

Report on the Australia-Malaysia Internships Roundtable Hotel Maya, Kuala Lumpur

BACKGROUND

The inaugural *Australia-Malaysia Internships Roundtable 2008* was an initiative to bring universities and businesses together to explore internship opportunities in Malaysia for Australian university students.

Approximately 30 representatives from Australian universities and Malaysian businesses attended this half day event which included presentations by each of the Australian university and business representatives.

The event presented the opportunity for both universities and businesses to identify models of internships that have worked and the challenges faced in hosting them. The discussion worked towards establishing a platform for further engagement and future models.

In her opening remarks, the Australian High Commissioner to Malaysia, H.E. Ms Penny Williams noted the marked increase in Australian business investments in Malaysia in the last two years. With education being the bedrock of this relationship, she said the challenge now was to take advantage of the tremendous opportunities posed by internships. She emphasised her commitment to the initiative and laid the foundations for discussion, outlining some of the issues for consideration, including the appropriate disciplines, format and duration for internships.

EVENT SUMMARY

Mr. Adam Carlon, Counsellor (Education) presented an overview of the intent of the roundtable and how internships fit within the broader student mobility priorities of AEI Malaysia. He then elaborated on the issues raised by Universities Australia in its position paper, *A National Internship Scheme: Enhancing the skills and work-readiness of Australian university graduates* which reaffirms the need to be innovative in preparing graduates to be work-ready. The way forward was to encourage and build partnerships between industry and university with the backing of the government and the wider community. Mr Carlon reiterated that the roundtable provided an opportunity to consider how universities and the business community in Malaysia could work with AEI to facilitate internship opportunities, and that this discussion was the initial step to work towards this goal.

THE UNIVERSITY PERSPECTIVE

Ms Jan Drew, Regional Director of Malaysia and Singapore Markets from the University of Melbourne, outlined her university's approach. She offered two priorities – the resources to source the internships as well as the administration of the internships as the key for a successful internship model. She commented on the current initiatives by the university to try and address this through their Student Mobility Unit and Student Exchange programme which offers short term, 6-12 week programs or the option of an in- or out-of-country study tour in collaboration with universities and businesses (especially in their Faculty of Commerce). The Engineering faculty was interested in following suit.

Mr David Richards, Marketing & Business Development Manager from the University of Queensland, indicated that visa issues remain a limitation on internships in Malaysia. He also commented that the university plays an active role in promoting the internships experience with options in undergraduate or postgraduate study in many of their faculties. He mentioned that the university's Biological and Chemical Sciences Faculty was interested in reciprocal programs.

Ms Ann Johns, International and Partnerships Faculty Director at Deakin University, presented Deakin's developed approach to internships. She explained that internships are an option for credit towards both undergraduate and MBA degrees, with 100 hours (e.g. three weeks full-time, or one day per week for 13 weeks) equating to one credit point. Deakin has two internships currently operating in Malaysia – with Daimler Chrysler and Ernst & Young.

Mr John Bentley, Acting Associate Dean (International) of the Faculty of Business and Law at Victoria University, spoke about the university's Living in the Workplace and the Community (LiWC) scheme, which encourages students to opt for the internship experience. He added that the long-standing internship relations VU has with companies such as ANZ Bank and Ernst & Young has been very useful in the midst of competition for top-notch graduates. He also commented on the need to collate feedback in various forms (e.g. electronic media) from students who have gained from the internships experience as a constructive means of improving models offered to increase the uptake of internships. He cautioned that there is not a high demand for Malaysian internships, but that there was good demand for sports placements in the Human Development Faculty.

Mr Chris Hepperlin, Director of Student Services at the University of Technology, Sydney, commented on the challenges faced by the university in finding a successful internship model. The issues of management, program duration, selection of students and managing expectations (paid vs. unpaid work / ongoing paid work / graduate jobs) remain important and increase the expense and time required to establish programs at scale. He spoke about the need for a strong partnership between businesses and universities to host internships and the advantage that local institutions already have through their presence and connections in the country.

Professor Robin Pollard, Pro Vice Chancellor and President of Monash University Sunway Campus, spoke of the obstacles faced in facilitating internships, including the cost/benefit ratio, visa issues and government regulations. He argued that internships need to be comprehensively packaged. He outlined the university's Bachelor of Arts (Global) program which includes one compulsory semester in Malaysia.

Ms Marisa Cordoso, Assistant Director, International Recruitment at the University of New South Wales, agreed with Prof. Pollard that internships need to be packaged. She explained that the general perception of Australian students about Malaysia is one of a holiday destination as opposed to being an attractive study destination. She suggested an additional model of internships offered in collaboration with another country (i.e. time divided between the two, e.g. 3 weeks in Malaysia, 3 weeks in Vietnam).

Professor John Evans, Pro-Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive of Curtin University of Technology, Sarawak Campus, said that Malaysia's economic growth development projects (i.e. SCORE in Sarawak) provide a potential gold mine for internship opportunities in industries such as petroleum mining, geology and the niche area of Islamic Financing. He also stated that Curtin's approaches to internships are structured in accordance with their January/July semester intakes.

Mr Walter Ong, Dean of International Student Admissions at Curtin University of Technology, Main Campus, recommended outreach through career fairs and mentioned postgraduate study tours as a good opportunity for Malaysia.

Mr Justin Tay, Regional Recruitment Manager of & Country Manager for Malaysia at RMIT University, focused on the need for coordination in assisting with location of work placements which translates to the need for a solid business relationship. He commented that Malaysian students studying in Australia place higher value on an Australian work experience and that working with an Australian company in an international setting would be attractive.

Professor Jeyapalan Kasipillai, Chair of Malaysian Business, School of Business, Monash University Sunway Campus, shared Monash's experience in their work placement program (2 components: 30% employee report & 70% student report) offered to students during their summer break basing selection on a strong academic average of 60%. He commended that this translates into the positive perception that employers hold of Monash University.

Dr. Foo Yin Fah, VU Coordinator at Sunway College, suggested incorporating a specific joint program (e.g. the Asian Business Program) when offering internships to Australian students.

THE BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE

Mr Thomas McGuire, Leighton University Manager, Leighton Contractors (Malaysia), explained the Leighton University initiative to provide seamless transition from university into Leighton, developed in response to skills shortages. The scheme involves a specially developed curriculum of 180 hours over three semesters, with a workplace component during summer breaks. He called for companies to put aside differences or industry competition to collaborate in offering their respective industry perspective in coming up with a viable internships strategy. Leighton is keen to facilitate Australian student mobility to Malaysia via internships as long as there is commitment from the students.

Mr Ranjit Singh, Corporate Services Manager of QBE Insurance, presented QBE's strategy in hosting internships, currently confined to Malaysian students studying in Australian universities doing an internship of between 6 weeks to 3 months in the area of finance industry and risk management. He also focused on the need to define expectations and objectives in a transparent manner. In QBE's experience, mentorships (having a mentor assigned full-time to an intern to gauge performance and provide feedback as well as assist in a final report through which the intern will gain credits) have been an effective practice. He was supportive of internships as an avenue for recruitment.

Ms Rani Vaithilingam, Manager Southeast Asia Markets, Wotif Holdings, shared the hospitality industry perspective for an internship model. Current hospitality internships tended to offer a general experience which disregarded specific interests that students might have. She suggested a streamlined model of project-based internships to give a sense of ownership to students and also to work with a number of hotels to align expectations and needs. She argued that hospitality was a natural fit for internships in Malaysia, given the country's reputation as a tourism destination.

Mr. Keith Christiansen, CEO of GHD Perunding Sdn Bhd welcomed collaboration with universities in deciding on suitable models to encourage students to do their internships in Malaysia. Despite existing formal linkages with the University of Newcastle and University of Melbourne, he argued that there is room to strengthen these links and summed up with an afterthought of 'How do we connect up?' Issues to consider include assistance in the selection and identification of suitable students, visa issues and practicality in terms of cost. He welcomed the opportunity of placing more interns within his company.

Ms Agnes Lo, People Manager for Sinclair Knight Mertz Sdn Bhd, commented on a keen interest to work with companies in similar industries to come up with industry-specific models for internships. Sinclair Knight Mertz currently conducts a short term three month internship program targeted at undergraduates with the possibility of extending the program to postgraduate level. She also stated the need for feedback from students to gauge their interest in being placed in their offshore offices. She proposed student exchanges and billeting as a way to overcome concern about accommodation standards.

Ms Audrey Danasamy, Director of CPA Australia, spoke about CPA's accounting internships. She commented that they have not been as successful in getting Australians to come to Malaysia as they have been for Singapore. She suggested that Singapore's advantage was that it is a finance hub and the salary rates are more attractive.

Cdr. Poon Wee Ching, Director for International Marketing at DKLS Marketing Sdn Bhd, focused on internship opportunities available in business operations through collaboration with other countries (e.g. government-linked companies where there is cooperation in minerals industry with Indonesia and Xiamen). Currently, DKLS offers internships in collaboration with local institutions (e.g. Politeknik Ipoh)

Mr Leigh Howard, Director of South Asia for Talent2 International Ltd, focused on the need to target students who are keen on doing internships, but do not know where to start looking for them. He said that internships have to be packaged in an attractive manner – taking into account the image, cost and branding involved. He also commented that the challenge in coming up with a viable model is that success stories are usually measured on a case-to-case basis and there is difficulty in using a systemic solution in trying to come up with good internship models.

Mr Rohizat Baharum, Director of Human Resources, Convex Ltd (joint venture with Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre), shared Convex's experiences and approach by hosting internships which it first offered three years ago. Convex currently offers a training programme for their interns with certified departmental trainers and a cultural as well as an induction program to provide interns with options for career development.

Mr Mohd Khair Ahmad, Managing Director of Iryas Inc, proposed managing participant expectations through seminars which could address some of the industry-specific issues. He raised the issue that there were some problems with accommodation standards and cultural differences that would need to be managed.

Ms Cynthia Celestine, Director of IDP Australia, said that students are looking for portability. She commented that credit matching needs to be addressed and that payment of interns is an issue under Malaysian regulations. She proposed an e-registry for Malaysian industry and Australian students to register their interest in hosting/participating in an internship.

OUTCOME

Apart from the immediate networking opportunities to establish linkages between the Malaysian business community and Australian universities, the key outcomes of the Australia-Malaysia Internships Roundtable include:

1. AEI to facilitate opportunities for companies in Malaysia to speak to visiting Australian university study groups on internship possibilities;
2. AEI to consider developing a publication which showcases internship opportunities in Malaysia for distribution to Australian universities, with the possibility of expanding this publication to include information about study opportunities in Malaysia;
3. AEI to explore the role that Malaysian industry bodies might play in facilitating internships in Malaysia;
4. AEI to clarify the eligibility of existing student mobility funding arrangements (e.g. University Mobility in the Asia Pacific program funding) to internships;
5. AEI to provide further information on internship opportunities on the Australian High Commission website, including relevant links to participating universities and businesses; and
6. AEI to seek clarification from the Malaysian Government on a process to streamline visa application processes for Australian interns travelling to Malaysia

CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges identified during the discussion, there was overwhelming support for this initiative from both businesses and universities, with a focus on Malaysia's unique position as a regional hub and great launching pad for a global career. In addition to the strong and long lasting education links between Australia and Malaysia, participants considered internships to bring a new dimension to the education relationship – one that could attract Australian students to Malaysia, but which also added a significant work readiness element to the Australian university education experience, and increased participants' employability skills. Businesses also recognised the significant support that such a program might have to their recruitment strategies.

Further Information

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