

The Royal Society of Edinburgh
and
The Council for Industry and Higher Education

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Internationalising Higher Education

Beyond the comfort zone...

The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) recently published a report called *Global Horizons for UK Universities*, highlighting the importance of encouraging students to ‘think international’ and the challenges faced in persuading overseas students to come over here. At the joint RSE-CIHE event, speakers from business, education and government responded to the findings of the report and added some suggestions of their own...

The language was strong from the start, as RSE Vice-President Tariq Durrani described how universities in the US talk about a ‘gathering storm’ and the ‘war for talent’ in the academic marketplace, with shortfalls of millions of graduates in coming years, not just in America but also in Europe. And while UK universities must do more to compete for overseas students, international experience is becoming the new ‘must-have’ for UK graduates competing for jobs.

Setting the scene, CEO Richard Brown summarised the recent CIHE report, discussing the need for UK universities to produce “global citizens better equipped” for the globalised world, the need for greater cultural sensitivity to overseas students, and the need for universities to project their brands globally. He also talked about the importance of developing curricula with a ‘global perspective’ and international collaboration with researchers and industry partners, at the same time as pushing more students abroad. “We have to take students out of their comfort zone,” he added, since business today is more likely to favour multi-lingual students with drive and international experience.

And how can we achieve this? According to Brown, internationalisation should be a central part of university strategy, whilst more funding is also required to raise awareness and ‘send out the right signals’. The CIHE is also concerned about universities focusing too much on income and not enough on how to provide a high-quality student experience. Another issue is poor integration of overseas students on campus and a low appreciation of the international dimension among teaching staff. Even though foreign students rate UK teachers highly, they also say their education does not prepare them very well for employment. Government could also help with visa applications, Brown added.

Turning to Scotland, Brown said overseas students perceive it as a good place to study and work, but only 50 per cent believe there are job opportunities here which are directly linked to their own academic career path. Not only should we pay more attention to the views of alumni, Brown added, but we should also develop the role of employers, so that Scotland can become the preferred location for international students and the best place for employers to recruit them.

Speaking on behalf of the business community, Shonaig Macpherson said that most Scottish companies take higher education for granted, but have a lot to learn from academia, because the universities can often be the ‘eyes and ears’ of industry, spotting trends like internationalisation and selling their services overseas, long before business. The universities have also done well in attracting foreign investment and forming global partnerships in areas such as research.

In Macpherson’s view, Scottish universities are doing very well in terms of promoting a global perspective, but should constantly question if they are producing the ‘end-to-end’ graduates that we need for an agile and flexible workforce, and if the degrees on offer are what we *really* require in the new global age. In addition, Scottish universities should benchmark themselves against other countries, and develop ‘affinity’ networks as well as outward-looking schemes like Saltire Fellowships.

She also asked why we don’t focus more on the needs of the 70 per cent of young people who are not in the NEET (not in education, employment or training) category, and why we are not crying

out for more knowledge workers, and making a greater effort to develop our graduates' management skills.

“Scotland can be a *cul-de-sac* for someone with international experience,” she cautioned, echoing the other speakers' concerns about employability and lack of multicultural awareness.

Sir Muir Russell then stressed the need for universities to get up to speed on internationalisation, pointing out Scotland's plus points – such as 30,000 overseas students from 180 countries, and our philanthropic projects in countries such as Malawi and Rwanda – but also urging universities to recognise that everything we do is now defined by international standards, and that reputation and league tables do really matter when it comes to planning for the increasingly globalised world of the future.

The universities also need to work harder to get more research partnerships, and collaborate with international governments as well as NGOs and business, to become more innovative and open to new ideas, he added.

He also urged business to get closer to the universities and think about its future requirements and how the universities can meet them. More companies should use their links with universities to improve the employability of graduates, taking greater advantage of internship schemes, for example, whilst government should also value higher education more and support it just like any other sector.

Representing government, Mark Batho welcomed the CIHE report and explained how internationalisation fits into the Scottish Government's strategic framework, “to deliver a higher level of sustainable economic growth.” Among the questions being posed by government are how education and lifelong learning in Scotland perform in comparison to other countries, and how we can learn from overseas experience. Also, how can we bolster Scotland's reputation abroad and ensure that Scots have a more rounded ‘world view?’

“We need to welcome and value international students,” said Batho, adding that we also need to measure our progress and make sure that we place a greater emphasis on employability, integrating work experience and education. “Universities have to learn what employers want, and employers should be more aware of what the universities can do for them,” he added.

Batho then concluded by saying that Scotland is on the right track, but not doing enough, when it comes to internationalisation, pointing out that an upcoming visit to China by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Fiona Hyslop, to sign a memorandum of understanding to finance academic exchanges, is a sign of continuing progress.

The discussion which followed addressed a wide range of issues, including Scottish students' lack of confidence when it comes to studying abroad, the financial implications and the lack of language skills among British students in general. Above all, the message was that students should be made more aware of the fact that studying overseas is good for you not only academically, but also in terms of employability. Business in Scotland was also encouraged to take more advantage of the large pool of highly skilled foreign graduates seeking employment here, whilst government was urged to think more carefully about immigration, to make it easier for companies to hang on to overseas talent.

As well as producing more employable graduates, our universities should also try to develop students' entrepreneurial skills, as well as multi-cultural awareness. The Royal Bank of Scotland is an internationally well-known, multi-cultural organisation, Richard Brown commented, but which Scottish university can claim to compare with the bank in terms of global outlook?

Income from overseas students is often essential to balance the books, but the CIHE report serves as a potent reminder that when it comes to internationalising higher education, our universities (and government) should focus on the long term – not only next term.

Peter Barr

