

Internationalisation: The new “must have” for the strategic plan

Scan through most university strategic plans and references to “international” activity are hard to avoid. Whether the focus is on student recruitment, international business links, partnerships or research endeavour, most higher education organisations stake a claim for international activity at some level.

Recently, however, things have been changing...

Over the last two years the new “must have” strategic aim has become “internationalisation”.

What, though, does “internationalisation” mean and is it really different from the more traditional objectives associated with international activity and profile?

A trawl through university strategic plans provides fairly consistent indications that while “international activity” is one thing, “internationalisation” may very well be quite another...

INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITY: DEPTH AND SCOPE

In very general terms, international aims for UK HEIs cluster around four key themes, which include:

- [1] THE RECRUITMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS
- [2] INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION AND CREDIBILITY
- [3] RAISING THE BAR: PEER BENCHMARKS
- [4] INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITY: CROSS-PORTFOLIO PARTNERSHIPS

The features associated with these themes help to group organisations and indicate the drivers behind their international goals and ambitions.

These “characteristics” provide some insight into the depth or scope of the international agenda for different organisations and go some way towards informing an understanding of what internationalisation really is (and isn't).

[1] THE RECRUITMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

For some organisations, inevitably, the main focus of international activity is limited to the recruitment of international students, plus the systems, networks and international links that drive that process:

- Success in international activity may be centred on corporate KPIs that cite the relative number of international students “as a proportion of the total student population”: i.e. as an indicator of a goal achieved.

[2] INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION AND CREDIBILITY

- For many organisations, an international agenda is dominated by the pursuit of worldwide recognition and profile: From their strategic plans, many organisations are hard to separate in their pursuit of “an international profile”.
- They desire to be viewed as “internationally competitive”; “renowned for their style of T and L”; their “world class research”; the professionalism and “excellence of their education and research” etc.
- The number of research-focused organisations now indicating ambitions to be in the top 50 research-oriented universities globally has increased dramatically in the latest round of 5 year strategic plans.

[3] RAISING THE BAR: PEER BENCHMARKS

While the stimuli for this global positioning drive may be obvious:

- The imperatives to retain and develop opportunities for additional research funding.
- The need to develop and maintain a credible global profile (if “world-wide” is the target market) etc.

They do indicate the increasing pressure exerted on some segments of UK higher education given the rise of global league tables and the ease of comparison across world higher education markets.

It is not enough to be internationally focused: everyone must know about it, too. For the research-intensives, it is not about simply “competing across the UK”, but about gaining global presence and working in effective partnerships with international organisations which have the status, expertise and renown to endorse and enhance a UK university's portfolio of competences (and reputation).

A very wide range of institutions have long recognised the need for an international profile which can deliver a wide range of benefits. Case studies include universities with a declared regional focus.

A number of UK institutions aim to be benchmarked against global exemplars of the "regional University" concept; an opportunity which can enhance credibility, reputation, partnerships and profile.

Similarly, an eclectic group of universities state within their Strategic Plans that they strive to:

- Contribute to their region through their international links and activities.
- Use international initiatives to address regional, economic or cultural priorities.
- Drive regional inward investment through targeted international activity.
- Work in partnership with regional, internationally active businesses.

[4] INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITY: CROSS-PORTFOLIO PARTNERSHIPS

Strategic Plans indicating the broadest reach of international activity showcase internationally active partnerships. These can involve opportunities as diverse as the curriculum portfolio through to third arm activity, with universities such as Southampton providing text book case studies of how to do this well.

Key indicators for this in-depth approach to international activity include:

- Links with a wide range and number of international businesses and research partners.
- Joint working with international institutions, businesses and industrial organisations across the globe.
- Socrates-Erasmus agreements with universities in the European Union.
- Student placements available around the globe plus "off-shore" or transnational education opportunities.

THE REAL CHALLENGE OF INTERNATIONALISATION

- Staff exchanges.
- Membership of key organisations such as the Worldwide Universities Network, for example.

A review of UK higher education Strategic Plans demonstrates that many organisations do engage in broad ranging international activity to the extent that it is embedded in their long term goals and aspirations. However, "internationalisation" suggests a process of change and transformation that must, surely, exert an influence upon the style, attitude and culture of the institution.

So, is internationalisation different from stating "an international aim" or focusing on "raising global profile"? Professor Shirley Pearce, Vice Chancellor of Loughborough University is a staunch advocate of internationalisation, and provides a clear explanation of what it should mean within the higher education context.

She is determined that Loughborough will "deliver a real international experience for students while they study at the University". This will demand much more than mere rhetoric. Professor Pearce recognises UK institutions need to move "beyond simply recruiting international students and to begin delivering a demonstrably international experience for all those that study and work here". Her plans focus on developing the crucial "Loughborough Experience" so that it "provides students with the opportunity to experience different teaching and learning styles and to develop international friends and connections that will serve them well throughout their lives".

EXPERIENCE-DRIVEN INTERNATIONALISATION

The real challenge of internationalisation is, therefore, to transform institutions: to enable them to deliver a tangibly distinctive experience for students and staff informed by their international activities, focus and partnerships.

For example, via:

- Innovative approaches to T and L pedagogy that will attract students from around the globe, add distinctiveness and value to the learning experience.
- A market-responsive portfolio that is index-linked to changing world-wide markets as well as UK demand.
- Global partnerships that drive innovation, investment and inform an organisation's culture and personality.
- Exchange programmes that broaden experience for both staff and students.
- Opportunities for students to study at partner organisations around the world, as part of their study time at UK universities.

Internationalisation is not an easy option. If an organisation is to fulfil an internationalisation agenda, it will need to deliver a demonstrably different experience for all its stakeholders.

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