

Keynote on “The pros and cons of balanced mobility:
How to get a win-win situation?”

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Distinguished speakers and participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am greatly honored to deliver a keynote in this conference, and share some views with you on the topic of common interest. I hope my talk can encourage action steps on enhancing inter-regional student and scholar mobility between Asia and Europe.

The issues I would like to bring up cover the relation of quality to academic mobility, and role of government to facilitate balanced mobility focusing on student mobility, which is a key challenge of disproportionate movement.

Student and scholar mobility is the undeniable phenomena in the world of nowadays-tertiary education. It has become “A Must Norm” among the international tertiary community as a tool to groom global citizenship for international workplace. Due to the diversity among universities across regions and costly activity, proportionate mobility seems an ideal concept, which needs hard efforts for the achievement.

Definition

UNESCO defines academic mobility “a period of study, teaching and/or research in a country other than a student’s or academic staff member’s country of residence”.

ASEAN Economic Community describes that mobility involves the ability of students, teachers and professionals to move freely between institutions and countries, whether for the purpose of higher education study or employment.

Student mobility is defined as any academic mobility which takes place within a student’s program of study in post-secondary education. The length of absence can range from a semester to the full program of study. There are two main types of student mobility: mobility for an entire program of study (diploma or degree mobility); and for part of program (credit mobility).

Relation of quality to academic mobility

Negative side of low quality provision

According to these definitions, student and scholar mobility is a complicate activity of cross institutions and countries relating to many factors: the great diversity of educational system, academic year, languages of study, culture and regulation difference. Other than these factors, the low quality provision and financing are the great barriers for student and scholar movement, which have caused the “pro” and “cons” in academic mobility.

The issue of quality is at the heart of academic migration and main cause of disproportionate mobility. It is always the truth that wealthier countries offering higher international academic standards are the most chosen destinations for study by foreign students and become the “pro” key players in influencing student mobility within regions.

Project Atlas reported the global international education exchange balance in 2009 that a larger proportion of inbound to outbound students were in Western Europe and North America. As for East Asia & Pacific, total outbound and inbound students are nearly equal while the number of outbound students was much bigger than inbound students in South, West and Central Asia.

Countries with a weaker quality of education are largely influenced by the well-developed countries, but with smaller bargaining power. As a consequence, disproportionate mobility, whether it is horizontal or vertical, is seen as a common situation for developing countries.

Countries with a perceived lower quality of education are always the “cons” suffering the problem of “brain drain” with their students and scholars’ mobility. These countries are more at risk for losing their qualified labor force to more developed countries as a result of student and faculty migration. The “brain drain” phenomenon will have negative effects on the economies of developing countries and their higher education institutions in the long run.

The problem of quality has also caused the difficulty in the achievement of credit transfer between home and host universities when there is a big gap of educational quality between the two parties. There are endeavors to overcome this fundamental among regions through the creation of credit transfer system. However, in practice we will see only the one-way credit transfer from higher-ranked university to the lower-ranked university but not opposite direction. Two-way credit transfer can be realistic only when the two universities are of similar standard and quality.

The behind reason is that credit transfer is another indicative of a common standard for the assessment of students' academic performance. If students' performance cannot be guaranteed achieving a desirable level of qualifications, it may be embarrassing to accept transfer of credits.

Student and scholar mobility is a luxury activity requiring financial support to implement it. Sometime it becomes the difficulty of less wealthy economies to give support to such activity. As a consequence, the wealthier countries will gain the upper hand to set conditions to recruit academic talent to provide academic advantages for their countries.

The competition to attract outstanding students is even fiercer in the knowledge-based society in which intellect, information and technology play vital role for success. In addition, many countries are entering the aging society with lessen input for their higher education and industrial sector. To attract qualified workforce to satisfy their productive sector is the urgent need. Wealthy countries, which majority is industrial countries with high quality of education have become the "net importers" of foreign students while less wealthy countries have been the 'net exporters". This again may divert to the disadvantages of developing countries. I cannot call such approach quality mobility.

Since student mobility is a cost-related activity, it is thus the tuff task to provide accessibility to a wider scope. Outstanding students are the minority enjoy attending the exchange while majority of students with average academic performance is left behind. It is not possible to improve accessibility for all students. Having inbounds from foreign countries may be a better choice to encourage the exchange of knowledge and install global perspectives into local students through multicultural dimension.

Positive side of high quality provision

On the contrary, what we can expect to see if equal quality can be achieved. Academic mobility has merits in itself though it is a single outbound and inbound. At the individual level, studying abroad will provide opportunities to exchange ideas and ways of viewing the world. Individuals will gain international knowledge and perspectives and some skills needed in the global economy.

Academic mobility can yield wider scope of benefits if it is a two-way exchange. It will bring to the integration of outside-in and inside-out process. That is to bring in knowledge from outside to universities and express good practices of universities to the outside world. The exchange of knowledge and culture understanding will occur under such procedure.

Attracting international outbound is not an easy task because of concerns over maintaining university quality. Students may seek out universities with higher standard rather than other reasons.

Quality improvement is worth for universities to invest. Universities may not be able to reap its benefit in a short term. On the contrary, it yields benefits to universities in the long run as being a core factor to attract international intake and to maximize institutions' knowledge networking capacity.

Quality provision of education will make outbound recognized and acceptable while attract top inbound to enhance the quality of education and the academic reputation of institutions. For some countries, international student mobility can be a source of revenue for economic development and to foster mutual understanding across borders.

If universities' quality is internationally recognized, I believe a two-way mobility will not be the hard implementation. But universities will gain immense benefits from such activity because student mobility is the most dominant element of internationalization.

International students have been beneficial to universities as they have to develop their professional development and facilities to link with other internationalizing institutions. International exchange students can help strengthen the capacities of faculty members and their multicultural awareness.

This has become a key factor for faculty members to fulfill their roles in a complex and borderless society. The presence and participation of students from other cultures has encouraged faculty members to internationalize their courses, acquire new knowledge and open themselves to different perspectives. These capacities have significant impact on the teaching of local students.

International exchange students have influenced the development of coursework and learning to fit the multicultural classroom. Curriculum should contain significant international content blending global issues and perspectives with domestic knowledge. International curriculum is another key element to enhance local students' competitiveness and to develop them into future professionals.

The exchange of students has broadened technical cooperation and encouraged knowledge circulation. Global challenges on climate change, emerging diseases, food and energy shortage, and natural disasters call for a multifaceted network of individuals and organizations to find solutions. The mobility of students and scholars can create a pool of multidisciplinary approaches that overcome these threats.

Several countries have encouraged academic mobility as part of a comprehensive internationalization policy in order to improve the quality of domestic higher education. Therefore, the number of foreign students enrolled in universities is used by the QS and Times Higher Education World University as an indicator for a university's ranking.

The growth of international trade in higher education services has allowed the free flow of students and academics to an even greater extent. Higher education is being pressured to put greater effort towards improving their quality so that they can accept a flow of students from around the world.

How to get win-win situation

To get win-win situation needs the concerted collaboration among involving stakeholders: government, and universities. Government should play both "pro" and 'con" roles to implement academic mobility.

As for the "pro", a range of measures should be employed to improve internal mechanisms that include monitoring and managing the processes involved in the enhancement of quality higher education and academic mobility. Standards and guidelines for quality assurance and qualification frameworks have to be put as national agenda to create mutual trust and confidence of educational provision among involving institutions.

Government must take various measures to stimulate higher education to cultivate quality culture and set standard for all university activities, ranging from teaching, learning, evaluation, and professional practices. Standards will enhance quality. Standards set should go beyond national to address international criteria so that higher education can achieve greater status and international recognition by global community.

The achievement in fostering quality and standard at international recognition will facilitate the proportionate between outgoing and incoming across regions. At the same time, it will enable the mobility of students among universities in country possible.

Creative ventures that facilitate mobility across borders should be strongly considered, such as joint and dual degree programs, "twinning" and "sandwich" programs, joint research, and the establishment of research clusters.

Under joint and dual degree programs, partner universities should equally collaborate on developing comparable degree programs. This would include the joint offering of core subjects, program assessment, evaluation, grade comparison and requirements for the granting of degrees. Joint study programs – also known as “study abroad” and “faculty exchange” programs – are suitable to promote the mobility of faculty members and students who have the opportunity to teach and learn in different higher education environments. This mobility generates knowledge, pedagogy, research, and heightens the quality of higher education.

Financial support from the government is important to make a larger-scale mobility possible. However, support from domestic government may not be sufficient to encourage the exchange of students and scholars. The wealthier countries should be made aware of the inequality and the different cultures of quality. As a result, they will be more open-minded and reliable partners that can provide help to less wealthy countries with a weaker quality of education. The wealthier countries could potentially provide grants to fully support outbound and inbound academic talent. This dual support network will create an interdependency of development between partners.

Another measure the government should do is to encourage the balance between local and international knowledge by encouraging institutions to blend local wisdom with modern knowledge to be offered from an international or global perspective. The combination of local and modern knowledge is a good opportunity to preserve own culture and identity while up-date teaching methodologies and introduce new techniques such as collaborative learning, team teaching and the application of new technologies.

As for the con side, outbound or inbound mobility may cause unexpected impact on the nation's culture and higher education. For example, undesirable cultures may attach with student mobility. These different cultures may influence our traditions and cultures, which may be lost if they are not well protected and passed on. The challenge is to preserve our cultures by practicing and making them part of our lives. Government must make an effort to sustain and widely promote our cultures to the young generation.

Mobility is a mixture of races. Ideological and religious affiliation to host countries may motivate and mislead international students towards conflict zones. To prevent such a situation, government needs to set recruitment criteria and system to track international students and the process of student migration.

Unit cost per graduate may be higher for home universities in sending their students abroad. This implies government has to bear more expenditure to produce graduates.

In this case, government and universities should cooperate to diversify funding for mobility from all sides. Perhaps there could be an incorporation of fundraising or partnerships with private sector, NGO, philanthropic foundation, students' parents and international forum such as UMAP.

As the OHEC's former Secretary-General, let me touch a bit on Thailand's development. The OHEC has set up a National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Thailand (NQF). It strives to ensure consistency in both standards and awards for higher education qualification, and to establish equivalency between these awards and those granted by higher education institutions in other parts of the world.

Dual exchanges of students and faculty members have been operating under ASEM-DUO Thailand Fellowship program. This program represents the OHEC's intention to support incoming and outgoing academic participation between Europe and Thailand.

Malaysia-Indonesia-Thailand Mobility Programme or M-I-T was launched in December 2009 among tripartite voluntary countries: Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. The project aims to promote the student mobility as one of the key mechanisms to strengthen a long-term mobility in Southeast Asia, and lay a solid ground work for the integration of ASEAN Community in the year 2015. The use of UMAP credit transfer system or UCTS is agreed to ensure the process of credit transfer. The courses in the pilot project had to be delivered in English.

The support from host government or receiving universities would cover the exempt of tuition and facility fees, provision of basic medical care, buddy/tutor/international advisor and locating accommodation for incoming students.

The home government or sending universities would cover accommodation expenses, provide international health insurance, allot monthly allowance; and support international travelling to outbound students. Targeted number of students should be 25 outgoing from each country. The scope of participating countries should further expand to include ASEAN +3 by 2015. From 2010-2011, there were 167 students attending the program.

Recently the Council of University Presidents of Thailand (CUPT) announced the prospect of rearranging school semesters in Thailand at the undergraduate level so that the semesters fall between August and September to match those in Europe, which will also benefit Thailand's education system in the long run.

Conclusion

In conclusion, balance mobility is not easily implemented when there are also provisions for quality assurance. International standards of quality have been the success factor for global markets with highly skilled labor. Proportionate mobility will remain a far-reaching dream if universities ignore the improvement of quality.

Of equal importance is the responsibility of universities to build the confidence and trust of learners by providing them with a high quality of education. Teaching research and services need to be geared towards excellence. The curriculum, faculty, staff, facilities and environments should incorporate international aspects so that they may attract foreign students. Universities can be successfully branded according to these strengths while remaining centrally-oriented towards quality.

Lastly, I embrace your sincerity and synergy that I know will bring about many fruitful endeavors from this conference forward. I wish you all a successful conference.

Thank you.