

HOW INSTITUTIONS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES CAN FORM SUSTAINABLE INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS: EXPERIENCES FROM INDIA

P. J. LAVAKARE, MEMBER, BOARD OF MANAGEMENT, SYMBIOSIS INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY, PUNE (INDIA)

Introduction

The internationalization of higher education at the institutional level is a relatively new concept in many developing countries. In the past, individual researchers have worked with their foreign counterparts in more or less stand-alone mode. Now, student demands for exposure to global opportunities through higher education are rapidly increasing, and institutions in turn are seeking to develop strategic international partnerships. Often they do not know how to systematically initiate and sustain partnerships at the institutional level. Based on my experiences in India, I would like to Offer some measures that institutions in developing countries should take to develop successful international partnership programs.

Understanding the Need for International Partnerships

For strategic international partnerships to be successful, educational institutions in developing countries must understand their necessity. The boards of management, academic councils, and the various institutional committees should organize debates among their faculties and administrators to highlight the necessity of international partnerships in the changing global educational environment. The open debate should identify the benefits of international partnerships for the students, teachers, and education community as a whole. The implications of international partnerships additional costs that arise from the internationalization of the campus, the need for improved infrastructure for international students and faculty, and social, health, and security concerns-should be clearly communicated and addressed.

Individual departments should provide opportunities for faculty members to meet counterparts at foreign universities and form collaborative relationships based on similar academic interests. All international exercises involve expenses for traveling abroad and hosting international partners. If a sense of jealousy arises among other faculty members who have not had the opportunity to travel abroad, the departmental head should prioritize the budget to provide opportunities for everyone.

Potential partners can grow frustrated when they receive no response from their counterparts on individual initiatives. It is therefore necessary that institutes as a whole make adequate provisions for projected activities before engaging foreign partners. In reaching out to international partners, not only should you identify benefits to the host institution, but you should also explain the possible benefits that the partners can expect from your institute. partnerships are likely to be Successful only when day provide mutual benefits to both sides.

I have tried to build partnerships for my institution by carefully choosing a likeminded or similarly endowed institution as a partner. However, our management often wanted to collaborate only with the best institutions from a foreign countr^y, without realizing that such institutions were not necessarily the most appropriate fit for our institute. It is therefore important to understand the mutual strengths and weaknesses of the partners, and to convincingly convey this information to the management.

Setting Up an Office for International Partnerships

Once institutional commitment is confirmed, it is necessary to assign the task of administering this partnership to an Office for International Partnerships (OIP). These offices are uncommon in many university exchange programs in developing countries. The engaged faculty members are often responsible for handling the administrative and logistic problems associated with academic exchanges. However, faculty members may not have the necessary infrastructure to address all the administrative and financial issues that are critical to the success of international partnerships. Ideally, the engaged faculty members should be focused on the academic elements of the program, and the OIP should act as a facilitator that oversees the international partnership.

The OIP should also encourage other faculty members by surveying other institutions for partnerships and preparing a database for potential partners based on the policies initiated by the boards of management and the expertise of the faculties. It is important to identify the right personnel for manning an OIP. They should include those who have traveled or studied abroad and are familiar with the global educational scene.

Communication channels should be mainly based on electronic mail. People-to-people contact should precede an extensive e-survey of the available opportunities. The staff of the OIP should be aware of international conferences like the annual NAFSA Conference that expose the global educational partners to opportunities in international education. Organizations in the U.S. like the Institute of International Education (IIE) also offer opportunities for building international partnerships through institutional membership programs.

In a typical university in a developing country, each academic discipline may vie for international partnerships with its own specialists. This structure does not provide the full benefit of international partnerships to the entire institution. I believe that the role of catalyzing internationalization cannot be left to an individual department, but should be done by an independent "department" that considers the interest of all academic units of the university. It is in this context that the concept of an OIP was born in MY university. Every department would then expect the OIP to help them in their interests in international collaboration. As I have learned, the process of internationalization has to cut across various disciplines to provide maximum benefit to the institution as a whole.

Identify the Areas of Partnership

International partnerships are formed at different levels and for different target groups. Often, a university receives a high-level delegation from a foreign institution, and a vague Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is signed to demonstrate the intent of internationalization. However, there are a large number of MOUs signed by universities on both sides that have not advanced beyond these noble intentions penned down amid photo shoots and press releases. Before such MOUs are signed, there has to be an honest commitment to internationalization by both partners.

A country like India receives many political delegations from various countries. In most cases, the agenda is political with some economic plans added in. To make the collaboration look more comprehensive, many countries include education exchanges in the overall agreement signed between the two countries. The academic community is then asked by their foreign offices to follow

up on these agreements; however, many institutions have not done their homework on identifying and selecting the areas of cooperation. This leaves the education part of the collaboration ineffective, and often this part of the MOU is ignored. It is necessary for educational institutions to be proactive and indicate to the foreign affairs ministry their specific interests in areas of collaboration and the names of the institutions with whom they would like to work.

Teaching and Research Exchanges

Certain partnerships could introduce innovative ways of teaching based on the best practices from each culture. One approach would entail searching for institutions known for their excellence in teaching. This is not to say that institutions should ignore faculty who are doing research, for teaching and research cannot be divested in the higher education domain. A partnership based on teaching should focus on how given faculty members use various methods for communicating with their students. If the partnership is for research, the focus should be on areas of research common to the two institutions and whether appropriate infrastructure, including the availability of library resources and research scholars, exists on both sides. If an institution hopes to start a new area of research with the help of the partner institution, this can happen only if the partner institution sees a potential for future collaborations as an equal partner.

Regardless of the teaching or research approach, the partnership protocol should clearly indicate whether the partnership involves both students and teachers with Mutual exchanges to each other's institutions. Well-planned visits of Students and teachers should incorporate the methodology of joint selection. The financial arrangements need to be cleared, including the duration of the stay at each institution.

The most common approach for funding such exchanges is that the sending side pays for travel while the receiving side bears the hosting costs, which are agreed on in advance. Issues related to health insurance and emergency situations need to be kept in mind, and sufficient time should be allowed for obtaining visas and other travel documents. Once the personnel to be exchanged are identified through careful academic scrutiny, direct communication between the two should be encouraged, without over-involvement from the administrative machinery.

In my experience, institutions in India have faced problems of partnering in teaching areas, because there is lack of understanding of how credits are transferred by partnering institutions. Further, the academic calendar of Indian institutions does not match with that of Western institutions. This creates hurdles in scheduling teaching programs. The teaching methodology also varies between Indian and Western systems. In India, we tend to focus more on delivering lectures than on ensuring that students learn by actively participating in the classroom. Internationalization programs should keep these details in mind when undertaking programs of collaboration.

Partnerships for Joint Degrees

Apart from student and faculty exchanges, a new form of partnership is emerging in which institutions agree on giving joint degrees to students who complete part of their course requirements in one country and the remaining in the partnering institution. This is a more difficult partnership to handle, as academic requirements have to be met on both sides. The students and the faculty have to adjust to learning and teaching under different educational cultures.

Private universities in India have been more flexible in undertaking such joint degree programs with international partners. Government institutions have yet to experiment with this innovative way of promoting student mobility. Unfortunately, some joint degree programs are not accepted by employers in India, particularly if the employment is with a governmental organization. Indian students have been able to use such joint degree programs primarily for seeking admissions in Western universities, but not in their own Countries. Students in developing countries have found these joint degree programs useful for enhancing their careers abroad.

Campuses Abroad

With Opportunities for providing trans-border education, educational Institutions are exploring partnerships that involve setting up their campuses in another country. The student community benefits from these kinds of partnerships, but developing countries are concerned that the increased competition may have an impact on their own institutions.

Indian institutions have ventured abroad in countries like Dubai and Malaysia. The pending legislature in the Indian parliament has provisions that may allow foreign institutions to set up campuses in India. However, there is a feeling that the conditions may be too restrictive and unattractive for foreign education providers to venture on Indian soil. Nevertheless, setting up campuses abroad greatly internationalizes the education system and opens opportunities to local students who would otherwise be deprived of an international education experience.

Study Abroad Partnerships

Developed countries are looking to provide global exposure to their students through study abroad programs in developing countries, like India, where credit based courses allow their students to experience different cultures. Unfortunately, many developing countries are not geared to offering such multidisciplinary and socio cultural-based courses. If developing countries gain expertise in providing study abroad programs, they could be in a position to develop successful international partnerships.

Over the past decade, I have encouraged several universities in India to develop Study India Programs (SIP) for foreign students to come to India for a period of four to six weeks. Normally, the faculty is reluctant to do the extra work of developing a curriculum that is multidisciplinary and requires innovative ideas. The management has given monetary incentives for the faculty to take up the additional task of planning and executing SIP for foreign students from developed countries. We have used the diversity of India to develop Culturally rich study abroad programs to enhance our international experience.

Programming and Budgeting

For any successful partnership initiative, the details of the collaboration should be exchanged in advance and included as part of an addendum to the main MOU. This project document should be as detailed as possible. The necessary financial implications must be spelled out in the overall budgets of the partnering institutions. When the MOUs are signed, often there is no mention of the financial arrangements for partnerships. This becomes a major impediment when institutional budgets are affected by external constraints. The international programs tend to be

cut under such situations. If institutions are serious about sustaining international partnerships, the Financial plan for the internationalization activities must be reflected in the overall budgets approved by the respective boards. International travel and hospitality to foreign visitors need to be adequately provided for. Transfer/ repatriation of funds and the relevant income tax regulations also have to be taken into account when deciding on payments to visiting faculty.

I have found that many Indian universities have not yet fully internationalized their campuses. The concept of internationalization is often misunderstood. I recall one university equating internationalization with "world-class" education. Some Indian universities have not yet seen internationalization programs as a means of enhancing the value of education and producing "global citizens." The fact that inter-nationalization programs also can enhance international recruitment is not planned for. The budgeting exercises in our university systems have not yet provided adequate financial provisions for international exchanges, which are the heart of any internationalization program.

Conclusions

As student mobility increases, developing countries are realizing the importance of international education. Educational and cultural exchanges are considered necessary in today's world without borders. Unfortunately, many educational institutions in developing countries are not aware of the modalities that need to be in place in order to develop sustainable international partnerships. In this brief chapter, I have suggested some areas of mobilization that will help educational institutions, particularly from developing countries, understand the issues involved in developing successful and rewarding international partnerships.