

The Evolution of Universities' Internationalisation Strategies: the Student Social Experience

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Abstract:

Due to the increasing numbers of international students in UK higher education, an investigation of how higher education institutions manage the integration of international students and how they embrace the cultural diversity on campuses is of considerable importance. An international student's experience is defined not only by their classroom-based experience but also by their social experience. It is common for international strategies to concentrate on the former and neglect the latter, but experience shows that these two elements should support each other and socio-academic integration is important. So analysing the development process for university international strategies, examining the key elements and evaluating the results of planning strategically for students' social experience can help to identify best practice for a first class international student experience. This paper has a dual purpose. The first is to explore how universities' social strategies are formed and where they lie on Mintzberg's deliberate/emergent continuum, which leads directly to the second purpose; to examine universities' strategic priorities and the importance of the international student social experience within the context of strategic planning. The paper introduces a conceptual framework which highlights the way in which the social experience can be embedded as a strategic priority for achieving socio-academic integration and, as a consequence, provide mutual benefits for both international students and universities.

Strategies Revealed:

Research in higher education policy has already shed light on the importance of international students' social experience [1-2]; however, its position in the strategies of higher education institutions' (HEIs) remains less clear. This section addresses the issue of how social strategies are being formed at HEIs via the application of Mintzberg's work [3]. He claims that real-world strategies lie on a continuum, from 'Planned Strategies' which belongs to the extreme deliberate pole where strategy is conceived theoretically and practically as limited to intended behaviours, analytical processes and action plans [4], through

to 'Imposed Strategies', which belongs to the extreme emergent pole where strategy is considered as a pattern of unplanned actions emerging to adapt to environmentally imposed changes [5-8]. Other strategies which fall in-between these two opposing extremes differ in their degree of blending the deliberate and emergent perspectives together [9], as illustrated in figure 1.

Despite the importance of the deliberate approach to strategy formation explained by Porter [10], it may not be sufficient in today's environment where large numbers of international students from a variety of backgrounds are imposing their own changeable demands, which cannot be managed properly through fixed plans. It has been argued that this approach can be likened to a "one-man show" where the top management is the only creative thinker that formulates fully strategies prior to execution [11]. This impedes the notion of strategic learning, blocks out communication channels with the external environment, and stifles innovation [12]. On the other hand, the emergent view acknowledges absolute uncertainty and encourages trial and error learning theory [13]. Unlike the traditional top-down hierarchy followed in making decisions, emergent strategies evolve by the contribution of those who are working in the front-line of an organisation as they have direct contact with customers and are the closest to consumers' demands; in our case a first class international student social experience. This drives the University to be Customer-centric and not Company-centric [14-15]. Despite the potential effectiveness of an emergent strategy, it is seen best as a complement to deliberate strategy; not to replacing it entirely, in order to maintain control and structure [16]. Indeed other researchers found that the advantages of blending the two approaches lies in achieving the balance between having a central strategic direction along with a sense of effective strategic learning and adaptation, in a way that avoids chaos [17-19]. Yet this balance is not guaranteed because what works for one university may not work for another. Therefore, it is critical to explore the different types of international strategies at UK universities and how they compare with each other. To do so, it is helpful first to comprehend the key components of university strategies; in other words, to define the scope of strategy and identify the strategic priorities.

Strategic Priorities Paradox in Higher Education:

Strategic planning is a leading mechanism to manage change at universities and maintain sustainable advantage [20]. However, researchers tend to focus their attention on the academic, financial, and estate strategy; or at best, the integration of all of them [21-23]. Yet, there is no clear picture about the role of the student social experience in international education and the necessary re-shaping of strategic planning in HE. Research conducted in 37 UK universities has identified five types of internationalisation strategy [24]; however none of them consider the social experience of students (Figure 2).

| <i>Internationalization strategy</i> | <i>Rank</i> | <i>Type of university</i> |
|---|-------------|--|
| Recruitment of international students | 1 | All but especially in newer universities, former polytechnic and privately funded institutions |
| Student and staff exchange programmes | 2 | All but especially in the older universities |
| Development of international partnerships for teaching, including joint programmes, offshore teaching and learning | 3 | All but especially in the newer universities |
| Development of international collaborative partnerships for research, entrepreneurship and development | 4 | All but especially in the older universities |
| Curriculum internationalization, ranging from minor changes in content to fundamental redesign of objectives, teaching methods and assessment | 5 | All, but especially in newer universities |

[Maringe, 2010]

When examining international students' social lives, several studies have found that many international students suffer from homesickness, difficulties in building new social networks, adaptation and communication problems [25-31] and even mental health issues [32-33]; with distinctive scores for isolation and a need for greater social support than their home colleagues. Emerging research relates this to the cultural distance, lack of English Language proficiency and academic performance deficit which act as barriers preventing international students from joining social activities on campus and making friends from different nationalities [34-41]. Being unsatisfied socially can produce academic stress [42-43] because scholars who cross national borders need strong social connections to support their studying and a good life balance [44-45]. Conversely, failure to attain high academic performance drives students to emphasise their academic goals and spend less time on socialising which negatively affects their social satisfaction and leads to the same issues associated with an unbalanced life [46-47]. So perhaps the literature undervalues the importance of the international student social experience and its embedding within the strategic planning processes in HE and there is a substantial gap in the scholarly understanding of the overall strategic priorities in HEIs. The conceptual framework in figure 3 proclaims the need for an internationalisation strategy, whether deliberate or emergent, which alters the strategic decision-making priorities. It suggests a balanced triangular relationship between social satisfaction, academic achievement and students' life balance.

This study is believed to be the first attempt to provide an alternative perspective on the scope of strategic international planning in HE to incorporate the international student social experience in order to achieve socio-academic integration.

The Study Approach:

By adapting a qualitative approach, this study focuses in its early stages of development on an in-depth single case-study at one initial UK University to identify a number of the key issues. There is no attempt to generalise, especially that this topic is fairly new to the research arena, but rather to analyse deeply the history and current state of play in one UK HEI. A comparative study between a number of UK universities will be conducted subsequently. The case study will comprise two distinctive stages while collecting data. First of all, 'in-depth semi-structured interviews' with the Vice-Chancellor, Pro Vice-Chancellor (International) and other staff members from different organisational levels through using purposive sampling techniques [48]. The answers from the first two interviews with the Vice-Chancellor and Pro Vice-Chancellor (International) will determine which staff members need to be interviewed, depending on their contribution in setting the strategy and/or influencing international students' social experiences. The reason for the selected sampling approach reflected the need to gather detailed comprehensive data across the University to interpret, objectively, the full picture of the University strategy formation process and its impact on the nature of international students' social experience. Secondly, a 'document review' in order to extensively re-analyse and place the existing data in context; as part of the investigation, key documents such as: University's previous and current strategies, International Student Barometer survey results, university annual reports, and statistics of international student body growth will be carefully reviewed as it can supply empirical background data to the study. Navigating the initial first University website will help to recognise some of the social enhancements on campus such as investing roughly £25M in a new Learning and Leisure Centre this year which brings together all different elements of student social facilities in one place [49], as well as forming a variety of international societies and hosting a series of campus-wide events throughout the whole year to enhance communication and integrate international students [50]. Although the University seems to possess an internationalised strategy to ensure a world class international student experience at the University [51], it is still too early to declare which of Mintzberg's strategies it adopts and whether it pursues the deliberate perspective, emergent perspective, or blends both. However, it does show that the University believes that the growth of the international student body requires the provision of a first class international student experience and that many non-academic factors affect that student experience.

Conclusion:

This paper introduces a study to explore the various types of strategies associated with the international student social experience in UK higher education and addresses the question: how are strategies formed in HEIs? In addition, it attempts to examine the strategic priorities of UK universities and the extent to which they embed the international student social experience within their strategies. The study investigates the link between strategies and the underlying issues associated with achieving socio-academic integration. It may be that altering the strategic planning priorities and putting a similar

weight on the academic and social aspects to provide a first class international student experience could benefit both international students and HEIs, which would have significant implications for the HE sector.

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