

Student Mobility and Credit Transfer Scheme:

A New Challenge for Asian Universities

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Globalization brings new challenges and increases economic, cultural, environmental, and social interdependences as well as new transnational financial and political formations arising out of mobility of capital, labor and information. (Blackmore, 2000) The crucial factors leading to global competitiveness are utilization of knowledge, accessibility of knowledge and creative use of knowledge. Knowledge and knowledge management turn to be the indexes to determine how well-developed each country is. In order to be able to create knowledge, innovations and technologies necessary for a knowledge-based society, each country has to undergo the educational reform.

Internationalization and Higher Education Development

There has been increasing discussion over Asian university development and strategies on how Asian universities will go through the serious competition of international proportions in the areas of research, human resources, student enrollment and facility maintenance. Many leading Asian universities are undergoing the processes of restructuring in order to become more internationally competitive. The advent of internationalization and the concept of "Knowledge-Based Society" lead to more universal access to universities. The number of international students enrolling in various universities around the world has drastically increased during the past decade.

The Bologna Process : The European Attempt

The European countries are leaders in making their higher education become a more

transparent system whereby different national systems would use a common framework based on two cycles: undergraduate and graduate programs. In 1999, the education ministers from around 30 European countries met in Bologna and formed a joint declaration, well known as the Bologna Declaration, to establish a European area of higher education by 2010. In fact, the Bologna Declaration focuses on quality assurance, mobility of students, teachers and researchers as well as how to improve international transparency and how to facilitate academic and professional recognition of qualifications. The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System or ECTS, which has been introduced earlier within the Socrates-Erasmus framework, is more widely implemented. In brief, the ambitious goal of European countries is to increase the mobility, employability and competitiveness of their manpower.

University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific

Following the footsteps of the European countries, universities in the Asia-Pacific region have been discussing on means to increase educational standard and to maximize access to excellence of education in the region. The movement of University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP) was initiated just about a decade ago, with the aim to enhance international understanding through increased mobility of university students and faculty. Since the UMAP Constitution has been adopted in 1998 at the UMAP Reference Group Meeting in Thailand, 29 countries have participated in the program.

UMAP Credit Transfer Scheme

The UMAP Credit Transfer Scheme, similar to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System or ECTS, was introduced to increase student mobility by ensuring that credits earned when undertaking studies at a host university are fully accepted. The UMAP member countries, territories and administrative regions as well as their university administrators have been working towards standard arrangements for recognition of studies undertaken by exchange students and the pilot phase was initiated in the year 2000.

Though UMAP and UCTS are modeled after the European inter-university student exchange program, well known as the "Erasmus Plan," there are great differences between the situation in Europe, where a unified network of nations or EU has been firmly established, and that of the Asia-Pacific region that is yet to be discussed. Despite these efforts, the UCTS is limitedly implemented. For example, Thailand has been one of the founding members of the UMAP since 1991; however in 2004 there were only 15 universities that participated in the UMAP Student Exchange Program due

to many limitations and constrains.

Nearly all UMAP member countries reported the following impediments (UMAP Country Report, 1995):

- Difficulty in obtaining appropriate financial assistance
- Unwillingness of students to consider studying abroad as part of their study plan
- Different school system and different academic year
- Difficulty with credit transfer and recognition of degrees
- Language barriers

The difficulty with credit transfer, recognition of degrees, different school system and different academic calendar are among the major obstacles faced by many universities in their trying to increase the number and scale of student exchange programs. It is unrealistic to impose a common curriculum structure and school system onto the universities in the Asia-Pacific region. However, flexibility in terms of examination arrangement and recognition of studies undertaken abroad will help alleviate the problems. With the strong commitment and full support of university administrators, internationalization of higher education should be set a priority.

Efforts should be spent on nurturing an atmosphere for an international learning environment to encourage local students to participate in the study abroad program both as a host as well as an exchange student. E-learning is another innovative means to increase flexibility of timing and universal accessibility. In addition, quality assurance and the development of database are crucial factors when the e-learning mode is adopted.

The Challenges and New Pursuits for Universities in Asia

The international dimension of higher education is of increasing importance. It is by sharing knowledge through mutual cooperation; universities will be able to compete at the regional and international arena. Competition and comparison are, contradictorily, two sides of the same coin. Therefore, it requires a right balance. Openness and fairness should be offered to other less developed universities. Communication among participating universities will help facilitate the mobility of students, faculty and researchers within the region.

In addition to UMAP, 31 states and countries met in Bangkok in 1983 at the UNESCO Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific. They agreed to promote regional and worldwide co-

operation in the matter of comparability and recognition or equivalence of Studies and academic qualifications. Subsequently, the UNESCO Declaration on Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific including the Plan of Action was adopted at the UNESCO Regional Conference on Higher Education in Tokyo, Japan in 1997. It clearly stated that,

"Individual institution must develop international linkages, such as those for the exchange of staff and students and for academic co-operation. As well, they must support the activities of international organizations and bilateral agreements between countries within the region"

In conclusion, I would like to call upon all participating universities and colleagues to come together to promote the student exchange and credit transfer scheme. By fostering these international linkages, the regional aims to mobilize people in a global and diverse society will not be too farfetched. People, regardless of nationality, will learn and strive for a better place to live and work together.

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