

Leading internationalisation in higher education: building multilateral research links in Sino-UK institutions

Dina Lewis and Catherine Montgomery¹, Faculty of Education, University of Hull, England

Abstract

Global competition has intensified over the last two decades and ‘Higher education has turned to internationalisation as both a response and a proactive way of meeting the demands for greater globalisation’ (Maringe 2011). Research suggests that we have probably at the early stages of the process of globalisation (Bjorvatn et al, 2008) and there is further potential for huge growth in some nations, particularly the nations of South East Asia including Vietnam. Such developments have presented particular challenges for the leadership and management of higher education institutions. This paper explores some of the challenges and benefits inherent in the process of leading a sustainable approach to internationalisation of universities.

Drawing upon a recent research project exploring the internationalisation strategies of Chinese and English universities, this paper argues for the need to shift from short term, financially driven recruitment-led approaches favoured by the West during the past two decades to longer term sustainable research-led approaches. The preliminary findings suggest a new approach is needed focused on: the cultivation of key strategic partnerships with research active institutions, placing high value on staff and student mobility and the development of multilateral international networks offering mutual benefits across traditional nation state and institutional boundaries. The data from three Chinese universities suggests that, if Western universities are to keep pace with internationalisation in South East Asia, university leaders will need to alter their perspective on interaction with overseas institutions and adopt mutually beneficial multi-lateral approaches to research collaboration and internationalisation currently being modelled by China (Bone, 2008, Lewis and Montgomery, 2014). The consequent changes in academic mobility will also require a paradigm shift with regards to curriculum and pedagogy. This paper challenges leaders of curriculum reform in a globalised world to move towards approaches that take into account the benefits of intercultural exchange and present content through a non-dominant perspective, challenging biased views and promoting equity in participation (Morey, 2000).

Internationalisation and the challenges for leadership in higher education

A key strategy adopted by universities across the world to respond to the social phenomenon of globalisation is internationalisation and over the last three decades universities have, almost universally, adopted internationalisation as a guiding mantra. As globalisation has intensified ‘higher education has turned to internationalisation as both a response and a

¹ Dina Lewis is the Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Hull and Catherine Montgomery is the Associate Dean for International Engagement.

proactive way of meeting the demands of greater globalisation' (Maringe 2010, 24). However, internationalisation in higher education is commonly narrowly interpreted and the issues relating to both international and transnational education are treated almost entirely within an economic discourse (Djerasimovic, 2014). Rivzi and Lingard (2010) suggest that globalisation has heralded a shift in higher education towards a neoliberal values orientation and that there has been a:

'reorientation of values from a focus on democracy and quality to the value of efficiency and accountability with a greater emphasis on human capital formation allegedly demanded by the new knowledge industries and required by nation states to participate and compete successfully in the global economy' (2010, 72).

Rivzi and Lingard (ibid) argue that liberal social values over the last 20 years have been subordinated to dominant economic values and there has been a convergence in thinking about educational values in higher education. They assert that HEIs across the globe have shifted focus from democracy and equality to the values of efficiency and free market competition, with a greater emphasis on the development of human capital. The impact of neo-liberal management practices and values in higher education is widely debated in the current literature (Clifford and Montgomery 2014) and whether universities are motivated by economic motives or by the desire to develop cultural understanding and share the benefits of global collaborations is not clear. The perceived political and cultural benefits of internationalisation including Western universities maintaining an influential global reputation through networks and communities is also contested:

'Maintaining a global network of people in power who have experience and understanding of the UK through its education system continues to be a way of facilitating continued global influence indirectly' (Fernandes 2006, 135).

These conflicting discourses have posed challenges for the leadership of higher education institutions in many countries. In the case of England progress in moving towards internationalised universities appears to be slow and has developed unevenly, with perceived advances being focused in particular institutions. A lack of a shared institutional understanding of internationalisation has proved to be a barrier and progress is often as a result of the vision and enthusiasm of particular individuals or groups of staff (Montgomery, 2012). Perhaps it is this lack of strategic and uniform direction that leads Edwards to note that as far as internationalisation is concerned we are 'still having the same conversation we were all having in the 1970s' (Edwards, 2007, 373).

In 2008 the UK Brown government commissioned the Bone (2008) report on 'Internationalisation and Higher Education' in England. This report calls for a paradigm shift from internationalisation as a recruitment led activity driven by economic imperatives (neo-liberal values orientation) towards internationalisation as a long-term partnership activity. Some might say this is a return to more complex liberal social values. More recently Grant

(2013) wrote a stimulus paper for the English Leadership Foundation asserting that questions need to be asked about the impact of the Bone report. Grant questions the ethical motivations of English university leadership teams, faculty and national agencies including government ministries, asserting that it is a paradox that English higher education seems to lag behind other sectors in its grasp of the new realities of multiple global contexts (Grant, 2013, 3).

Internationalisation of Chinese higher education

Although the practices and activities of internationalisation among higher education institutions across the world are interlinked through collaboration, the aims and purpose of particular aspects of internationalisation in national contexts are distinctive. The research has noted that there may be differentiation in the way that research-oriented universities and teaching-oriented universities (or ‘Russell Group’ and ‘new universities’) in the English approach the development of internationalised education (Fang 2012). In 2010, the Chinese government published the ‘National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)’, which stated that the Chinese government would encourage its schools and institutions to introduce a range of strategies to develop international communication and cooperation. Whilst some argue that the benefits of internationalisation in higher education are more likely to be enjoyed in western or northern European universities (Altbach and Knight, 2006) than in the developing economies of the South and East, China has developed strong and coherent internationalisation strategies that are beginning to tip the balance of the global higher education system in favour of the east (Maringe, 2011).

In order to counteract the effect of Western hegemony and the subsequent impact of brain-drain China is putting in place a well-planned strategy of brain circulation which is strengthening the infrastructure of the Chinese HE system and repositioning China in world rankings. Chinese strategies driven by the Education Ministry include: funding academic and student mobility, encouraging visiting scholarships and prioritising overseas experience as a key criteria for promotion to professorship. Under this system mutually beneficial outcomes are encouraged through the mobility of human capital. Chinese scholars gain qualifications in some of the best universities abroad and return to China to strengthen the Chinese HE system through a deliberate system of brain circulation (Pan, 2010; Lewis and Montgomery, 2014).

China’s strong, coherent and strategic approach to internationalisation of higher education appears to stand in contrast to the English individual and piecemeal approach. UK Government incentives to support internationalisation in HEIs are limited in scope and are mainly confined to Erasmus and Generation 20 British Council initiatives (Bone 2008). In England staff and student exchanges are experienced by a small percentage of scholars and government incentives to support study abroad are a low priority: approximately 4% of English students studied abroad in 2010 and in other European countries whilst there is mobility to Europe and the USA relatively few staff and students study or take up visiting scholarships in Asia.

The distinctive approach to the internationalisation of higher education of these two countries is the starting point for this research.

The research

The research set out to explore the distinctive conceptualisations of internationalisation prioritised by higher education institutions in England and China. The investigation aimed to draw out key differences and similarities in the approaches to leading the strategic development of internationalisation in institutions in England and China with a specific focus on the benefits and challenges posed by internationalisation to leadership of higher education institutions.

The research is based on a multi-site case study of six higher education institutions, three in China and three in England. Whilst this is not a comparative study the six cases afford some opportunities for comparative findings and to this end the three cases in each country were carefully chosen to reflect the institutional characteristics of the other country cases. In each country two research intensive institutions and one teaching and learning oriented institution was selected for investigation.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with senior staff in all six institutions. The interviews targeted the Deputy Vice Chancellor (or equivalent) with responsibility for internationalisation, a Dean of a faculty or senior academic and a senior member of the international office of each university. Thus, eighteen hour-long interviews were carried out in total over a four month period.

Findings

The initial findings from the interview data present interesting contrasts in the two countries' approach to internationalisation. However, for the purposes of this paper the data collected from the three Chinese universities will be emphasized in order to provide a parallel for South East Asian institutions.

The challenges of leading internationalisation

In terms of the challenges perceived by the Chinese institutions language emerged as a major issue in international collaboration both in terms of research and in teaching in English. Senior leaders in the Chinese institutions also acknowledged the need for personal change and changes in the ways of working. They considered the difficulty of encouraging staff to engage in the transformation. Academics noted the challenge to their academic leadership of the pedagogic approaches of the 'west', and the distinction between Chinese traditional approaches and the more interactive and inclusive methods of the west. It was also suggested that more Chinese lecturers had experienced interactive approaches through their experience abroad.

In the research intensive universities in China there were perceived challenges to collaborative research from differences in methodological approaches. The predominance of quantitative approaches and literature driven analyses were perceived to be in contrast to the emphasis on empirical research in education in 'The West'. In addition to this the thematic focus or topics of research were seen to be distinctive in the two countries. Given these

differences in the nature of the research focus in the two countries, academics perceived there to be challenges in the construction of platforms for research collaboration.

The benefits of internationalisation

The major benefits of internationalisation were raised by participants as research collaboration and multilateral networking. Senior staff and academics in all of the three institutions perceived there to be tangible benefits related to an increase in research quality as a result of the development of multilateral international collaboration. The Chinese institutions were clear that they were seeking opportunities to work alongside other international (and not exclusively English) higher education institutions on research projects and publications in English which were seen to be part of a 'genuine' partnership. This was noted to be relevant to global competition in higher education and linked to pressures associated with the global league tables. All of the institutions in China appeared to have advanced and progressive conceptualisations of the benefits and roles of internationalisation in higher education, including the promotion of ideas for internationalisation 'at home' in China.

One of the surprising outcomes of internationalisation in China was noted to be the opportunities afforded to women academics. One of the senior members of academic staff in one of the Chinese institutions noted that women in his faculty had benefitted from the changes brought by internationalisation and had become more confident in research and leadership.

Tentative conclusions

At this initial stage in the research project some tentative conclusions are suggested. The advanced conceptualisations of internationalisation mentioned above included a perception that staff and student mobility is only the first phase of internationalisation and a further stage would involve the development of a transformation in the perceptions and ways of working of academic staff. A senior member of the leadership team of the teaching and learning focused Chinese university noted that a paradigm shift is needed in the leadership of universities and a consequent change to curriculum and pedagogy will be necessary. This commitment to internationalisation heralds promise for Chinese higher education. The early findings of this research suggest that Chinese government strategies are having an impact and ultimately China will begin to challenge 'western' dominance in higher education.

Thus the differing characteristics of the strategic approach to developing internationalisation in China and England underlines the need for change in the way higher education institutions collaborate in the context of globalisation. There is a paucity of theoretical and empirical research in this area of higher education. This focus on internationalisation as research collaboration is innovative. The Bone Report (2008) and the subsequent position paper by Grant (2013) were ahead of the field in this respect. In contrast to the lack of theory, a number of research intensive universities are conceptualising internationalisation in this way and constructing it as the way forward. Further research is required in this area.

References

- Bjorvatn, K., V. Norman and L. Orvedal (2008) On the road to Samarkand: globalisation and the Swedish economy. *Expert report no. 21 to Sweden's Globalisation Council*
- Bone D. (2008) *Internationalisation of HE: a ten year view*. London: DIUS
- Clifford, V. and C. Montgomery. 2014. Challenging conceptions of Western higher education and promoting graduates as global citizens. *Higher Education Quarterly* 68 (1): 28-45.
- Djerasimovic, S. (2014) Examining the discourses of cross-cultural communication in transnational higher education: from imposition to transformation. *Journal of Education for Teaching*. 40 (3).
- Edwards, J. (2007). Challenges and opportunities for the internationalisation of higher education in the coming decade: Planned and opportunistic initiatives in American institutions. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11(3), 373-381.
- Fang, W. 2012. The development of transnational higher education in China: a comparative study of research universities and teaching universities. *Journal of Studies in International Education* 16 (1): 5-23.
- Fernandes, J. 2006. Trends in International Student Mobility: a Study of the Relationship between the UK and China and the Chinese Student Experience in the UK. *Scottish Educational Review* 38(2):133-144.
- Grant C. (2013) *Losing our chains? contexts and ethics of university internationalisation*. London: *Leadership Foundation for Higher Education* 1-19
- Lewis, D. and C. Montgomery (2014) *Internationalisation in higher education: perspectives and transformation*. Lecture given at Xiamen University, 18 March.
- Maringe, F. (2011) Higher education transitions: from an international to a global focus. In, Clifford, V. and C. Montgomery (eds.). *Moving towards Internationalisation of the Curriculum for Global Citizenship in Higher Education*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.
- Morey, A. I. (2000) Changing higher education curricula for a global and multicultural world. *Higher Education in Europe*, 25 (1), 25-39
- Montgomery, C. (2012). Future curriculum for future graduates? Rethinking higher education curriculum for a globalised world. In Ryan, J. (Ed). *Cross cultural teaching and learning for home and international students: Internationalisation of pedagogy and curriculum in higher education*. Oxon: Routledge.

Pan, S.Y. (2010) China's experience: changes and challenges in the flow of international human capital. *Journal of Educational Enquiry* 14, 259-288

Rizvi F. and Lingard B. (2009) *Globalising Education Policy*. London: Routledge