Despite a profusion of international activity within any given institution, a holistic or institution-wide approach to international stakeholder engagement remains elusive, writes Douglas Proctor.

Higher education providers have begun to drive internationalisation into all corners of their institutions. It is now common for international strategy to inform agendas in learning and teaching, research and outreach/engagement.

This is at the very heart of the concept of comprehensive internationalisation put forward by Professor John K. Hudzik, former president of NAFSA, in 2011. In his terms, “comprehensive internationalisation is a commitment, confirmed through action, to infuse international and comparative perspectives throughout the teaching, research, and service missions of higher education. It shapes institutional ethos and values and touches the entire higher education enterprise”.

However, to what extent is international engagement “joined up” within an institution? Do we have an integrated approach to engagement with international stakeholders?

Institutional success in internationalisation is generally measured through the scale and scope of our various international activities. These can include the level of our international collaboration in research, the research funding we’ve secured from international sources, the number of international students recruited and enrolled in our courses, the size and reach of our outbound student mobility program, our efforts to internationalise the curriculum, our alumni community abroad, our engagement with partner institutions and governments abroad, our contribution to international public policy.

But, despite a profusion of international activity within any given institution, international engagement remains only partially joined up. In many cases, joining the dots on international engagement is dependent on the circumstances of organisational structure. Whatever the case, whether collaborations between key international units are forged based on structure or pragmatism (for example, between student recruitment and alumni), a holistic or institution-wide approach to international stakeholder engagement remains elusive.

This presents a significant opportunity for the future of international education and internationalisation more broadly. If institutions are to realise the broader benefits of comprehensive internationalisation, it will become crucial for them to join the dots between their international stakeholders and their international engagement activities. Harnessing this collective potential will lead to outcomes which would otherwise go unrealised.

If institutions are to realise the broader benefits of comprehensive internationalisation, it will become crucial to join the dots between their international stakeholders and their international engagement activities.
THE DOTS AL ENGAGEMENT

These include greater philanthropy, additional resources from government or non-government funding agencies, new opportunities for research collaboration and the mobility of staff, enhanced access to student mobility.

Importantly, joining the dots on international engagement will enable a more holistic understanding of the values associated with internationalisation within today’s institutions. Were we to find the right ways to connect the dots between the various forms of international engagement, I imagine we would succeed in truly embedding internationalisation (as a process of change) within our institutions. We could then re-position its value beyond and outside the simple metrics of international student numbers, outbound students, international research funding and rankings.

Building the case for integrated stakeholder engagement

Many higher education providers have adopted an integrated approach to managing the student lifecycle: from initial enquiries and applications, through admission and enrolment, to study and then on to an alumni community. Rationales for such an approach include a streamlined and improved experience for a diverse student body (including sizeable international student cohorts), as well as increased student retention.

In the background, much work has been done to improve administrative efficiency, to ensure a seamless student experience regardless of internal processes and to streamline service delivery across the various campus offices supporting each stage of the student experience. Investment has been made in advanced Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems to support these endeavours across the internal and external stakeholder groups in the student lifecycle.

Figure 1: Internal and external stakeholders in a simplified student lifecycle.

In terms of international engagement, this focus on the student lifecycle has done much to support the experience of a growing number of international students on campus.

However, similar initiatives have not been adopted in relation to the ‘cycle of engagement’ with other international stakeholders, including business/industry, government, funding bodies, peer institutions, NGOs and the community sector. Indeed, responsibility for managing relations with this group of external stakeholders can be so widely distributed across campus that the very process of mapping stakeholders can be a lengthy and involved exercise – not to mention the subsequent development of plans of coordinated action.
Barriers and roadblocks

Barriers to the implementation of an integrated model for international engagement were discussed at workshops delivered at the Australian International Education Conference in October 2011 and 2012. Attended by over 70 participants in total, these workshops focused on people and partnership engagement frameworks in international education and attracted internationalisation practitioners from all sectors.

Participants agreed that the two key impediments to integrated engagement with international stakeholders were culture and systems. Silos within the administration of many institutions see information held closely by the custodial owner (often in the name of ‘relationship management’ with the external party), while IT systems are generally poorly designed to collate and share relevant information.

As such, a single external party can easily be perceived as an exclusive stakeholder by multiple offices on-campus, recorded separately on a range of unrelated IT systems, and subject to a range of different (and mutually exclusive) relationship management strategies.

Nevertheless, a strong case can be built for a holistic approach to our engagement with international stakeholders. As an illustration, consider the following examples:

- An alumnus is appointed Australian Ambassador to a country of key importance to the university’s research strategy – do we have the systems in place to join up the dots between alumni relations, international relations and research?

- An international industry partner has asked one of the faculties to deliver a tailored training course in South East Asia – can we leverage this activity to support our student recruitment from that country, as well as to promote relevant research capability across the university to this industry partner and its local network?

In each case, a joined-up approach to international engagement presents an opportunity to secure outcomes which may not otherwise have been realised – in terms of the university’s profile and positioning, in terms of its student recruitment and research income, or in terms of traditional research outputs.

- HR data identifies over 20 academic staff who hold a PhD from one of the university’s leading partner institutions abroad – do we have the right settings internally to identify whether these staff have nurtured ongoing collaboration with their alma mater and whether this has led to joint funding or publications? Can we capture the enthusiasm of this group of staff to support the partnership and/or to attract prospective students?

Take the not too far-flung example of an alumnus who now heads up a major international company. That same company offers student internships, runs a recruitment program for new graduates and commissions contract research. This single external stakeholder could quite reasonably be recorded as a key contact by the alumni office, the research office, the student mobility office, the careers office, the industry engagement office and by one or more faculties in relevant disciplines.

How does a higher education provider manage a relationship with the head of this company, or with the company itself, in such circumstances? Without the capacity to cross-reference information on external stakeholders within the institution, it cannot.
The two key impediments to integrated engagement with international stakeholders are culture and systems. Silos within the administration of many institutions see information held closely by the custodial owner ... while IT systems are generally poorly designed to collate and share relevant information.

- Clear mapping of available data sources on international engagement and activities, and internal protocols for information-sharing and data access, and
- Close cooperation (formal and informal) between each of the offices tasked with external engagement regardless of internal boundaries.

Naturally, solutions will vary for different institutions and what works for the University of Melbourne will not necessarily hold true elsewhere.

However, it may well be incumbent on the international office to lead the thinking on this on campus. Without such leadership, it is not clear who will drive the process of “joining the dots” on an institution’s international engagement. The question remains, therefore, whether international educators can persuade the campus community of the value and benefits which an integrated approach to managing international stakeholders will bring.

Douglas Proctor has led the International Relations Office at the University of Melbourne since 2008. Later in 2013, he will commence PhD studies in international education at the University of Melbourne’s Centre for the Study of Higher Education. For more information, visit iro.unimelb.edu.au and cshe.unimelb.edu.au.

Sources