

**UK Universities' Global Engagement Strategies:
Time for a rethink?**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Introduction

The primary aim of this report is to stimulate conversations within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that are considering their future global engagement strategies. It is hoped that the issues raised and the questions posed will be a useful starting point for discussions and may aid development of a generation of distinctive strategies that truly reflect institutional values, mission and character.

The report starts with a sector-wide analysis of the global dimension within 134 UK HEI strategic plans current in late 2020, noting key characteristics, emerging themes and some common weak spots. Building on these insights, it explores (via in-depth interviews with 12 senior sector stakeholders, supplemented by references to recent publications and events) some of the changes we might wish to make in future, post-pandemic strategies for global engagement.

Current state of play

The report argues that now is the right time for HEIs to rethink their approaches to global engagement. The pandemic has accelerated a recalibration of the global HE sector's priorities, from climate action through to online learning. Greater emphasis is being placed on universities' contribution to the global common good, often through international collaboration. They are being urged to embrace an ethical, non-colonial approach to internationalisation. However, disconnects exist between some aspects of UK government policy and the mission of universities. At institutional level, the challenge is to stabilise finances in the context of an economic recession at the same time as keeping in sight a long-term vision for global engagement.

While the centrality of internationalisation varies according to institutional mission, three-quarters of current UK HEI strategic plans either name it as a specific strategic theme or embed it across the entire plan. The rhetoric in recent strategic plans tends to be more values-led than in earlier ones. There is now an increased focus on the institution's global contribution. However, the metrics used have not changed significantly over time. Where Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are included within strategic plans, the majority relate to institutional profile, reach or income. This may suggest a mismatch between what universities say is important to them and what they actually measure when evaluating success. It may also reflect the challenge of wanting to make a valuable social contribution within a competitive context where profile-building is better rewarded.

The review of current strategic plans reveals certain common strategy 'traps'. Since now is an important time for rigorous strategic thinking, it is worth highlighting these pitfalls so that they can be avoided in future. The key areas to pay attention to are: internal consistency and alignment between the main strategy and supporting strategies (e.g. internationalisation); frank acknowledgement of the institution's specific global engagement challenges and explanation of how these will be overcome; prioritisation of a small number of mutually reinforcing actions (and decisions on what **not** to do); and alignment between institutional mission / values and international success measures, so that the latter reflect what makes the institution distinctive.

Next generation strategies

The next generation of global engagement strategies must fulfil a range of purposes. These include making a positive impact across different aspects of organisational mission; helping to stabilise university finances; and finding a valued and distinctive position for the institution to occupy within the global knowledge ecosystem. However, the forward-looking ideas and new opportunities which excite academics and practitioners when discussed in sector conferences, opinion pieces and working papers often get diluted (or dropped altogether) when institutional strategies are developed. Now may be the time to embrace some of the more far-reaching changes that could take an institution's global engagement in new and distinctive directions.

Research revealed some key (and in many cases interrelated) themes which are worth considering when new strategies are consulted on and existing ones reviewed.

At a philosophical level, it is seen as important to consider the 'why' of internationalisation. What are the primary drivers and how will the institution's approach reflect its values and support its mission? How can the perspectives of those who challenge western and Anglosphere-orientated notions of internationalisation be considered? How will the institution negotiate government policies in a way that is true to its values? What will be different about the kind of internationalisation it pursues in a post-Covid context? Are there global engagement principles about which the university community will take a public stand and which will help to differentiate it?

One high-level theme was the need to address global – and local – challenges as part of the post-Covid recovery. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals were seen as a useful hook within global engagement strategies. The intersection of international education with climate impact, equality, diversity and inclusion, and social and racial justice, was seen as fertile ground for new initiatives. Consideration is needed of the benefits that global engagement can bring to local / regional communities and of how civic engagement activities can have a positive international impact.

Another high-level theme related to negotiating new global dynamics in a post-Brexit world, where the balance of power is shifting from West to East. Issues ranged from the ethical dimension of building international relationships to the need for a university's portfolio of partner countries to support institutional mission, spread risk and ensure diversity. It was seen as important for institutions to build understanding of partner country priorities and to enhance the ability of staff and students to engage globally, supporting intercultural competency and linguistic development.

On a more tactical level, there was emphasis on rethinking partnership models, based on deep consideration of how international partnerships can help institutions to achieve their – and their partners' – overarching strategic goals. The need for more holistic partnerships was outlined, along with a potential repositioning of transnational education (TNE) within the education portfolio, including a focus on its role in widening access to new participants. Institutions were urged to consider what needs to happen for them to develop truly flexible provision and whether it is even helpful to draw distinctions between TNE and other delivery modes (or between TNE students and other students). The benefits and challenges of working with different types of partner, such as agent aggregators, pathway operators and Online Program

Management (OPM) specialists need to be evaluated. Consideration should also be given to new forms of collaboration with UK peers and within global networks.

A further important theme centred on 'internationalisation for all' in a digital world: inclusive approaches to developing global perspectives and enriching the student experience, often assisted by digital technologies. There was a strong emphasis on ensuring all students (and staff) have access to international and intercultural experiences regardless of whether they can travel. It was felt that a reconfiguration of curricula is required to integrate virtual exchange, collaborative online projects and themes such as sustainability, decolonisation and social justice that are prioritised by many of today's students. Supporting global employability and ongoing engagement with international alumni were seen as critical elements of the student experience. And the fostering of a global mindset and cultural intelligence in staff was viewed as an essential underpinning for truly inclusive internationalisation.

In order for new strategies to be effective, alternative operating practices are needed. These include greater agility and a willingness to review and adapt strategy on an ongoing basis; a shift from silo working to shared responsibility, cross-institutional collaboration and joint, project-based initiatives; a reconfiguration of international offices, with more in-country hubs and less long-haul travel; and a translation of rhetoric (in such areas as carbon emissions and diversification of source countries) into tangible actions.

A final theme – linked to the findings of the first phase of the research – related to new ways of measuring success. Institutions will need to grapple with the challenges of measuring impact and carefully consider the role of rankings. While there were mixed views on the mainstream global rankings, some powerful arguments emerged that they are no longer fit for purpose and encourage both unnecessary competition and the development of isomorphic strategies; that they are more about looking good and 'keeping up with the Joneses' than about doing good. Placing less emphasis on rankings would help institutions to concentrate on self-improvement, making a distinctive contribution and building 'inner confidence'. Alternative measures of progress were suggested, that would reflect greater diversity of mission. These included ratings, indexes and survey-based tools that could be tailored to an institution's mission and priorities (and those of its key stakeholders).

Conclusion

The report concludes that the current context for HE global engagement is fraught with tensions – from the geopolitical level through to the institutional level. However, Covid-19 has provided us with a structural break to rethink our approach and address some of the disconnects. If the right questions are asked to open up discussion as strategy is developed, there is an opportunity to grasp some of the bold ideas that emerge, to test them against institutional mission and values and, where appropriate, to embed them in a global engagement strategy that helps the institution to cultivate its own distinctive approach to internationalisation and make a positive impact both globally and locally.

About the author



Dr Vicky Lewis is an independent consultant, who specialises in working with Higher Education providers to develop or refine international strategies, infrastructure and implementation plans.

Clients have ranged from small, specialist institutions just setting out on their internationalisation journey to Russell Group universities with an impressive global footprint. Since establishing her business in 2013, Vicky has worked with numerous UK-based HEIs as well as providers located in Germany, France, Sweden, Malaysia, Israel and the US.

Vicky's consultancy expertise draws on both professional experience and academic research. Before becoming a consultant, she worked for 19 years within UK universities (in Wales, Scotland and England). This included 13 years at Senior Management Team level at Bournemouth University, where she was initially appointed to set up an International Office from scratch and progressed to become Director of Marketing & Communications, leading a large, multi-function team.

In 2007, Vicky completed the University of Bath's DBA (Higher Education Management) with a thesis on 'integrated internationalism' within UK HEIs. Subsequent research has focused on transnational education and on institutional strategies for internationalisation and global engagement.

Vicky is a regular speaker at international conferences on a range of internationalisation-related topics. She is a keen blogger (see: <https://www.vickylewisconsulting.co.uk/news-and-views.php>), a Consulting Fellow with Halpin Partnership and an active member of the European Association for International Education.

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