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Welcoming foreign providers

As internationalisation gathers pace, more and more institutions are considering establishing either campuses or collaborative arrangements offshore. This includes some of the more elite institutions around the world (for example MIT, Johns Hopkins, INSEAD and the Sorbonne are planning a base in Abu Dhabi, while Harvard is taking space in Dubai Knowledge Village). Yale is an exception, having just withdrawn its plans to have a presence in Abu Dhabi.

One early hazard institutions often face is knowing just how friendly the host country is to foreign providers. In an attempt to demystify the issues surrounding the regulation and control of private or overseas providers the World Bank and its offshoot, the International Finance Corporation, are organising a two day conference on private education in May. At the heart of the issue is the identification of different approaches to developing national policy on the private sector and foreign providers.

Mauritius must surely top the league table of those who offer a friendly welcome. The National Board of Investment (on which sits the Vice Chancellor of the University of Mauritius) views Mauritius as key player in the global knowledge industry and as a gateway to education provision within the region. It positively encourages educational investors supported by a clear and transparent regulatory framework. The regulatory body, the Tertiary Education Commission, sets out the rules and procedures for applying for registration, as well as giving detailed statistics on the scale of the private sector. In addition the TEC provides a helpful list of the "Indicative Priority Fields of Study" currently viewed as essential for national planning purposes. In a relatively small island this positive attitude has generated 44 private providers (28 of them from the UK) and has contributed to the highest national gross enrolment rate in Africa.

Another question facing the conference is whether governments should go further and provide cash or other incentives to the private sector. Somewhat surprisingly, this is a recommendation in the Thematic Review of Tertiary Education just published by the OECD (see below). Among its "general policy directions" is the recommendation to "publicly subsidise tertiary education studies offered by private institutions". One suspects that cultural and political barriers will cause many countries to hesitate before accepting this idea, even though it may make economic and practical sense.

Sources: Mauritius Board of Investment at <http://www.investmauritius.com/Detail.aspx?PagelD=38> and The Tertiary Education Commission at <http://tec.intnet.mu/> GlobalHigherEd issue of 17th April for a useful analysis of American universities involved in the Gulf States and in Singapore.

OECD's Thematic Review sets some challenges

After many years of gestation involving studies in 24 countries (including Australia, New Zealand and the UK) the OECD has produced a massive report called "Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society" that pulls together global policy developments and suggests some policy directions for governments to consider.

The result is an interesting mix of proposals; some of which will seem almost banal, but some of which are quite dramatic. The general framework is one of governments focussing more on strategic issues, while giving institutions greater autonomy to respond. A major challenge is to find a proper balance between governmental steering and institutional autonomy. Among the policy recommendations are the following:

- Use cost sharing between the State and students as the principle to shape the funding of tertiary education, except where the level of public resources is sufficient to ensure that quality is maintained. This statement threatens many deeply held convictions in European countries such as Sweden or France.
- Ensure that quality assurance is a “mechanism that enhances quality rather than simply forces compliance with a bureaucratic requirement”. A challenge that has not been overcome in many countries.
- Give institutions ample autonomy over the management of human resources including broad discretion over the setting of academic salaries and determining academic career structures.
- Encourage the recruitment of more international staff by establishing international agreements on the transfer of pension rights.
- Develop on-campus internationalisation such as encouraging institutions to deliver programmes in foreign languages. Surely an invitation for more use of the English language.
- Commit external quality assurance to an advisory role as the system gains maturity.
- Develop alternatives to the current global rankings.

Overall, the report provides plenty of food for thought, even for the more advanced members of the OECD and addresses key concerns among higher education policy makers such as the labour market, funding mechanisms, the maintenance of quality and internationalisation.

The Report's recommendation on global rankings fits neatly with a study on the use and impact of league tables just published by HEFCE in the UK. The Open University and Hobsons were commissioned to look at three national and two international sets of rankings. Their findings confirmed the love-hate relationship that institutions have towards them. They know that the methodology is flawed in several ways (such as excluding some institutions, using inadequate proxies for quality, being based on out of date information and insufficiently transparent) and yet it is obvious to all that they cannot be ignored and are a real factor in decisions made by foreign governments, overseas students and academic staff about which institution to support or work with. In line with the OECD the report suggests that governments should act together to promote understanding of alternative sources of information to the league tables as well as working with the compilers to remedy some of the deficiencies.

Sources: OECD *Thematic Review of Tertiary Education: Synthesis Report*. April 2008.

www.oecd.org/dataoecd/20/4/40345176.pdf

Counting what is measured or measuring what counts? League tables and their impact on higher education institutions in England. See HEFCE Publications 2008/14 at www.hefce.ac.uk

Student complaints on the increase

Three years ago a new entity called the Office of the Independent Adjudicator in Higher Education (OIAHE) was created in England and Wales to act as the ultimate arbiter of disputes between universities and their students, replacing the curious historic system under which each university appointed a Visitor to hear appeals. In that time it has made over 1650 rulings and has done this in every case within its target time of six months. However, its latest Annual Report for 2007 reports on a disturbing increase in the number of applications. The reasons it speculates are partly due to changing attitudes among students, the emergence of student contracts and partly to legislation such as that relating to disability discrimination.

In Canada there is a longer history of student litigation with much of it vexatious, such as a recent case claiming religious discrimination that lasted for seven years and that was finally won by the University of British Columbia which was awarded costs of C\$1.7million. The number of cases is also on the rise and a lawyer in the Canadian Association of University Solicitors claims that "whatever is happening legally in the US, no matter how nutty it may seem, eventually finds it way here in some form or another". This is just what the OIAHE hopes to avoid with its careful student-friendly approach to handling all applications and relatively speedy process.

Sources: Annual Report for 2007 of the OIAHE at www.oiahe.org.uk. "When students sue". University Affairs, May 2008. The journal of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada at www.universityaffairs.ca

The editor, Jay Kubler, and author, John Fielden, are always pleased to receive comments on the usefulness and content of this briefing service. News from other Commonwealth countries, which might be of wider interest, is also most welcome. They can be contacted by e-mail on vcnet@acu.ac.uk or by fax on +44 (0)20 7387 2655.

