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Internationalisation: A Whole-of-Institution Approach

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In this paper we first clarify and analyse notions of what internationalisation is and the ways in which it has become an important strategic goal for higher education institutions in Australia. In particular, this paper seeks to demonstrate the attributes of a whole-of-institution conception of internationalisation, which requires defining and analysing what is meant by whole-of-institution. This is followed by a discussion on the means of achieving a whole-of-institution approach, focusing in particular on the broad pressures on, and underlying potential of, tertiary education in Australia. The basis for, and nature of, the mechanisms and systems for assuring quality in each key area is then discussed. The University of Wollongong is used as a case study, examining key areas of policy framework and implementation systems, committee structures and primary areas of activity. This offers an opportunity to consider a single institution in light of the two essential elements of the whole-of-institution approach—embeddedness and quality assurance mechanisms.

1. Introduction

‘To fulfil its role effectively and maintain excellence, higher education must become far more internationalized; it must integrate an international and intercultural dimension into its teaching, research, and service functions.’ (IAU Statement, UNESCO World Conference in Higher Education 1998.)

Internationalisation is frequently narrowly defined as encompassing international students and off-shore teaching. Such a conceptualisation sits at odds with claims that Australian universities are world class and internationalised in all respects. This paper offers an analysis which explores the concept of internationalisation as a whole-of-institution project, and the challenges that arise in assuring quality when taking such an approach. One advantage of the whole-of-institution model is that the ‘international and intercultural dimension’ is integrated with all university functions and thus becomes embedded in the culture. Indeed, if a university claims to be ‘internationalised’ then evidence of embeddedness and integration are essential. The whole-of-institution approach takes account of the interests and needs of members of the university, and can provide a basis for genuine and thorough-going internationalisation. This is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for universities to claim to be internationalised. The second essential element is evidence of monitoring mechanisms and systems by which internationalisation in its component elements as an holistic concept are measured and benchmarked. (Wachter, 1999; Carroll, 2003)

2. Assuring and Ensuring Internationalisation

Central to the whole-of-institution approach is that internationalisation is not only instilled at every level and activity of the organisation, but the policy framework and systems must also be integrated and aligned with the structures and organisation of the institution’s internationalisation objectiveness. In order to understand how these integrate, it is useful to examine a university from the perspective of four key areas—participants, policies, structures and core activities. A culture of internationalisation in each of these four facets is necessary, but is only sufficient for the whole-of-institution if all four aspects are internationalised and congruent with each other.

The participants in the university community—the academics, students, executive professional and support staff—are central for the core activities, policies and structures of the institution. Their involvement and intercommunication is crucial for the larger goals and day-to-day operations of the university. The need for effective involvement and communication has become even more crucial in recent years as expectations have grown that universities will fulfil multiple demands. It is because of the increasing complexity of tertiary institutions that focus on whole-of-institution internationalisation or any

other objective must also take account of the plans and policies as well as the structures that will support, enable and regulate participants in effecting the core activities of the institution.

Thus, at the broadest level, a University Strategic Plan sets directions for the core activities of teaching and research, and provides the fundamental basis for policies. The broad strategic plan will then be supported by and realised through a cascade of lower level plans and the policies that underpin them. What is essential here are the communication and participation channels that ensure that plans and policies are shared, and thus congruent with each other. The communication channels and participation processes are the 'glue' that make real the ideals, goals and plans for internationalisation, for example. With genuine involvement in development of plans and policies through structures of committees and delegations that enable their engagement, participants will then be able to undertake their own specific goals and ideals within the internationalisation framework. Moreover, in achieving engagement in and commitment to internationalisation, congruence is ensured and quality assurance mechanisms fit (see e.g. University of Western Australia, 1999).

Commitment, congruence and effective quality assurance in an increasingly complex environment underpin the process of achieving major objectives such as whole-of-institution internationalisation. This demands attention being paid equally to structures and policies and the needs and rights of participants in fulfilling the core activities of the institution with collegial communication as the 'glue'.

It is perhaps unfashionable to give too much weight to structures, yet in this fluid and volatile environment for tertiary institutions it is important that traditional university committee structures be sufficiently defined, together with formal structures for interaction between committees. Thus the Strategic Planning Committee would work with the Academic Board and its main committees in covering core functions such as Research, Education and Internationalisation. In these ways, internationalisation initiatives and evaluations are integrated with faculty plans and the plans and structures of the support and professional units. The policy frameworks can then not only operate effectively at broad university-wide levels, but also in terms of the staff and student experience, thus assuring that internationalisation is a whole-of-institution initiative and culture (De Vita & Case, 2003).

It is the same when considering the student populations. Internationalisation policies and initiatives should take into account graduate and undergraduate students, and domestic and international students. The latter must then consider their important sub-categories of on-shore international students (further categorised into degree and study-abroad students) and off-shore students. At this point it becomes evident that the internationalisation strategy crosses over the Student Experience strategy. It is in just such crossovers that the importance of clear and integrated structures and policies becomes apparent. Committees that have clearly delineated accountabilities and concomitant delegations that take account of the complexity enable multiple objectives and strategies to be met if also underpinned by the engagement of members of the university community. In the case noted here, the goals of a rich student experience intersect with and complement internationalisation strategies, rather than compete with them (see e.g. De Jong & Teekens, 2003).

Thus within the core activity of the student experience, policies for enabling study abroad, internationalisation of the curriculum, and the provision of international minor sequences are complemented with systems to support international and domestic students with language enrichment programmes tied to particular subjects and student academic support programmes (Nilsson, 2003; Pearson, 1999). One example is the University of Wollongong programme, Peer Assisted Study Sessions (known by the acronym PASS), which is a highly successful non-compulsory programme with high levels of uptake in large core subjects. It involves weekly small-group meetings led by senior students. The primary focus is on problem solving, critical thinking and the like, as appropriate for the current lecture and tutorial topics being covered. What is most notable about the PASS programme has been not only that it has increased international student success rates, but also, with a high uptake of domestic students, the programme has had a major beneficial effect on increasing interaction between international and domestic students attending the weekly meetings. Programmes such as the PASS programme highlight the values of the whole-of-institution approach, demonstrating ways in which the University Education

Plans, university and faculty committees and professional support units act in concert to meet an identified goal. There is also a feedback loop with the development and success of such programmes, further reinforcing the notions of internationalisation as a whole-of-institution concern (see e.g. University of South Australia, 2000).

A challenge arises in meeting the crossover demands of internationalisation and the student experience in off-shore programmes. Enabling appropriate support and sensitivity to students' needs can be more difficult in off-shore situations. In the main, however, difficulties are mitigated through the whole-of-institution approach to internationalisation. This is because the systems and structures in place to effect whole-of-institution strategies will also ensure that off-shore students' learning resource needs are met and their student experiences are optimal. (see Coleman, 2003).

In order to achieve this, staff development is crucial. Again, this depends on linkages between faculty committees, the professional support units and the university committees. From such linkages and information flows comes training programmes in off-shore teaching, the multicultural classroom, maximising the effectiveness of the technological resources, and curriculum development. The information flow enabled by the committee structures, together with the notions of internationalisation, means that needs can be quickly identified and remedies offered (see e.g. University of South Australia web site; University of Western Australia, 1999).

Broader strategies such as the University of Wollongong Strategic Links Grants programme have also played a key role cutting across institutional boundaries. Of itself a collaborative activity, the Strategic Grants programme provides funding not only for collaborative research, but also for teaching and professional activities with targeted international partners. Grants have been provided for joint real-time teaching, the joint development of library web sites, staff and student exchange, and collaborative teaching with overseas universities. The successful outcomes of collaborative research from the Strategic Links Grants also highlight the research element of internationalisation. Enabling collaboration through developing and nourishing international links is one part of a larger mission to ensure that the crossover between internationalisation and research strategies at institution and faculty levels is effective. Again, it is evident that the whole-of-institution project depends heavily on crossover membership of committees, consultation, and the widespread commitment to internationalisation.

International research collaborations draw from and feed into the university's system of developing links at all levels with overseas institutions, and ensure a clear system of overseeing links and bolstering relationships with key partners at many levels. The strongest links develop where there are good relationships at several levels, including senior executive, research collaborations, teaching links and student exchange across several disciplines. These strengthen internationalisation through their comprehensiveness and mutual expectations.

Finally, it is important that structures and processes are in place to ensure that these kinds of goals and activities are reflected upon, evaluated and, where needed, improved. Mirror review mechanisms are the essential element in whole-of-institution. Systems must be in place to ensure that Faculty and resource centre plans are reviewed at least as regularly as the Strategic Plan and broad function plans, not only in terms of each Plan's own objectives but also against the other Plans. In these ways, together with other ingrained evaluation and accreditation processes, a reflective approach and public scrutiny on a regular and frequent basis can provide a set of review mechanisms to ensure the whole-of-institution internationalisation approach is well realised. However, the difficulties in developing cross-functional performance indicators cannot be underestimated and is an area which deserves further research.

3. Conclusion

A comprehensive whole-of-institution approach to internationalisation can bring benefits to Australian universities, and can help to reduce perceptions held by some that Australian universities only approach internationalisation for the money it can bring. A whole-of-institution approach requires institutional commitment and a thorough integration of internationalisation into all aspects of the planning process.

This must be supported by effective performance indicators as a basis for measuring the progress and institutional effectiveness of a whole-of-institution approach to internationalisation.

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