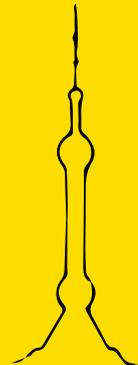


Why going global is the hot topic in higher education

Competing on a world stage

The appetite for international development in UK Higher Education hasn't diminished over the last two decades, with the number of overseas students quadrupling since 2000 and a number of British universities establishing offshore campuses. But with domestic provision growing apace in the developing world, overseas governments trying to curb the outflow of students from their countries and immigration controls in the UK becoming ever tighter, have we reached 'peak international'? Will overseas student numbers hold up, or collapse? And what will internationalization mean in the next two decades?

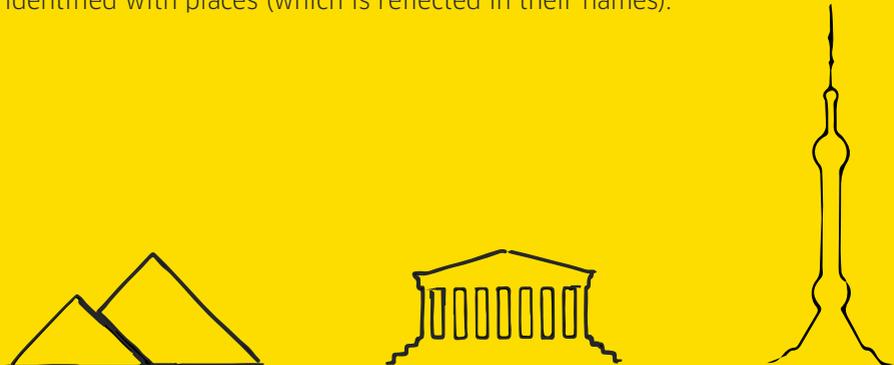
So, if you agree that globalization is a hot topic, here's a real Topic to help you mull things over.



An emerging idea that might well become the backbone of a new internationalization agenda is the notion of the 'global university'. A global university is one that is more interested in how it compares against an international peer group rather than to institutions in the UK. It is the equivalent, in the world of higher education, to the multi-national corporation. And, with seven British universities in the 2014-15 THE world top 50 (29 in the top 200), becoming a global university is clearly a realistic aspiration for many institutions in the UK.

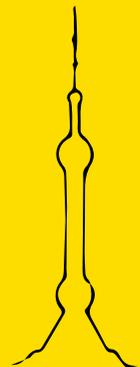
What does it take to be global?

Becoming a global university must involve more than just a mind-shift, however. For universities such as Nottingham and Liverpool, with a physical presence outside the UK, it is about becoming a multi-local operation. For others, engaged in research and teaching collaborations with partners around the world, it is about exploring new ways of working. And yet for others it is about ensuring an intake of the best students from around the world. Regardless of what 'globalisation' means to a university, it undoubtedly has implications for the university's brand (and, indeed, for its identity). Global institutions need global brands. However, most British universities, and all the UK's elite universities, are closely identified with places (which is reflected in their names).



These historical links continue to be very important. But they are also limitations, especially where the reputation of the institution has become bigger than the cities in which they are based. Municipalities may wish to work with their universities to promote the region but a global university may not always benefit from too close an association with a provincial British city.

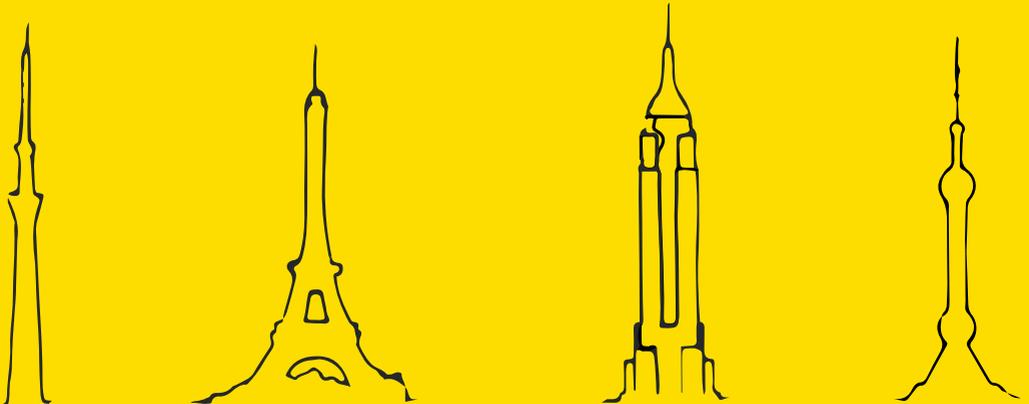
A global university needs to establish a meaningful relationship with the parts of the world in which it operates, and to make this clear to its audiences – something that is difficult to achieve if it is strongly associated with another part of the world. For instance, many UK universities have a particular interest in China – some have partnerships with Chinese universities, some even host ‘Confucius Institutes’ (the Chinese equivalent of the British Council). Nonetheless few talk coherently about their Chinese activities, and even fewer set out what they are offering to the People’s Republic of China. The messages they give suggest instead that China is just an important market. Yet a global university can’t only be an exporter; like a multi-national it must be seen to make a substantive contribution to the economies, societies and cultures in which it operates. Consequently UK universities will need to get much better at talking about themselves as institutions that ‘think globally and act locally’.



The Anglophone advantage

Universities from English speaking countries (the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada) dominate the world rankings, capitalizing on the role of the English language as the lingua franca of contemporary academia and business. Being an Anglophone institution is clearly a huge advantage in the world arena; only a third of universities in the THE top 100 list are from countries where English is not the first language (and for many of these English is the principal language for teaching).

But if the UK can punch above its weight in the global league because of the Anglophone advantage, we should also be looking out for the Australians (who are doing disproportionately well in tables of both 'established' and 'new' universities). Back in 2008 the Lisbon Council ranked the Australian university system the best in the world, followed by that of the UK. And there is clearly a great deal that can be learnt from leading Australian global universities such as Monash, which have taken a head start in reinventing themselves as global universities.



Leading with research, benefiting from commercialisation

For obvious reasons internationalization has been very closely associated with teaching, with even research-led universities focusing their efforts on student recruitment and overseas teaching partnerships. But with increasing pressures on student recruitment it is inevitable that research will come to play a more and more important part in universities' international development activities. The fact that the UK leads in many hugely important areas of research, particularly in life and physical sciences, will be of great advantage here.

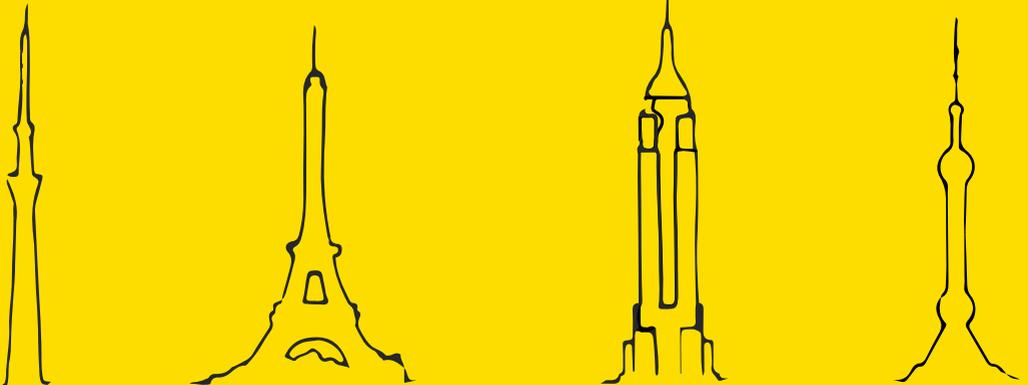
This advantage can't really be pressed home, however, until universities become really serious about commercialization. Those UK universities that have significant 'third stream' capabilities can be counted on the fingers of one hand. And even these frequently fail to link their investment, IP and consultancy activities with what they say about their overseas research activities. In developing economies the opportunities for spinning revenue streams out of research are enormous, and could easily eclipse student fees. But once again this underlines the vital importance of presenting the global university as an institution in which research, teaching and enterprise are intimately connected. Indeed the shape of the global university of the future may be such that the traditional structure of faculties, schools and departments gives way to clusters which carry out research, teaching and consultancy.



So what next?

Over the next few years UK higher education sector will become even more concerned with world rankings; this much is certain. Different institutions will respond to the challenge of competing on an international stage in different ways, and at different speeds. All, however, will need to think about the implications that 'going global' will have for their organisation, branding and communications. And no doubt most will be looking for exemplars who have blazed a trail.

How each university rises to the occasion will depend on its ambition, priorities and resources. Whatever this response might be, though, it will inevitably mean addressing new and discerning groups of audiences and getting one's story straight. Effective branding is going to be important as never before.



What's with the hard sell? Give me a break!

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