

Internationalising Higher Education: A Pilot Study of Two Russell Group Universities (0097)

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The proliferation of globalisation and mobility flows raise the question as to how to deal effectively with diversity in higher education in order to enhance the teaching and learning experience as well as how to become ever-more competitive and attractive to international students in a globalised world. In this context, the internationalisation of Higher Education is a key priority area in universities across the UK and institutions have been or are currently in the process of developing or re-developing their internationalisation strategies. In line with this, there are numerous initiatives that are examining the internationalisation of the curriculum, encouraging student and staff mobility, and exploring students' experiences of intercultural learning. This is evidenced in recent work supported by the SRHE (Kim & Brooks, 2011), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (King et al, 2010), and the Higher Education Academy (e.g. Hyland et al, 2008), which recently published a strategic framework for the sector on internationalising Higher Education (Higher Education Academy, 2014).

Against this background, this pilot study explores the internationalisation strategies of two Russell Group universities, which are currently working on developing these strategies. Developing an internationalisation strategy is a complex process in which the notion of internationalisation itself is often understood differently by different stakeholders. Altbach and Knight (2007:303) state that 'internationalisation will remain a central force in higher education, though its contours are unclear'. Indeed a key challenge facing those involved in developing university internationalisation strategies is how to arrive at a common understanding of what internationalisation is, what it should involve (i.e. objectives, processes, approaches), and what it is intended to achieve.

The project's methodology involves analysing key policy documents and documentation on the developing strategies and conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with key staff involved in the internationalisation process in order to better understand the central ideas behind the internationalisation strategies. In particular, the project seeks to shed light on: how 'internationalisation' is understood and defined; the purpose and rationale of the internationalisation strategies; the aims and objectives; the processes involved and approaches and actions to be taken to set up and implement the strategy; what is intended to be achieved; measures of success. The study also seeks to uncover the challenges, problems and potential barriers to developing and implementing the internationalisation strategies and questions the extent to which these strategies are internationalising the university, based on Knight's (2004, p.11) definition of internationalisation as '... the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education'. Examples of good practice are also explored.

The study's key research question is: How is the internationalisation of higher education being pursued at two Russell Group universities in England?

Based on this key question, a number of sub-questions are also being addressed, including (but may not be limited to):

- How is the internationalisation of Higher Education understood, perceived and defined at two Russell Group universities?
- What are the aims, objectives and key foci/priorities of the internationalisation strategies at these institutions?

- What approach is being taken towards internationalising higher education?
- What are some of the challenges, problems and barriers to developing and implementing the university internationalisation strategy?

The project is at the early stages and the current focus is on the literature review and collection of documentation for analysis, which will be completed during the summer term, followed by interviews. The paper will report on the study's preliminary findings, which are expected to shed light on how the internationalisation of higher education is conceptualised by those involved in designing internationalisation strategy and how these interpretations shape how these strategies are being approached. This will be critically discussed with reference to relevant academic literature on the concept of the internationalisation in higher education in order to reveal how far these strategies can be said to have an international, intercultural or global dimension (Knight, 2004). In addition, the strategies will be considered in light of both EU level policy (i.e. the Bologna process) and UK initiatives such as the 'Internationalising Higher Education Framework' developed by the Higher Education Academy.

The findings will provide useful examples of the ways in which internationalisation strategies are being developed noting successes but also highlighting some of the challenges and problems associated with pursuing them. This will be useful to other universities in the UK that are or will be re-designing their own internationalisation strategies. Recommendations will be provided on what particular areas and issues should be considered or re-considered, emphasised or de-emphasised, and what should be further pursued and developed in order to ensure that internationalisation strategies are successfully implemented and that they go far beyond a reductionist economic view. During the conference presentation, further directions for this pilot study will be discussed as a second stage to the pilot is already being planned.

References:

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