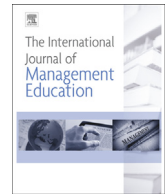




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## The international business of higher education – A managerial perspective on the internationalisation of UK universities



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### ABSTRACT

This paper employs a managerial perspective to examine the internationalisation of higher education (HE). Using four case studies of United Kingdom (UK) universities, the research identifies the differences between organisations that are making good progress toward implementing their internationalisation strategy and those that are finding it more difficult. The literature review combines three sets of literature on: the internationalisation of HE, management of HE institutions and strategic management. Based on the literature three main challenges to UK universities implementing organisation wide internationalisation are identified and a set of organisational prerequisite qualities are suggested, which if put in place will provide should produce sound basis on which to implement an internationalisation strategy. The literature suggests that contemporary universities are international businesses and as such should give more serious consideration to how their internationalisation strategy is managed. The research indicates that some UK universities are struggling to come to terms with their new operating environment and whilst they nearly all have international strategies, they need to pay more attention to the implementation of those strategies.

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## 1. Introduction

The international business of higher education (HE), or academic capitalism as it has been labelled by [Slaughter and Leslie \(1997\)](#) is based on information, ideas and people moving across international borders. HE has always had an international dimension ([Gacel-Avila 2005](#); [Marginson & Rhodes 2002](#)) and scholars have a long history of cross border movements. However in the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century the global movement of students, staff, programmes and even institutions reached a new level ([Naidoo, 2006](#)). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and

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Development (OECD) estimates that there were 2 million international students studying outside their country of domicile in 2000 (OECD, 2012). This number had more than doubled by 2010, to 4.1 million and is estimated to grow to at least 7 million by 2020 (Ryan, 2013). In the United Kingdom (UK) the international student population also grew significantly over the same period, growing from 231,000 (11 percent of the total UK student population) in 2000 to 370,000 (15 percent) in 2009 (HESA, 2011).

International HE is a significant industry in all the Anglophone countries (Caruana & Spurling 2007; Poole, 2001; Van de Wende, 2001) and is increasingly important to the economies of those countries, for example it is the fourth biggest export earner and is vital to the whole economy in New Zealand (Bennet, 1998; Li, 2004). International HE is also increasingly important to universities and HE institutions (HEIs) in continental Europe (Enders, 2004; Smemby & Trondal, 2005) as well as some key educational nodes around the world; cities like Hong Kong, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, that play host to multiple international branch campuses (Koutsantoni, 2006a; Naidoo, 2006).

The growth in the international business of HE, parallels a similar period of unprecedented growth in the levels of world trade (Friedman, 2005; Guest, 2011); leading to the observation that HE is at the same time both an agent of globalisation (encouraging the sort of student movements referred to above) and a business that must respond to the consequences of globalisation. For example UK universities now compete with aggressively marketed global competitors and an increasing number of on-line challengers (Collini, 2012; Healey, 2008). In the UK the response to this international competition expresses itself in two main ways, firstly there is an emphasis on boosting university reputations, through developing international research (and the university's position in league tables that measure research output) and secondly redoubling efforts to attract fee paying international students who are often regarded as key to the financial survival of HEIs in the UK and elsewhere (De Vita & Case 2003; Scott, 2002). Perhaps as a result, staff working in HE in the UK perceive that the internationalisation of UK universities is purely market seeking (Peng, 2009) with a near universal emphasis on recruiting international students (Bennett & Kane, 2011; Turner & Robson, 2007).

However, not all university internationalisation strategies have to be so commercially focussed; for example, Scandinavian institutions tend to concentrate their internationalisation activities on the needs of their home students, preparing them for work in a globalised society and job market by focussing their efforts on study-abroad options (Dobson & Holta 2001; Tossavainen, 2009). Leading French and many other European business schools concentrate their internationalisation efforts on meeting the requirements of the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) accreditation body (Perrin-Halot & Thomas, 2012) while South Korean institutions have focussed their internationalisation strategy on switching to English as the medium of instruction (Piller & Cho, 2013). The internationalisation experience of UK universities is therefore somewhat different to that in other parts of the world.

Market seeking internationalisation strategies in the UK and other English speaking nations have not generally been challenged by academic staff (De Vita & Case, 2003) or student groups (NUS Scotland, 2010). This may be because they believe their universities need the income from international student fees, but it could also be because staff and students groups alike neither have a shared understanding of what internationalisation is nor what it means for them (Healey, 2008). Therefore there is no common cause to question and criticise (Docherty, 2013). In contrast, in South Korea (where all staff and students think of internationalisation as teaching in English) there has been a much more widespread debate and criticism of internationalisation strategies of the South Korean universities (Piller & Cho, 2013).

Whether we like it or not, twenty-first century universities, their academic staff and students work and study in an increasingly competitive global HE industry, in which HE providers compete to recruit the best staff, produce the best research and develop strong international reputations (Healey, 2008; Shattock, 2010). This study takes this competitive business environment as its context and employs a managerial lens to examine the internationalisation of UK universities. Three literatures are referred to: HE management, the internationalisation of HE and strategic management. Based on these literatures three major challenges to UK universities seeking to internationalise their activities are identified. Towards the end of the literature review, best practice guidance from the three literatures is synthesised to create a list of suggested pre-requisite qualities for organisation wide internationalisation.

The research that informs the second half of the article takes the form of four case studies of similar UK universities going through the process of internationalising their activities in rather different ways. After the research methodology is explained the results are described and then analysed thematically and with reference to the pre-requisite qualities mentioned above.

The next section comprises a review of the main relevant literatures, starting with definitions of the terminology employed.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Definitions and context

What is internationalisation? Does globalisation mean the same thing or something different? Is internationalisation something that can be managed by an organisation or is it something that happens in the environment, external to the organisation or in the mind of an individual person?

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