

Global push is driven by rivalry, study says

by Michael Delaney

Desire to gild reputations rather than to foster co-operation motivates internationalisation, finds Michael Delaney.

International competitiveness is a higher priority for universities worldwide than international co-operation, a study for the International Association of Universities has found. But institutions are still guided largely by academic motives, according to findings from the IAU's 2005 global survey report, which was launched this week at the IAU's conference in Beijing.

The report presents findings from a survey of attitudes towards internationalisation. Higher education institutions and national university associations from 95 countries were polled for the largest internationalisation study of its kind. The survey collected views on the importance of, and rationale for, pursuing internationalisation and its benefits and risks. It also covered institutional strategies, growth areas and national policies on foreign-language learning. The survey compared regions and the developed and the developing world.

Of the institutions polled, almost half listed competitiveness or strategic alliances as the prime mover of internationalisation. Among the national university associations, 44 per cent cited competitiveness as the primary rationale for internationalisation. Paradoxically, excessive commercialisation was the most feared negative effect. International co-operation as a motivating force lagged some way behind.

Other important motivations were an institution's ability to expand the international knowledge of its students and faculty, and to boost its research capacity.

The report's author, Jane Knight of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, emphasises that there is no key motivation that can be singled out. Rather, universities pursue internationalisation for a variety of reasons, from furthering cultural awareness and improving academic quality to enhancing an international reputation. Some 96 per cent of respondents believed that internationalisation brought benefits, but 70 per cent also acknowledged risks.

Revenue-generation and brain gain ranked low on the list of perceived benefits. But Dr Knight points out: "This survey covers 95 countries. I'm not sure many developing countries are making revenue generation a high priority. Even in the developed countries, there are only a few that concentrate on that. We in higher education need to be looking at all the countries, not just at the big six or eight who are oriented to commercial output."

Dr Knight says the findings of the survey "paint a relatively positive picture in terms of the sustained importance of internationalisation and the increase in

the number of higher education institutions that have moved from an ad hoc to a planned approach towards internationalisation." Yet the picture is "less encouraging" at national level, where governments pay inadequate attention to international education.

Dr Knight predicts an increase in popularity for joint and double degrees in the future, and identifies as key trends the growth of institutional networks, student mobility, the recruitment of fee-paying students and research as a form of international collaboration.

The most important part of the survey is developing longitudinal data. "We're looking at continuity," she says.

Eva Egron-Polak, secretary-general of the IAU, agrees: "By carrying out global surveys on a regular basis, the association seeks to improve the understanding of the latest trends emerging in this rapidly changing sector... analysis of the results helps the IAU and others to determine what actions are needed in the future to address some of these crucial questions."

Internationalisation of Higher Education: New Directions, New Challenges is available for €35 (£23.60) from the International Association of Universities, by contacting iau2@unesco.org

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