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Strategies for Transnational Education

Sir Graeme Davies
Vice-Chancellor
University of London

Transnational Education - Why?

There has been a series of largely independent parallel developments in our different countries all of which have reflected a common awareness of growing opportunities, problems and imperatives associated with the enhanced ‘globalisation’ of higher education as we move to a ‘borderless’ world.

These developments are variously

- academic
- political
- technological
- operational

all have contributed to significant changes in our academic environments.

Transnational Education - some consequences?

There is a common recognition that ‘globalisation will create an agenda for a new internationalisation.

That agenda is very likely to be of critical importance

- for institutional positioning
- for the determination of the differentiation strategies needed for success in both internal and external environments.

It is inevitable that the importance of systematising internationalisation will become more central to the strategic plans and objectives of universities aspiring to the highest status.

Transnational Education - a Way Forward?

One approach to systematising internationalisation is to seek to build strategic alliances with institutions both here and abroad.

Strategic connections embracing a capacity and a commitment to effective and systematic collaborations are almost certain to add value to

- academic capability
- national and international visibility
- reputation
- competitiveness

even for established universities.

What may be needed by Potential Partners

There is likely to be a need for a great deal of commonality in the cultures and structures of potential partners committed to playing leading roles, such as

- a similar range of academic disciplines
- a commitment to research of international quality
- positive involvements in collaboration in research with industry and commerce
- academic staff from a wide range of backgrounds and with wide international experience
- staff with strong roles in their regional and national communities
- student communities which are strongly international
- well developed technological infrastructures.

The Value of Strategic Alliances

The important move must be to put the infrastructure in place well before it is needed.

There are potential gains amongst which are

- focussed and accessible mobility
- exchange of best practice in academic, political and managerial arenas
- access to consistent benchmarking protocols with the prospect of an agreed code of recognition
- an ability to share experience, expertise and developments in areas related to distance education.

The Down Side

But international strategies and linkages tend to have second order priority often only being pursued as sources of income intended to augment and sustain the perceived ‘core’ business.

Even in such circumstances strategies that are not systematic, even when building on existing links, are likely to be less effective. Further, there is a high probability that not being systematic will be a serious liability in the longer term.

In the near future institutions are likely to find themselves

- in more hostile political circumstances as competition for national and international resources becomes more fierce
- under increasingly serious pressure in their local educational arenas.

From Down Side to Threat

Large scale changes to anything as diverse and important as a country's educational system will be

- complicated
- prolonged
- disruptive.

These changes will need to be carried through in the face of the ever-present realities imposed by organisational and institutional constraints, costs, space, time and individual attitudes.

Without careful planning the most probable outcome in dealing with increasing economic and political pressures will be a set of piecemeal, disjointed, ad hoc responses strongly dominated by local pragmatism.

Other Global Changes

There is widespread acceptance that we are moving to a global ‘learning society’. Is knowledge to be that society's new economy?

The universities have a legitimate claim to have the highest concentrations of knowledge and those who move first will be best placed. But there are likely to be many less well qualified sources which will seek to exploit the position and benefit from the demands - this could lead to an extensive, unsupervised supply which could be damaging by association to established institutions.

For both students and employers there will be much to recommend international validation and legitimisation.

Converting Linkages to Partnerships

There are many challenges in formulating and formalising meaningful partnerships in Higher Education. This is especially the case whether the partnerships are international.

There appears to be some basic criteria that are essential to establishing and developing an effective partnership

- the external environment should be collaborative rather than competitive
- the missions of the partner institutions must be compatible
- there must be mutual respect for the strengths of the partner institutions
- there must be complementarity in the areas of expertise.

But do not get carried away by the Prospect of Partnership

Partnership success also assumes that

- the heads of the respective institutions feel comfortable with and facilitate collaboration
- senior staff are committed
- there is mutual trust between the institutions.

But where and how can things go wrong ?

A real risk is overcommitment arising through seeking to abate risk. While there may be comfort in a multiplicity of links this creates the real possibility of the dissipation of effort, discontinuities in connection and lack of focus.

Strategic Alliances - the Preferred Futures

In successful strategic alliances a number of goals should be able to be achieved

- links that add genuine value to the current functions, status and capabilities of the partners
- clearly evident commitments to the highest international standards especially in the quality of teaching and research
- operating intelligence in changing environments
- stability in frequently unstable external circumstances.

There may be risks but the rewards are likely to be great !