Strategies for Higher Education Internationalization in UK Based on the Process Approach-A Case Study

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Abstract. As one of the most proactive countries in international education, UK has formulated research theories in higher education internationalization. Under the framework of Process Approach, this article explores the strategies, policies, and implementation practice of British Universities by a case study. The article patterns the findings into the overall institutional internationalization strategies and polices, and the government’s influence. Afterwards, the article analyses the characteristics of British HE Internationalization, including emphasis on students and teachers taking-in, on education quality and university reputation, being profit-oriented, and being active in education marketing. The last part proposes suggestions on Chinese HE internationalization: adopting a decentralized managing mode, establishing internationalized programs, improving assistance service system, and etc.

Introduction

The last 3 decades witnessed education internationalization and increasing number of universities attaching great importance to internationalization in their institutional policies and strategies. In Europe, the creation of the Institute of International Education (IIE), the British Council, and the International Association of Universities (IAU), indicates the growing interest and efforts in international cooperation and exchange (Knight & Wit, 1995).

UK has a very strong profile internationally, for its high research and education reputation, its elite top universities, the popularity of English and of admiration for British culture (Worton, 2012). In the last 15 years, UK considers higher education (HE) internationalization as a part of its global strategy. What’s more, UK has transferred its HE internationalization from experience-based practice to theoretical study, and to the implementation of strategies. In the context of a globalised world, China cannot exclude itself from the outside to develop its HE. UK’s policies and implementation practice in HE internationalization have the significance of inspiration and reference to Chinese universities.

Literature Review

Internationalization is “a channel for educational opening-up and knowledge-exchange, a stimulus for international marketing opportunities, a prompt for international research collaboration and a descriptor of cross-border student flows” (Turner & Robson, 2008, p.5). Wit (2011) emphasised the political, economic, social and cultural, and academic rationales for HE internationalization are interconnected, and may vary in importance by country and region, may change over time, and may lead to different approaches and policies. Kehm & Teichler’s research in 2007 pointed out 5 major changes of research themes on HE internationalization, among which from administration of mobility to strategic action and systems steering of internationalization is the major one.

Since late 20th century, HEIs began to focus on strategic planning to assess their institutional activities and set priorities in their future development. Ayoubi (2006) identified 3 major stages of internationalization strategy planning: to set up the design; to choose the best way to realize the design; and to evaluate the process by comparing the design with the implementation.

Taylor (2004) examined the strategies for internationalization in four leading universities from Canada, the U.S., Sweden and concluded that the crucial considerations in the strategy making and
implementing processes are: knowledge of marketing and institutional positioning, effective communications, agreed-upon fair but challenging targets, supporting mechanisms, effective information, transparency in decision making, and so on. Toyoshima (2007) examined 5 pre-1992 and 4 post-1992 universities in England to probe into the different attitudes and strategies towards internationalization. In the author’s opinion, these universities are representative, but in order to provide recommendations to China, we need to study highly internationalized universities’ strategies.

In summary, majority of recent literature have focused on the theoretical, policy and marketing areas from the macroscopical perspective of HE internationalization. But few practical research is available to guide and support the achievement of university’s responsibilities under the framework of the Process Approach proposed by Knight & Wit (1995), and fewer studies have presented internationalization as an integrated phenomenon affecting every aspect of life in the university.

Research Design and Methodology

Based on the Process Approach proposed by Knight & Wit (1995), this article confines its study in Solentside University in anonymity in southern England. Solentside University is quite active in internationalising its education. It is a research-active university with a range of internationally excellent areas. Many of the academics take the international leads in their fields. The National Research Assessment shows that research in Solentside is world-class—40% submitted rated internationally excellent or world-leading, and 78% rated internationally recognized or above.

In order to provide a practically-focused discussion of the key organisational issues and draw a more comprehensive picture of HE internationalization in UK universities, this research adopts a qualitative research, utilizing documents and semi-structured interviews to collect data. For sake of the validity, only officially published documents and credible websites are studied. The interview respondents are mainly the middle-management and teaching faculties.

Findings

Interview results confirm that the whole university has come to a consensus on the understanding of internationalization, but the focus vary because of working positions. Schools Heads focused on the academic side, including the students and staffs recruitment and exchange, trans-national education, research and innovation, and curriculum design. While the International Office focuses on the financial side. They commented on the reasons behind: finance, multicultural experience, university reputation and national strategy, communication across cultures. They listed the top 4 issues of internationalization: recruitment of international students, cooperation with foreign universities, recruiting outstanding researchers and teaching faculties worldwide, and internationalising domestic students. The University has done the first 3 quite well, but the last one seems difficult.

Process Approach to the Internationalization Strategy

**Strategy Planning.** A four-staff planning team in the Planning Department was established, directly reporting to the Vice-Chancellor. The planning process is mainly on the bottom-up side. University executive board sets the direction and target after rounds of discussion, then the planning team drafts the strategic plan, and presents the draft to the faculties and schools so that the middle layers can feed their needs up. The University never sets target for individual faculties or schools, but let them make their own plan under the guidance of the university plan. A separate internationalization strategy is being drafted and will be delivered in the very near future.

**Educated-related Activities.** Solentside University has established international cooperation with hundreds of foreign universities in and out of Europe. Inside EU, Solentside is a significant participant in the Erasmus and Erasmus Plus schemes. Its cooperation outside Europe is the forms of 2+2, 3+1, exchange program, and etc. It is successful in overseas students’ recruitment, 13% (about 2,950) of its student population being overseas students from more than 140 countries. Meanwhile,
domestic students and staff have appropriate opportunities to go abroad for study, exchange, even for placement to finish a sandwich pattern university program.

**Technical Assistance and Educational Cooperation.** To provide a better education experience, the University has a wide range of support services from all walks of the university for every student, such as the pre-arrival information package and the tutoring system. Constant lively person-to-person tutorials, workshops, even courses provide not only academic guidance but also personal and psychological support. In addition, lecturers also do much to ‘bridge the gap’, ensuring that the student feels being connected and accepted. To help lecturers deal with the potential problems, intercultural training programs for teachers are held all year around by the University.

**The Extra-curricular Activities and Institutional Services.** The International Office designed a Mix and Match social networking scheme to integrate all students from different cultural backgrounds. Under the scheme, coach trips, cultural festivals and parties make it possible for students to meet and communicate while studying in UK. Another important event for overseas students is Host UK, which links international students with friendly local hosts. During the weekend-stay, oversea students deeply communicate with local people about cultures and lifestyles.

**Organizational Strategies**

**The Mission and Vision Statement.** These statements reflect the University’s commitment and support for internationalization from senior managers and the board of governors. It is easy to observe that these two statements don’t specially mention words like internationalization or globalization, or cross-border cooperation. But the international objectives are embedded in the University’s Strategy (2012-17) which consists of Education strategy, Research strategy, and Knowledge Services strategy.

**The Position of International Office.** Is to implement initiatives for internationalization activities, and there are international affair coordinators in each faculty. The major roles of International Office are marketing and liaison, working together with Marketing and PR departments to promote the university and evaluate its marketing position. Plus, the role of overseas offices and agencies can not be ignored. The University has representations in over 57 countries, with the main function being marketing. The University opens a web-site illustrating the benefits for studying or working abroad to promote domestic students to study abroad, which is rarely seen in the author’s home country.

**Role Model.** At present, Solentside does not have any role models to internationalise its education. The University does not have the specific plan of in-country or overseas campus, which is against what Toyoshima (2007) has claimed that finding an appropriate role model was very important.

**Evaluating Internationalization.** Lastly, evaluating internationalization of HE is a challenging work, though this can be done through the number of partnerships (MOU, MOA), overseas students and scholars. Challenges from governments foreign policy, immigration policy, business investment and reputation risk of running overseas campus, and insufficient internal infrastructure of supporting service make the evaluation out of control. So, the University does not intend to evaluate or reward managers’, school heads’, or teachers’ performance in internationalization. But internationalised teaching content and methods matters students’ satisfaction on their education experience.

**Government’s Internationalization Strategies and Its Influence on HEIs**

**Foreign Policy.** Universities have to make decisions following the national and UN’s foreign policies to develop relationships with certain countries. Finance is important, not about making money but dealing with banks. This is well illustrated by author’s Kurdistan classmates, an autonomous region of Iraq, who haven’t received monies from their government for nearly six months.

**Immigration Policy.** UK’s newly articulated immigration policy tighten the visa application and toughen English language requirements for overseas students, which make foreign students harder to be accepted by UK. This policy also influences the recruitment of foreign staffs and faculties.
Candidates holding foreign passports applying for a university position may encounter more difficulties because Solenside has very limited visa application for non-local staffs.

**Language Policy.** UK government’s language policy doesn’t manage effectively to change British people’s lack of competence and interest in foreign languages and cultures. Language study is currently not required for either GCSE or A-level. So, British students are unwilling to study abroad. What’s worse, few universities have a pure language school, but usually school of language and area study. And when a financial problem arises, the language school will be the first to be influenced.

**Discussion**

**Characteristics of Internationalization Strategies in UK Universities**

**Solentside Lays more Emphasis on Students and Teachers Taking-in than Sending out.** The fact that there are more students and scholars coming to UK for study than domestic students and scholars studying abroad is a threat to further development of HE internationalization. UK government did very little to encourage its peoples to be exposed to foreign languages and culture.

**Education being An Industry.** Government’s policies “stimulate the commercial growth of education and the idea that education is an export industry”, and push universities to become entrepreneurs (Toyoshima, 2007). Solentside’s mission statement clearly states the economic function of university ‘We [The university] will enhance our position as a leading modern university …, enabling us to make a major contribution to… And economic development.’ In designing programs, Solentside adopts the market-oriented model, specific programs for specific regions and countries to meet specific market demands.

**Quality Control.** Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is established to monitor academic standards and review how universities maintain high quality. Universities have to report to QAA constantly the attendance, assignments assessments of overseas students. What’s more, on the organizational level, the tutoring system actually guarantees the quality through constant support. Solentside does not have any satellite campus inside and outside. Officer’s explanation is “…branch campus especially overseas could be risky of finance, staff, recruitment, and even the reputation of the university…” Obviously, keeping good education quality and university reputation matters.

**Focus on Post-Graduate Study and Post-Graduate Research.** This accord with Solentside’s strategic development and will provide a stronger base to research, and grow the research area.

**Being Active in Marketing Its Education.** Marketing its education home and abroad is done by different departments. The Marketing Department is responsible for home marketing, while International Office for marketing abroad. Among the marketing strategies, overseas agents and representations play important roles in better serving potential international students.

**Challenges**

International education will dramatically increase in UK. But threats are standing in the way internally and externally. The mainly threats step from the government policies, changing need of students, worldwide competitions, international competition quality assurance, challenges of managing diversity, recognition of foreign credits.

Today’s students are more technologically literate and selective, and they have greater expectations, which contributes to the rapidly increasing competition in international education. Second is the supporting service available in individual universities. When international students in a single university come from more than 140 countries, supporting services and infrastructure will face greater challenges. Student with different ethics and cultures in the university need to be treated the same as local students. These factors make individual university’s supporting service more difficult.
Implications on Chinese HEIs

There is a need for a clearer policy roadmap to guide and direct the development of this important arena. The first priority is for MOE China to change its management policy from centralized to decentralized to run universities, relating education development to economic development.

Conceptually, Chinese governors, vice-chancellors, staffs and teaching faculties need to introduce market concept to education. In practice, MOE China should take some measures to introduce competition into Chinese education market, like the establishment of private HEIs, further opening its education market to foreign institutes and enhancing cooperation with its foreign counterparts. With less financial support from the government, universities will have much more autonomy and face more pressure in competing against their counterparts home and abroad, which to a great extent is the motivation of university mercerization and development.

In practice, marketing strategies should be taken to promote Chinese education. Chinese Confucius Institutes need to be enlarged in scale in developed countries. Chinese universities need to establish a professional marketing team, positioning in the international education market, based on their own features and privilege. And establishing overseas representation offices or finding appropriate representations in foreign countries, playing the roles of alumni are also good practice.

For Chinese universities it is urgent to carry out curriculum reform, establishing some degree programs which are taught in English with specific aims of attracting international students. It is urgent to socialize the management and service to improve service quality, like improving accommodation conditions, personal tutoring and academic tutoring system, the placement center, and the framework of culture integration activities. It is urgent to introduce a third-party to safeguard the quality of HE, and publicize the results to inspect and to provide references for students' choice.

Lastly, MOE China has taken actions to investigate and make preparations for a virtue education reform which can promote education to every corner of the world. UK’s E-University Plan, providing degree programs to overseas students, is a very good example for Chinese universities to follow.

Conclusions

The international dimension of HE has become increasingly central to the agendas of international organizations, national governments, HEIs in many countries. In provision of HE to people around the world, UK has been a global leader. Its policies and strategies have great significance of inspiration developing countries. But, and when applying UK’s experience, China needs to take its special national context into consideration.

References


