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The international strategies of universities: deliberate or emergent?

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ABSTRACT

The internationalisation of higher education, which has developed from a number of separate initiatives to become a strategic objective in its own right, has not been investigated from a strategic organisational perspective. Case studies of four English universities were developed via a Grounded Theory methodology. Mintzberg and Waters' [1985. "Of Strategies, Deliberate and Emergent." *Strategic Management Journal* 6 (3): 257–272] 'deliberate' and 'emergent' strategies were used to analyse the trajectories of the international strategies of the case study universities. It was found that the international strategies were deliberate in each strategic period, whereas they were emergent over a longer time frame. Internationalisation has gone through three phases, as the approaches of universities to this phenomenon have matured and progressed from operational to strategic. A conceptual model which describes the trajectory of the international strategies of these English universities is developed and is a major addition to the internationalisation literature. Future research should examine the applicability of the model to other countries.

KEYWORDS

Internationalisation; universities; deliberate and emergent strategies

Introduction

Internationalisation in higher education (HE) has been investigated in terms of its context, benefits, challenges and implications (Maringe 2010; Jiang and Carpenter 2013; Knight 2013; Urbanovič and Wilkins 2013; Svetlik and Braček Lalić 2016) and some studies are, in effect, guides for higher education institutions (HEIs) (Hénard, Diamond, and Roseveare 2012; European University Association 2013; Higher Education Academy 2014). However, there has been a lack of research investigating internationalisation from a strategic organisational perspective. Therefore, this study aims to explore the development of international strategies in universities. The focus of the study is at a university strategic level, and it does not investigate departmental or module-level internationalisation initiatives (Figure 1).

The development of internationalisation in HE

The term 'internationalisation' has become widely used in HE since the 1990s. Yemini and Sagie (2015) found that the subject of 'internationalisation in higher education' had almost the same number of publications as the broad subject of 'higher education' between 2001 and 2006. Although the percentage of publications on both increased between 2007 and 2014, research on

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Figure 1. The research context.

'internationalisation in HE' increased more rapidly than on 'HE' which reflects its growing importance as a phenomenon.

There are a large number of different perspectives on internationalisation; its purposes, practices, and implications. Arum and van de Water (1992, 202) referred to international education as 'the multiple activities, programmes and services that fall within international studies, international educational exchange and technical cooperation'. One description of the internationalisation of HE sees it as

> the process of integrating an international dimension into the teaching/learning, research and service functions of a university or college. An international dimension means a perspective, activity or service which introduces or integrates an international/intercultural/global outlook into the major functions of an institution of HE. (Knight 1994, 7)

Soderqvist (2002, 29) defined internationalisation as

> a change process from a national higher education institution to an international higher education institution leading to the inclusion of an international dimension in all aspects of its holistic management in order to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and to achieve the desired competencies.

However, these definitions focused only on the international student 'academic' experience and assumed, implicitly and explicitly, that teaching and research are the sole functions of the education system (Knight 2013).

Subsequently, the definition of 'internationalisation' has evolved and descriptions of the term have been broadened to apply to an updated HE context. Yemini (2015) defined internationalisation as 'the process of encouraging the integration of multicultural, multilingual, and global dimensions within the education system, with the aim of instilling in learners a sense of global citizenship'. This definition used specific terms that showed a recognition of the importance of cultural and language barriers in an attempt to integrate international students so that they become prepared to act as 'global citizens' in an interdependent world. Internationalisation as a concept and a practice has broadened due to an increasingly diversified international student population to include inter alia both the academic and social experiences of students (UKCOSA 2004; Wadhwa and Jha 2014; Yemini 2015). It has also increasingly focused on non-student issues, such as research collaboration and staff experience (Attila and Andrea 2009; Tange 2010; Jacob and Meek 2013). Therefore, it is important to examine what universities do to be 'internationalised' and what strategies they deploy to pursue it.

Internationalisation agendas at universities

At one time, International Offices were responsible for all international activities in HEIs (Curtis 2013). This was understandable since internationalisation was primarily associated with international

student recruitment and mobility (Fielden 2011). However, the definition of internationalisation now includes international partnerships and collaborations, international student and staff experience, international learning and research, and it has become a descriptive term to define the university's mission, strategy, culture and structure (Middlehurst 2008). Indeed, internationalisation now aims to widen and integrate international activities across universities, and it is becoming an important aspect of universities' institutional strategies, while still encompassing the significant role of the International Office (Fielden 2011; Curtis 2013).

The internationalisation of HE has become crucial for its competitiveness and sustainability. Universities are paying great attention to it – as both a concept and an agenda. This has translated into the active development of strategies, policies, programmes and infrastructure that has made many universities into institutions that take internationalisation seriously. A variety of internationalisation policies and practices have been employed and developed in HEIs, on their home campuses and abroad, to implement their internationalisation plans, such as recruiting international students (Cudmore 2005; Mosneaga and Agergaard 2012; Huang, Raimo, and Humfrey 2016), internationalising the curriculum (Haigh 2002; Luxon and Peelo 2009; Ardakani et al. 2011; Magne 2015; Pandian, Baboo, and Mahfoodh 2016), promoting international research mobility (Attila and Andrea 2009; Jacob and Meek 2013), integrating international students and promoting intercultural capabilities (Stier 2006; Miller 2014), and the opening up of branch campuses in other countries which are designed to attract students who are not able to travel overseas for education (Wilkins and Huisman 2012; "Overseas Branch Campuses" 2015; Wilkins and Huisman 2015; Shams and Huisman 2016).

The broadening of the definition of the term 'internationalisation' reflects its increasing importance to universities as a concept and as a set of activities. Although internationalisation can be considered to be an input to various other activities in a university, including teaching and research, it has become increasingly important as a performance measure (or to be more precise, a set of performance measures) in its own right. This is reflected in various international league tables such as the *Times Higher Education*, the Shanghai Jiao Tong index and the QS star system (Hoyler and Jöns 2013). As a consequence, universities have begun to develop explicit international strategies, or at least an international dimension to their overall strategy. Nevertheless, the adoption of an 'international strategy' by HEIs is a relatively recent phenomenon and has been rarely examined from a strategic organisational perspective.

Deliberate and emergent strategies

Strategy was, and still is, often viewed as being designed to achieve a long-term goal which has considered intended behaviours, analytical processes and action plans (Mintzberg 1990). This 'deliberate' approach advocates that strategy should be fully formulated prior to an implementation phase (Porter 1980), that is, consciously processed and deliberately controlled by a senior management team. Thus, deliberate strategies are the result of analysing and assessing internal and external circumstances (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats), taking into consideration an organisation's values and its corporate social responsibility towards the community (Ansoff 1980). Subsequently, strategies can be evaluated to decide which is the most appropriate.

The application of the concept of deliberate strategy to HEIs suggests that senior managers will adopt international strategies which define all the key international issues, analyse where they are positioned now and where they want to be in the future and then articulate action plans to achieve their goals. In other words, everything is intended and planned for in advance and certainty and predictability in the environment is assumed (Argyris 1977; Brown and Eisenhardt 1998). Every single aspect of deliberate strategies is articulated explicitly and the external environment is considered to be only a minor input to the strategy formulation process (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel 1998).

Unlike deliberate strategies, emergent strategies are considered as actions that emerge within an organisation in order to adapt to turbulent environmental patterns (Brown and Eisenhardt 1998). The

absence of intentions – a pattern of unplanned actions – is its main feature. It is a response to the unpredicted events within business units which require a high level of flexibility (Andrews 1980). For these actions to be a 'strategy', they need to be consistent over time (Mintzberg and Waters 1985; Bodwell and Chermack 2010). The total absence of intentions represents the extreme case of an emergent strategy; however, the degree varies among different emergent schools of thought (Argyris 1977; Brown and Eisenhardt 1998). According to Mintzberg and Waters (1985), 'openness to such emergent strategy enables management to act before everything is fully understood, to respond to an evolving reality rather than having to focus on a stable fantasy' and thereby improves organisations' competitive responsiveness.

In contrast to the traditional top-down hierarchy which is common in most decision-making models, emergent strategies are developed by those who occupy the lower echelons of an organisation, as they have direct contact with customers (Mckeown 2012), and therefore reflect market pressures which make them customer-centric, not company-centric (Watson and Harris 1999; Johnston and Bate 2013). Top managers define the general behavioural guidelines and boundaries, and emergent strategies usually evolve within these boundaries. They are also labelled as 'deliberately emergent' in the sense that the central leadership creates conditions which allow strategies to emerge (Mintzberg and Waters 1985). In this context, the front-line staff who have direct contact with international students would have a say in shaping the international strategy in a university in collaboration with the top management team. While front-line staff have the flexibility to improve students' experience on campus by performing certain actions in their day-to-day activities, the consistency of these actions makes them seem like an emergent strategy (Bodwell and Chermack 2010). Such emergent strategies support staff at different organisational levels as they are constantly learning and enriching their capabilities to accomplish the desired goals (Argyris 1977; Senge 1990).

Mintzberg and Waters (1985) argued that an extreme emergent strategy that lacks control and structure is not recommended; at best, it may serve as a complementary part of a deliberate strategy but it cannot offer a complete alternative to it. In an emergent strategic process, the organisational vision, mission and goals are pronounced explicitly and shared among members at all organisational levels. However, this emergent strategy is not strictly fixed as it can be adjusted flexibly. The emergent strategy view is not about having a contingency strategy or scenario planning just in case; instead, it is about letting strategic patterns emerge on their own to craft a deliberate strategy over time (Watson and Harris 1999; Bodwell and Chermack 2010).

Mintzberg and Waters (1985) claimed that real-world strategies lie on a continuum, from 'Planned Strategies', which belong to an extreme deliberate pole where strategy is conceived theoretically and practically as limited to intended behaviours, analytical processes and action plans (Porter 1980; Dess and Davis 1984; Mintzberg 1990), through to 'Imposed Strategies', which belong to an extreme emergent pole where strategy is considered as a pattern of unplanned actions which emerge in response to environmentally imposed changes (Argyris 1977; Quinn 1980; Mintzberg 1987; Senge 1990). Other strategies, which lie in-between these two polar extremes, differ in the degree to which they blend the deliberate and emergent perspectives together.

Mintzberg and Waters (1985) also highlighted that there is often a gap between an organisation's realised strategy and its originally intended strategy throughout the strategy implementation process. Realised strategies that were intended in advance are called deliberate strategies; realised strategies that were a result of a non-intended pattern in a stream of actions are called emergent strategies and unrealised plans that were intended are called unrealised strategies.

Blending the deliberate and emergent strategies together achieves a balance between providing a central goal-direction, along with a sense of flexibility and responsiveness for adaptation; being open to effective strategic learning while avoiding chaos and being out of control, and having a clear vision; yet, giving room for the details to emerge (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel 1998; Downs, Durant, and Carr 2003). This has been referred to as 'organisational ambidexterity', meaning that an organisation can make use of opposites adequately instead of making trade-offs (Bodwell and Chermack 2010). Managers can learn what works the best from the previous

experiences of their organisations since realised strategies tend to be the future deliberate strategies as time goes by; managers benefit also from unrealised strategies as they learn what does not work and what needs modification (Mintzberg and Waters 1985).

Methodology

Although some recent studies focus on how UK universities manage internationalisation, a strategic organisational perspective has not been adopted in the literature. Therefore, this study attempts to determine whether the international strategies of English universities are deliberately planned or have emerged over time. Moreover, it examines different institutional strategic periods in order to identify the development of these strategies.

An exploratory/interpretive approach was adopted to the data collection. A modified form of Grounded Theory methodology (GTM) was employed in which concepts were generated from empirical data, rather than from existing literature. Thus, a brief literature review was conducted at the beginning of the research for the purpose of identifying research gaps and questions that remain to be answered and to guide the collection and analysis of data. Afterwards, an intensive literature review was carried out surrounding the theory to be tested (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

A study of four English universities in the UK HE sector was conducted to better understand the nature of international strategies in different organisations which operate in a common environment. There was a long list of different universities that could have been chosen to participate in this research. A non-probability purposive sampling technique (theoretical sampling) was applied to choose the universities to be interviewed (Marshall 1996). A convenience sample was identified from established contacts. The universities all had different histories.

A qualitative approach, using in-depth semi-structured interviews and document review, was adopted. Although the interviews were time-consuming to conduct and analyse, they provided rich insights that could not be collected from large survey samples. Each interview lasted approximately two hours and it followed a general framework of questions. As the research questions relate to strategic information, interviewees needed to be senior managers. Confidentiality during data collection and data analysis was guaranteed; therefore, all personal details are kept anonymous (Howe and Moses 1999; Christians 2000).

The research objectives were translated into a series of questions that reflected the study's key variables (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000). The questions were guided by Charmaz's (2006) approach to GTM. A series of exploratory questions was designed and there were no specific variables to be measured. The questions were presented in an open-ended format so that the participants could talk freely about the subject. Questions were asked in a non-directive manner to let the respondents talk about what was of importance to them in a given context and to avoid directing their answers; thereby enhancing research reliability.

Document review was undertaken alongside the interviews to re-analyse the existing data. This can be as valuable as other sources for generating theory (Mogalakwe 2006). Important documents, such as the universities' current and previous corporate strategies and international strategies, were reviewed in detail in order to generate empirical data. All documents were subject to Scott's (1990) quality control criteria for handling documentary sources: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. All documents were collected from the interviewees personally during the interviews or downloaded from the universities' official websites. They represented the actual strategies which were being employed at the universities.

Data collection and analysis was an iterative process in which incidents, codes, categories and concepts were compared until a grounded theory had been developed. Theoretical sampling is 'the process of collecting data for comparative analysis' (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 9). This means that when the initial data collection and analysis starts to develop explanations, this might suggest the expansion of the sample (theoretical/purposive sampling) and/or the collection of subsequent

data. Thus, data were collected until theoretical saturation was reached, in other words, until new information did not add any further insights (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

The exploration of the most recent international strategies in four different English universities, in order to identify the similarities and differences between them at one point in time, was the main research focus (spatial variation). However, a new issue emerged during the data collection and data analysis phases, due to being 'theoretically sensitive' to the need to collect more data about the universities' previous strategies and to investigate further the development of their international strategies over time. Thus, a comparison between the international strategies at each university over three consecutive strategic periods was a new focus (temporal variation). Supplementary questions were designed, pretested and sent via email to the participants following the initial interviews.

Three sequential stages were employed in the analysis of data: open coding – to group similar concepts in categories with conceptual labels attached to them; axial coding – to compare and contrast categories to identify relationships; and selective coding – to identify a core category as the central phenomenon (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The qualitative analysis software NVivo 10 was used to manage the research data. The deployment of this tool in the study significantly enhanced the analysis phase in terms of organising different codes and categories more quickly, and finding relationships and connections more easily.

Findings

It was stated clearly by all participants that international strategies are deliberately planned, which is the effective way to get things done from their point of view. They analyse markets carefully and try to anticipate trends and events. They identify their strategic aims and enabling actions critically and stick firmly to this in order to avoid any major unplanned events that may require making changes to any element of their strategies. Interviewees stated that they plan for a strategy which is robust enough to cope with any changes at an operational level. For them, having a deliberate strategy does not conflict with having a flexible strategy; however, for a strategy to be effective, the university's vision, strategic direction and main objectives should not be changed over the specified strategic period. However, the emphasis and processes can be adapted easily to be responsive to the market and the environment. One of the participants commented 'the strategy is broad with a lot of underlying aspects. So, most of the operations should be able to fit with it'. However, participants' answers to the supplementary questions indicated that the development of the universities' international strategies had taken place over three consecutive strategic periods. This could be seen in the changes associated with the international profile of the participating universities and the extent to which internationalisation was embedded within their institutional strategies.

The development of an international strategy as part of a university's overall strategy was a key point of interrogation. The four universities were asked about how 'internationalisation' featured within the university's strategy during three consecutive strategic periods (strategic period 3 refers to the most recent strategy). They were given three options to choose from (Not at all – Mentioned – Foregrounded). 'Not at all' and 'mentioned' refer to internationalisation not being mentioned at all or being mentioned/featured underneath some of the other aspects of the university's strategy, whereas foregrounded indicates that internationalisation is a key aspect of the university's strategy and that its international strategy can be found in a separate document. In all cases, these responses were in line with other documentary evidence from each university (Table 1).

The development of 'internationalisation' within the universities' strategies has a noticeable impact on their international profiles. The change in the person responsible for the international strategy at each university during each strategic period is shown in Table 2.

As can be seen from Table 1, University A did not have an international strategy in the strategic period 2006–2009. However, internationalisation featured in the university's strategy in the strategic period 2009–2012 and the strategic period 2012–2015; yet, it was not foregrounded. Moreover, the international profile did not change during these strategic periods; the Director of International

Table 1. The development of 'internationalisation' within the universities' strategies.

	University A	University B	University C	University D
Strategic period 3	Mentioned (**2012–2015)**	Not at all (**2010–2015)**	Foregrounded (**2010–2015)**	Foregrounded (**2013–2018)**
Strategic period 2	Mentioned (**2009–2012)**	Foregrounded (**2005–2010)**	Foregrounded (**2005–2010)**	Mentioned (**2008–2013)**
Strategic period 1	Not at all (**2006–2009)**	Not at all (**2000–2005)**	Foregrounded (**2000–2005)**	Not at all (**2003–2008)**

Table 2. The change of international profile in the context of the universities' organisational structures.

	University A	University B	University C	University D
Strategic period 3	Director of International Development (**2012–2015)**	Director of International Office (**2010–2015)**	Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International/Partnership) **(2010–2015)**	Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International) **(2013–2018)**
Strategic period 2	Director of International Development (**2009–2012)**	Dean of International Faculty (**2005–2010)**	Head of International Office (**2005–2010)**	Dean of International Development (**2008–2013)**
Strategic period 1	Director of International Development (**2006–2009)**	Head of International Office (**2000–2005)**	Vice-Chancellor (**2000–2005)**	Head of International Office (**2003–2008)**

Development was the person responsible for the planning and execution of the university's international agenda during the whole period (Table 2).

University B did not have an international strategy in the strategic period 2000–2005 when the Head of the International Office was responsible for international recruitment. Then, a transformative international strategy was put in place in the strategic period 2005–2010 as it was the main focus of the Vice-Chancellor (VC) at that time. Subsequently, a new position was created and the university's structure was altered to create a Dean of International Faculty. During the strategic period 2010–2015, internationalisation did not feature in the university's strategy because the university had a different VC and internationalisation was not the key focus of the university's strategic plan. Thus, the Director of the International Office became the person in charge once more. However, many internationalisation activities and practices were continued as part of the university's 'international agenda'.

Internationalisation was foregrounded at University C for a long period of time, unlike at the other three universities. The VC was in charge of 'international' in 2000–2005, which demonstrated the importance of internationalisation as a core element of the university's strategic emphasis during this strategic period. In the strategic period 2005–2010, the Head of the International Office was responsible for the international agenda and then University C appointed a Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International/Partnership) and gave 'international' a higher profile in the strategic period 2010–2015.

Internationalisation in University D went through different phases over three strategic periods until it became a key strategic aim. This happened incrementally as there was nothing about internationalisation in the university's strategy at first. Subsequently then it was mentioned underneath some other aspects, and later it became a strategic priority. The Head of the International Office was the person in charge of international (student recruitment) during the strategic period 2003–2008. A senior academic was then appointed as Dean of International Development in 2008–2013. In 2013, the Dean of International Development was promoted to Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International) in order to indicate that international had the same weight as teaching and research in the university and following a fourfold increase in international student numbers.

Discussion

Mintzberg and Waters (1985) claimed that real-world strategies lie on a continuum with the extreme deliberate pole at one end and the extreme emergent pole at the other end. They also specified the main characteristics which differentiate deliberate from emergent strategies. Among those characteristics are the presence of the intention and the notion of planning for everything prior to execution. The current study highlights the importance of 'time frame' as a key aspect to be considered in order to determine the type of strategy, in terms of it being deliberate or emergent. It was clear from interviews and documents that the four universities' most recent international strategies are all deliberate with clear objectives, plans and performance indicators during the recent strategic period (short time frame). Yet, looking through three strategic periods (longer time frame) changes the way they appear because they have evolved over a number of years.

The universities' strategies during the three strategic periods examined were deliberate. The set of strategic objectives they planned for, the strategy formulation processes they went through and the performance indicators they used to monitor their progress required that approach. However, the data analysis revealed that the international strategies have emerged over time via the embedding of the internationalisation function within the universities' overall strategies, giving internationalisation a higher profile and altering the university's organisational structure compared to previous strategic periods. The international strategy was seen as a deliberate strategy when considering each strategic period separately, while it was seen as an emergent strategy when considered over several strategic periods (Figure 2).

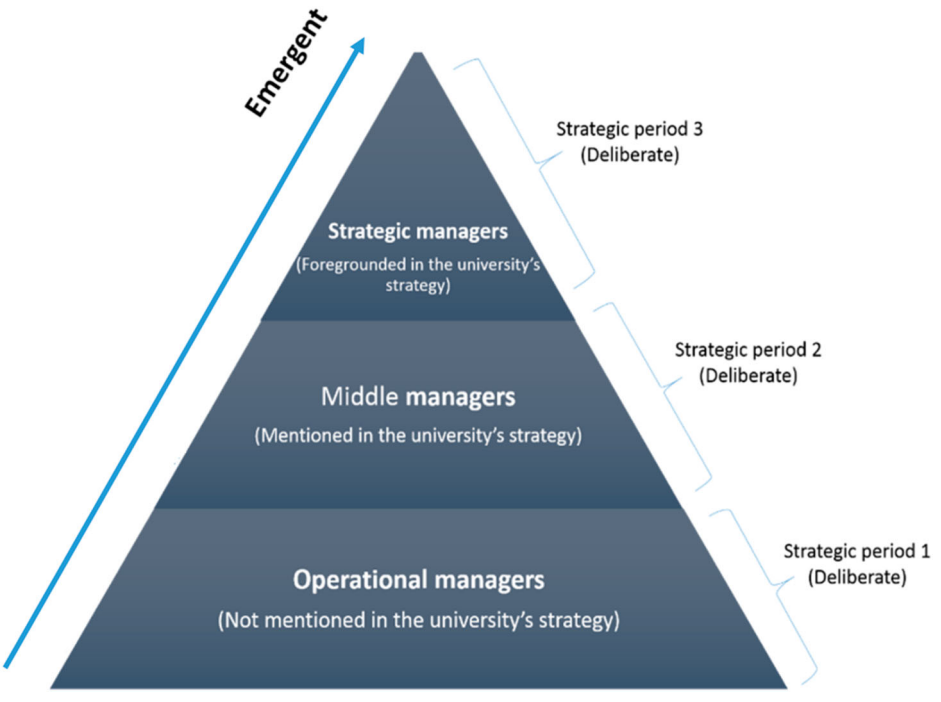

Figure 2. Trajectory of English universities' international strategies.

Three developmental phases can be identified in the trajectory of the international strategies of English universities (Figure 2). Different universities will have completed each phase at a different historical point in time.

Internationalisation starts as a group of initiatives which did not previously feature in a university's strategy and is controlled and promoted by operational managers (e.g. Head of the International Office). In the second stage, internationalisation practices increase and are mentioned in the strategy, but not foregrounded, and they are controlled and monitored by middle managers (e.g. Director of International Development). In the third stage, internationalisation is widened to include more international elements and became a core strategic priority which is managed by senior managers (e.g. Pro-Vice-Chancellor, International).

Conclusion

Internationalisation has developed from a number of separate initiatives to become a strategic objective in its own right during a period in which HE has become a global commodity. Previous research has examined trends in the internationalisation – and internationalisation practices – of universities. However, it has not adopted a strategic organisational perspective on internationalisation.

This study makes a major contribution to the literature by being the first to study the trajectory of the international strategies of a group of universities. The study identifies the importance of time frame as a strategic lens to determine the type of international strategies which four English universities have pursued, using Mintzberg and Waters' (1985) deliberate or emergent typology. It is found that the identification of international strategies as deliberate or emergent depends on the time frame considered. It was found the international strategy was deliberate in each strategic period, whereas it was emergent over a longer time frame of several strategic periods. This provides support for Mintzberg's (1987) view that 'strategies are both plans for the future and patterns from the past'.

The study has led to the development of a conceptual model (Figure 2) which outlines the trajectory of the international strategies of English universities. The conceptual model highlights the changes which have taken place in each of the three phases of the universities' international strategies. The conceptual model does not assume that each university will necessarily go through every phase in a linear fashion and, in fact, some universities might move backwards, at least for a time, for example, as key personnel change; an example of that would be University B (Tables 1 and 2). In fact, each of the four universities in this study journeyed through the three phases differently in terms of both the time frames and the appearance of some of the characteristics, but they all had a similar direction of travel.

The results of this study are also of practical importance in that the conceptual model developed (Figure 2) can be used as a 'roadmap' for the internationalisation of universities, at least in England. It is clear, however, that time frame will be an important issue in any national context, particularly as a university's internationalisation strategy matures and as emerging national and international political issues come into play. By using this model, universities can identify where they are and where they want to be; and hence what actions need to be taken to drive forward their international strategies more quickly.

Future research should attempt to identify whether or not this model can be applied to other countries. Every country has its own specific national context and characteristics. Indeed, the internationalisation agenda is probably not as well developed in many countries as it is in England. Therefore, it would be interesting to see to what extent the three phases which have been identified in England are also applicable elsewhere in the context of different internal and external drivers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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