# Bridging Today's Students with Tomorrow's Opportunities: Internationalization Strategies to Leverage Alumni for Brand Positioning of Universiti Sains Malaysia

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**Abstract**: This study aims to highlight ways in which we can leverage alumni, especially international alumni, in addressing challenges that higher education institutions (HEIs) face in marketing their institutions to increase the number of prospective international students. When alumni share their experiences with peers through word-of-mouth (WoM), they have a direct influence on the decision of prospective students on whether to study at a particular institution or not. For students, the lure of an international experience is great, but what the experience offers is critical. To leverage alumni for brand positioning of HEI, it is important to first engage them. Therefore, a large part of the internationalisation strategy of Universiti Sains Malaysia focuses on the student experience to gain cross-cultural competency. This is evident through international experiences, which include activities such as student exchange programs, study abroad, international volunteering, internships, and personal travels that provide students with experiences in another country or cultural context. This paper also discusses internationalisation strategies in promoting intercultural competence and engaging our alumni.

**Keywords**: Alumni, intercultural competency, internationalization strategy, Universiti Sains Malaysia, USMi

## Introduction

Internationalisation is gradually establishing itself as a new credo in higher education. Most higher education providers are positioning themselves as multicultural and global to attract more students. Higher education is striving to improve the employability of graduates and bridge social inequality between peers. This has prompted higher education providers to adapt their curricula to the current realities of the job market (Tholen & Brown, 2017). Globalisation has had a significant impact on businesses and the expectations on employees. Although state-of-the-art curricula are desired by both students and employers, the latter are also now searching for graduates who are emotionally charged and equipped with soft skills — especially in understanding and managing people from different cultural backgrounds and interacting with each other to achieve business goals (Crossman & Clarke, 2010). Crossman and Clarke (2010) also claim that employers attribute graduates with international experience with the ability to build relationships and networks abroad and manage business cross-culturally and with cultural understanding. Higher education institutions (HEIs) face a major challenge in the *quality* and *type* of students they attract, as the composition of their students is critical to their development and success (Alam, Faruq, Alam, & Gani, 2019). An effective way to attract

prospective students is through word-of-mouth (WoM), and graduates from HEIs manage to accomplish this task effectively because they have first-hand experience of these institutions. The satisfaction of graduates with the knowledge acquired, acculturation, and employability are also critical to the marketability of the institution and its brand.

The aim of this study is to identify ways in which we can leverage alumni, particularly international alumni, in solving the challenges faced by HEIs in marketing their institutions to increase the number of prospective international students. When alumni share their experiences with their peers through WoM, they directly influence prospective students in deciding whether to study in a particular institution or not. For students, the lure of an international experience is great, but what it offers is critical. An international experience includes activities such as a student exchange program, studying abroad, international volunteering, internships, and personal travel that provide students with experience of a different country or cultural context (Crossman & Clarke, 2010).

There are several important questions that determine the decision to embark on studies at a particular HEI and are often related to employability. The following questions encompass the subsequent interrelated points:

1. Is the cost of obtaining a higher degree affordable?
2. Are the new knowledge and skills acquired by students making them more productive?
3. To what extent do they benefit from their new experiences in the workplace, or are they more employable than their fellow peers?
4. Are others motivated to follow the same educational path by a graduate's apparent improvement, especially career success?
5. Do students receive support (educational, emotional, and financial) during their studies?

## Literature Review

During a professional training, Kalimullin and Dobrotvorskaya (2016) proposed that an individual or a prospective student should undergo three main stages: applicant, student, and graduate (an alumnus). In higher education, people who come into contact with a prospective student play a crucial role in influencing them. Although family, friends, and mass media contribute to the portrayal of universities to prospective students, the alumni of these HEIs play a critical role in the selection process for prospective students in choosing a university. They see alumni as a litmus test to judge how successful they will be should they choose the university. Other factors include the financial situation of the prospective student. For example, their ability to not only pay tuition fees but also the cost of living in the city or region where the university is located (Kalimullin & Dobrotvorskaya, 2016).

Other factors are the infrastructure, the presence of student dormitories, and modern equipment (computer labs, sports facilities, and other equipment). The freshmen also pays attention to the resources and support for the teaching process in the form of available financial grants, library resources, support for conferences and journal publications, and international cooperation activities. Tholibon, Mokhtar, Zulkarnain, Latib, and Ismail (2021) reported that mobility students at Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Pahang had lower levels of satisfaction regarding infrastructure facilities at the university compared with those regarding other aspects of the university, which indicates that infrastructure is a matter of concern for international students.

Prospective first-year students exhibit attentiveness towards industry collaborations, particularly those within the STEM fields. This is because individuals who pursue higher education are not only full-time students for academic purposes but also professionals who want to advance their careers. In Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) has been the most entrepreneurial university for several years and has the most collaboration with industry partners. This has put its students in an advantageous position in terms of internships, on-site training, research, and employability.

The repertoire of academic programs offered by a university reflects how contemporary the institution's curriculum is to the current world realities. In this sense, USM is one of the few institutions that offer courses in sustainable development and maintain a sustainable development

research centre. USM's ranking has steadily improved over the past 5 years, which has improved USM's visibility among prospective freshmen. People who enrol in higher education are adults and typically have many needs in their educational journey that require support (educational, emotional, and financial). Students direct their attention toward situations that unveil the support extended by the institution to its students when it is required. A positive evaluation of the support received would, among other things, increase the marketability of a HEI.

The nature of communication among participants in the university determines the nature of collaboration among students. This lays the foundation for a broader and more solid connection between alumni and institution worldwide. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is now at the forefront of the world in this regard. The MIT graduate is now a brand, and the economy created by MIT graduates exceeds that of some states in the United States of America. A study conducted by Clark, Chapleo, and Kati Suomi (2020) also showed that improving alumni connections and industry or business support help differentiate the institute from other players in higher education.

## USM Initiatives for Branding

We have listed some of the initiatives undertaken as part of the internationalisation strategies — both to promote intercultural competence and to engage the alumni.

### USM International (USMi)

Creative initiatives developed by USM's International Mobility and Collaboration Center (IMCC) have significantly increased the number of international students at USM. Internationalisation is crucial for a HEI, and the number of international students in the HEI is a reflection of its internationalisation strategies. In 2018, USM founded USMi, an association of international students studying at USM. This constitutes a part of the agenda in the internationalization of USM targeting intercultural competency among the multi-ethnic international students and between international and local students. This has built a brand for USM with USMi serving as an icebreaker, uniting both international and local Malaysian students of USM. The international students and some local students who are members of the Executive Committee (Exco members) of USMi are selected for an academic session (Figure 1). Cultural activities, accessible to a diverse body of international students studying at USM, are fostered through the assistance of IMCC. USMi's activities are organized and conducted by the exco members and international students in collaboration with the IMCC. These activities include field trips, games, carnivals, and competitions that promote cooperation and a sense of belonging among peers. Although the number of undergraduate students is quite modest (1.41% men and 0.46% women), the activities and initiatives developed by IMCC through USMi and *Kawan* (another initiative explained in the following section) have increased the number of male and female undergraduate students to 10.14% and 6.25% in 2021, respectively (Alumni Development Centre, 2021).



**Fig. 1** USMi first Exco members

**Kawan**

*Kawan*, the Malay word for *friend*, is one of the initiatives under the student ambassador rebranding initiative designed to support new students at USM. The experiences that alumni share with their respective compatriots have a significant impact on them. This, in turn, has led to current students and alumni being able to assist prospective students throughout the enrolment process at USM. Because most new enrolees enjoy socializing with their compatriots, having a *Kawan* who acts as a national representative for the prospective student at USM makes it easy for the enrolee to seamlessly fit into their new environment. This initiative increases the popularity of the USM brand to prospective students.

**The Interactive Alumni Dashboard**

The School of Computer Sciences and the Alumni Development Centre worked together to develop an Alumni Dashboard Exco members (Nafisah, Syaheerah, & Darweena, 2021; Hussein, Syaheerah, & Darweena, 2021) (Figure 2). The dashboard was specifically designed to track alumni progress. The existing dashboard was not very intuitive and did not provide descriptive analytics. To replace the existing dashboard, a new dashboard was developed to visualize the statistics and results of key factors. The goal of this project is to improve the efficiency of the Alumni Dashboard system. Descriptive and predictive analyses were performed using Power BI, visualization software (Nafisah, Syaheerah, and Darweena, 2021). This dashboard proves to be more intuitive compared with the previous dashboard, making it much easier to track alumni movement and progress. The drill function also allows our stakeholders to clearly visualize the statistics in a graphical form for better decision-making.

For example, numbered statistics can now be displayed in a clear graphical form from USM Alumni Development Centre (2021). As shown in Figure 2, the number of enrolees at USM has increased remarkably over the past 5 years. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, 403 students from 37 countries have newly enrolled at USM. Among the new alumni from different countries, three countries (China, Nigeria, and Indonesia) top the hit list of new enrolees at USM with a total of 98, 39, and 27, representing 24.32%, 9.68%, and 6.70% of new enrolees for the year 2021, respectively (USM Alumni Development Centre, 2021). Today, USM alumni are spread across 190 countries around the world, from the North America to the Middle East, Africa, South America, and Asia. The total number of USM alumni today is 6,424; comprising 0.5% undergraduates and 2.41% graduate students. In the last 5 years, the aforementioned countries topped the rankings: China with 51.6%, Indonesia with 46.8% and Nigeria with 14.2% of the total international alumni population.
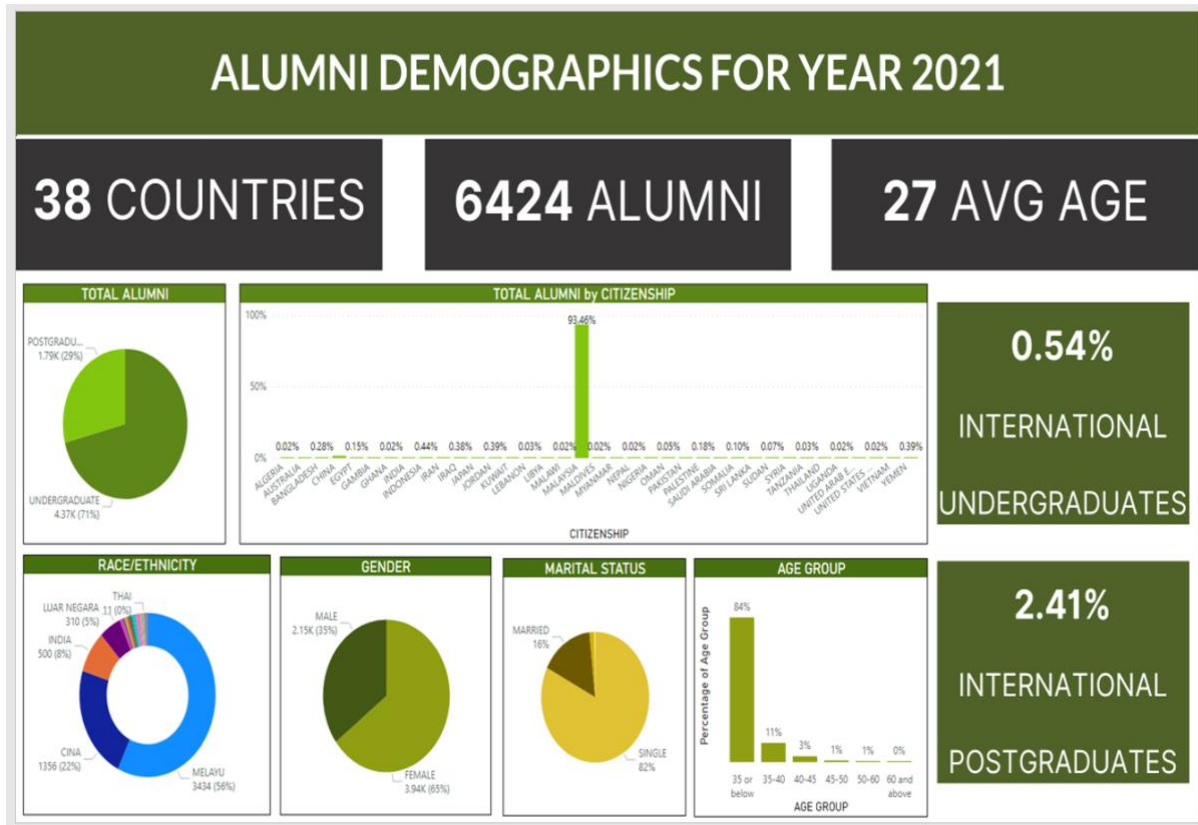
**Fig. 2** A snapshot from the Alumni Dashboard

**The NERVE Centre —Initiative During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Although COVID-19 has shown our vulnerability as humans, it provides ways to show kindness even in the worst of times. COVID-19 infection made it difficult to transport and deliver supplies, food, and other essentials to various students within and outside the campus. A command centre was established, which was managed by the students for the students but with guidelines from the IMCC that adhered to the standard operating procedures for COVID-19. During the Movement Control Order in Malaysia, the Vice-chancellor (VC) himself distributed essential goods to the students, which caused admiration among the students. They were very grateful, and for many students, the handing over of gifts and essential goods by the VC himself is a memory they will always cherish in their hearts.

**Methodology**

Data used in this study are both primary and secondary data. Primary and secondary data are obtained from personal interviews and interactions with prospective, existing, and graduated students of USM around the world and from the Alumni Development Centre of USM, respectively.

**Findings and Discussion**

Our findings will help identifying the branding challenges that HEIs should be aware of to develop better marketing strategies for their institutions. Over the past five years, the number of USM alumni has grown significantly. In 2021, there are 1964 for postgraduates' alumni and 4,460 for undergraduates' (USM Alumni Development Centre, 2021).

Our findings show that alumni play an important role in branding an HEI. The experiences they share contribute significantly to a prospective student's decision to pursue higher education. Many prospective students find out about the HEI through its brochure, bulletin, or media channels.

However, when they meet a former student of the institution, they are much quicker to decide whether to enrol at the institution or not. This underscores the potency of word-of-mouth (WoM) dynamics, wherein the dialogues engaged with alumni are harnessed as a litmus test to ascertain the likelihood of prospective success within the institution. This is the reason why the number of international students at USM is steadily increasing. Creating a robust activity in terms of learning, living, and social interactions among alumni provides a great repertoire for branding initiatives for an HEI.

## Conclusions

Branding of HEIs is usually successful when the initiatives have a touch of creativity that incorporates forms of cultural views of other nationalities. Students who enjoy their experiences at USM feel more belonged, are better engaged, and are likely to share both their experiences and feelings with prospective students. On social media, alumni share their stories and memories and tag the institution and their friends from other countries, creating a strong wave of WoM, which in turn creates a wider reach for the institution. This makes the institution more international in the eyes of prospective students, and they are more likely to choose the institution.

### Suggestions for Future Research

Moving forward, processes pertaining to programs such as *Kawan* and USMi could be streamlined to achieve two goals: ensuring smooth functioning of the processes and expanding the scope of the programs. Additionally, digitalisation of processes and data shift pertaining to IMCC initiatives to dashboards would ensure widened accessibility and transparency and would reduce the possibility of human error.

### Co-Author Contributions

This study unequivocally declares the absence of any conflicts of interest among the authors. Mr. Yusuf Yakubu, a former USMi Exco members member with notable expertise in content and social media and an alumnus of USM's School of Computer Sciences, assumed responsibility for devising the research methodology and conducting the descriptive analysis outlined in this paper. Dr. Syaheerah Lebai Lutfi, the esteemed founder and advisor of USMi since 2019, also holds the position of Deputy Director at the IMCC, where she currently oversees the Global Engagement portfolio. Moreover, she serves as a consultant for the Alumni Development Centre and played a pivotal role in supervising the Alumni Dashboard, which is prominently featured in this study. She spearheaded the operations of USMi, managed the initial *Kawan* initiative, and contributed valuable statistical insights presented in this paper. Furthermore, Ms. Darweena, in her capacity as the Coordinator of the Alumni Development Centre, made substantial contributions to the data collection and dashboard development efforts detailed herein. Last, Associate Professor Dr. Muhizam Mustafa, as the Director of IMCC, provided crucial data derived from the Nerve Centre at USM, thereby enriching the content of this research endeavor.

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