

feature

Studying in Singapore and Malaysia

Education institutions in Malaysia and Singapore say that both countries have many advantages for international students and numbers look set to grow in the future. **BETHAN NORRIS** finds out more.

While studying in the USA, Australia or the UK might be the ultimate goal for many Asian students, factors such as high tuition fees and travel costs, as well as cultural and safety concerns, have been prompting many to look for educational opportunities closer to home. Singapore and Malaysia have both undergone something of a transformation in their international student provision in recent years, with higher standards and increasing choice attracting greater numbers of students to their shores.

Khairul Faiz Morat, Manager of External Relations at Monash University - Malaysia Campus, says that the private higher education sector in Malaysia has gained momentum in recent years. "The country has successfully hosted four foreign university branch campuses and a number of local colleges have grown to become university colleges well en route to becoming universities in their own right," he says. "Despite some key challenges, the sector has grown tremendously and this bodes well for the future."

The growth of foreign university campuses in both Singapore and Malaysia has certainly boosted the profile of these two countries as a study destination for international students. Jeremy Yap from James Cook University Singapore (JCUS) says that, as well as gaining a well-respected qualification, students studying at their Singapore campus also have other advantages. "Students studying at JCUS go through a fast-tracked trimester year that allows them to finish their studies earlier than their counterparts in Australia – eight months of summer holidays are taken out to allow faster completion of the courses. This brings about savings to precious time and money while enjoying the rights and privileges that come with being a full-time student of JCU Australia," he says.

For many international students choosing to study in Malaysia or Singapore, cheaper tuition fees and reasonable living and travel costs are principal factors. Leecen Hoh from Taylor's University College & Taylor's College in Malaysia says that students come to study in Malaysia if they can't afford to study in a western country of their choice. However, cultural considerations can also play a role as Leecen relates. "Malaysia is viewed as a model Islamic country – with a good living environment, no discrimination, halal food, Islamic culture – by many other western countries," he says.

Scott Dooley from Lorna Whiston Schools, a secondary school in Singapore, agrees that Singapore can often be an attractive consideration for students and parents who may be influenced by negative views of the west. "It is not such a culture shock for [students] when they first arrive," he says. "Things here are still Asian, they are never made to feel like outsiders. I know a lot of parents like the fact they don't have to worry about drugs or encountering racism etc, things they often believe are prevalent in the west."

Yap lists a number of other reasons why students might choose to study in Singapore. "This city in Southeast Asia embodies the finest of both east and west," he says. "It is a safe, clean and green country with state-of-the-art infrastructure that presents itself as an ideal destination for studying overseas. A student [visa] is relatively easy to obtain compared to other destinations."

Institutions in Singapore and Malaysia also offer a full range of course options for students. Morat from Monash says that business courses are most in demand by both international and local students although other courses may increase in popularity shortly.



"The university has received significant interest in the engineering programmes," he says. "Some of the newer programmes, such as the Bachelor of Psychology & Business have lower student numbers as they are new programmes."

At JCUS, business programmes are also in demand from international students. "As we offer an MBA, some students who have finished our Bachelor in Business stay to finish their MBA courses as they can complete both in three years thanks to our fast-track system," says Yap. "We can accept students without work experience on to our MBA courses," he continues.

Due to the location of both countries, international student nationalities tend to be predominantly Asian and Leecen in Malaysia says that Indonesian, Chinese and Korean students are their largest nationalities. "Chinese numbers have decreased gradually over the years [due to] higher admissions requirements [and] competition from other Malaysian institutions, institutions in China and other countries such as Singapore and the West," he adds.

Dot Chen from HELP University College in Malaysia says that the college's top international student nationalities are Chinese, Indonesian, Maldivian and African. She adds, "[We have experienced] a drop in mainland Chinese students – as experienced worldwide – and an increase in numbers of African students. China is encouraging her students to study in China by boosting educational options in China [while] awareness of the education offered at HELP and in Malaysia has risen among students in Africa."

However, as awareness of the opportunities available in Southeast Asia grows, it is likely that new student markets will open up in the future. Dooley says, "For all areas of education in Singapore, one of the biggest obstacles has been people's awareness of Singapore as an education option. For instance, in Japan I was asked often, 'Do they speak English in Singapore?' However, places closer to Singapore have always had a higher understanding of what Singapore can offer." ■

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