

**ISSUES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF UNIVERSITIES'  
STRATEGIES FOR INTERNATIONALISATION**

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**PREAMBLE**

Universities have always tended to be internationally oriented institutions in terms of research, scholarly activities, and access to the world of knowledge by a wide variety of academics from different disciplines with different needs. However, the considerable expansion of international activities over the last decade is a phenomenon closely linked with financial reduction, the rise of academic entrepreneurialism, as well as, of course, a genuine philosophical commitment to cross cultural perspectives in the advancement and dissemination of knowledge.

The principal purpose of this paper is **to examine some of the strategic and policy implications of this development**. The discussion is based on a conceptual framework of strategic analysis (Davies 1995), drawing on work by Keller (1983), from conclusions derived by the author from R and D and consultancy projects and experience of institutional life. The bulk of the evidence, however, is derived from two major action research projects directed by the author, the first co-sponsored by the Association of European Universities (CRE) and UNESCO (Davies 1997), and the second by CRE and the European Commission (Davies 1998). These projects based on some 40 European universities yield rich evidence of future agendas for the international effort of universities.

Through the paper, for the sake of brevity and space, reference is made to elements like "international effort", etc. This is a shorthand term to encompass under- and postgraduate education, research, consultancy, technology transfer and continuing education. It is quite appreciated that different detailed emphases need to be put on particular management practices for each of these elements.

It is assumed that the institutional context in which international activity is initiated contains all the normal characteristics of a collegium and a professional bureaucracy, with all that this implies in terms of inertia, resistance to central directives and a very healthy decentralisation of expertise and autonomy at the level of the individual and basic unit. Strategy development and implementation thus requires appropriate instruments of change. It is also assumed that the international market is highly competitive for all these university activities, and that universities are therefore being driven into entrepreneurial modes of behaviour at a corporate level, often because of external factors, which do not necessarily sit at all easily with the traditional collegial and bureaucratic culture of institutions. Areas of tension are explored as appropriate.

Finally, the detailed characteristics of the services offered by universities are not discussed. Instead, the focus is on critical areas of decision-making and organisational functioning and those factors which may either facilitate or retard development.

### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY**

A **conceptual framework** for the analysis of international strategy developed by the author is a convenient basis for discussion (see Figure 1). Two sets of factors are identified : those internal and those external to the university. The detailed elements of these factors has been analysed elsewhere (Davies 1995), but briefly, for the purposes of this discussion, they may be summarised thus:

#### University Mission

All universities have implicit or explicit missions or statements about mission (deep seated beliefs, values and traditions). As we shall see, universities are becoming increasingly explicit about the international dimension of this - the reasons behind international activities; their scope; the outcomes expected; the geographical foci etc. Because of external factors we shall discuss, significant mission shifts can be discussed.

#### Strengths and Weaknesses

For universities keen to develop their international effort, it is logical they build on and exploit strengths in international market places, rather than expose weaknesses. The consequences of the latter are likely to be severe, and will have knock-on consequences for regional and national business also. The strength of the academic programme and profile is clearly central to this, in terms of the quality of programmes

(assessed externally); their breadth (range of disciplines) and depth (sub-degree affiliations through to postdoctoral studies); their flexibility and adaptability to changing international opportunities and threats (in terms of variable delivery mechanisms; learning opportunities; credit flexibility etc.); and strategic alliances with other providers in an international context.

It is apparent that **many universities are vulnerable in the international domain** because of the above, and also because various elements of their personnel policies and practices (skills, attitudes, incentives, working conditions) or financial policies and practices (income sources and flows; buoyancy; costing and pricing; financial agreements; pump-priming and investment funding etc.) are not up to supporting significant international endeavours. In short, they inhibit good performance on the international scene, rather than support or facilitate it.

#### Organisation

The delivery of international services, like most market sensitive offerings, probably needs differentiated and specialist organs and roles, if it is to be successfully promoted and sustained. In characteristically devolved institutions, the core of international operations will logically occur at department/faculty levels, which, however, do have entrepreneurial limitations. Hence, we see the evolution of specialist units for the generation of contracts, contacts and intelligence - international offices, vice-rectors with international portfolios, specialised consortia, offshore centres and franchise operations etc. The challenge for institutions is to ensure that such internationally oriented 'periphery' organisations are firmly tied to the academic heart of the university, without losing their flair and creativity.

#### Externally Perceived Image and Identity Externally Perceived Image and Identity

This, in a sense, is a mirror of internationally perceived mission, and the challenge of the university leadership is to ensure that the two are closely aligned. Institutional propaganda which does not correspond to the understanding and perceptions of international clients and stakeholders in terms of pedigree, quality of operations, marketing and ability to deliver, is likely to be in trouble. Institutional leaders clearly have a major role here to ensure image corresponds with reality.

#### Trends and Opportunities in the Market Place

The international market place is clearly volatile in terms of cultural differences; national and international developments; the shifting agendas of IGO's and NGO's; labour markets; international

research priorities; and conventions and legal prescriptions. We shall shortly consider the likely environmental imperatives identified in the international CRE-UNESCO and CRE-EC studies, and what these are likely to mean for universities, in terms of the understanding of the ramifications and possibilities; the need for realistic strategic management; the likelihood of market segmentation and difficult choice in terms of research commitment; and the ability to gain credibility in working with influentials and sponsoring organisations.

#### Assessment of Competitive Situation

The international market place is clearly becoming very competitive for under- and postgraduate students; sponsored research, technology transfer, consultancy and continuing education - from other universities in one's own and other countries; from private providers operating on different commercial assumptions, and very formidable international consortia. Universities thus need to analyse their competitive strengths and weaknesses - and those of their rivals - in determining their optimum contribution to international education and research. This analysis is a highly strategic activity, and more so for being international players. Developing this capability at a corporate level within universities is difficult - making resulting strategy stick in a devolved university is even more difficult - but very necessary.

The **formulation of international strategy** is thus likely to be a compound of the interplay of these six broad factors. The assessment of risk in the consideration of these should not be overlooked, especially in those domains which really require considerable upfront investment. Internationalisation, almost more than any other domain of university activity, does call for environmental analysis of the highest order, and it is to this we now turn.

#### THE EVOLUTION OF INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY

**Universities have always tended to be international in character** but, historically, this has principally been at a very devolved level. The researcher has regarded himself or herself as a member of an international community of scholars, drawing on the work done by others, travelling to work with colleagues in other countries in the same field, and participating in international conferences. Some long lasting institutional collaborations have built on this foundation.

Many western countries, of course, have been motivated by **altruism** in their international endeavours, especially in relation to developing countries. In UK, for instance, the Commonwealth links provided a

natural focus for assistance to many of the world's infant universities in the 1960's and 1970's assisted by IUC - a co-operative company formed by UK universities - which eventually yielded place to the British Council. This interest is paralleled in broad terms in USA, Germany and Netherlands, for instance.

The **genesis of the 'European' ideal** also provided a strong philosophical stimulus to internationalisation, though the idealism was soon tempered by the realisation that Brussels funds were available, and several universities' international bureaux were predicated on the desire to tap European Community funds. Notwithstanding, many links both with Europe and the developing world still proceeded apace unconnected with any overt institutional framework.

In the period after 1981, the introduction of higher fees for overseas students in UK provoked many universities into proactive marketing for overseas students, often for reasons which were instrumental rather than altruistic. This adoption of an unbridled **entrepreneurial ethic** in UK through clumsy recruiting campaigns and other manifestations clearly caused some resentment in the countries targeted for such efforts, and also amongst universities from other systems providing services in the countries concerned. Other European universities have not, in general, displayed quite the same entrepreneurial tendencies. This entrepreneurialism, of course, can lead a university into vulnerable positions. Thus, the recent economic downturn in South East Asia has created significant policy and financial problems for some UK universities.

Throughout this decade of the 1980s, a few universities had developed clear and systematic international strategies either in UK or the continent of Europe, though institutional agreements proliferated, often without real substance, and these were clearly no substitute for a comprehensive international strategy. Governmental agencies to help universities in this effort, such as DAAD (Germany), NUFFIC (Netherlands) and the British Council provided variable levels of support for institutions both in quantity and quality, partly related to the availability of funds; partly to the extent of interest and understanding of the developing countries; and partly because of a confusion in their own role vis-à-vis universities.

The **European Community** from the early 1980s has, of course, generated a plethora of programmes designed to assist in the European dimension of internationalism - ERASMUS, SOCRATES, LEONARDO, COMETT, ESPRIT, BRITE, etc. It has clearly facilitated linkages with Eastern Europe through TEMPUS and with Latin America through partial support of the CRE Columbus programme. However, universities are still partly hampered by a lack of policy preparation, though this is certainly improving with Socrates

bids; slightly cavalier attitudes to student welfare; a lack of serious pervading commitment to various manifestations of the European or international ideal; the coincidence of financial reduction at home with these EC initiatives - which are clearly not full cost.

All these EC ventures, of course, are aimed at different policy outcome targets. The preceding discussion relates to the past: let us now consider what factors are likely to be dominant in the coming decades in the evolution of universities' international strategy.

### **FUTURE INTERNATIONAL AGENDAS FOR UNIVERSITIES**

Arising from a depth analysis of the working strategic visions of some 40 European universities (Davies 1997; Davies 1998) there are some interesting portents of likely opportunities and threats - or at least, challenges.

At the outset, it is clear that **the particular geographic location of individual universities** would appear to be an important factor in determining university international agendas ... or ... put in a slight different way, universities will look for different things as outcomes from their international activities. The 1998 study was based on universities in three types of region - peripheral region; region of economic renewal (from a period of decline); region of population concentration, and some discernible common trends may be observed from the research.

As a generality, it may be said that universities in peripheral regions (e.g. north Norway or Finland) will want to use international projects and activities as a way of significantly diminishing their geographical marginality. Universities in regions of economic renewal (Eastern/Central Europe, NE England) will wish to use internationalisation as a means of attracting inward economic, financial and intellectual investment. Universities in regions of high concentration and growth, already reasonably wealthy (Brussels, Barcelona, Rotterdam) will wish to use their international endeavours to reinforce their positions on international cross-roads. What means are most appropriate we shall consider later.

Referring back to the earlier observations on the location of universities, some institutions may well see themselves as **instruments for the globalisation of a subcontinental region** (Balbaus); as the fulcrum between subcontinental regions (Istanbul vis à vis Europe and Asia); as a means of assisting regional cohesion; or as incubators of cultural diversity and tolerance in regions of multi-racial tension (the former Yugoslavia).

It is also the case that university international activities will be critical in some contexts in terms of **political reconstruction, democratisation and the nourishment of an adolescent market economy** (Central Europe, Balkans, former Soviet Baltic states). Thus, institutional agreements may be sought which provide international expertise to the university in areas like constitutional law, economics, banking, business management etc., which in turn provide assistance to local interests in reforming governmental and economic structures.

The above examples demonstrate that universities in general are concerned with the **diversification of their missions** way beyond teaching, research and traditional definitions of community services, into very broad portfolios of interaction with their regional partners and stakeholders. It follows that global collaboration may be seen as an essential element in regional development whether in terms of student flows, research, technology transfer or inward investment. How far universities systematically plan for this with their regional partners (governments, development agencies, enterprises) is another point: do they, for instance, "sell" the region to potential overseas investors (e.g. Japanese car manufacturers) partly on the basis of the services universities can offer? How far is institutional P.R. geared to this?

The **globalisation of teaching and learning** is widely seen by institutions in the 1997 study as being inevitable, giving rise to a whole series of complex, inter-connected consequences. Among these, is the realisation that there are expanding global markets for students and the facilitation of international student mobility with associated issues of mobility schemes within EU and between EU and other regions is to be regarded as the norm. This trend certainly implies a search for interconnected sequences of degrees, diplomas etc., and for recognition, including professional recognition of awards on a truly international basis.

This need is likely to be exacerbated by the growing availability of high quality learning opportunities through the **Internet and other electronic means**. This has many implications. Internet makes available world class programmes in potentially every country which creates potential competition for less eminent providers. It also opens the way to strategic alliances between providers with different strengths which could provide services not feasible on a purely national basis, thus confirming that one of the principal roles institutions will play will be that of knowledge broker in a rapidly expanding international knowledge market.

Across Europe, there is a common expectation that the university curriculum will be cast, not only in terms of the cognitive mastery of disciplines, but in terms of **skills and competencies** not only related to

particular disciplines, but also of a general transferable nature. Moreover to several countries, there are demands for employees for a predictable set of attributes from university graduates, irrespective of institution. This issue may well generate one of the central areas of debate over the next decade : the determination of curriculum content; who determines it; and what issues for accountability are posed. The debate is likely to go way beyond national boundaries, to the European level, as is the case with the harmonisation of professional qualifications. Whilst competencies and credit equivalents are creative instruments, global straitjackets could well inhibit institutional flexibility. It is nonetheless, an issue likely to be basic to institutional international strategy.

It is quite clear from both the 1997 and 1998 studies that **preparation for the world of work** is perceived to be one of the universities' main tasks over the next two decades. The development of programmes of study deemed relevant to employers' needs is central to this, in terms of content; the preparation of skills and competencies; work experience; and out-country experience for work and study purposes. The assumption made by many universities is that they will be preparing students for an international labour market, given the way EU is evolving; given the nature of employers likely demands of more highly trained employees in the international domain; and given the growing importance of co-operative and corporate education.

This clearly raises big questions for university processes of course design; international benchmarking of programmes; for quality assurance strategic alliances for maximising student experiences; and the adequacy of co-operation with industrial and business partners in the international domain.

The international dimension of research and scholarship has always been apparent, especially at a devolved level. The studies however, reveal **internationally oriented research agendas**, which really require significant institutional level strategy. **Research quality assessment** exercises in various countries normally ascribe the highest gradings to research which is of international standing. This implies that researchers are continually exposed to international best practice which means, of course, substantial Internet investment; adequate budgets for international travel; effective departmental partnerships with foreign universities; etc. Joint doctorates, such as the European doctorate, are likely to be more significant, providing doctoral students with varied international experience. Membership of international research networks and benchmarking "clubs" would therefore seem to be paramount. Greater attention is being given to the **role of universities in the innovation chain**. In this international context therefore, universities need to work out how to provide different sorts of services: to local or regional companies who need access to the best international know-how, R and D etc., to multi-national

companies whose allegiance to universities in whose regions they happen to be located may not be high compared to universities in the country of their headquarters; to multinational companies who are toying with the idea of bringing inward investment to the region of the university. These may call for quite different responses, but do require some strategic research policy.

In all the institutions surveyed in the two studies, there is little evidence of **attention to the North/South axis** - or, to put it more specifically, little explicit comment on the responsibilities of European universities to assist less well-off colleague universities in developing countries. This could take several forms - student networking and exchange; staff exchanges; joint programmes; assistance with equipment; joint bids to funding agencies etc. There is no doubt that the IGO's have emerging priorities in this field, and the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education 1998 sets out a whole action programme in this regard. The upgrading and sustainability of universities in developing countries thus constitutes a significant challenge of internationalisation of higher education in the next two decades.

Finally, it is both implicit and explicit in the above that universities will have a major role to play in the **transmission of cultural values**, both within Europe, and from Europe to other international settings. It is possible to detect from both the 1997 and 1998 studies a broadly based conventional wisdom on what universities stand for in a turbulent, tense world, qualities such as rationality; respect for human rights; sovereignty of the law and ethical consideration in social commitment; individual autonomy and freedom; pursuit of free enquiry, truth and excellence; inter-denominational ecumenism; and the scope for agreement and diversity within a common frame of toleration. Many of these indeed were encapsulated in the CRE Magna Carta of European Universities signed in 1988 in Bologna. How these lofty statements are expressed in strategic action is another point altogether, but questions are raised about the extent to which the degree curriculum and pedagogy deliver these qualities; the extent to which the university's role in social criticism nationally and internationally espouses these values; and the extent to which the university sees itself as a defender of these faiths in difficult political settings.

It will be recognised, of course, that some of these international agendas are already with us in terms of recognition and initial action, whereas some are barely at the recognition stage. All in all, they constitute a formidable workload for the individual university to assess their significance, and to evolve systematic policy responses.

### **POSTSCRIPT**

If we examine the operational manifestations of each of the agenda items defined above, considerable question-marks are posed against the **capacity of the university to respond appropriately** in terms of the boxes defined in Figure 1. If we simply took the challenge of third world university development, this poses huge issues in terms of an European university's personnel policy; resource deployment; financial decisions; curriculum and student mobility policy; and offshore operations, not to mention the strategic qualities of its leadership. Thus, universities need to sift out the realistic from the unrealistic, and the attainable from the unattainable, with an eye to effectiveness of outcomes, quality, and of course, ethical standards. It is fully recognised, of course, that internationalisation does not constitute the only institutional agenda - which makes the strategic balancing act even more difficult.

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