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Internationalisation of Second-tier Higher Education Institutions

A look at Universities of Applied Sciences in Austria

115 - Successful Internationalization of Higher Education

Abstract

This contribution looks at the internationalisation rationales of Universities of Applied Sciences in Austria by adopting both a historical lens as well as a future outlook. By shedding light on the Austrian science system and its sectoral differences, a number of internationalisation approaches are discussed and related to the strategic alignment of second-tier higher education institutions.

Keywords:

Internationalisation, second-tier higher education institution, higher education, internationalisation rationales, University of Applied Sciences

1. Introduction

Triggered by the Bologna process and its accompanying measures of harmonisation and internationalisation efforts, Austrian institutions of higher learning, like many other European universities, have, over the past 15 years, attached top priority to their internationalisation agendas. These efforts were mainly undertaken to promote a common European higher education system which was stipulated in the declaration signed by 29 European states in Bologna, Italy on 19 June, 1999.

In this regard, critical voices have been raised warning that Austria has not yet a coordinated national internationalisation strategy that spans across all higher education institutions (HEI) (Wissenschaftsrat, 2010, p 231). This is all the more relevant since the willingness of HEI to incorporate such a comprehensive strategy in their development planning was identified as a decisive factor for success in internationalisation efforts (Wissenschaftsrat, 2010, p 246). At this point, it needs to be questioned, however, whether such an overall and integrated strategy has the potential to serve as an adequate means for the differing internationalisation purposes of the Austrian science system and its sectoral differences. This is particularly relevant in view of enhanced efforts to ensure multi-dimensional profile development and a systematic process of differentiation within higher education institutions (Wissenschaftsrat, 2013, S 50) on the one hand, and the “great attraction in imitation” identified between universities and polytechnics on the other hand (Noorda, 2014, p 11).

It is certainly true that a number of commonalities can be found at all levels, but without clearly understanding the context of differing institutional realities, international practices and their accompanying rationales are open to misinterpretations. Hence, it may be too simplistic to equate student recruitment with economic purposes or priority attached to ranking positions with elitist claims. The same goes for mobility by itself which may not always be a reliable indicator of the degree of internationality of an HEI.

Given Austria's binary system of higher education consisting of research universities and Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS), it needs to be stated here that the following contribution looks at what de Wit et al (2015) call "second-tier higher education institutions". Not only do first and second-tier institutions differ with regard to their selectivity, prestige, curriculum, academic versus practical orientation (Arum et al, 2007), they are also believed to adopt different approaches towards internationalisation and diversity management. As such Universities of Applied Sciences (also referred to as polytechnics, AMK or technical colleges) are more likely to act as gate-openers for non-traditional students by allowing for vertical expansion to previously excluded social groups. Such new populations of students may be professionally qualified, internationally mobile or also mature learners. According to Schuetze and Slowey (2012) an increased diversity of student profiles includes "lifelong learners", "second chance learners", "deferrers", "recurrent learners", "returners", "refreshers" and "learners in later life" which may include both a national and international student body. By drawing on such a broad variety of students, second-tier higher education institutions meet expectations held in relation to an increased expansion of student diversity (Ayalon and Yogev 2006).

Since up to now only limited research on internationalisation of so-called second-tier higher education institutions has been conducted (de Wit et al, 2014, de Haan, 2014, de Wit, 2011, Maringe, 2009, Raby and Valeau 2007, Waechter, 1999), this contribution seeks to shed some additional light on this issue by exploring the internationalisation agendas of Austrian Universities of Applied Sciences.

2. Internationalisation and Universities of Applied Sciences

Internationalisation, a term widely used in post-secondary education to add an international dimension to higher education, lacks both linguistic and conceptual clarity and is thus employed in multiple ways (Gaisch, 2014, p 11). The same applies to related terms such as "Internationalisation at Home" (IaH), introduced by Nilsson at the turn of the millennium (in Crowther et al, 2000) or the overarching term "Internationalization of the Curriculum" (IoC). Since then, a number of overlapping concepts have emerged and endless discussions over coherent and structured definitions bear the risk of distracting attention from the main job of implementing internationalized curricula (Beelen & Jones, 2015, Gaisch, 2014).

What can be argued with reasonable certainty, though, is that both IaH and IoC are "the two pillars upon which universities' endeavours to internationalise their activities rest" (Beelen, 2011, p 261) and that the concept of internationalisation has gradually been moving from "added value to mainstream, and also has seen its focus, scope and content evolve substantially" (De Wit, 2010, p 5).

In contrast to research universities which have a much longer history, conduct fundamental research and offer academically oriented programmes, Austrian second-tier higher education institutions were only set up in the 1990s with close regional ties, a strong vocational orientation and an applied research focus. As a result, it can be assumed that also their internationalisation endeavours differ and are closely aligned with their strategic priorities. While the first tend to invest more time and effort into gaining top international market and ranking positions, the latter appear to be more concerned with the internationalisation of their curricula as well as the mobility of their students and staff. In this context, it generally seems that their main benefits for internationalisation is similar to those of the UAS in the Netherlands (de Haan, 2014) insofar that the provision of international experience and knowledge to the local students and the creation of an international environment largely derive from an intensified recruitment of internationally mobile students.

Although it was stated that Universities of Applied Sciences act as role models when it comes to the compliance to the Bologna process (Messerer et al, 2003) and can even be seen as “model students of the Bologna reform” (Pechar, 2009, p 169), they were not found to be more internationalised than research universities. Despite the previously outlined advantages for second-tier institutions, Pechar (2009) identified a number of framework conditions that have negative effects on the internationalisation endeavours of Universities of Applied Sciences in Austria.

For one, he states that in view of the relatively small national educational segment (11%), they may not obtain sufficient international visibility and hence not be part of important cross-border mobility networks. He also suggests that the administrative workload for mobility programmes may not be justified unless some critical mass is reached. Further arguments are in line with the strong ties to local industries and the location of many Universities of Applied Sciences. Since a number of Austrian campuses are situated at rather remote places, they may not have the same broad appeal for internationally mobile students as traditional universities which are mostly located in bigger cities. Another obstacle to successful internationalisation was found in what Pechar calls the “technical monostructure” (2009, p 170) of Universities of Applied Sciences with a strong focus on specialisation, often in niche markets, and a tendency towards overspecialisation which may make international academic recognition more difficult. The call for a European-wide acceptance of Bologna-compliant degrees therefore presents a particular challenge for political and institutional stakeholders.

On a more positive note, he predicts that such shortcomings may be overcome through the consolidation and further expansion of existing locations, through a larger portfolio of programmes in more varied subject areas and strengthened research capacities (Pechar, 2009, p 170).

3. Ideological Rationales for Going International

Arguably, ideological rationales are strongly related to societal and institutional cultures as well as market-driven and political interests. When looking at internationalisation rationales from a historical point of view, the first motivation for Austrian Universities of Applied Sciences to go international can be found in what Van der Wende (1997) describes as internationalisation towards Europeanisation; the global development towards a knowledge society that increasingly focuses on international dimensions in higher education, and within Europe towards a Europeanisation of higher education policy (Van der Wende, 2004, p. 9). Hackl et al (2003) interpret this change of focus as a shift from a political to a more economic rationale where cost efficiency and a more specific education with pronounced vocational components have become foregrounded together with increased efforts into international marketing and student recruitment.

In line with the growing societal relevance of intercultural learning, the next step in the internationalisation process was based on the academic rationale with a heightened awareness that emerging challenges of a globalised world will require a deconstruction of Western models of knowledge (Maringe & Foskett, 2010, Resnik, 2008). This was also the time when curricula redesign has started to become a major issue and by mapping course learning outcomes and adapting them to the Bologna model, it was sought to produce work-ready graduates (Oliver et al, 2007) possessing the skills to navigate an interconnected world. Increasingly driven by the employability agenda, which was further reinforced by governmental initiatives and academic teaching and learning standards, Austrian Universities of Applied Sciences have begun to place ever-growing emphasis on the need for skill development and consequently more innovative teaching practices. Such a focus has become all the more relevant in view of a European (and in particular Austrian) mismatch between the skills employers require from graduates, and the skills students acquire in higher education institutions (Brandenburg et al, 2015, Chydenius & Gaisch, 2015).

For some, (Erasmus) mobility is the magic formula that shall help students to strengthen key transversal skills which are crucial for graduate employability and allow them to create a European identity and sense of belonging (Standley, 2015). Others, especially those who see mobility strongly related to socio-economic status, see it more along the lines of “spatial flexibility to move horizontally between cultural spaces rather than vertically in terms of social advance” (Powell & Finger, 2013, p 281) and critically question whether the small minority of border-crossing mobile students can, in fact, be regarded as the carrier of internationality (Noorda, 2014). To counteract social inequalities, voices have become louder to not only align transferable skills developed through international experience with those sought by graduate employers but also acknowledge the value of domestic intercultural contexts for similar learning (Jones, 2013). On a critical note, it is stated that internationalisation at home and the development of intercultural competences for domestic students and staff have been

regarded of secondary importance for too long and that locating internationalisation of the home curriculum in electives alone is insufficient (de Wit, Deca & Hunter, 2015, S 52).

After the political, economic and academic rationales (also see Jiang, 2008, Altbach & Knight, 2006), the culture and social rationale for internationalisation seems to have generally become the most neglected issue (Knight, 2015, p 5). In this regard, and especially against the background of the current refugee crisis, the question arises, however, whether Austrian Universities of Applied Sciences together with traditional universities should not take a more active role in promoting cultural and ethnic diversity and foster improved intercultural understanding among multiculturally diverse people, both on an academic and societal level. Such an attitude may be further reinforced by a wide scholarly discourse on the significance of diversity and diversity management in higher education which has gained considerable momentum in recent years, and is now reaching the heart of Austria's HEI arena.

Although the generic internationalisation categorisations brought forward by Knight (2004), namely, social, political, economic and academic rationales, may still be valuable today, there are a number of additional emerging motivations that appear to drive Austrian second-tier HEI towards further internationalisation. For one, due to their practice-oriented education and in view of the demographic development, they appear particularly committed to producing brain power for the domestic industry through international education initiatives. Second, they have started to place major emphasis on what Knight (2015, p 3) calls the "commercial trade" indicating that new franchise arrangements, potential foreign or satellite campuses and on-line delivery are seen as additional income-generating opportunities which may also open up to more non-traditional students.

A further rationale for going international which was found true for Dutch second-tier HEI, and also appears– to some extent - applicable to Austrian Universities of Applied Sciences, was identified by de Haan (2013). What she calls the "bandwagon effect" is the overall fear of second-tier institutions to fall behind competitively when the entire "sector is moving in the direction of greater international involvement" (p 15). Such a stance does not presume that active participation in internationalisation is per se driven by a pro-actively defined rationale. Rather, it suggests that an international orientation is considered a necessity or even a burdensome obligation to have sustainable competitive advantage.

4. Achievements and Future Outlook

Much has been realised since Austria established second-tier higher education institutions in 1994: all Universities of Applied Sciences implemented International Offices, many of which have just celebrated their tenth anniversary. Within only a few years, infrastructure has been provided to assist both students and staff to engage in international mobility and a large network of partner universities and higher education research partnerships has been created. Recently, a shift in priorities from a previously quantitative approach to a more qualitative assessment of partner universities has taken place, one that goes beyond Erasmus and overseas exchanges and also seeks recruitment of degree-

seeking students as well as strategic partnerships for research projects and double degree programmes.

In terms of internationalisation, the most recent development and financing plan (2017-18) puts particular emphasis on the development of international degree programmes, strengthened cooperation with internationally acknowledged HEI and a specific set of IaH policies aimed at non-mobile students. By making strategic internationalisation the core issue of the development planning, it is sought to gradually implement the mobility strategy adopted in Bucharest in 2012 covering the following issues: curricula designs that allow for increased opportunities of mobility through “mobility windows”, action for quality improvements with regard to the preparation, support and follow-up of studies abroad, fair and transparent recognition of qualifications and a greater range of English-medium taught courses for non-mobile students (Fachhochschulentwicklungs-und Finanzierungsplan, 2014, p 18).

Although a number of measures have already been put into place for internationally immobile students in the form of IaH activities that particularly focus on the “intercultural and international dimension in the teaching learning process and extracurricular activities” (Wächter, 2003, p 6), IaH is after all a change process. In this respect, it should be noted that domestic students are often found to resist intercultural group work and avoid contact with their international peers, which may lead to unequal access to transformative experiences and powerful knowledge (Harrison, 2015). Such a transformation requires, first and foremost, an inclusive institutional mindset that encourages and promotes intercultural learning across-the-curriculum without predominantly focusing on activities that are “far away and for others” (Teekens, 2007, p 5). Such a stance needs to go hand in hand with an increased level of engagement of faculty staff, be it in terms of international collaboration, teaching and services, which is generally regarded as the major stumbling block on the road to developing and sustaining internationalisation (Stohl, 2007, Troia 2013, Gaisch, 2014).

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