

# University internationalization

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2013

CHINA DAILY HONG KONG EDITION

**F**ew would disagree that university internationalization is an appealing ideal. Higher education has become an integral part of globalization, and thus internationalization has been set as a strategic goal by many universities. Unfortunately, there is no consensus and much misunderstanding of the ideas, goals and content of internationalization among institutions and stakeholders. There have also been discussions on the difficulties it faces and the controversies it has aroused.



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According to the related literature and my personal experience and observations, university internationalization typically includes one or more of the following elements or manifestations: English as the main teaching and working language; a high number of international students and faculty members; the incorporation of international dimensions into the curriculum, campus, research and management; academic collaborations; exchange programs and accreditations. Some of these internationalization activities take place on local campuses, whereas others need to take place overseas.

University internationalization can achieve one or more of the following goals: promoting international vision and cross-cultural understanding and skills among teachers and students; encouraging teachers and students to care about and tackle pressing global issues; improving graduates' capabilities and mobility in the context of globalization; boosting the exchange and cooperation of teaching and research among universities to enhance output; and promoting the international reputation and influence of the university, region or country. I believe that the first two are the most significant goals.

Unfortunately, many institutions lack a general

consensus about the priorities of internationalization and do not have a set of international strategies or principles. While pursuing many "internationalization" activities as mentioned above, many institutions have concentrated on form rather than substance in the blind pursuit of rigid figures, and have ignored the true meaning of internationalization.

Moreover, the nature of education has gradually changed from a social nature to a business nature. Even some publicly funded universities engage in profit-oriented 'internationalization', pitching their non-quota Master's programs to self-financing non-local students. In this way, internationalization has gradually been melded into a tool for gaining profits or resources, which ignores its original meaning and the pursuit of excellence.

Universities that engage in this behavior often overlook the higher goals of internationalization, such as the promotion of high quality teaching at an international level, the cultivation of global perspectives and cross-cultural skills in students, and encouraging teachers and students as world citizens to care about and tackle pressing global issues (such as human rights, poverty, food, environmental protection, energy, financial reforms, network security, business ethics, humanity and happiness).

Internationalization also brings some unexpected risks and challenges to many Asian universities, such as suppressing the native language; allowing overseas partners to dominate cooperation and take away the local institution's autonomy, causing a loss of local cultural identity in collaboration programs; provoking too much competition among institutions, leading to less funded higher education opportunities for local students; causing estrangement or even conflict between local students, and non-local students and over-commercializing higher education.

University internationalization has both merits and costs, so universities need to be conscious about their own conditions and stages of develop-

ment. Violation of some ground principles and the misuse of resources for internationalization may cause wasted efforts and even harm teaching quality and students' interests.

When devising internationalization strategies, universities should set up principles and core values that protect national and cultural identities, equality, independence, academic quality, local and international responsibility, non-local student's rights, and cultural and language diversity.

University internationalization is a process and a means, not an end. Universities have a mission to nurture talent, create and disseminate knowledge, preserve cultural heritage, promote local culture, cultivate world citizens and pursue the well-being of mankind.

Internationalization should not, therefore, be confined to international student and teacher recruitment, academic exchanges, student exchanges and joint programmes, nor should the goal of internationalization hinge on economic benefits or international competition.

Only under certain conditions and with clear goals and strategies can collaborative programs with overseas universities yield positive results, otherwise much effort will be wasted and the educational principles and characteristics of a university may be tarnished.

Blind imitation of British and US models and the indiscriminate application of foreign standards will lead to what the Chronicle of Higher Education calls the "McDonaldization of higher education". Local universities should instead protect their own culture and preserve the idea of an Asian university or a Chinese university.

Admittedly, there are obstacles and costs to advancing internationalization, but these issues are exactly those upon which the government, universities and communities need to reflect and work.

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