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STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

LOOK SMALL, THINK BIG 09

IN CONVERSATION WITH SIMON MARGINSON 14

USING STRATEGIC ENTREPRENEURS TO
BUILD STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS 21

U4 NETWORK: INSTITUTIONAL
DEVELOPMENT THROUGH TRUST 33



USING STRATEGIC ENTREPRENEURS TO BUILD STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Internationalisation through strategic partnerships is a goal for many higher education institutions and their upper-level management teams. Yet for institutional objectives to truly flourish, they should get the most out of the various skills that different actors bring to the table. This piece explores the interesting role that can be played by resourceful academic staff in materialising institutional, and individual, aims. ▶

A few years ago, I asked around universities why staff were not more involved in building strategic international partnerships. I was told, “the staff won’t do it,” or “management won’t let you do it.” I smelled a rat. Having worked in private business, where staff *will* do it and “management need you to do it,” I was convinced the real reasons were more organisational than personal. Two years later, I was developing strategic partnerships I had negotiated, organised and implemented myself, with the support of my colleagues and management. Based on my experience, I also developed a theory regarding these much espoused but less practised initiatives.

PITFALLS AND BLIND SPOTS

There’s a vicious circle of execution failure in higher education internationalisation strategy, especially in strategic partnerships. Repeated failure to implement properly results in a culture of underperformance, in which failure is expected, tolerated and ignored. Ignorance of the underlying reasons means assumptions (such as those quoted above) rush in to fill the knowledge gap. Managers step into the strategy vacuum and pull all the wrong levers. Hardly surprising in institutions in which Gresham’s Law applies: *discussions about bad operations drive out discussions about good strategy implementation.*

Strategy documents, where they exist, contain vague statements about the ‘encouragement’ or ‘facilitation’ of strategic partnerships tacked onto the end of the ‘international’ section. There they languish without responsibilities, targets, allocated resources or key performance indicators, even in the most managed

of institutions. The ‘rhetoric-reality gap’ in higher education internationalisation strategy, and the resulting deterioration in the global position of UK universities, are well documented.

ACADEMIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Universities are complex organisations operating in a turbulent environment, variously described as “organised anarchies” and “professional bureaucracies.” Political scrutiny and multiple constituencies mean autonomy is constrained and aims are unclear, disputed and changing. Universities are therefore reacting organisations, and even a minimal understanding of strategy would lead to the adoption of an emergent strategic approach, learning and adapting as you go. Such an approach would benefit from the strong cultural values of many university staff who are able to work under an umbrella of institutional aims broadly in line with their own.

Instead, the rise of managerialism has pushed universities into trying to adopt a planned approach to strategy, executed through demanding compliance with bureaucratic process and control, and working entirely against the predominant values of academics. No wonder then that there is a hostile attitude among many in higher education to ‘academic entrepreneurship’ (spin-off activities, etc). This interpretation of entrepreneurship is based on a narrow and superficial understanding of the concept in which it is misunderstood as purely commercial, resulting in it being wrongly equated with managerialism. In fact the opposite is true.

Consider Schumpeter’s early definition of “pure” entrepreneurship from 1947: *the doing of new things or the doing of things that are already done in a new way.*

Further definitions emphasise the value of autonomy and flexibility (not just making money!), similar to ‘academic freedom’ and therefore appealing to the strong values of many university staff. Use this “pure” concept and whole areas of your university have just become staffed by entrepreneurs, seeking to do new things in new ways, such as internationalising through partnerships. I know this to be true from the giddy range of creative, flexible, determined and autonomous behaviours I observe in my colleagues at all levels – academic and administrative – as I built my strategic partnerships with other universities around the world. But it is only recently that I recognised my own and my organisation’s tendencies and skills as entrepreneurial.

IS THE CURRENT MOTIVATION FOR INTERNATIONALISATION CORRECT?

Sometimes driven by the need to create alternative income streams and by growing managerialism, the predominant attitude of higher education to internationalisation in Anglophone countries has been a tactical ‘infusion approach’: reductionist, symbolic, commercial and competitive.

Anglophone universities in particular have been reliant on an unsustainable competitive advantage based on teaching in the English language (a basic strategic error), focused on the short-term exploitation of lucrative international students (a basic marketing error) and implementing superficial changes to programme titles and syllabi via bureaucratic process (a basic execution error). University staff have not bought into this shallow approach imposed from the top (another basic execution error), faced, as

they are every day, with the consequences for all students and their own inability to deliver satisfactorily.

It is not internationalisation they disagree with, indeed many staff enjoy the international diversity of their working environment, it is the underlying

This purely commercial approach cannot motivate staff to engage in partnerships

values driving it. This purely commercial approach cannot motivate staff to engage in partnerships. It is now resulting in a loss of market share as institutions in other countries surpass such institutions in the genuine quality of their internationalisation.

A FRESH APPROACH

There is an alternative: a transformative, internationalist and cooperative approach to partnering, implemented through commitment to a vision rather than compliance with targets. A holistic and comprehensive approach to 'deep' internationalisation, in which the organisation is populated by current and future global citizens, and embraces international students as valuable resources rather than tolerating them as a necessary evil.

Staff participation is essential to develop better skills, attitudes, professional and institutional networks. This vision is in line with the internationalist values of most academics and many of their administrative colleagues and is therefore much more likely to be implemented. Link it with an entrepreneurial approach to

implementation and to a broad umbrella strategy – building on an existing preference for freedom and flexibility – and you have an executable strategy for the future of international strategic partnerships.

Often in the process of developing our partnerships was it only my deeply held beliefs about the value of internationalism, coupled with my entrepreneurial perseverance, which kept me hurdling the barriers. No amount of managed targets would have succeeded.

INVALUABLE QUALITIES

But entrepreneurs are not strategic. They are self-interested and tactically exploit opportunities for their own benefit. I certainly had my own interests at heart at the outset. Welcome, Robert Burgelman's concept of the "strategic entrepreneur". Working in the ranks of large, complex organisations, they use "autonomous strategic behaviour" to deliver elements of

affected through compliance with a policy. An individual must commit. So demanding is the implementation of a worthwhile partnership, that the entrepreneurial tendencies of self-reliance, perseverance, passion and flexibility are invaluable. Strategic entrepreneurs are skilled in 'piggy-backing' on existing resources and doing more with less. Sound familiar? A little support from management and some organisational slack allow them really to flourish.

Can't identify your strategic entrepreneurs? Don't look in your committees, they are avoiding them, preferring instead to create and use their own team culture, network of relationships and the informal communication stream. They might have been pushed out of your organisation or they are dormant.

If you really want to build long lasting, worthwhile, profitable strategic partnerships, don't be so commercial and

Staff participation is essential to develop better skills, attitudes, professional and institutional networks

the corporate strategy, often supported, as I am, by middle managers. Usually operating on the fringes of the organisation and rarely in the higher levels of management – entrepreneurs do not succeed by investing in the status quo – they are well-placed and capable of delivering the more challenging and risky aspects of a holistic internationalisation strategy, such as strategic partnerships.

So personal is the decision to invest the time and effort needed to build a long-term partnership, that it cannot be

controlling. If you want to maintain your internationalisation strategy in an age of financial crisis, don't waste resources micro-managing. Instead, base your umbrella strategy on an inspirational vision of diversity and the values of internationalism. This will awaken your dormant strategic entrepreneurs and attract others: give them a direction rather than directives, build in a bit of slack and autonomy, allow them to piggy-back, and watch them deliver.

— ALISON PEARCE