
Developing international partnerships



Background

Britain's forthcoming departure from the EU, an ever more volatile international market, and an increasingly uncertain funding picture within the UK, combine to focus UK HE institutions' attention on international partnerships.

A university, seeking to manage the development of international partnerships, asked us to benchmark three relevant areas:

- Collection, recording and use of management information about international academic networks, contacts and partnerships (any teaching, research and enterprise/other activity that does not constitute formal collaborative provision directly covered by academic QA processes)
- Checks of potential international partnerships and activity against strategy
- How incoming enquiries about possible new international partnerships are handled.

In each of these three areas we sought to understand:

- Staffing roles and responsibilities
- Information capture and use
- IT support.

From this benchmarking and from working with other universities, we identified six key risks that need to be managed:

1. Missed opportunities to develop partnerships aligned with strategic objectives
2. Missed benefits from existing partnership activity
3. Poor handling of incoming requests for international partnerships
4. Resources wasted on international partnerships that do not contribute to strategic objectives
5. Reputational and financial risk from inappropriate partnerships
6. Declining relevance of, and benefits from, ongoing partnerships

We engaged with institutions of varying size, teaching/research mix, and international experience. We are grateful to senior staff at those providers for their input. Participants were candid and generous with their input, are all at different stages in the development of their activity, and provided a useful variety of perspectives to this work.



Observations

Responsibilities and staffing structures

It was striking that all institutions saw international partnership activity, and the management of associated information, as a strategic priority. All had, or were implementing, some level of central dedicated professional services support. There was no common locus for this activity, and priorities varied according to the particular strategic focus of each institution's international activity. Structural changes were used to reinforce increased central support. These changes included direct reporting at PVC/DVC level, centralised administration in one office, separation from other activity to enable focus, and the development of cross-institution networks and groups.

Understandably staffing levels varied. Different approaches and responsibilities were evident. We have not fully explored the different scale of activity in each institution, but staffing levels do not appear to directly reflect the scale of activity. Responsibilities were sometimes combined with other activities such as UK partnership management, student/staff internationalisation activity and other related activity. Staffing levels sometimes reflected a desire to increase partnership activity. The prevalence of roles that suggested a form of relationship or account management to nurture and maintain partnerships was striking.

All institutions saw important links between international partnerships and student recruitment. Different structures were evident but all supported close links between these activities.

Academic staff played vital roles in every institution's approach. Different approaches were used to ensure academic leadership of internationalisation. These included lead academic roles in schools/faculties, some on split contracts with administrative duties, but all with a significant role in driving strategy and in joining up information flows around their university.

Information capture and use

Approaches to information capture and its use in decision making varied significantly. One participant advocated the collection of as much information as possible and to support this with extensive staff engagement to ensure staff understood why this activity was needed. At the other end of the scale another participant preferred minimal information for insurance purposes, fearing information overload would distract from action. All cautioned against collecting personal data without ensuring compliance issues had been considered. For those keen to collect information, use was made of reporting templates, links to travel booking systems, and other tools such as Survey Monkey.

In all cases central teams were in place, or being introduced, to manage incoming queries. These teams either are, or will be, central points of reference for external or internal queries relating to international partnership activity. Systems and processes for query management varied. Some have clear triage and logging systems with associated process documentation and 'boilerplate' text. Others prefer a simple case-by-case approach.

A variety of approaches were also evident to the use of information as a driver of strategy. Some adopt a 'bottom-up' approach in which staff identify opportunities and put them forward. Others systematically audit activity to drive categorisation of partnerships in relation to strategy and then allocate differential support. In one institution, financial incentives were used to drive activity in line with strategy.



IT Support

All institutions have thought about IT. Different systems were used. Complexity was proportionate to the development of partnership and international activity. Larger scale solutions included, dedicated off the shelf international partnership systems such as Mobility Online (http://www.sop-at.com/en/products/mobility_online) and QS Uni Solutions (<http://www.qs-unisolution.com/>). Their dedicated functionality for the particular challenges of international partnership management were especially valued. This was contrasted by one participant with the challenge of building in-house systems in competition with other institutional priorities and the risk of functionality creep over time as multiple internal user requirements are addressed. Earlier stage IT solutions included mixtures of spreadsheets, databases and simple office solutions.

A narrow majority of institutions either used or intended to use Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems (such as Microsoft Dynamics) to manage interactions with external partners. This was either through a specific module being developed within their institution's wider adoption of a CRM system, or as a stand-alone system solely for international partnership management. Particular uses included co-ordinated timetabling of international visits both to prevent clashes and/or to connect people before visits and to store basic information about all international partnerships. All those involved with CRM use reflected to some extent on the challenges of CRM adoption across an institution. Issues raised both by participants and based on our wider experience include the need to ensure all relevant staff are trained comprehensively, that there are clear business processes to define how and when it should be used and clear responsibility for maintenance and currency of data, and that there is continued active technical support for its use when established.

Two institutions talked particularly about the benefits of developing and using mandatory automated centrally administered travel booking systems for international activity through, for example, simple in house web forms. Benefits included ensuring common approaches are taken and that budgets and risk around international travel are controlled, but also to ensure that useful information is collected about current activity across the institution in order to develop and monitor partnerships.

All institutions mentioned the importance of clear web presence for this work, with varying stages of progress. All recognised the need to continue to develop their website to make partnership opportunities clearer and make it easier for partners to access information and reduce the volume of inbound queries.

How Uniac can Help

We can help you design, develop and assure efficient and effective systems that help manage the risks described above – both now and in the future as you build new effective international partnerships.

We will work hard to understand the specific international context at your institution, and to develop straightforward, pragmatic recommendations informed by best practice.

To discuss this further, please contact Chris Taylor. Email: ctaylor@uniac.co.uk Tel: 0161 2472860

