

Session 5: Workshop 3

Title: The draw of the Pacific Rim - an Australian perception?

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Chair's Introduction

The topic of discussion here is the organisation University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP). This is a dynamic and growing region, and the development of international relationships and the increasing interdependence of economies, call for new approaches to a wide range of issues. One way of achieving this objective is through the mobility of university students and staff. UMAP aims to bring an Asian-Pacific perspective to fundamental issues in university education by facilitating this exchange of people and ideas.

Professor Moses' Presentation

Background

The term "Pacific Rim" was popular ten or fifteen years ago, but has become irrelevant as Australian universities now have an increasingly international perspective, focusing on worldwide links with Asia, the Pacific region, the Americas, Africa and Europe.

The organisation UMAP was founded by the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) in 1993 to increase student and staff mobility in the Asian and South Pacific areas. UMAP membership is open to countries, territories and administrative regions in the Asia-Pacific region.¹ Members can be represented by government higher education departments or ministries, individual universities, university umbrella organisations, or a combination of these. Individual persons are not eligible to be members.

Students participating in UMAP undertake a period of formal study while on exchange. This study should be for a minimum of one semester and a maximum of two semesters. Hosting universities are expected to waive tuition fees for UMAP students on exchange. Credit for study undertaken while on exchange is to be accepted by the home university. Undergraduate and postgraduate students can participate in UMAP.

¹ Membership is currently open to the following countries and territories: Australia, Hong Kong, Mexico, Russia, Brunei, Indonesia, Mongolia, Samoa, Cambodia, Japan, Myanmar, Singapore, Canada, Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Taiwan, Chile, Laos, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, Fiji, Macao, People's Republic of China, USA, Guam, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam

The future for UMAP

There are certain issues that UMAP faces:

- Staff need to be persuaded to move from the better resourced institutions to less well resourced universities - even bonuses are not always a sufficient motivation
- A broader range of student exchange needs to be fostered - unless students are from a particular ethnic background, only language students are keen to take part in such exchanges - how can science and business students be motivated to take part?
- Countries may be ready to join UMAP, but they are not always keen to provide UMAP with sufficient resources - how can an organisation change or develop if sufficient funding is not available?
- If members believe in the importance of relationships in the Pacific/South Asian region, how can they translate such beliefs into making these ties a true working partnership that benefits all?

Discussion

How can staff/students be motivated to take part in the exchange process?

Staff and students need to be made aware of the schemes - even when information is publicised in university newsletters, it can still be hard to generate interest in the schemes.

Staff and students need encouragement to look beyond areas where they may already have a personal interest or link such as the knowledge of a language.

People need to be encouraged to explore new partnership/exchanges other than those with perennially popular countries like the USA, or away from traditional links such as between New Zealand and the UK. In the last decade there has been greater interest in exchanges focused in Asia, between Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and now China.

University leaders need to realise that the establishment and acceptance of such exchange schemes can take a long time. Perhaps countries like Australia and New Zealand, which are immigrant countries, will be quicker to embrace exchange schemes than other countries with more static populations.

How does Australia's increasingly international student base affect the exchange process?

Australia is becoming like the UK or USA in terms of its broad international student population. This reflects both that international travel has become commonplace for many groups of people and that many education ventures are now focused on worldwide markets, making a global approach very important.

Universities need an increasingly global approach.

Universities must have an international perspective. Staff/student exchange programmes are not simply of use in language departments, they make the whole institution a better place. There are social benefits resulting from the meeting of different cultures and populations.

Is UMAP of use to the whole region?

UMAP does not have funds to support exchanges, although some governments provide funding. However costs of staff/student exchanges can be difficult for poorer regions/institutions to meet, as is the case at the University of Papua New Guinea. What is the value of the organisation when less well-resourced institutions are, in effect, discriminated against?

While UMAP is important to universities interested in creating worldwide links, individual universities like Waikato often forge international links with other institutions as a result of personal contacts initiated by faculty members. UMAP, however, does reflect how universities in New Zealand, for example, are looking to increase links within the Asian and South Pacific context rather than working closely with the UK.

Individual institutions have to decide how to prioritise overseas links/schemes to ensure those links it does have are of maximum benefit to its staff and students.

Can universities help the exchange process on a practical level?

Universities have always had a reputation for enabling staff mobility through research leave. This in itself is a good starting place for assisting staff exchange programmes, although more practical assistance might also strengthen the process - for example, the University of New England does not have staff accommodation available for staff exchange participants, which could be very useful.

Conclusion

Universities should not become disillusioned if there are few short-term benefits gained from exchange programmes. Even if they are problematic to arrange or fund, universities should persevere. Exchanges are a vital part of the academic world and are extremely important in a time of globalisation.