

## Chapter 2: South East Asia<sup>1</sup>

### Section 5: Brunei Darussalam

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#### 1. Outline of the Higher Education System in Brunei Darussalam

Brunei Darussalam achieved complete independence from Great Britain and became a sovereign nation on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1984. The state is organized with the sovereign acting as Prime Minister, along with the Defense Minister and Finance Minister, into a constitutional monarchy system entitled the Malay Islamic Monarchy (or Melayu Islam Beraja, abbreviated to MIB) (Shibata, 2009, p.45). National finances are strong, supported by exports of petroleum and natural gas, and this creates a stable government alongside a well-developed social welfare strategy, and comprehensive free public education. Higher education provision includes a range of scholarships available for eligible students, and most students who go overseas to study often receive a full scholarship.

The University of Brunei Darussalam (hereafter UBD), which used to be the only university offering degree programs in Brunei Darussalam until 2008, was established by the monarch in October, 1985 (Ramly and Metassan, 2006, p.37). On opening, the University accepted 176 students, and offered a program of English language education with the support of the University of Leeds and the University College Cardiff (Today's Cardiff University) in the UK, as well as a Malay language university education program (mainly consisting of Malay language, Islamic research, Islamic religious studies, etc.) with the support of Universiti Sains Malaysia and the University of Malaya. Subsequently, in 1991, the University began its Master's program, adding a Doctoral program in 1999-2000, and producing its first Doctoral graduates in 2003 (Ramly and Metassan, 2006, p.37).

In addition, there is also the Institute of Technology Brunei (hereafter ITB), established in 1986. However, it used to educate students to a Higher National Diploma (hereinafter referred to as HND) level, and many of its students had to go abroad, particularly to the UK, in order to gain Bachelor's or Master's degrees<sup>1</sup> until 2008. The Institute began a twinning program in 2001, to develop opportunities for overseas educational partnerships.

In both the Brunei State Development Plan for 2007 to 2012, and the new Brunei Darussalam Long Term Development Plan ("Brunei 2035"), developments in the education sector are listed as one of the eight priority project plans. Pehin Dato Abdul

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a part of Hotta, Taiji. *et al* (2010) 「ACTS と各国の単位互換に関する研究」 (Study on the ASEAN Credit Transfer System and Credit Transfer Systems in Asian Nations) [The Report of Mission Research by the Promotion Fund of Leading University Reform, The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan (MEXT), 2009], Hiroshima University, 403 pp.

Rahman Taib, Brunei's education minister, gave a lecture in 2008 in which he promised that between 2007 and 2012 the government of Brunei will invest 8.7% of its budget for a development plan in education. Under these plans, in the higher education sector, the government aims to raise the rate of students' enrollment at university level from 23% in 2007 to 40% by 2012. Additionally, in order to create a system that can contain this increased number of students, it implemented a reform of its higher education system in 2009 (Abdul Rahman, 2008, pp.12-16).

In line with this, in January 2007, the Institute of Islamic Religious and Cultural Studies transferred away from UBD to form Brunei's second university, established under the name Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (hereinafter referred to as UNISSA). The university offers education and research in Islamic law, finance, society, culture, history, etc., in Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral programs<sup>2</sup>. Subsequently, in August 2009, ITB began to offer Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degree courses<sup>3</sup> in seven academic disciplines as a regular Institute of Technology, in line with the transfer of the School of Engineering of UBD. However, it continues to offer its Higher National Diploma (HND) level educational program alongside these.

These reforms to the higher education system led to the establishment of three higher education establishments offering degree programs, in the form of UBD, ITB and UNISSA under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education. In the fiscal year of 2008, this resulted in a total teaching staff of around 500, with around 4500 students engaged in higher education. Furthermore, the Ministry of Religion upgraded the existing Seri Begawan Religious Teachers' College, which exists to train teachers for Islamic religious schools, to the Seri Begawan Religious Teachers' College University (hereinafter referred to as Kupu SB).

However, since these universities only began operating educational programs in August 2009, their regulations, educational programs and curricula are still significantly under developed<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, UBD was the only institution awarding Bachelor's degrees and more advanced degrees in the nation until 2007, and has always had a government representative as a member of the board of trustees. Thus, the credit grading and credit transfer system of UBD was considered to be the system of the nation accredited by the government until very recently.<sup>5</sup> In consideration of the situation described above, the regulations and activities of UBD are described below as being representative of the major systems and situation within Brunei Darussalam.

## **2. A university case study**

### **(1) Outline of Universiti Brunei Darussalam**

**1) Established:** 1985

**2) No. of Faculties:** The university comprises seven organizational units, namely four faculties (Arts and Social Sciences, Business, Economics and Policies Studies, Faculty

of Science, Institute of Health Studies), the Academy of Brunei Studies, a Language Center and the Institute of Education. It offers not only Bachelor's degrees, but also graduate studies (UBD, 2009f).

**3) No. of courses:** Each of the seven organizational units offers Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral courses. Since 2009, the Institute of Education has offered a one-year teacher training course to graduates of the four faculties listed above. Furthermore, the University offers diploma-level teaching and healthcare professional qualifications.

**4) No. of students:** Undergraduates: 2,838; Graduate students: 285; Other (diploma, etc.): 697 (as of December 2009).

**5) No. of overseas students:** 190 (as of December 2009)

**6) No. of teaching staff:** 375 (as of December 2009)

**7) Teaching/semester periods:** The university operates in a two-semester system, with the first semester taking place between August and December (18 weeks) and the second semester between January and May (18 weeks). The first semester is comprised of 18 weeks as shown below (UBD (2010b)):

(1<sup>st</sup> semester (18 weeks) schedule)

7 weeks of lectures

1 week of holiday

7 weeks of lectures

1 week of examination preparation

2 weeks of examinations

**8) New Bachelor course program:** Within the Bachelor education programs, a new "Next Generation Programme" (hereafter GenNEXT) was instigated in August 2009. The following is an outline of this education program. GenNEXT is an education program that allows students to acquire a Bachelor's degree in four areas of study, i.e., arts and social sciences, health science, science or management (UBD, 2010a). Each faculty has a range of majors, but the curriculum is flexible and designed to provide an interdisciplinary education that straddles faculties and courses, in order to allow the acquisition of specialist knowledge appropriate for contemporary requirements. In order to achieve this, the GenNEXT program offers three types of teaching, as follows: (1) degree core courses, which all students enrolled in the GenNEXT program must study (these include Malay Islamic Monarchy (hereinafter MIM) and communication-related studies designed to improve university research and learning skills), (2) major courses according to the major selected, and (3) interdisciplinary elective courses (hereafter Breadth courses)<sup>6</sup>. Between 50-60% of the overall curriculum comprise core degree courses and major courses, while the remaining 40-50% can be taken in Breadth courses. Breadth courses can be categorized into three types as follows: (1) optional courses in other faculties, (2) optional courses within the student's own faculty, and (3) interdisciplinary optional courses, which involve

studying a particular course from a range of perspectives. The third year of the course is known as the Discovery Year, during which students select to take a domestic internship or study overseas, with the purpose of developing into rounded individuals from a range of perspectives. There are five different patterns defined for the study required in this third year:

- (1) 1 semester participation in a short-term study abroad program (hereinafter SAP), and completion of four Breadth courses at UBD
- (2) 1 semester participation in an internship, and completion of four Breadth courses at UBD
- (3) 1 semester of community service as a local volunteer, and completion of four Breadth courses at UBD
- (4) 1 year participation in SAP
- (5) 1 semester participation in SAP and 1 semester in an internship

All the courses above are calculated as equivalent to eight courses (32 credits).

\*In addition, as an alternative to participation in SAP, students may participate in a Student Exchange Program (referred to hereinafter as SEP).

**Table 1: Example of four year overall curriculum and number of credits (for students in the Bachelor course, majoring in management)**

Courses taken in years 1, 2 and 4	No. of courses
Program core courses	5 courses
Major core/elective courses	13 courses
Interdisciplinary Breadth courses	6 courses
3 <sup>rd</sup> year (Discovery Year). One option from the following	
SAP (or alternatively SEP), internship, community service, four Breadth courses	8 courses or equivalent
Total	32 courses or equivalent

Source: UBD, 2009a, p. 5

The list of courses offered to students taking the GenNEXT program beginning in August 2009, during their first semester (September – December) is as per the attachment (UBD, 2009a). It is immediately obvious that there are a lot of courses for which four credits are awarded. As shown above, however, just because 32 courses have been taken, it is not the case that students will receive  $32 \times 4$  credits = 128 credits. Depending on the major, there are some combinations with courses that only offer 2 credits, and so for most majors, the level of credits required for graduation has been set at 124.

**9) Changes in language used for teaching:** Prior to 2009, most departments at UBD offered teaching in English, although at the same time Malay cultural and language and Islamic cultural and language courses relating to MIM policy, as well as courses

relating to Islamic religion were taught in Malay or Arabic. With the transfer of the Islamic religious and cultural institute to UNISSA in 2007, however, since the educational programs taught at UBD in Malay or Arabic effectively moved off campus, the GenNEXT program, which began in August 2009, is now 95% taught in English.

**10) Plan for expansion of Graduate School education:** During 2001-2002, there were only 2 Doctoral students in Brunei, but numbers have gradually risen so that there are currently just under 10 Doctoral dissertations in progress. In line with the reforms to higher education that took place in 2007, a plan was implemented to increase the number of students taking Doctoral courses, and since the fiscal year of 2009 up to 300 scholarships have been offered to encourage students to continue to Doctoral level. The scholarships are only available, however, to gifted students, and as such, despite the fact that 800 students applied in the fiscal 2009 year, only a very few lasted to the final stage of the examination process, and UBD staff point to the difficulty of increasing graduate student numbers<sup>8</sup>.

**11) University management structure and external assessment activities related to quality assurance:** Since UBD was the only university in the country offering higher education until recently, government representatives' participation in the board of trustees meant that they were involved in the setting of regulations, etc., and that these regulations were applicable nationwide. Currently, however, there are three universities under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, each of which is operated independently. Since these are all state universities, however, the government is involved in the management of the universities through participation in the boards of trustees, etc. At UBD, furthermore, external assessment is implemented on a regular basis, with faculty assessors from overseas inspecting transcriptions of results and examinations on an annual basis. Every three years, external assessors visit the University and inspect the various major programs, departments and faculties. It appears that the auditing of the credits and results systems is another part of the work done by external assessors<sup>9</sup>.

## **(2) Outline of regulations relating to UBD's credit system**

### **1) Credit system for Bachelor's programs**

In principle, four years (eight semesters) of study and 124 credits are required for a Bachelor's degree. One course (module) usually comprises either two or four credits, although there are a few courses that comprise three or one credits. In the GenNEXT program, which began in 2009, however, a significant majority of courses comprise four credits<sup>10</sup>. Most courses (modules) of four units involve four hours per week of classes, although some involve only two or three, and occasionally courses involve up to 10 hours of classes. Since the teaching structure differs depending on the subject area, it

cannot be assumed that the number of credits awarded is automatically related to the number of hours taught. Furthermore, while regular lectures are two hours long, there are also some small class tutorials of one hour, and tutorials are arranged based on study arrangements and the teacher's schedule, at the start of each semester. As a result, in general, most teaching staff teach for between eight and 14 hours per week, but in courses to which more students than anticipated sign up, they may be required to increase the number of tutorial classes they take, and depending on the semester, may in some cases have to teach up to 30 hours per week<sup>11</sup>. Based on the above, it seems that information relating to course names and number of units, as well as the number of hours required for study, is readily available from UBD, but it is clear that the number of units on offer does not link consistently to a particular number of hours of class or study. This can vary widely depending on the department or teacher, indicating a significant level of autonomy given to teaching staff.

One method of estimating the number of hours spent in study is to look at the hours spent on an internship or other similar program. In Japan, one credit is considered to represent 45 hours spent in practical or research study, but at UBD, the minimum amount of time required to be worked for credit in a semester's internship course is usually 64 hours. While this figure is not clearly stated in credit units, since it represents 16 credits, it could be said that time worked does not necessarily guarantee the number of hours spent in study per credit<sup>12</sup>.

## 2) Credit system for Master's programs

Master's programs are divided into programs for which students are enrolled for between 1 and 2 years at the University, and where they are awarded a Master's degree based on examination of their Master's thesis, and programs where the qualification can be achieved by taking taught modules. The thesis-based Master's course requires the student to take courses specified within the major by his or her supervisor, and to complete a Master's thesis. In such cases, the credits acquired from courses taken are required as part of the program's coursework, but since the number of credits taken does not in fact have an impact on the conditions for graduation, the number of courses required differs depending on the student's major. A Master's thesis must in principle, be a maximum of 60,000 words long, and the degree is awarded based on passing a viva-voce examination of the thesis.

The examination panel consists of the following six people: (1) the chancellor, or a member of teaching staff recommended by the chancellor, (2) the head of faculty, (3) the head of department overseeing the student's major, or a member of teaching staff recommended by said head of department, (4) a university examiner, (5) an external examiner (providing such is available to attend the examination) and (6) the student's supervisor (UBD, 2009c).

Master's degrees gained by studying courses, on the other hand, require the completion of courses specified under each major. In general, 40 credits (in 10 or more courses) are required. Most individual courses comprise 4 credits, and require between 8 and 10 hours per week of study. There are also tests for each course, for which the examination panel comprises the following four people: (1) the head of faculty, (2) the vice-head of faculty, (3) the head of the major department and (4) a university examiner. Moreover, in order to graduate from a Master's program, students have to undertake "research guidance" education, defined according to their major. This "research guidance" involves actual experience of policy evaluation analysis, the completion of a short thesis, or the implementation of a research project, meaning that the student is effectively required to submit some sort of report. If the number of credits awarded in relation to this research guidance project exceeds 16, furthermore, a fifth member of the examination panel is required, in the form of an external examiner. For graduation, the student is required to have a GPA of 2.5/5.0 or above in the courses he or she has taken (UBD, 2009d).

### 3) Credit system for Doctoral programs

The Doctoral program does not, in principle, require any courses to be taken, but rather the awarding or otherwise of a Doctoral degree is by the process of a viva voce examination of the candidate's Doctoral thesis. In general, it is expected that students will take between three and seven years to obtain the qualification.

### 4) Syllabus

The following information was supplied in the syllabus sample for one course at UBD.

- (1) Course number
- (2) Course name
- (3) Course type (Compulsory/Breadth)
- (4) No. of credits (the number of taught hours and number of hours spent in self-study are also given)
- (5) Prerequisite
- (6) Objective
- (7) Contents of taught classes
- (8) Grade assessment (proportion of grades awarded for examinations, presentations, attitude in class, homework, etc.)
- (9) Teaching materials
- (10) Course schedule by week

While the number of taught hours and number of hours of self-study are clearly indicated, these do not necessarily correspond to the number of credits awarded.

Furthermore, learning outcomes are not necessarily used as indicators for results evaluation at the end of the semester.

(3) Overview of regulations and quality assurance activities in relation to the UBD grading system

Between 1985 and 2009, the following grade assessment table was used as the standard for grade assessments at UBD.

**Table 2: Standard of Grade Assessment in UBD  
(Used under former education program until 2009)**

Results	Percentage marks	Assessment
A	80-100%	First Class Honours
B	70-79%	Second Class (Upper) Honours
C	60-69%	Second Class (Lower) Honours
D	50-59%	Third Class Honours
E	40-49%	Pass Degree
F	39% or lower	Fail

Source: UNESCO (2003)

From August 2009, however, the grading system has been changed significantly, with the introduction of the GenNEXT program. The pass/fail borderline has been raised from below 40% to below 50%, and a GPA system has been introduced<sup>13</sup>.

**Table 3: Standard of Grade Assessment in UBD (interim)**

Module assessment	GPA points
A <sup>+</sup>	5.0
A	4.5
B <sup>+</sup>	4.0
B	3.5
C <sup>+</sup>	3.0
C	2.5
D <sup>+</sup>	2.0
D	1.5
P	1.0
F	0

Source: UBD (2009e)



Furthermore, while it appears that evaluation is done using a relative assessment standard based on distribution of student grades, many members of the teaching staff still appear to be grading using an absolute assessment method<sup>14</sup>. Grade assessment is done by adding the marks awarded for homework, presentations, examinations, etc., and calculated as an overall percentage, with results being awarded based on the grades above. The method by which teaching staff submit final results to the relevant university office is by online registration, though the majority of teaching staff still submit paper forms to the University administration department to have the results inputted on their behalf. Submitted results are confirmed by the professor in charge of each of the educational programs, with final management of the results done by the head of the department. If a member of teaching staff has graded projects in an irregular way, advice from the dean is issued. However, in general there appear to be almost no constraints imposed on marking.

#### (4) Student exchange activities and transfer of credits and grade assessments at UDB

The Credit Transfer System (hereafter CTS) at UDB has been used at the University since the SAP was introduced in 1986 (UDB, 2009b). When the system was introduced, SAP was a program that allowed Bachelor students to spend their third year of study at an overseas university, mostly in the UK. This program has been expanded recently, and now sends around 60 students each year to the UK, Australia, Jordan and Malaysia. Under this program, which is a short-term overseas study program built into the UDB curriculum from the start, courses that cannot be offered at UDB are designated by teaching staff, and students are able to take such courses and bring the credits back with them to enroll in UDB for their fourth year, after which they can graduate after taking the required courses. The Department of Medicine operates a more complex “twinning program”, whereby students complete 3 years at UDB and then transfer to study in the UK for another 3 years, acquiring a UK doctor’s qualification before returning to Brunei. UDB has experience of setting up such programs, having had them in operation since the opening of the University, and as such can be said to be a higher education institution that is open and positive in regard to credit transfers. Credit transfer under SAP, however, should not be read as an alternative to courses at UDB, since students take courses that are selected for them and considered part of the existing program curriculum. Thus, credit transfer has never so far been considered a problem<sup>15</sup>.

In comparison to this, UDB’s Student Exchange Program (SEP) began to accept students from around 2000, but only officially dispatched its first students under the program in 2005, and as such the University’s experience in credit transfer on these courses is still minimal<sup>16</sup>. Currently the University accepts around 15 exchange students per year, and dispatches around 20, under SEP. These students enroll at UDB for one year, and providing that they obtain results averaging B or C+, they are

allowed to enroll as exchange students for one semester or one year during their second year. Currently the University has agreements with higher education institutions in Europe and America, the Middle East, members of AUN (the ASEAN University Network), Japan, Korea and China, among others.

Many students going to study overseas are financed through a scholarship of some sort. Since students achieving an average academic result of B or C+ or above qualify for a scholarship, a high proportion of students going to study abroad or on exchange programs do so on a scholarship. In the case of exchange programs for overseas study, the overseas university also provides some support, meaning that students have many opportunities for financial support.

There are plans to expand SEP in the future, but since its status is different to SAP, wherein the research departments were well acquainted in advance with the educational programs on offer by partners universities before dispatching students and allowing credit transfer, the International Department is proactively utilizing systems such as ECTS (European Credit Transfer System), ACTS (ASEAN Credit Transfer System) and UCTS (UMAP Credit Transfer System) wherever possible when agreeing on new student exchange programs, in order to enable credit transfer with as many countries as possible (UDB, 2009b).

Credit and grade transfer systems at UBD are implemented based on the following principles:

- (1) Results obtained at partner universities can be transferred to UBD at the same assessment level.
- (2) However, when transferring grades from a university that uses a differing assessment system, results may be assessed higher or lower than the results obtained (this does not apply to the pass/fail borderline).
- (3) Adjustments to grade assessments are at the discretion of each department's Examination Board.
- (4) UBD-CTS is explained in Article 22 of the University Examination Assessment Regulations
- (5) The table below shows examples of adjustments used in regard to partner universities and countries.

**Table 4: Examples of grade transfer from overseas, based on UBD-CTS**

Result	Percentage	Assessment	Assessment in UK	Percentage	Assessment in Jordan	Percentage
A	80-100%	1 <sup>st</sup> class	A	70-100%	A	85-100%
B	70-79%	2 <sup>nd</sup> class (upper)	A-/ B+	60-69%	B	75-84%
C	60-69%	2 <sup>nd</sup> class (lower)	B	50-59%	C	65-74%

D	50-59%	3 <sup>rd</sup> class	C+ / C	40-49%	D	55-64%
E	40-49%	Pass	F	39% or lower	E	45-54%
F	39% or lower	Fail			F	40% or lower

Source: UBD (2009b)

- (1) Grades from the UK and Singapore are assessed 10% higher. As shown in the table above, therefore, a result of 70% will be assessed as 80% or higher at UBD.
- (2) Grades from Australia and Malaysia can be transferred without adjustment, since their assessment is done based on a system very similar to the UBD grading system.
- (3) Results from Jordan, other countries in the Middle East, and universities using a grading system similar to these, will be marked 5% lower at UBD.
- (4) The overall average of results from Korean and Japanese universities will be converted to a GPA such as that used at UBD, and accepted as transferred marks.

### 3. Conclusions

The higher education system in Brunei Darussalam used to consist of the single University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD), causing it to stand out from the development situation seen in other countries. Being a national university, UBD operated under direct management of the government, but while it maintained strong partnership systems with universities in the UK and other countries, it also established various independent systems, and each department was acknowledged as autonomous. For this reason, the curriculum, credit systems and operation of grade assessment differ from department to department, and while the University exists as a whole within a single large framework, there are various different systems in operation at different levels. In 2007, reforms to the higher education system are thought to have had a significant impact more recently on the University system itself. The UBD GenNEXT program is an extremely innovative program, under which the credit system and grading system have been further clarified, as well as unified across the whole university, giving it greater transparency in regard to overseas universities and facilitating international partnerships. Further developments in these areas are anticipated in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> ITB website (<http://www.itb.edu.bn/>) (Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> March 2010)

<sup>2</sup> UNISSA website (<http://www.unissa.edu.bn/>) (Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2010)

<sup>3</sup> According to an interview with University of Brunei Darussalam on 1<sup>st</sup> March, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> UBD website (<http://www.gennextdegrees.ubd.edu.bn/index.html>) Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2010

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<sup>11</sup> According to an interview with University of Brunei Darussalam on 1<sup>st</sup> March, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.