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Internationalisation of higher education in the UK - Towards a sustainable model (0117)

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There is a now significant volume of research conceptualising the meaning of internationalisation in HE. Whilst in some countries there have been 'theoretically and methodologically ambitious studies', Kehm and Teichler, 2007, in the UK much of the discourse and research on internationalisation has been grounded in practical implementation and efficient operationalisation of institutional international strategy rooted in the language of economic theory. The paper will explore in outline some of the arguments as to why the marketisation discourse has emerged within UK higher education institutions as the dominant discourse and will argue that unless and until the discourse on internationalisation is broadened beyond this financial paradigm and fundamentally reassessed via a new conceptual framework, UK Higher Education Institutions risk not just loss of financial income in the long term, but a more fundamental risk of damage to their institutional reputation globally.

Internationalisation of higher education in the UK - Towards a sustainable model

There is a now significant volume of research conceptualising the meaning of internationalisation in HE moving from early discourse in the 1990s about the meaning of internationalisation as something that could be clearly demarcated (Knight, 1994) to broader issues of globalisation, marketisation and commodification, with concomitant discourse on the move from the information society to the knowledge society. Alongside, a parallel discourse on internationalisation has developed, particularly evident in UK research, grounded in the practical implementation and efficient operationalisation of institutional international strategy. Much of the latter research has been funded by national and supranational policy agencies and is rooted in the language of economic theory.

In 1994, Knight defined internationalisation as "the process of integrating an international/inter cultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution." Knight notes a multiplicity of potential rationales and motivations for internationalisation, synthesised into four main rationales – political, economic, academic and social although the economic motive has become more prevalent as universities look for alternative sources of funds in response to deep cuts in their budgets. Certainly for many universities in the UK, international markets have come to be seen as an important revenue generating activity. Knight suggests that "there can be a direct and beneficial relationship between an international market orientation and the internationalisation of the primary functions of a university.....However, the key phrase is 'can be' which implies that this is not always the case." (Knight, 1999).

The economic rationale and motivation for institutional internationalisation has not been made explicit in UK higher education international strategy documents, but has been widely adopted, leading to many universities concentrating, almost exclusively, on "short-term mass recruitment to traditional study in the UK." (Bone, 2008). This recruitment led process approach has been exacerbated by

institutional organisational structures which increase “the influence of what could be called the periphery on international activities”. The danger of such an approach is that institutions neglect what Burton Clark (1998) refers to as the “academic heartland” i.e. the core areas of teaching, research and learning and ultimately risk loss of institutional academic reputation in consequence.

In the UK internationalisation is mainstream strategy. In 2007, Fielden’s research recorded the universality of adoption of an international strategy by all UK HEI’s. Indeed, as Fielden observes, several UK Universities describe internationalisation as being a core element in *all* their activity. But what is remarkable, from an analysis of these strategy documents, is their general commonality of content. Whilst there is some shift of emphasis in motivation visible, principally between those that are university-centred strategies and focus on the future reputation and capacity of the institution and those that are student-centred and articulated in terms of the qualities that students will be expected to gain from their University experience, their content remains remarkably similar. The similarity might reflect what Burgin refers to as the sum of taken-for-granted realities of everyday life (1982) wherein the ‘reality’ of common perception of internationalisation reflects, consciously or unconsciously, an adherence to a shared but flawed understanding of the meaning of internationalisation which will act to further the interests of western ideological concepts of higher education. It is helpful within this paper to explore in outline some of the arguments as to why a particular ideology has emerged within UK higher education institutions.

Teichler (2008) postulates that an emphasis on financial factors, within a general marketisation discourse, has shaped internationalisation strategies in the UK more strongly than in other European countries. The UK discourse on internationalisation is in part the result of regulatory modes embedded in the funding of higher education as evidenced for example by differentiation of fees according to the nationality of students. De Vita and Case concur noting that “although the participation of overseas students in UK universities has a long history, the differential fee policy reconfigures them in such a way that they become part of a calculative cash nexus.” (De Vita and Case, 2003)

The marketisation discourse in the UK has been reinforced by government policies designed to improve the international competitiveness of Higher Education Institutions within the promotion of UK PLC (itself a term cloaked in corporate terminology).

Brady (2006) notes that the performance indicators for the latest Prime Minister’s Initiative clearly articulate the primacy of economic priority in the UK internationalisation discourse:

- To attract an additional 100,000 international students to the UK
- To double the number of countries sending more than 10,000 students per annum to the UK
- To achieve significant growth in the numbers of partnerships between the UK and other countries

Brady (2006) observes a clear location of the first three performance indicators within the objective of increasing fee income and the necessity to protect market position for UK Universities. Teichler (20078) suggests that the situating of UK University International strategies within a financial discourse model has ignored alternative discourses which have been prominent in other Countries e.g. the knowledge/competence discourse, evidenced by the scant regard paid until recently by Universities in the UK to the importance of internationalisation at home, particularly in the context of encouraging UK students to study abroad for at least part of their studies.

One consequence of the dominance of the financial discourse model in the UK has been a proliferation of funded research focussing on threats to the commercial competitiveness of UK Universities. But what is absent in these 'policy' conclusions is any voice other than that of economic imperatives reasserting the 'import' model of internationalisation. The concern is that these policy assertions presume that the weaknesses in competitive advantage can be counterbalanced without a change of the financial logic. The author suggests that unless and until the discourse on internationalisation is broadened beyond the paradigm of competitive globalisation inherent within the dominant financial discourse in the UK, and is fundamentally reassessed via a new conceptual framework, UK Higher Education Institutions risk not just loss of financial income in the long term, but a more fundamental risk of damage to their institutional reputation globally.