

NOTES ON THE PROCESS OF INTERNATIONALIZING A UNIVERSITY

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My colleague Guy Haug has talked about the different stages of internationalizing university studies, leading ultimately to institutional internationalization; he has given examples of good practices in the European environment, and explained the different options for evaluating the internationalization processes that exist and the importance of using them.

The positive impact internationalization processes have on the quality and competitiveness of institutions is generally accepted in the university environment nowadays. However, the degree of institutional involvement and strategic approach required by the process of internationalization is not always forthcoming from the universities themselves.

In fact, although most European universities include internationalization among their objectives and as part of their mission statement, few have a solid strategic plan which establishes clearly defined aims and the allocation of human resources and materials for achieving them. In most of the universities in our environment, internationalization is still approached as a phenomenon which is outside the “central core” of the institution and often focused on student mobility, normally exchange.

The exchange of students and professors is without doubt the most visible side of internationalization in European universities. The Erasmus programme, the reference point for European education and training initiatives, which involves over 90% of universities in 31 countries (3,100 universities), has led to almost two million students doing part of their studies in European countries other than their own since 1987¹. Although these figures are significant, we are still a long way from achieving the European Commission’s objective of reaching the figure of 3 million Erasmus students by 2011, and only a minority of European students are able to enjoy such an opportunity. The Erasmus programme has also been a key factor in developing a compatible credit system throughout Europe (ECTS) and paving the way for new strategic projects like the Erasmus Mundus Programme, aimed at the global international education market.

¹ European Commission. Education and Training. <http://ec.europa.eu/education>

Mobility programmes, the internationalization of curricula, joint qualifications, and participation in international programmes are without doubt excellent initiatives in themselves. With a view to achieving institutional internationalization, however, they should form part of a broader and more strategic planning process, which we could call a **Strategic Plan for Internationalization**. Ideally, this must be a plan which fits the institutional or global strategy of the university (on a broader scale), setting out objectives which are realistic, defined and quantifiable in the medium-to-long term and which allow the mobilization of a broad base of members of the University community in the development of the internationalization process.

Some of the reflections required of universities when addressing said Plan are as follows:

1. What they really want to achieve by internationalizing the Institution. What the objectives are and how these will be prioritized. Some examples are as follows:
 - Providing students with the opportunity to have an international experience.
 - Increasing the attractiveness and quality of the programmes offering joint qualifications.
 - Attracting foreign students to degree and/or postgraduate programmes.
 - Offering professors opportunities to improve their CV through stays abroad.
 - Managing to improve the position of the Institution in the international rankings.
 - Improving the international skills of administrative staff in different services through stays abroad.
 - Developing special summer or study abroad programmes, specifically aimed at international students.

2. The current international positioning of the Institution. Strengths and weaknesses when it comes to achieving the proposed internationalization objectives. An analysis of the Institution's positioning on an international level is fundamental before starting to define a strategy for the future. This analysis must be both internal and external.

The internal analysis must provide data regarding the situation of the University in relation to, as a minimum, the following points:

- Foreign students: foreign students who study at the Institution, their countries of origin, which studies they do, their opinion of the University.

- Own students: own students who go on stays abroad, destination universities and countries, programmes they participate in, the students' language level.
- Professors: professors of the University who participate in joint projects with foreign universities or have been on stays abroad. The ability of professors to give their classes in a foreign language. Foreign professors who teach at the University.
- Agreements and Programmes: agreements the University has signed and their level of activity. International programmes in which the University participates.
- Advertising and promotion activities: attendance at fairs, institutional missions, advertising campaigns and other activities the University has undertaken in recent years, and evaluation of the results.
- Services: internationalization support services (International Relations Service, website in different languages, student residences, Language Service...).

This analysis should be aimed at identifying the strengths of the Institution on which to base a solid institutional framework and the internationalization strategy itself. Although universities frequently present themselves in a similar way, each Institution has some characteristics that distinguish it from the rest. Some examples are location and environment, having the latest installations, providing a friendly and amicable service, unique and attractive qualifications for international students, specific services, etc. It is important to be able to identify these differential characteristics, evaluate them and focus all our advertising strategy on them. One error to avoid is trying to be (and presenting ourselves as) what we are not. Future students and universities with whom we are going to create alliances must receive a message which is defined, believable and consistent.

The external analysis must provide those data regarding the situation of the University in relation to, as a minimum, the following points:

- Analysing global trends in international mobility.
- Selecting target countries for implementing advertising and internationalization actions.
- Identifying universities in competition with our own and those with which we can establish alliances and carry out joint projects.
- Evaluating how our University is perceived internationally and whether this perception corresponds to the image we wish to give to the outside world.

3. Once we have carried out the internal and external analyses, it is now time, and not before, to decide on the actions to take and the planning process for said actions. Universities often undertake international actions without having previously conducted adequate planning. Attendance at a student fair abroad, for example, should always include a plan on how to attend to the subsequent demand for information, monitoring the students from this country who enrol at the University and providing attention, if applicable, to the specific needs of this group.
4. What human and material resources are available for achieving the objectives and those that will be available in the future. Internationalization requires resources and, depending on the objectives being followed, even investment. The objectives and actions to be undertaken must be able to count on the allocation of the corresponding resources.
5. Lastly, it is essential to establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the Plan by means of one of the options that Guy Haug presented in his talk. An Internationalization Plan is not a static instrument, it is dynamic and needs to be reviewed periodically in order to see which aspects are working and which need to be modified. Only in this way will it be an effective instrument capable of obtaining results.

By way of conclusion

The internationalization process requires, in short, a strong commitment on the part of the Institution, which will be difficult to make if not from the conviction that internationalization represents an effective contribution to the University's global institutional project. This contribution and how it fits with the global project of the Institution are specific for each university but require, in all cases, prior strategic reflection on the real possibilities of each institution on an international level. The definition and channelling of this contribution also require adequate planning: this must be realistic with the allocation of resources and receive all the support possible from the University community as a whole. Should these conditions not be met, there exists a real risk that actions and efforts towards internationalization, however commendable they may be, remain in a position that we may call 'peripheral' within the Institution, with a limited capacity to impact on the Institution as a whole.

Internationalization is now a key factor of differentiation for European universities and constitutes, from this perspective, an opportunity for universities of wide-ranging profiles to be able to strengthen their institutional project.