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Implementing International Staff Exchange

Alison Pearce, Teresa Waring

The 'Bologna Declaration' was signed by twenty-nine European Ministers of Culture and Education in June 1999. The overarching objectives of the 'Bologna Process' are to create an increasingly converged system of higher education (HE) across Europe, in order to maximise transferability and mobility of staff and students and to increase the global competitiveness of European Higher Education systems. The promotion of mobility is one of the founding principles and is seen as the basis for establishing the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Subject to the forces of globalization and implicated in the Bologna Process, Northumbria University is therefore engaged in the development of an internationalisation strategy, of which the encouragement of staff exchange forms a stated part. Such exchanges rarely take place however. Meanwhile, the failure to execute strategy is increasingly acknowledged as a major problem in organisational performance today (Pennypacker & Ritchie 2002, Bossidy & Charan 2002, Johnson 2004, Mankins & Steele 2005, Hrebiniak 2006, Pfeffer & Sutton 2006, Carpenter & Sanders 2007, Kaplan & Norton 2008, Hill 2009).

The purpose of this research is to bridge the 'gap' (Kaplan & Norton 1996, Pfeffer & Sutton 2000, Bossidy & Charan 2002, Mankins & Steele 2005) between successful strategy formulation and actual execution of that strategy by investigating how to implement international staff exchanges (as opposed to student exchanges) as part of an internationalisation strategy in a 'new' (ie post-1992) UK business school. A comprehensive recommendation is developed in the light of both academic and practitioner literature concerning strategy execution generally, strategic entrepreneurship, internationalisation of HE and strategic management in HE.

The research uses a first and second person Insider Action Research approach as proposed by Coghlan & Brannick (2005). An Action Research 'small group' was established and a Pre-step and six chronological cycles of Action Research were enacted over twenty-seven months, each consisting of four phases: Diagnosing, Planning Action, Taking Action and Evaluating. The research revolves around the author, who organised and undertook an international staff exchange, and also three further groups, characterised by their level of involvement in the research: collaborators, participants and respondents. Data generation methods include a reflective journal, unstructured interviews, meeting transcriptions and document analysis. Each phase is analysed in four ways - Experiencing, Reflecting, Interpreting and Taking Action - from which themes emerge. The meta-cycle of enquiry - content, process and premise - then combines these themes with the theory to produce a model of strategy execution pertinent to international staff exchanges in a new university business school.

Implementing International Staff Exchange

Duality is the nature of the major recommendations and a simplistic transplant of the expatriation policies of commercial organisations is avoided. The 'corporate entrepreneur' (Burgelman 1983) can be central to the execution of the most innovative elements of a strategy. Members of the creative class (Florida 2002), they may be attracted by the foundation of a diverse environment and culture promoted by a university's values-driven approach to internationalisation (Knight 1999, Jones & Brown 2007, Harris 2008). Their autonomous strategic behaviour (Burgelman 1983) must be at first facilitated and later managed by the elements of an execution-focused organisational architecture, including structure, process and resources. In a university, the overall approach to staff exchange should combine central and local (school-based) functions both to develop strategic initiatives and to exploit tactical opportunities.

While Action Research is widely used in education, this is the first time it has been used to investigate issues of strategy execution, an area of strategic management only recently being explored. The findings of the study might have limitations in terms of their generalisability to institutions and countries beyond the context of the 'case study'. However, readers are provided with enough detail to judge relevance for themselves and the resulting model provides a basis for further research.

It is hoped that the research will provide suggestions and food-for-thought for both individuals and organisations regarding bridging what is widely-acknowledged as a knowing-doing gap (Pfeffer & Sutton 2000) ie how to go beyond well intentioned and yet vague statements involving the 'encouragement' of international staff exchange and actually to make it happen.