

Chapter 18

Rising up the Ranks: A University's Journey of Change

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ABSTRACT

The paper will cover all aspects of the change journey: engaging with relevant stakeholders, the recruitment and retention of high quality faculty members, the review and revision of the curriculum, improving the quality and quantity of research output and publications, developing centers of research excellence, raising the level of funding for both research and teaching, expanding the number of graduate students, developing an eminent visiting professors' program, the internationalization of the university, strengthening governance and administration and raising the international profile of the university. It will set out, in detail, the strategies and processes that were developed to realize the vision, as well as the challenges and problems encountered, and steps taken to address these challenges and problems. Mistakes were made along the way and the lessons that can be learnt for any university that aims to be involved in the ranking exercises.

INTRODUCTION

Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) was an unranked university until 2014. In less rigorous ranking exercises such as Webometrics, 4 International Colleges and Universities (4ICU) and Class-Base, UBD was regularly placed in the 2500 to 3500 range. In 2014, UBD broke into the Quacquarelli Symonds Asian University Ranking, achieving a creditable 171-180, ranked among the top 200 universities in Asia. UBD did particularly well in 5 categories, placing 43rd in international students, 42nd in faculty student ratio, and 11th in inbound students. In two categories, UBD was ranked among the top 10 in Asia; 7th in international faculty and 4th in outbound students.

At the time of the writing of this paper, the 2015 QS Asian rankings had just been released. UBD made a significant jump in overall rankings, up from 171-180 to 118-- a jump of almost 60 places, mak-

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ing it one of the fastest rising universities in Asia. The university achieved top 25 in Asia in 5 categories, three of these in the top 10: 23rd in faculty-student ratio, 14th in international students, 6th in international faculty, 2nd in inbound students and 1st in Asia for outbound students.

How did UBD rise up the ranks so quickly? Given the known natural disadvantages of small and new universities in the ranking exercises, how did a 30 year old university with less than 5000 students which for most of its history was focused primarily on teaching, achieve this? This paper documents and details the strategic initiatives and processes enacted to transform UBD into a university of teaching and research excellence. It will evaluate these initiatives, those that were successful, those that were less successful, and those that failed, as well as the many painful but important lessons learnt in the journey of change.

Universiti Brunei Darussalam

UBD was established in 1985, opening its doors to a first intake of 176 students. Being the first university in Brunei Darussalam, it started with only two faculties, Arts and Social Sciences and Education. Within the first five years, two additional faculties—Science and Management and Administrative Studies—were added. Over the next 30 years, UBD has continued to grow and develop. Located on its 400 hectare campus overlooking the South China Seas, there are, at present, 5000 students, 23% of which are graduate students, and about 500 academic staff.

A comprehensive university, there are presently eight faculties: Arts and Social Sciences, Science, Brunei Studies, Education, Business and Economics, Policy Studies, Integrated Technologies, and Health Sciences. In addition, there are two service faculties, Language Centre and Continuing Education Centre, as well as eight research institutes: the Institute of Asian Studies, Sultan Omar 'Ali Saifuddien Centre for Islamic Studies, UBD-IBM Centre, Centre for Advanced Materials and Energy Sciences, Centre for Advanced Research, Institute of Leadership, Innovation and Advancement, Institute of Biodiversity and Environmental Studies and E-Government Innovation Centre.

The Journey of Change

Prior to 2009, UBD was fundamentally a teaching university. The total funding for research for the whole university was only US\$200 thousand a year. UBD was also essentially an undergraduate university, with graduate students accounting for only two percent of the total university population. There were limited internationalization efforts, and international students constituted only one percent of the university population. In order to start on the journey of change, it is important to: *know where you are and know where you are going*.

To know where we are, the university conducted an extensive review and consultation process, both formally and informally, with stakeholders, including faculty leaders and staff. Four key weaknesses were identified: pedagogy, people, publications, and processes. Pedagogically, UBD had self-contained departments with very few collaborations across faculties and departments. The mode of teaching was conventional, “chalk and talk” classroom lessons. In terms of people, UBD lacked high quality academic staff, largely due to an uncompetitive pay scale which had remained stagnant for 20 years. In addition, there was a mind-set problem, where the status quo was considered good. Hence, people were comfortable and did not see a need for change.

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