the private and non-private universities is guided by Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi (KPT) as mentioned in

National Strategic Plan for Higher Education (NSPHE) 2007, (15.0). According to NSPHE 2007, the main objectives in internationalism is to introduce Malaysia as the best hub for higher education at the international level. NSPHE 2007 aims to increase the number of international students at the local universities to 15% of the overall student percentage in 2020, as well as the international academic employees with the aim of 15% percentage from all the employees in higher educational institutions. UMS on the other hand, has to perform excellently and achieve a good amount of achievements in the national and international levels as a higher education institution.

As a continuum of that, in July 2011, the government announced the main policy of internationalism for our country (MOHE, 2011). As stated in the mentioned document, the objectives of the policy is to speed up the intake flow of international students to 150,000 students in 2015 and after that, to 200,000 international students in 2020 (MOHE, 2011). Based on the said targets, the biggest obstacle is to manage the international students at macro and micro levels. In facing the close competitions in and out of our country, the intake of international students should also be taken care of for the sake of education quality so that the education will not be sacrificed in order to get to the set objectives regarding the number of international intake. From the aspect of academic content and teaching as well as learning elements, the quality guarantee is an important weight that needs to be taken care of in evaluation because it contributes to the branding as well as reputations of the higher education sector and the labelling of our country's universities (MOHE, 2011). Parallel with the statement, the critical element that cannot be neglected is the intake of international students that is needed to fix the local universities at the eye of the international standard, especially to UMS that has visions and missions toward the status of research university. In that context, the benchmark in international education is moving to another direction through taking into account the evaluation that is not solely comprised of experienced international employees with caliber but also the community of campus society that comprised of different international students or in other words, diversity. The initiative logically manages to raise students' interests from outside of Malaysia to come and study to Malaysia's prestigious universities.

Putting the debate aside, generally, this study looks into the mobility of international students that refers to the presence of international students' community in giving positive contributions to UMS. A lot have the opinion of establishing new universities so that the intake of international students can be increased at the international level, parallel with the effort in strengthening the placing and status as prestigious universities (Jiang dan Carpenter, 2013). This strategy is aligned with the higher education contemporary movement and suggests that government universities to take international students in effort to increase their reputation nationally and internationally (MOHE, 2011). However, there are parties that rejected the idea because they thought that the intake of international students do not have a long-term effect since the intake is aimed to fill in the defects of the student population for a short period of time. Because of that, this study is able to offer a specific proof on how the international students evaluate their experiences studying in the local universities in Malaysia and to put justification on how UMS does the work as a place to get higher education.

Almost all of the literature discussions are about internationalism covering students intake, curriculum, teachers' practice as well as the management process. However, one of the aspects of internationalism that does not being highlighted as it deserves is how internationalism in a university can be said to be able to utilize international students' experiences from their different backgrounds and races. In this study, researchers try to unveil the scenario in UMS as a higher education institute that is prompting an effort to choose this path via the international

students' community experiences that prevails the way on how international students explain and justify the meaning that could be obtained from their experiences studying abroad.

In the context of this study, UMS functions as a case study institution to develop and evaluate research as well as determining whether the international students' expectations are somewhat on par with the real situations or the other way around and whether the surroundings of the institute affects their expectations or not. A few continued aspects in this study stepped out of the boundaries of the issues related to the overall experience of studying abroad together with the presence of suggestions on the rules, practices, and internationalism policies in UMS. To ensure that internationalism can be reached, a close observation is done whether UMS accepts the different aspects in the process of internationalism and practice one of the most notable ways that is used by government universities to accept the internationalism challenge through the intake of world-class international students or not. This study is also predicted to be able to attract attention and increase the two-way international collaboration between UMS and abroad universities in the similar effort to get the intake of students that not only interested to study abroad on their own initiative but also because of the opportunity to exchange students from abroad universities to experience UMS.

Research Methodology

This study utilizes the qualitative research approach through the case study research design, semi-structural profound interview sessions to each of the research objective that has been proposed. The profound interview sessions with informants is implemented for data collecting that is related to the effort in identifying expatriates' experiences individually and the benefits that are gained from the rules and policies of internationalism in the involved higher educational institutes. The inductive data analysis involves the theme construction and the concept that was constructed from the transcription statements of the interview using thematic analysis via coding and categorization, allowing patterns, themes and narration to prevail from data in order to take care of the expatriate persuaders based on experience evaluation studying abroad and choosing to study in UMS. Because of that, the flow chart of the work process that was proposed refers to the research work that is about to be implemented.

On the other hand, the election of criteria of 46 respondents is through the non-probability sampling technique and the sampling functions are based on aspects such as; has been studying for a whole semester but has not exceeded six semesters for a period of time under one course and has a status of international student in UMS, has the intention of staying in Malaysia until the end of studies, chooses to come independently to Malaysia and does not receive any scholarships in the enrolled course or involved in any student exchange programs between universities. The function of case study is to prepare a profound point of view, macro level information about challenges faced by international students in their experiences studying in UMS. Based on the increase of international students in UMS in 2016, recorded was an increase as much as five to ten percent (MOHE, 2011), so, there is a relevant tendency to obtain a good amount of interviews that is up to par with the mentioned research parameter mentioned above. In the effort of getting reliability to ease research process, the implementation of study in UMS where researchers act as academic members. It gives benefits to the researchers as "inside researchers", to get trust from the university management and involved informants.

Findings

A speech about higher education internationalism focuses more on international students' issues and pedagogical issue (Cristea, 2013). The contribution of this study is to move the focus from the contextual of higher education internationalism system to the experience of international

students regarding to their studies abroad. The findings that are shown here slip a continued dimension through introducing precise comprehension about international students' mobility internationally. The findings have introduced a new dimension that offers profound comprehension regarding university internationalism with benefiting experience to international students.

In order to fulfil the first objective of this study through international students' experience, the findings of this study suggest that furthering studies abroad is a multidimensional and dynamic experience. The findings proved that the dimensions are related where respondents always use one dimension or theme to highlight or support the others. Relationship between Malaysia and the countries of origin is also deemed as complex, multidimensional and dynamic. However, a theme concerning exploration and family dominated all of the respondents' experiences statements about studying abroad. The findings then support the idea of literature mobility of the management of international students that declared international students as the envoys of exploration (Irene, 2013).

Among the findings that have been found vital are; the international students that study abroad deemed the experience as a literal exploration compared to metaphoric experience. Personal transformation is the dominant theme for all of the respondents that suggested continued synergy on the past research. The main finding of this study highlights on the broaden theme connected to social interaction and relationship social for instance, the relationship between the host country and the country of students' origin, closeness and alienation. Moral support from the family brings a vital influence on the experience studying abroad in other country from the country of origin and also the other way around (Tharenou, 2010). In addition, respondents usually related family factors when uttering about other themes concerning their experiences.

The importance of individual action influences all of the deployed statements by the respondents. The respondents of this study were reported that they were actively participated in the expatriation experiences (Colvin, 2012). The involvement includes managing the problems that they had and shaped the expatriates' experiences, especially in various challenges through exploration while being in the host country. Along with it, study finds that individual deemed as a study subject compared to being an object in the experience that they have gone through. However, respondents' statements that involved social structures, as an example, reinforcement and legislation were said important especially in relating the relationship with the official respondents statuses (Kim, 2015). The findings in this study also explored the relationship between respondents and Malaysia and their countries of origin. The statements of the respondents in this study suggest that the themes related to meanings of individual, social interaction and relationships as well as social structure play the main role in the relationships.

The second objective of this study refers to the basis and policies of UMS internationalism which showed competition where universities in this country are forced to compete to produce excellent and qualified students as well as quality international educators. The country's educational action plan makes sure that the higher education system has the internationalism characteristic to boost Malaysia as the hub of excellence in higher educational institutions internationally. Upon 2020, Malaysian's IPT student enrolment is aimed as much as 15 percent from the total of the overall number of IPT student enrolment with 50 percent enrolment is for competitive courses in IPTA. Through the initiative, the intake of international lecturers is aimed as high as 15 percent from the total number of IPT educators specifically in research universities (MOHE, 2007). Some of the subjects prevailed by the "study subjects" which are

the international students that were supposed to be given attention to by UMS are being discussed as below:

a) The Basis and Policies of Universiti Malaysia Sabah Internationalism

The findings of this study look on how utilization of expatriates' experiences individually among international students while studying in UMS, is not solely on the effort of university's party to understand the factor of international students' arrival to the IPTA. The contribution of this study suggests that evaluation's mechanism that is done retrospectively on the studies' experiences at the level of higher education can adapt to the basis of UMS internationalism, related to the following issues:

i. English as the intermediate language for teaching and learning approaches in UMS

Obstacle from the language barrier among the international students to consider the offers to study in Malaysian's IPTA becomes the discussion's issue in this study (Gill Saran Kur, 2005). As an example, for all the research university level IPTA, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) has the smallest percentage in international students' intake while, Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (UIAM) recorded the highest percentage of international student intake in this country (MOHE, 2016). This scenario also shows the downfall of international students recruitment in UKM probably because of the pre condition that requires international students to communicate during teaching and learning in the university's national language which leads to decreasing interest for international students to join in the university (Norzaini and Yang Farina , 2008).

University Malaysia Sabah (UMS) follows the footsteps of South Korea where they are implementing internationalism through initiatives such as offering 30 percent of the course contents in English such as in *Korea University* (Ho, 2007). This is parallel with UMS 2013-2017 strategic plan in suggesting that English is applied in the medium of teaching and learning. UMS plays a role in developing the skill of conversing in English (written and oral) among the lecturers through general speeches and English writing course which function to help international students whom understand not the local language. In 2015, UMS policies made it compulsory to use English to convey knowledge in tutorials and lectures. After that, 10 percent of the academic employees that were going through sabbatical leave "research attachment" and "fellowships" encouraged to be placed in English speaking countries to benefit the English speaking skill in effort to increase teaching proficiency in the future.

ii. Broaden the database of UMS Expertise Directory in the effort to empower research as well as attract postgraduate level international students

The findings of this study found that a few of the respondents voiced out their worries on the issue of this country's bachelor's authority in research that have the skills and expertise in specific fields. On the same lane with the government's aim to encourage international educators with skills and expertise to work under research universities as high as 15 percent from the amount of academic educators in 2020 (MOHE, 2007), the effort to broaden the database of UMS expertise directory in IPT has to be made a reality. The effort is seen as a critical step in attracting more international postgraduates to study in this country's IPT. For the reason of research offering scholarships to international students, moving a special fund related to postgraduates exchange activities should be provided based on achievements and using the standardized KPI. UMS also accepted the challenge to increase Malaysia IPT efforts through joining PhD split degree programme based on research to the academic employees as well as opening the door to international employees to enrol themselves in and contribute their expertises (Tham, 2010). The programme is supported by UMS where it runs the IPT efforts in

this country to become a hub of international higher education excellency through the cooperation programme with outside universities such as University of Nottingham from United Kingdom, Monash University, and Swinburne University of Technology from Australia to expand their branches in Malaysia. The approach is able to attract interests from a group of postgraduates from abroad universities to join UMS as one of the IPTA in Malaysia that is playing a role in becoming a competitive institution that offers higher education studies offer and research that is on par with international level universities.

The rise in effort to manage and handle prestigious seminars and conferences with the basis of international level higher education will attract huge funds for research at the international level to Malaysian's IPTA. Besides, increasing the number of national and international institutions to implement researches on socioeconomic, languages and cultures of the involved countries will involve effort in taking international postgraduates and local postgraduates in producing versatile campus society (Sarjit Kaur *et al.*, 2008). As an example, the recognition of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) that was nominated three times in a row in 2009, 2010 and 2011 as a representative for Asia for Commonwealth Universities for Studies Abroad (CUSAC) and becoming a national research centre that has international recognition has attracted interests of developed countries postgraduates.

For UMS, the increase in R&D commercials for the university's products has gained international recognition and was predicted to produce "laureates" among the academic members in UMS through publishing as well as the output of post researches. This finding also contributes to the literature field through opening the perception of; international experience is becoming more valuable when the higher education is going international (Tham dan Andrew, 2008).

iii. Reputation and credibility of Universiti Malaysia Sabah based on the quality of higher education in Malaysia

The international assumption on the quality of higher education in this country is significant in attracting more international students to join Malaysian's IPTA (Norhisham Mohamad, 2008). Based on the findings of this study, majority of international students generally take the destination of choice to further studies into account like going to a prestigious university to increase scholarship, the quality of graduation from a prestigious university and to maximize experience when studying abroad. All initiatives have to be made reality to make sure that there is no surroundings that could ruin the positive assumptions on Malaysian's higher education system quality.

In this context, the offered courses must reach the relevant set accreditation from Lembaga Akreditasi Negara (LAN). Efforts need to be added to encourage more institutions, recognition corporation, and abroad countries in recognizing course programme and this country's IPTA (Ismail Md. Salleh, 2007). The implementation of MQF is predicted to facilitate this process, especially when Malaysia became a member in the international recognition corporation such as Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualification Concerning Higher Education in the European Region 1997. The international recognition simultaneously attracted more international students to join Malaysian;s IPTA (MOHE, 2007).

Steps that are being done by UMS-KRAs cover the following cases:

1. Actively host "road-shows" that include "international education fairs" in order to increase the amount of international employees and students.

2. Increase the international research collaboration relationship through identifying “niche areas” of the UMS academic members’ expertises in order to obtain research and publishing grant at the international level which could indirectly increase the enrolment of international students.
3. Encourage collaboration (collaborating partners/institutions) with signing and joining MoU and MoAs at the international level.
4. Set up a research unit that has cooperation with prestigious universities and encourage collaboration in effort to get international fund that would lead to “fellowships” for the academic employees and postgraduate students.
5. Make it compulsory for the international students to attend and present their research outputs at the international conference to strengthen academic relationship nets.

b) University of Malaysia Sabah International Human Resources Management:

The main target is to give contribution to the UMS international human resources management in the process of international students recruitment through self reflection issues and personal perspectives that pictures the international students’ experience in choosing to further their higher education studies in Sabah. The findings of this research is also hoped to be able to prevail understanding on the adaptation of cultural crossovers that has been the negative factor of effectively adapt oneself in a new surrounding and then helps the management party to decrease the rate of dropping their higher education among international students. Critical issues that are going to be explored by this research are able to contribute to the success of international students, management including the fund on cultural crossover assimilation, scholarship form in financial aids and studies sponsors, cooperation and organization support system.

Among the issues that were being prevailed:

i) Visa and immigration issues

To attract more international students, UMS has accepted the challenge of the government’s encouragement to fulfil the provision to settle issues regarding visa and immigration. Among the issues regarding visa and immigration that were highlighted were repeated entrance for visa, visa collection in the country of origin by the Malaysian embassy party in another country, distribution of working visa for couples who accompany postgraduate students, distribution of visa for the children of postgraduate students, the rate of visa fees, visa facilities to the postgraduate students’ families, time taken to process visa and visa distribution for service period of time. Along with the fifth core in UMS internationalism strategy plan, they have provided the facilities in the application to apply for immigration entrance (visa). However, the findings of this study found that there are a few processes that can still be enhanced to smoothen the entrance of international students into this country’s IPTA (MOHE, 2011).

ii) Job opportunities for couples

The problem where couples who expatriate and find it difficult to get a job in this country becomes the main focus of this study’s respondents. The government needs to make a research on additional initiatives to allow postgraduate students who have couples to work in this country through giving a looseness in distributing full-time working visa and provide matching job opportunities according to their qualifications. A concern about couples with more than one job, especially to couples with professional qualifications needs to be looked at and this could be handled with giving career advice through related organizations or the human resource management involved with the IPTA (MOHE: *Internationalisation Policy*, 2011). For the children of the international couples (students) that also have full time student visa, they are

allowed to work within the time period of no more than 20 hours a week. This study suggests for the working time for them to be increased. For instance, graduates and excellent researchers among international students in Singapore are being given an intensive to work and to have a status of permanent residents.

iii) Research on Expatriation Management Field:

A research that is orientated from individual perspective among UMS international students will trigger a new research stimulation in the future that is potential to be applied by Malaysian's IPT and benefited by abroad IPT, especially for the IPT with the dependency on a big scale international student enrolment. The signification of this study allows the IPT to focus on the efforts in identifying factors that influence decisions to choose this country among the international students in certain IPT. Taking that the mastery of research back in the days were based on big scaled quantitative method, there is a need in applying qualitative approach in research. Organizational orientation that dominates the literature of international student managements has given attention to international students sent abroad by abroad universities. In comparison, this study focuses on independent individuals who choose and work for themselves to study abroad like some international students. Because of that, through giving attention to international students as an example of independent explorers, this study contributes another dimension on the void of international human resources literature.

Conclusion

The study of the experience in expatriation is so significant to a few parties including the individuals who are interested to study abroad and the creators of policies regarding research and management of international students by providing data and information to lead a student who wishes to study abroad. The findings of this study can be beneficial in amending basis and policies of internationalism in the involved institutions. The new findings in this study are hoped to be able to let others understand the utilization of expatriates' experiences individually among UMS international students, is not solely relying on the university's effort to understand the factors that could bring more international students into Malaysian's IPTA. The contribution of this study suggests that retrospective mechanism evaluation on international students' experiences should be greatly taken into account in the application of UMS internationalism basis. Critical issues that contribute to international students' successes including the exposure of cultural cross, organizational communication, organizational culture, amendment and cooperation, support system and outer surroundings. The problems are able to be decreased through understanding by observing the excuses made by the international students in making their decisions to expatriate, listen to the explanation of their decisions and let them share their experience studying abroad so that UMS could be benefited from the information especially in amending the basis of university's internationalism.

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