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The Bologna Process: Retrospect and Prospects

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Editorial

The “global knowledge village” is fast becoming a reality at all levels, forms and traditions of learning. For higher education institutions, embracing this is no longer optional. However, the menu of options available to satisfy the appetites of higher education stakeholders (students, teachers, researchers, and the labour market), is as diverse as the international diners at the knowledge table, and perfecting an appropriate recipe for internationalization will depend on each institution’s individual priorities, mission and national context.

A cursory glance at typical approaches employed, sees some institutions opting to internationalize their entire curricula with broader global perspectives in the respective fields, mandatory foreign language components or study abroad periods. Others place an emphasis on the scholarly exchange of students and/or faculty, the promotion of international research cooperation, or the design of innovative joint study programs with foreign institutions. More aggressive initiatives include the expansion of an institutional global outreach by the establishment of branch campuses and franchise operations, or the creation of virtual or online learning pathways. The choices, if not limitless, are certainly plentiful. A leading US university’s latest newsletter revealed a staggering array of international activities: Courses in Tibetan Language Offered; New Partnership Established with Brook University in Canada; Exchange with Leading Indian University Established; University President Attends Graduation in Cuba; Head of

Amnesty International speaks at University; Seven students receive Fulbright Grants to Study Abroad; New Program Improving care of HIV/AIDS Patients in Zimbabwe; New Arts Management Program in France; New Exchange with European School of Seismic Risk in Italy; Teaching in Singapore offers many benefits to University Faculty.¹ The newsletter concludes with more than eighty examples of the international activities of faculty and staff across all disciplines. Clearly, not all such initiatives will be applicable or relevant to all institutions in all countries, but locally adjusted variations may very well be a necessity.

Whilst these and other possibilities have their obvious merits, they also raise inherent practical difficulties and risks. Financial costs and human resource investments alone can be considerable; processes for maintaining quality control and reputation become more complex, particularly when overseas or joint programs are established. Practical concerns surrounding the language of provision, geographic location and visa/ migration restrictions add to the list of new and emerging internationalization problems to be addressed. Yet, failure to recognize the importance of internationalizing, whatever the reasons or avenues, carries the potentially far greater risk of some institutions becoming marginalized or parochial in the eyes of their stakeholders. At the European level, the objectives of the Bologna Process are helping institutions prepare for and adapt to a more international orientation, particularly with the recommendation to harmonize degree cycles and the accompanying introduction of a credit transfer system to ease the mobility of students and programs². This issue of Higher Education in Europe examines some of the above trends and their implications both from the perspective of the Bologna Process countries, and beyond the European context. Dahlgren, Handal, Szkudlarek and Bayer in their article

“Students as Journeymen between Cultures of Higher Education and Work: A Comparative European Project on the Transition from Higher Education to Working Life”, compare the situation in four European countries, pointing out different national approaches.

The issue of migration and mobility within the Finnish higher education context is addressed by Hoffman, while the impact of an international “study” experience on academic and personal development from a Greek perspective is presented by Raikou and Karalis. Similarly, Rodrigues Araujo discusses the implications for the academic careers and personal lives of Portuguese PhD students conducting research abroad or opting to complete their degrees outside of Portugal.

The increasing literature and debate on the needs and potential perils of internationalizing higher education are being mirrored by the competition among institutions to do so. A recent article in the New York Times reported on the thirst of US institutions for international expansion, “Where universities are heading now is toward becoming global universities,” said Howard Rollins, the former director of international programs at Georgia Tech, which has degree programs in France,

Singapore, Italy, South Africa and China, and plans for India. “We’ll have more and more universities competing internationally for resources, faculty and the best students.”³ A sentiment echoed by the Provost for Global Affairs – a telling post in itself – at the University of Washington who alludes to the phenomenon reaching frenzied proportions: “The demand from overseas is huge. [We] receive about a proposal a week... It’s almost like spam”.⁴ And the USA is clearly not alone in this drive to internationalize their missions. Institutions from Poland to India to Mexico (The Open University of India now boasts 2.1 million registered students worldwide) are embarking on strategies to attract more foreign students and researchers or to establish their own operations in other parts of the world in a bid to raise their international academic standing, reputation and (in some cases) much needed additional funding.

Ultimately the restaurant of higher learning will have to find new and appealing ways to tempt the palates of its potential consumers with the internationalized knowledge, skills and competencies required of our globalized new century. The race is now on among higher education institutions to meet these challenges, while concurrently preserving the national conscious of their academic heritage. As with so many other initiatives enveloping the world of higher education today, internationalization initiatives and success have to be benchmarked with others in the starting blocks; As Professor Tom Hayes from Xavier University, Cincinnati put it at a recent conference on the Globalization and Marketing of Higher Education in Poland, “If you are getting better, you have to be getting better faster than your competition. If you are not, you are in fact getting worse”.

¹ UB International, Fall 2007, vol. XVI, no. 2

² See the Bologna Process website: <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/>

³ The New York Times, February 10, 2008

⁴ Ibid.