

## **UK Universities' Global Engagement Strategies: Time for a rethink?**



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## About this report

This report is designed to be of practical use to those who are responsible for (or play a significant role in) the development of their institution's internationalisation or global engagement strategy – whether that strategy is articulated via the institutional strategic plan, a separate supporting strategy, both or neither.

It draws on a study of 134 current UK Higher Education Institution (HEI) strategic plans and 26 internationalisation strategies; in-depth interviews with 12 senior stakeholders; and a review of recent conferences, webinars and publications.

Insights are shared, alongside questions to be considered by HEIs as they reflect on the kind of global engagement strategy they should pursue in the context of a much-altered global higher education landscape. Now is the time for broad and deep strategic thinking to take place in our sector and it is hoped that this report will help to stimulate the discussions that are needed; and to strengthen the institutional strategies that emerge.

As with any piece of research, this report represents the tip of the iceberg. For those wishing to delve deeper into specific issues, the footnotes contain links to useful articles, reports and webinar recordings.

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Between them, my interviewees have experience of working at 25 different UK universities (in three of the four UK nations), with that experience fairly evenly split between pre- and post-1992 institutions. They include Pro Vice-Chancellors / Vice Principals (International), Directors (of International and of Strategic Planning) and individuals with research interests in internationalisation and strategy development. Their valuable insights are much appreciated – as are those of other colleagues across the sector who were generous in acting as sounding boards at both design stage and as findings emerged.

## About the author



Dr Vicky Lewis is an independent consultant, who specialises in working with Higher Education providers to develop or refine international strategies, infrastructure and implementation plans.

Clients have ranged from small, specialist institutions just setting out on their internationalisation journey to Russell Group universities with an impressive global footprint. Since establishing her business in 2013, Vicky has worked with numerous UK-based HEIs as well as providers located in Germany, France, Sweden, Malaysia, Israel and the US.

Vicky's consultancy expertise draws on both professional experience and academic research. Before becoming a consultant, she worked for 19 years within UK universities (in Wales, Scotland and England). This included 13 years at Senior Management Team level at Bournemouth University, where she was initially appointed to set up an International Office from scratch and progressed to become Director of Marketing & Communications, leading a large, multi-function team.

In 2007, Vicky completed the University of Bath's DBA (Higher Education Management) with a thesis on 'integrated internationalism' within UK HEIs. Subsequent research has focused on transnational education and on institutional strategies for internationalisation and global engagement.

Vicky is a regular speaker at international conferences on a range of internationalisation-related topics. She is a keen blogger (see: <https://www.vickylewisconsulting.co.uk/news-and-views.php>), a Consulting Fellow with Halpin Partnership and an active member of the European Association for International Education.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

About this report	2
Acknowledgements	2
About the author	3
Table of contents	4
List of tables and figures	5
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>PART ONE</b>	
<b>CONTEXT FOR THIS REPORT: WHY NOW?</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter 1: How this study came to be</b>	<b>10</b>
1.1 Methodology	11
1.2 Terminology	11
1.3 Scope	11
1.4 Structure of report	12
<b>Chapter 2: The pandemic as a catalyst for reprioritisation</b>	<b>13</b>
2.1 Higher education and its moral compass	13
2.2 The UK context: philosophical tensions	14
2.3 Institutional context: balancing ideological aspirations with present realities	15
2.4 Conclusions: time for a global engagement rethink	16
<b>PART TWO</b>	
<b>CURRENT STATE OF PLAY: TENSIONS AND TRAPS</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Chapter 3: The articulation of global engagement strategy by UK HEIs</b>	<b>18</b>
3.1 The global dimension: marginal or embedded?	18
3.2 Mission: making the world a better place	19
3.3 Strategic themes: global contribution or institutional profile-building?	20
3.4 Key Performance Indicators: international student recruitment trumps all	21
3.5 Supporting strategies: aligned or standalone?	21
3.6 Changes over time: broadening scope but narrow metrics	22
3.7 Conclusions: a mismatch between rhetoric and what is actually measured	23
<b>Chapter 4: Avoiding the 'hidden traps': lessons for the future</b>	<b>26</b>
4.1 Build internal alignment: consistency and cascade	26
4.2 Acknowledge the challenges: better to be honest	27
4.3 Ditch the laundry list: prioritisation and focus	27
4.4 Define your own success: matching rhetoric and reality	28

## **PART THREE**

### **NEXT GENERATION STRATEGIES: WHERE ARE WE HEADING? 30**

**Chapter 5: Time for a new approach 31**

**Chapter 6: Considering the 'why': drivers and differentiation 33**

**Chapter 7: Addressing global – and local – challenges 35**

**Chapter 8: Negotiating new global dynamics 37**

**Chapter 9: Rethinking partnership models 40**

9.1 Holistic partnerships 40

9.2 Flexible TNE developments 41

9.3 New competition and enhanced collaboration 42

**Chapter 10: 'Internationalisation for All' in a digital world 44**

10.1 Internationalisation for All 44

10.2 Enriching the student experience 45

10.3 A global mindset for staff 46

**Chapter 11: Alternative operating practices 48**

11.1 From coffee table publication to meaningful, living strategy 48

11.2 From silos to shared responsibility 48

11.3 From lip service to active changes 50

**Chapter 12: New ways of measuring success 52**

12.1 The impact conundrum 52

12.2 From rankings obsession to 'inner confidence' 53

12.3 Alternative measures of progress 54

**Conclusion: Opportunities to make a distinctive impact 57**

Overview of key questions for HEIs to ask 59

References 62

Glossary 66

## **LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES**

**Table 1:** The profile of the global dimension in UK HEI strategic plans 19

**Figure 1:** The global dimension in mission statements 20

**Figure 2:** The global dimension in strategic theme titles 20

**Figure 3:** Focus of KPIs with an international dimension 21

**Figure 4:** Relationship between published International Strategy and Strategic Plan 22

**Figure 5:** Balance of emphasis at the level of Mission, Strategic Theme Title and KPI 24

## Executive summary

### Introduction

The primary aim of this report is to stimulate conversations within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that are considering their future global engagement strategies. It is hoped that the issues raised and the questions posed will be a useful starting point for discussions and may aid development of a generation of distinctive strategies that truly reflect institutional values, mission and character.

The report starts with a sector-wide analysis of the global dimension within 134 UK HEI strategic plans current in late 2020, noting key characteristics, emerging themes and some common weak spots. Building on these insights, it explores (via in-depth interviews with 12 senior sector stakeholders, supplemented by references to recent publications and events) some of the changes we might wish to make in future, post-pandemic strategies for global engagement.

### Current state of play

The report argues that now is the right time for HEIs to rethink their approaches to global engagement. The pandemic has accelerated a recalibration of the global HE sector's priorities, from climate action through to online learning. Greater emphasis is being placed on universities' contribution to the global common good, often through international collaboration. They are being urged to embrace an ethical, non-colonial approach to internationalisation. However, disconnects exist between some aspects of UK government policy and the mission of universities. At institutional level, the challenge is to stabilise finances in the context of an economic recession at the same time as keeping in sight a long-term vision for global engagement.

While the centrality of internationalisation varies according to institutional mission, three-quarters of current UK HEI strategic plans either name it as a specific strategic theme or embed it across the entire plan. The rhetoric in recent strategic plans tends to be more values-led than in earlier ones. There is now an increased focus on the institution's global contribution. However, the metrics used have not changed significantly over time. Where Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are included within strategic plans, the majority relate to institutional profile, reach or income. This may suggest a mismatch between what universities say is important to them and what they actually measure when evaluating success. It may also reflect the challenge of wanting to make a valuable social contribution within a competitive context where profile-building is better rewarded.

The review of current strategic plans reveals certain common strategy 'traps'. Since now is an important time for rigorous strategic thinking, it is worth highlighting these pitfalls so that they can be avoided in future. The key areas to pay attention to are: internal consistency and alignment between the main strategy and supporting strategies (e.g. internationalisation); frank acknowledgement of the institution's specific global engagement challenges and explanation of how these will be overcome; prioritisation of a small number of mutually reinforcing actions (and decisions on what **not** to do); and alignment between institutional mission / values and international success measures, so that the latter reflect what makes the institution distinctive.

## Next generation strategies

The next generation of global engagement strategies must fulfil a range of purposes. These include making a positive impact across different aspects of organisational mission; helping to stabilise university finances; and finding a valued and distinctive position for the institution to occupy within the global knowledge ecosystem. However, the forward-looking ideas and new opportunities which excite academics and practitioners when discussed in sector conferences, opinion pieces and working papers often get diluted (or dropped altogether) when institutional strategies are developed. Now may be the time to embrace some of the more far-reaching changes that could take an institution's global engagement in new and distinctive directions.

Research revealed some key (and in many cases interrelated) themes which are worth considering when new strategies are consulted on and existing ones reviewed.

At a philosophical level, it is seen as important to consider the 'why' of internationalisation. What are the primary drivers and how will the institution's approach reflect its values and support its mission? How can the perspectives of those who challenge western and Anglosphere-orientated notions of internationalisation be considered? How will the institution negotiate government policies in a way that is true to its values? What will be different about the kind of internationalisation it pursues in a post-Covid context? Are there global engagement principles about which the university community will take a public stand and which will help to differentiate it?

One high-level theme was the need to address global – and local – challenges as part of the post-Covid recovery. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals were seen as a useful hook within global engagement strategies. The intersection of international education with climate impact, equality, diversity and inclusion, and social and racial justice, was seen as fertile ground for new initiatives. Consideration is needed of the benefits that global engagement can bring to local / regional communities and of how civic engagement activities can have a positive international impact.

Another high-level theme related to negotiating new global dynamics in a post-Brexit world, where the balance of power is shifting from West to East. Issues ranged from the ethical dimension of building international relationships to the need for a university's portfolio of partner countries to support institutional mission, spread risk and ensure diversity. It was seen as important for institutions to build understanding of partner country priorities and to enhance the ability of staff and students to engage globally, supporting intercultural competency and linguistic development.

On a more tactical level, there was emphasis on rethinking partnership models, based on deep consideration of how international partnerships can help institutions to achieve their – and their partners' – overarching strategic goals. The need for more holistic partnerships was outlined, along with a potential repositioning of transnational education (TNE) within the education portfolio, including a focus on its role in widening access to new participants. Institutions were urged to consider what needs to happen for them to develop truly flexible provision and whether it is even helpful to draw distinctions between TNE and other delivery modes (or between TNE students and other students). The benefits and challenges of working with different types of partner, such as agent aggregators, pathway operators and Online Program

Management (OPM) specialists need to be evaluated. Consideration should also be given to new forms of collaboration with UK peers and within global networks.

A further important theme centred on 'internationalisation for all' in a digital world: inclusive approaches to developing global perspectives and enriching the student experience, often assisted by digital technologies. There was a strong emphasis on ensuring all students (and staff) have access to international and intercultural experiences regardless of whether they can travel. It was felt that a reconfiguration of curricula is required to integrate virtual exchange, collaborative online projects and themes such as sustainability, decolonisation and social justice that are prioritised by many of today's students. Supporting global employability and ongoing engagement with international alumni were seen as critical elements of the student experience. And the fostering of a global mindset and cultural intelligence in staff was viewed as an essential underpinning for truly inclusive internationalisation.

In order for new strategies to be effective, alternative operating practices are needed. These include greater agility and a willingness to review and adapt strategy on an ongoing basis; a shift from silo working to shared responsibility, cross-institutional collaboration and joint, project-based initiatives; a reconfiguration of international offices, with more in-country hubs and less long-haul travel; and a translation of rhetoric (in such areas as carbon emissions and diversification of source countries) into tangible actions.

A final theme – linked to the findings of the first phase of the research – related to new ways of measuring success. Institutions will need to grapple with the challenges of measuring impact and carefully consider the role of rankings. While there were mixed views on the mainstream global rankings, some powerful arguments emerged that they are no longer fit for purpose and encourage both unnecessary competition and the development of isomorphic strategies; that they are more about looking good and 'keeping up with the Joneses' than about doing good. Placing less emphasis on rankings would help institutions to concentrate on self-improvement, making a distinctive contribution and building 'inner confidence'. Alternative measures of progress were suggested, that would reflect greater diversity of mission. These included ratings, indexes and survey-based tools that could be tailored to an institution's mission and priorities (and those of its key stakeholders).

## **Conclusion**

The report concludes that the current context for HE global engagement is fraught with tensions – from the geopolitical level through to the institutional level. However, Covid-19 has provided us with a structural break to rethink our approach and address some of the disconnects. If the right questions are asked to open up discussion as strategy is developed, there is an opportunity to grasp some of the bold ideas that emerge, to test them against institutional mission and values and, where appropriate, to embed them in a global engagement strategy that helps the institution to cultivate its own distinctive approach to internationalisation and make a positive impact both globally and locally.

## **PART ONE**

### **Context for this report: Why now?**

Part One of this report explains how this research study came to be and outlines methodology and scope (Chapter 1), before providing a brief overview of current global, UK and institutional context (Chapter 2), arguing that now is the right moment for UK higher education institutions to rethink their global engagement strategies.

Key insights are summarised at the end of Chapter 2.

## CHAPTER 1: How this study came to be

This study stems from a long-held fascination with the changing nature of higher education institutions' (HEI) international strategies over time.

I have worked in the UK higher education sector since 1994, when few institutions had anything resembling a formal international strategy. Over the last 25 years, I have witnessed their evolution. The early international strategies (in the late 1990s and early 2000s) tended to have economic drivers (and were often peripheral to the main institutional strategy), with an almost exclusive focus on recruiting international students. In the mid / late 2000s and early 2010s, we started to see broader internationalisation strategies. These positioned themselves as more comprehensive in scope and saw internationalisation as a change process, but were still relatively inward-looking, focusing on making different functions, policies and processes within the institution 'more international'. In recent years, these have begun to be superseded by global engagement strategies. This changing terminology signals a further repositioning of the strategy as more outward-facing, with an emphasis on engaging responsibly, for the long term, on a global scale.<sup>1</sup>

Research that I undertook in 2005 (via a survey of British Universities International Liaison Association [BUILA] members) suggested that a significant proportion of internationalisation strategies were perceived to be glorified international student recruitment strategies. Some practitioners clearly felt that 'institutions were paying lip-service to broader internationalisation objectives without really altering their underlying priorities'.<sup>2</sup>

This is a recurring theme. When Vincenzo Raimo reported on an investigation of UK universities' international strategies in 2013, he wrote: 'I've been surprised to find that some universities still believe that a one dimensional plan for international student recruitment is an internationalisation strategy'.<sup>3</sup>

For a number of reasons, late 2020 felt like a good time to take the temperature of the sector once again, exploring the global dimension within current HEI strategic plans and sharing insights on the most prominent themes at the current time.

However, it quickly became evident that the Covid-19 pandemic represents a 'structural break':<sup>4</sup> an opportunity to rethink strategies for a different kind of future.

So the balance of the research shifted from a study of current strategies (with a few observations about what future strategies might include) to a reflection on how the next generation of global engagement strategies might develop (drawing on research-informed understanding of the current strategy landscape, coupled with insights from recent publications and events and from interviews with a small group of senior sector stakeholders).

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this, see: Lewis, V. (2020) Time to move on from the internationalisation strategy? *Vicky Lewis Consulting Weblog*. Available at: <https://www.vickylewisconsulting.co.uk/time-to-move-on-from-the-internationalisation-strategy.php>

<sup>2</sup> See Lewis, V. (2007) 'Integrated internationalism' in *UK higher education: interpretations, manifestations and recommendations*. DBA thesis. University of Bath. p.59

<sup>3</sup> Raimo, V. (2013) Going global: UK universities must do more than talk the international talk. *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/aug/27/university-international-strategy-global-growth>

<sup>4</sup> See Baxter, M. (2020) Strategy, once the crisis is over: three lessons from the writings of Richard Rumelt. *LinkedIn*. Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/strategy-once-crisis-over-three-lessons-from-writings-mike-baxter/>

## 1.1 Methodology

The starting point for this study was a review (conducted between September and December 2020) of the strategic plans of Universities UK's (UUK) 140 member institutions. These were searched for via institutional websites and Google searches. In six cases, it proved impossible to locate any strategic plan. The analysis is therefore based on the 134 documents that were located.

The rationale for taking strategic plans as a starting point is twofold. First, they are publicly available for most institutions, whereas only 26 HEIs had publicly accessible international strategies at the time of this study (though it is assumed that many more exist as internal documents). Second, the profile of the global dimension within a strategic plan tells you more about its strategic significance for the institution than reviewing an international strategy which, by definition, is focused on that topic. Having said that, this study does also draw (in Chapters 3 and 4) on those internationalisation or global engagement strategies that were accessible.

To complement the document analysis with a more forward-looking perspective, in-depth interviews were undertaken in February and March 2021 with 12 senior stakeholders involved in – or with an interesting viewpoint on – the development of institutional global engagement strategy. An attempt was made, when selecting interviewees, to include individuals with experience covering a range of institutional contexts and geographical locations. Their role was not to represent their current institution, but simply to share their personal views based on expertise built up throughout their career. Interviews were semi-structured, took place on Zoom or Microsoft Teams and generally lasted for one hour.

The final source of insights drawn on in this report was the plethora of stimulating publications and events (especially virtual conferences and webinars) which emerged during 2020 and continued throughout the pandemic.

## 1.2 Terminology

For the purposes of this report, the term 'strategic plan' is used to refer to the document (pdf, website pages, microsite or electronic brochure) that communicates the institutional strategy, despite a variety of terminology being adopted by HEIs.

This report uses the terms 'international' / 'internationalisation' and 'global' / 'global engagement' because both feature in relevant HE discourse (often used interchangeably). Strictly speaking, 'international' means 'between nations', while 'global' means 'worldwide, relating to the whole world'. Global therefore tends – from a linguistic perspective – to have more inclusive connotations.

## 1.3 Scope

The research underpinning this report focuses solely on the strategies of UK institutions. While there are references to the insights of scholars and practitioners working in other national contexts, no attempt is made to compare strategies in the UK with those developed elsewhere. So, although the report may be of interest to readers in other countries (and some observations may be transferable), the context is firmly UK-specific.

An effort was made to approach interviewees with varied backgrounds, experience and perspectives; and to draw on a wide variety of articles, reports, conference sessions and events. However, because I have a particular set of interests and connections, some risk of

the 'echo chamber' phenomenon remains. If this is the case, it is hoped that this does not detract from the report's role as a stimulus for discussion.

The report also represents a snapshot in time and is very much 'of its moment' (late 2020 for the analysis of strategic plans; early 2021 for the stakeholder interviews). Every day, new material is published and new discussions take place, so it is inevitable that there will be developments and ideas which are not fully reflected in the report.

#### **1.4 Structure of report**

This report is divided into three parts. Part One is a short section providing useful context. Part Two covers the current state of play, based on a sector-wide analysis of the global dimension within the UK HEI strategic plans (and, where available, supporting international strategies) that were current in late 2020. Chapters 2 to 4 each conclude with a summary of Key Insights.

Part Three of the report is the most substantial one, focusing on the next generation of strategies and where we are heading when it comes to the future global engagement of UK HEIs. The chapters highlight key themes that emerged from the stakeholder interviews in February and March 2021. They also draw, where appropriate, on insights from recent publications and events. Chapter 5 explains the hierarchy of the subsequent chapters, each of which concludes with a summary of Key Questions.

The intention is that these Key Questions can be used as a prompt for discussion within institutions that are developing or reviewing their global engagement / internationalisation strategy. For ease of reference, they are therefore included in overview form in a separate section located between the Conclusion of the report and the References section.

The *Executive Summary* and *Overview of key questions for HEIs to ask* can also be downloaded as separate pdf documents from my website:

<https://www.vickylewisconsulting.co.uk/gsr>

## CHAPTER 2: The pandemic as a catalyst for reprioritisation

The shock caused by living through a global pandemic has triggered all manner of reprioritisations in people's lives. This extends to strategic thinking and planning within universities. The Covid-19 experience has encouraged us to step back and consider what matters most.

It has sharpened our collective focus on a number of areas touching on global engagement that were already emerging as prominent themes within HE sector discourse: the climate emergency (and the contribution of international travel emissions to this); collaborative (as opposed to colonialist) approaches to tackling global challenges (including those articulated via the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals [UN SDGs]); the meaning of 'Global Britain' and our future relationship with Europe; the civic role of HEIs within their local and regional communities; the need to address ingrained and systemically reinforced inequalities, including decolonisation of institutions; the fourth industrial revolution and the potential of digital technologies to make higher education more accessible.

The pandemic has shone a spotlight on the societal role of universities and their responsibility to contribute to the global common good.

However, at the same time, it has wrought havoc with university finances and catapulted many into short-term survival mode. The challenge of planning for a very different future while simultaneously keeping an institution afloat during a crisis has been immense.

### 2.1 Higher education and its moral compass

For Simon Marginson, the pandemic clearly illustrated the need to 'change the values that govern the way our higher education system functions... so as to put the common good ahead of all other considerations'.<sup>5</sup>

Higher education has an opportunity to contribute on a number of levels to the global recovery.<sup>6</sup> However, this will be most effective if institutions focus more on collaboration than competition and allow generosity of spirit to oust empire-building.<sup>7</sup>

This philosophy was articulated by Nicola Brewer in early 2018, when she asked the question 'By 2030, will universities "walk fast and alone – or walk far and together"?'.<sup>8</sup> Her article for *Wonkhe* posited the idea of universities as global team players, citing Adam Habib's observation that they should act 'in a way that supports the global academy of commons rather than simply advancing the individual aspirations of institutions'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Marginson, S. (2020). Pandemic shows need for HE for the global common good. *University World News*. Available at: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200724114218359>

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Bergan, S. et al. (2021). HE must help build a more sustainable, democratic future. *University World News*. Available at: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2021040711493081>

<sup>7</sup> For a vision of how this might work (and what other changes may lie ahead), see: Naidoo, R. (2021). *Higher Education for the Global Good: Visions, Spectres and Collective Action*. Concept note prepared for UNESCO's IESALC's project on the Futures of Higher Education project. Available in pdf form: <https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Naidoo-EN-1.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Brewer, N. (2018). By 2030, will universities 'walk fast and alone – or walk far and together'? *Wonkhe* Weblog. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/by-2030-will-universities-walk-fast-and-alone-or-walk-far-and-together/>

<sup>9</sup> For further reflections on this, triggered by attendance at UUKi's International Higher Education Forum in March 2018, see: Lewis, V. (2018). What International Education Needs. *Vicky Lewis Consulting* Weblog. Available at: <https://www.vickylewisconsulting.co.uk/what-international-education-needs.php>

In February 2021, Angelina Yuen-Tsang is reported to have urged universities 'to move from intense and often toxic competition for reputation and ranking to cooperation for societal solidarity and global connectedness'.<sup>10</sup>

There has also been much written in recent years about the imperative for ethical internationalisation. Wei Liu argues that the western model of internationalisation is unsustainable and that those who work in international education 'have an ethical obligation to reverse the adverse effects of economic globalisation and make the world a more equitable place for all', embracing the UN's SDGs.<sup>11</sup>

In 2019 and through 2020, the 'Internationalisation in higher education for society' concept and framework took hold.<sup>12</sup> Conferences highlighted the ways in which HE internationalisation can generate positive social impact.

However, this all sits uneasily alongside the continuing fixation of many institutions with global league tables and rankings. Increasingly, academic and practitioner discussions highlight the limitations of global rankings devised at a time (early 2000s) when research outputs represented the sole pinnacle of esteem (as well as being the most straightforward indicator to measure).

It has been argued that the mission of higher education has changed during the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century but the mainstream rankings have failed to evolve, paying little attention to such factors as social contribution, teaching quality, diversity and inclusion, or accessibility.<sup>13</sup>

Continuing to define 'success' based a skewed set of metrics, selected by the rankings compiler rather than chosen to align with an institution's own mission and priorities, can lead HEIs to develop isomorphic, vanilla-flavoured strategies. There is a risk of focusing on what your peer group prioritises instead of defining and developing your own institution's distinctive contribution.

## 2.2 The UK context: philosophical tensions

Institutional strategies are produced in a specific national context which reflects government priorities.

2019 brought the publication of the UK Government's International Education Strategy (IES), with its targets to increase the value of education exports to £35 billion per year and to recruit 600,000 international higher education students to the UK annually by 2030.

One crucial lever to help achieve student number growth was the widely welcomed announcement, in late 2019, of a new Graduate Immigration Route allowing international graduates of UK HEIs to remain in the UK for two years (three for PhD graduates) following their graduation to undertake (or seek) employment.

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<sup>10</sup> Kigotho, W. (2021). Universities urged to be drivers of societal solidarity. *University World News*. Available at: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210205073334340>

<sup>11</sup> Liu, W. (2021). Why ethical internationalisation is no longer a choice. *University World News*. Available at: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210127092352273>

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Brandenburg, U., de Wit, H., Jones, E. and Leask, B. (2019). Defining internationalisation in HE for society. *University World News*. Available at: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190626135618704>

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, CIHE Boston College webinar (25 January 2021). Are Rankings Still Fit for Purpose. *YouTube*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyGjRdEht00>

The final days of 2020, as the Brexit transition period ended, brought the news that the UK would participate as an associate country in the European Union's research and innovation programme, Horizon Europe, but would withdraw from the student and staff exchange programme, Erasmus+.<sup>14</sup>

The long-awaited IES update arrived in February 2021, along with the launch of the new Turing scheme to support the outbound mobility of UK-based students. The IES suggests that 'this scheme, in many ways, should be seen as the embodiment of our Global Britain ambitions'.<sup>15</sup> However, one notable characteristic of Turing is its lack of reciprocity and Wales has deemed it necessary to develop its own, reciprocal International Learning Exchange programme to fill some of the gaps in terms of mobilities and partnerships.<sup>16</sup>

This is symptomatic of one of the tensions that exists within the UK HE sector and is reflected in many institutional strategies for global engagement. While the discourse among both academics and practitioners in the area of international higher education engages with many of the social impact issues touched on earlier in this chapter, these – and research more generally – are not seen as within scope of the nation's International Education Strategy. In fact, drastic government cuts to Official Development Assistance (ODA)-funded research announced in March 2021 are expected to undermine universities' role in addressing global challenges and damage long-standing partnerships.

As has been observed before, the IES is primarily an education export strategy.<sup>17</sup> While both the original and, particularly, the updated version have much to commend them (e.g. the focus on diversification of student recruitment markets, expanding transnational education opportunities, enhancing the international student experience and graduate employability, and supporting outbound mobility), the underlying philosophy is one of building the UK's global profile, reach and – as highlighted in the chosen Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) – export earnings.<sup>18</sup>

Little surprise then that some institutional strategies come across as mildly schizophrenic (see Chapter 3).

### 2.3 Institutional context: balancing ideological aspirations with present realities

By early 2020, UK HEIs realised they needed to respond urgently to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and its accompanying travel restrictions and national lockdowns. Although existing global, national and regional issues (e.g. the climate emergency, transitioning to a full exit from the EU, the levelling up agenda) remained important, dealing with this immediate crisis took up significant institutional bandwidth and there were grave concerns about the

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<sup>14</sup> For more detail, see O'Malley, B. (2020). UK to stay in Horizon Europe but drop out of Erasmus+. *University World News*. Available at: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20201231151122758>

<sup>15</sup> Department for Education and Department for International Trade (2021). *International Education Strategy: 2021 update*. Available to download at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-education-strategy-2021-update> (see p.4)

<sup>16</sup> For more information, see Williams, G. (2021). Putting Wales on the world stage. *Wonkhe* Weblog. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/putting-wales-on-the-world-stage/>

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Lewis, V. (2019). A different kind of international education strategy. *Vicky Lewis Consulting* Weblog. Available at: <https://www.vickylewisconsulting.co.uk/a-different-kind-of-international-education-strategy.php?s=d&scr=cmt0>

<sup>18</sup> The only time in my memory that a UK national strategy has taken this broader perspective was in 2004 when the (then) Department for Education and Skills published its international strategy for education, skills and children's services: *Putting the World into World-Class Education*. Sadly, some of the commitments made in this (e.g. 'to transform our capability to speak and use other languages') were not followed through. Pdf version available at: [5819-DfES-World Class.txt \(ioe.ac.uk\)](https://www.ioe.ac.uk/5819-DfES-World-Class-txt)

impact on international student enrolments in 2020, 2021 and beyond. Many institutions had to focus almost all their energies on short-term fire-fighting.

As a result, there is an ongoing risk that some may lose sight of loftier goals in a scramble to survive from one financial year to the next. Others risk latching onto a long-term vision without really addressing the challenges that need to be overcome in order to achieve it.

For those that can get the balance right, there is an opportunity to rethink strategies that may previously have been based around traditional measures of institutional success, and to consider how the institution can contribute sustainably to the common good of the communities with which it engages. However, to be viable, any such shift in emphasis needs to be firmly grounded in the realities of the early 2020s, when a global economic crisis is taking hold, institutional finances are depleted and staff capacity to embrace further major change initiatives is compromised.

## **2.4 Conclusions: time for a global engagement rethink**

Now is the right moment for UK HEIs to rethink the global dimension within our institutional strategies. This will not be an easy process. Difficult choices will need to be made (including choices to stop doing certain things). And careful thought will need to be given to the phasing of changes.

Somehow, universities must strike the right balance between establishing a long-term vision of their desired place in the world and identifying shorter-term measures to stabilise their financial position and ensure they have the opportunity to pursue those more ideological aspirations.

### **Key insights:**

- The pandemic has accelerated a recalibration of the HE sector's priorities.
- Greater emphasis is being placed on institutions' contribution to the global common good.
- Universities are being urged to embrace an ethical, non-colonial approach to internationalisation.
- Questions are being asked about whether, in this new context, the mainstream global rankings are fit for purpose.
- While certain UK national policy developments are warmly welcomed, there is a disconnect between some aspects of government policy and the mission of universities.
- At institutional level, the challenge is to keep in sight a long-term vision for global engagement while stabilising finances in the short term.

## **PART TWO**

### **Current state of play: Tensions and traps**

Part Two of this report starts with a sector-wide overview of the key features of current UK HEI global engagement strategies, before highlighting some tensions within them (Chapter 3). It goes on (in Chapter 4) to outline common weak spots (and to share some good practice), so that the next generation of strategies can avoid typical traps and be as effective as possible.

Key insights are summarised at the end of each chapter.

## CHAPTER 3: The current articulation of global engagement strategy by UK HEIs

This chapter takes as its starting point an analysis of the articulation of global engagement strategy by the UK's higher education institutions. As outlined in Chapter 1 (Section 1.1: Methodology), the primary data source was 134 current UK HEI strategic plans reviewed in late 2020. In addition to this, 26 published supporting strategies dedicated to internationalisation or global engagement were studied.

The first observation to make is that strategic plans vary enormously in terms of size, scope, timeframe, level of detail and transparency. Although, as Mike Baxter points out in his excellent 2019 report,<sup>19</sup> the UK HE sector is more transparent than most other sectors when it comes to sharing institutional strategies, different universities draw the line in different places.

Some openly share Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), targets and milestones in their public-facing strategic plan; others clearly feel these are commercially sensitive or distract from the main strategic thrust. Some are willing to publish their supporting strategies; others reserve these for internal consumption. Some strategic plans are written as rallying cries for the key internal stakeholders who will be the primary agents of change; others come across more as external positioning statements. Some are brief and visionary; others include more operational detail.

Most of the strategic plans do, however, have certain common features. At the bare minimum, they consist of a suite of core strategic themes (described in a wide variety of terms, including Aims, Goals, Pillars and Priorities). The most common number of core themes among the strategic plans reviewed for this study is four. In around one-third of strategic plans, these core themes are supplemented by supporting / enabling themes. Ten of the plans reviewed include what can be described as cross-cutting (or horizontal) themes, which run across all other themes.

Around two-thirds of the strategic plans reviewed include an explicit statement of mission or purpose, while just over 40% include clear KPIs.

It should be noted that the strategic plans which were current in late 2020 include a handful published as early as 2013 or 2014, with approximately 20 being produced each year since then. Some of the strategic plans which were still current in late 2020 have since been replaced with new ones.

### 3.1 The global dimension: marginal or embedded?

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that different institutions (and types of institution) need to prioritise different things.

As Ian McNay wrote back in 1995: 'beware fundamentalists who have only one route to heaven – an international highway'.<sup>20</sup> He went on to observe that it is perfectly acceptable for the international dimension to be peripheral if this is where it fits best in the overall institutional profile. In the same year, John Davies developed a conceptual framework for the

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<sup>19</sup> Baxter, M. (2019). *University Strategy 2020: Analysis and benchmarking of the strategies of UK Universities*. Goal Atlas Ltd (p.30). Available to download from: <https://goalatlas.com/university-strategy-2020/>

<sup>20</sup> McNay, I. (1995) Universities going international: choices, cautions and conditions in Blok, P. (ed.), *Policy and policy implementation in internationalisation of higher education*, pp.35-40, Amsterdam: EAIE.

'institutionalisation of internationalisation' which included an axis running from marginal to high centrality.<sup>21</sup>

On reviewing the profile of the global dimension within the UK's current crop of institutional strategic plans, a spectrum of characteristics emerges. This seems to be linked to the centrality of an institution's approach to internationalisation (which may, in turn, be associated with institutional mission). It was possible to map individual strategic plans (albeit subjectively) based on these characterisations. This results in the distribution in Table 1, which shows that the global dimension is prominent in over three-quarters of strategic plans.

**Table 1 – The profile of the global dimension in UK HEI strategic plans**

Centrality of institutional approach to internationalisation	Profile of global dimension in institutional strategic plan	Distribution across UK HEI strategic plans (December 2020)
Marginal	Low profile, just the odd reference	17%
Emerging interest	Mentions scattered across core themes	7%
Explicit area of focus	Features as a dedicated core, enabling or cross-cutting theme in its own right	60%
Embedded (i.e. high centrality)	Fully integrated into ethos and content (without being an explicit theme)	16%

Source: Vicky Lewis Consulting analysis, December 2020

For some institutions, the profile of the global dimension will always remain low, since it is not a core part of their mission or identity. And, for those that do seek to become more globally engaged, progressing through the different stages is not necessarily a linear process. It is possible to reach the embedded stage without having first produced a strategy which includes an explicitly international or global theme.<sup>22</sup> However, as the distribution shows, most institutions **do** choose to make the global dimension an explicit point of focus. This is a way to signal its importance, using the strategy as a lever for specific changes in this area.

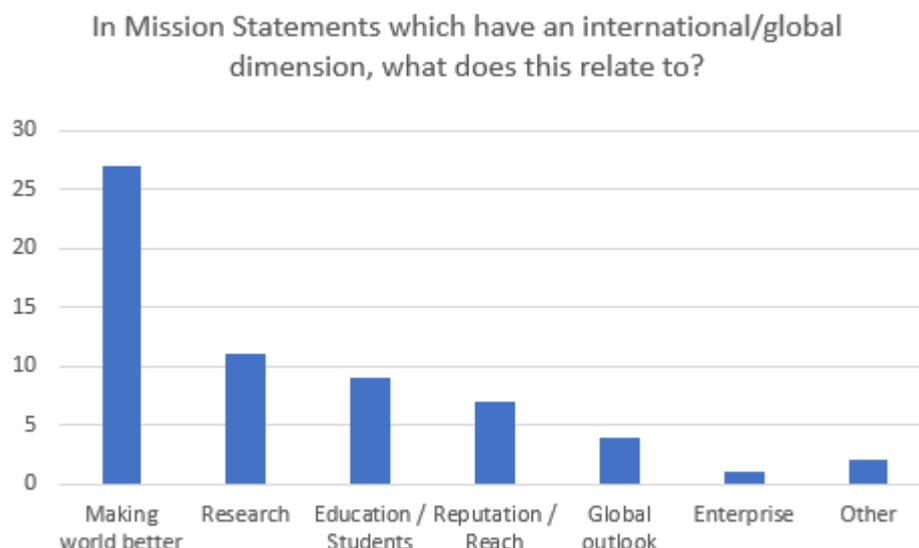
### 3.2 Mission: making the world a better place

Around half the mission statements (in the two-thirds of strategic plans which have one) include an explicit global dimension. Where this is the case, the most common theme (comprising nearly half of all references) is 'making the world a better place'. The next most common global themes relate to research, followed by education and students, then reputation and reach.

<sup>21</sup> Davies, J. (1995) University strategies for internationalisation in different institutional and cultural settings: a conceptual framework in Blok, P. (ed.), *Policy and policy implementation in internationalisation of higher education*, pp.3-18, Amsterdam: EAIE.

<sup>22</sup> For an investigation of the development of UK HEI international strategies over time, see: Soliman, S., Anchor, J. and Taylor, D (2019). The international strategies of universities: deliberate or emergent? *Studies in Higher Education*, 44:8, pp.1413-1424. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1445985>

Figure 1 – The global dimension in mission statements



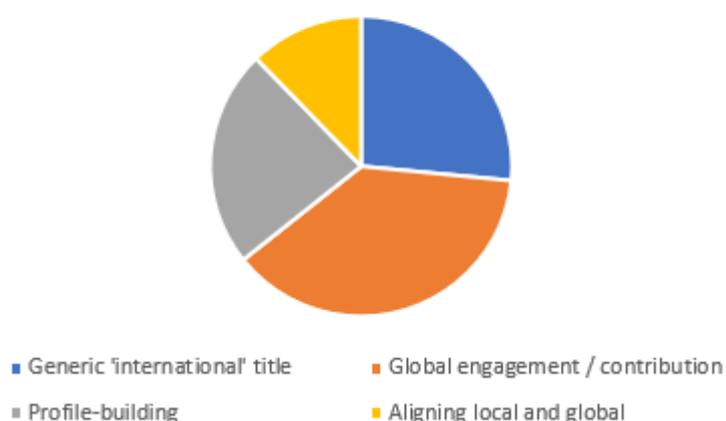
Source: Vicky Lewis Consulting analysis, December 2020

### 3.3 Strategic themes: global contribution or institutional profile-building?

Approximately 60% of the strategic plans include at least one strategic theme title which explicitly features a global dimension. This is normally a core theme (as opposed to an enabling theme). Just under a third of theme titles are generic words like 'international' or 'global'. Among the rest, around half reflect the presence of an outward-facing 'global engagement / contribution' dimension, around a third exhibit a more inward-looking 'profile-building' dimension, and the rest focus on aligning the local and the global.

Figure 2 – The global dimension in strategic theme titles

Distribution of global dimensions within UK HEI strategic theme titles (n98)

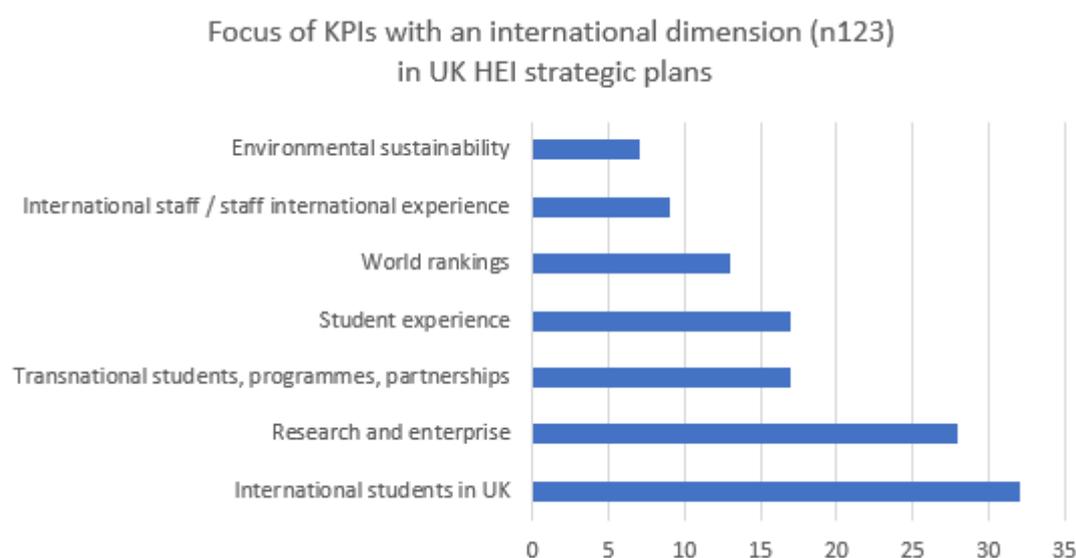


Source: Vicky Lewis Consulting analysis, December 2020

### 3.4 Key Performance Indicators: international student recruitment trumps all

Just over 40% of the strategic plans articulate explicit Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), with the vast majority of these including at least one KPI (often several) with an international dimension. Among KPIs with an international dimension, the most commonly applied relate to recruitment of international students to the UK (and, in some cases, the income derived from this). Next most popular are KPIs relating to research. Joint third come Transnational Education (TNE) activity and student experience. Other international KPIs relate to world rankings, international staff profile, and environmental sustainability.<sup>23</sup>

Figure 3 – Focus of KPIs with an international dimension



Source: Vicky Lewis Consulting analysis, December 2020

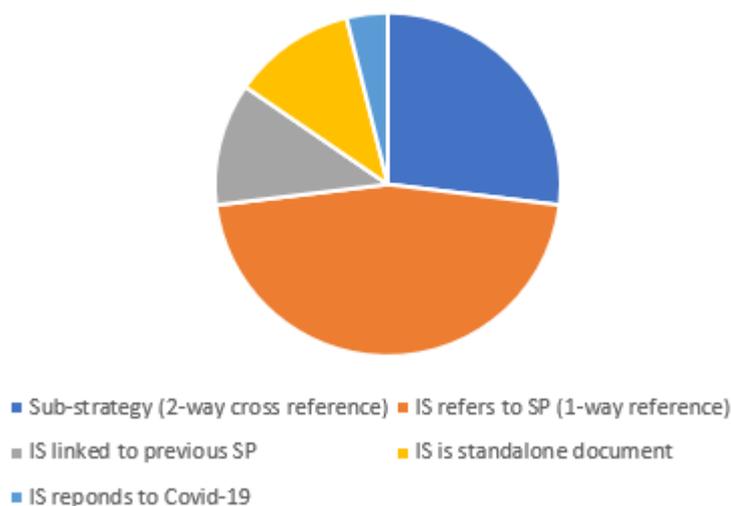
### 3.5 Supporting strategies: aligned or standalone?

In the 26 cases where supporting internationalisation or global engagement strategies are published, these are varied in scope and it is interesting to see how they relate to the main strategic plan.

<sup>23</sup> For the purposes of this study, environmental sustainability is included as an 'international' KPI due to the complex dynamics between internationalisation and environmental impact and because it is rapidly growing in prominence.

Figure 4 – Relationship between published International Strategy and Strategic Plan

What is the relationship between published International Strategy and Strategic Plan (n26)?



Source: Vicky Lewis Consulting analysis, March 2021

Nearly half of published international strategies refer to (or are clearly aligned with) the main strategic plan, without being referenced in that plan as a supporting strategy. Just over a quarter are explicitly referenced in the strategic plan as a named supporting strategy. A few of these were clearly developed in parallel with the strategic plan as there is cross-referencing in both directions. Some international strategies were developed in response to the main strategic plan (in some cases, following a consultation period, at a considerably later date).

Three international strategies that were still publicly available in late 2020 referred to a previous (in some cases long-superseded) strategic plan. A further three appeared to be standalone documents with no reference to (and little alignment with) the strategic plan. One publicly accessible international strategy was produced as a proactive response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

### 3.6 Changes over time: broadening scope but narrow metrics

The oldest, still-current strategic plans date back to 2013. The newest ones under consideration were published in 2020 (many before the Covid-19 pandemic took hold, a few afterwards).

Between 2013 and 2020, the term 'global' has gradually overtaken the term 'international' in strategic theme titles and, within the last two years, there has been an increased emphasis on themes relating to global engagement or contribution.

In order to explore in more detail the changing emphases over time, a comparative analysis was undertaken of the five oldest, still-current strategic plans (all from 2013 or 2014) and five new strategic plans (published between January and October 2020).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> An attempt was made to select strategic plans (from both eras) which represent a range of institutional types, all with an interest in internationalisation but at quite different stages on their journey.

Unsurprisingly, the emphasis within strategic plans can often be linked to the external context at the time they were developed. In the older ones (2013 and 2014), international student recruitment ambitions appear to have been tempered by the hostile immigration environment. EU students tend to be categorised along with domestic students, reflecting an income-based view. A high emphasis on internationally recognised research may be partially linked to the timing in relation to Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014. Little connection is made between the local and the global, with any partnership-related themes focusing predominantly on regional partnerships. And, pre-Brexit referendum, the European dimension is largely absent. The term sustainability features in many but, when you drill down, it generally refers to financial sustainability.

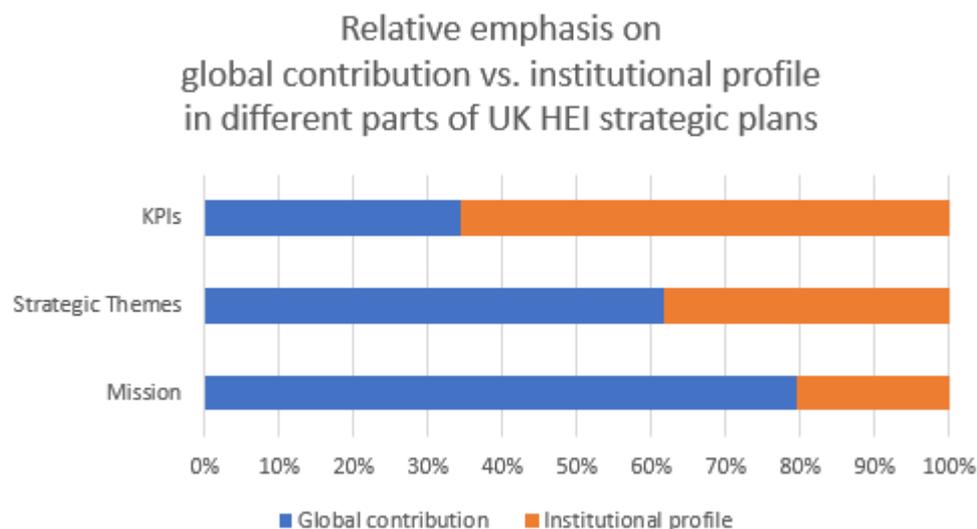
The more recent (2020) strategic plans tend to place greater emphasis on sustainability (in its environmental and social, as well as financial, sense), the UN SDGs and the climate crisis. Diversity and inclusion are common themes, along with social responsibility, justice and mobility (though there is little mention of decolonisation). Emphasis is placed on addressing global challenges through international collaboration. Civic and community engagement are highlighted, sometimes linked to global engagement. Innovation is a prominent theme, though this is often quite regionally focused. Surprisingly, given the imminence of a full Brexit, there is remarkably little on maintaining EU relationships.

On the whole, recent strategic plans come across as more values-led, with a focus on generating positive global impact. However, the KPIs that are used are often the same ones used in older plans, suggesting that metrics have not kept pace with the change of scope reflected in the strategic themes.

### **3.7 Conclusions: a mismatch between rhetoric and what is actually measured**

The UK HE sector's international strategies are evolving to become more outward-facing and values-based. The rhetoric is largely about making a positive contribution to the world. In mission statements, nearly four times more emphasis is placed on global contribution than on international reputation and profile. This reduces to a factor of 1.6 when we drill down to strategic theme titles. At KPI level, the relative emphasis reverses and there is around twice as much focus within international KPIs on institutional profile, reach and income as on global contribution.

Figure 5 – Balance of emphasis at the level of Mission, Strategic Theme Title and KPI



Source: Vicky Lewis Consulting analysis, January 2021

This drift in focus suggests a mismatch between the global priorities that HEIs **say** are important to them and what they actually measure when evaluating their success.<sup>25</sup>

Does a fixation by many on traditional, largely quantitative metrics betray a predominantly commercial and prestige-orientated world view that does not align with the rhetoric? Does it reflect a lack of imagination when it comes to tracking progress in global engagement? Might it suggest a desire to show that 'we're better than others', rather than a genuine effort to improve performance and optimise positive impact? Or does it simply reflect the challenge of wanting to make a valuable social contribution within a competitive context where institution-building is better rewarded?

Whichever is the case, it results in some mildly schizophrenic strategic plans, with rhetoric that engages deeply with global issues and societal impact being coupled with success measures that revolve around institutional profile-building and income generation. This weak internal alignment can lead to challenges when it comes to adoption and realisation.

### Key insights:

- The 134 UK HEI strategic plans that were current in late 2020 vary enormously in terms of scope, transparency and focus.
- Although the centrality of internationalisation varies according to institutional mission, a significant majority of strategic plans name it as a specific strategic theme.
- At the level of mission statement, there is a much higher degree of emphasis on making the world a better place (global contribution) than there is at the level of international KPIs, where the majority relate to institutional profile, reach or income.
- Some supporting international strategies are well aligned with the main strategic plan, while a few appear largely disconnected.

<sup>25</sup> For further exploration of this mismatch, see: Mitchell, N. (2021). Does UK universities' global rhetoric match reality? *University World News*. Available at: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210121123001538>

- Although the rhetoric in recent strategic plans tends to be more values-led than that of older ones, the metrics used are broadly similar.
- There appears to be a mismatch between what universities say is important to them and what they actually measure when evaluating success.
- This may suggest a tension between wanting to make a valuable contribution to the world and aspiring to build the institution's global profile within a marketised environment.

## CHAPTER 4: Avoiding the 'hidden traps': lessons for the future

A high number of UK HEIs had strategic plans which ran out in 2020. For some of these, the pandemic stalled consultation on a new strategy. A few put in place a short-term bridging strategy or a high-level refresh of their existing strategic plan in light of Covid-19. Others succeeded in ploughing on and publishing a full new strategic plan.

What is clear is that all HEIs (wherever they are in their strategic planning cycle) are having to invest in some strategic **thinking**, taking into consideration the radically altered external context and changing patterns of stakeholder demand and expectations. Scenario planning has come to the fore and institutions are being forced to make choices and to prioritise ruthlessly in a way that tends not to happen unless there is a crisis. They are being obliged to focus resources on those actions that will have the greatest positive impact.

These are the thought processes needed in order to develop any good strategy. Too often, however, they are not rigorously applied.

My analysis of the HEI strategic plans current in late 2020 reveals certain common weak spots which may reduce effectiveness. Drawing on selected institutional strategy literature, this chapter highlights some lessons to inform future global engagement strategies.<sup>26</sup> Extracts demonstrating good practice are included where this is useful for illustration purposes.

### 4.1 Build internal alignment: consistency and cascade

In his 2019 report, *University Strategy 2020*, Mike Baxter highlights the importance of internal alignment, stating that: 'Internal inconsistencies are what we have come to call the hidden trap of strategy. A strategy can read well, can look like it all hangs together yet still fall apart when examined in more detail' (p.30).

Examples of unhelpful inconsistencies include international student enrolment figures which are not synchronised between the main strategic plan and the supporting internationalisation strategy; or an internationally focused strategic theme whose objectives do not align with the priorities set out in its introduction.

Baxter goes on to write about the concept of cascade: the need for the top-level strategy to set the focus and boundaries to be applied in every sub-strategy.

The most compelling sub-strategies for internationalisation or global engagement clearly relate to the main institutional strategy, demonstrating how they further its core aims, including those which are not explicitly 'international'.

Sometimes this is done by cross-referencing. One pre-1992 university's internationalisation strategy spells this out:

On the pages which follow, each internationalisation objective is cross-referenced back to the 3 institutional pillars (1, 2 and 3). Objectives drawn directly from the institutional strategy are coloured gold.

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<sup>26</sup> For a much more detailed set of recommendations on university strategy, I strongly recommend reading Mike Baxter's report (pp.60-64): Baxter, M. (2019). *University Strategy 2020: Analysis and benchmarking of the strategies of UK Universities*. Goal Atlas Ltd. Available to download from: <https://goalatlas.com/university-strategy-2020/>

In other cases, it is clear that the consultation and development process for the institutional strategy and the supporting strategy took place in parallel, since each document refers to the other, with the internationalisation strategy expanding on a set of 'global' themes already articulated in the strategic plan.

Some sub-strategies follow a broadly similar format to the strategic plan and cross-reference other relevant supporting strategies. Some also outline expectations in relation to Faculty or School-level responses.

#### **4.2 Acknowledge the challenges: better to be honest**

Many of the strategic plans reviewed do not articulate the specific challenges that the institution faces and the changes that it needs to make in order to overcome them. According to Richard Rumelt's classic book, *Good Strategy / Bad Strategy*, one of the hallmarks of bad strategy is 'failure to face the challenge'. He observes that 'bad strategy fails to recognise or define the challenge. When you cannot define the challenge, you cannot evaluate a strategy or improve it' (p.32).<sup>27</sup>

Baxter argues that 'the time has come for strategy to have bite', suggesting that university strategies 'will become increasingly honest and transparent about the challenges they face and increasingly focused about how they intend to respond' (p.58).

Within many of the strategic plans reviewed for this study, the challenges spelled out tend to be external ones common to most HEIs. There is a tendency (perhaps reinforced by the fact that strategic plans are often treated as public relations vehicles) to focus on strengths to build on and opportunities to grasp, rather than being honest about how obstacles and weaknesses will be addressed.

It is refreshing to find examples of frank evaluation. One pre-1992 university's strategic plan acknowledges the tension between growth and quality and the negative pressures this has had on the experience of students: an area which is now being addressed as a high priority. It is telling that the Vice-Chancellor's Foreword positions the strategy as a practical guide for internal use:

This strategy is not a glossy sales pitch or a document to put on a shelf and forget about. Its primary purpose and audience is ourselves: it should be our own internal statement of our ambition, as well as to the wider world. It should also act as a living and practical guide to help us all plan and prioritise our activity.

Another institution's global strategy notes that there is much to celebrate, but also 'areas where we made less progress'. A real evaluation of progress against the previous international strategy is incorporated within the new global strategy, with honest assessment of both achievements and areas needing serious attention. This creates a sense of momentum, contextualising the strategy as part of an ongoing journey.

#### **4.3 Ditch the laundry list: prioritisation and focus**

As Alex Usher observes in his 2020 review of (mainly Canadian) HEI strategic plans, many appear to start with a laundry list of 'things that need to get done', then to cluster these into thematic 'buckets'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Rumelt, R. (2011). *Good Strategy / Bad Strategy*. Profile Books Ltd. UK

<sup>28</sup> Usher, A. (2020). Buckets and Pillars. *Higher Education Strategy Associates* – One Thought Weblog, 28 September 2020. Available at: <https://higherstrategy.com/buckets-and-pillars/>

The same criticism could be levelled at quite a few UK HEI strategic plans. Particularly where an institution is at a relatively early stage in its internationalisation journey (and perhaps feels that it needs to make up ground), there is a tendency to throw everything international into an 'international bucket' in an undifferentiated and unprioritised way.

Interestingly, some smaller HEIs (especially those with religious roots) take a more judicious, focused approach in their strategic plans, starting with an emphasis on global perspectives and global citizenship, rather than trying to do everything (international recruitment, partnerships, research) at once. This may suggest a more mission-driven strategy.

As Usher observes, the smart approach (and one which UK HEIs are becoming better at adopting) is to start with the vision and work backwards to establish a small number of clear (and mutually reinforcing) thematic pillars, supported by a prioritised set of actions designed to propel the institution along its desired trajectory.

One large London institution spells this out:

Strategy is also about making choices. Our Global Engagement Strategy will only have impact if we align our efforts with a limited set of priority actions, concentrating on where we can make the biggest difference.

Another Russell Group university articulates in broad terms its 'global influence' theme, then outlines the three specific priorities it will focus on for the next five years.

Particularly at a time of crisis, it is important to strip back the extraneous and concentrate efforts on the absolutely critical priorities for change.

#### **4.4 Define your own success: matching rhetoric and reality**

As we saw in Chapter 3, the success measures (or KPIs) that feature in strategic plans are sometimes misaligned with the professed ethos of the plan or the content of the strategic themes.

There are examples where the thrust of the 'international' theme includes powerful rhetoric about making a positive global impact through international collaborations and mutually beneficial partnerships, yet the primary measure of internationalisation is to be in the top X institutions in the world rankings; or the rhetoric appears to prioritise equipping all students to be global citizens with well-developed intercultural competencies, yet the main international success measure is 'number of international students recruited to the UK campus'.

Although it is much easier to adopt quantitative measures that allow for clear benchmarking against competitors, there is a risk that, by pursuing mainly these, the strategic intent is compromised and it is much harder for strategies to be distinctive.

One pre-1992 London university articulates the dilemma in its Internationalisation Strategy:

Measuring success in relation to an Internationalisation Strategy is a complex process. It is important that any measures consider both the direct outcomes of Internationalisation and the way in which Internationalisation has contributed to wider institutional objectives. Moreover, while quantitative, structural indicators can provide a useful measure of success it is important that consideration is given to how Internationalisation adds value to the institution.

Some UK HEIs adopt nuanced sets of indicators, which are closely aligned with the specific international priorities they have identified. One post-1992 institution with a focus on the student experience developed a composite KPI in support of its 'International Ethos' objective, which focuses on achieving 'consistent student performance between the main regional groupings' in areas relating to continuation rates, student satisfaction, academic success and graduate level employment.

This sort of approach suggests that the indicators are being used to aid self-improvement in priority areas, rather than as a badge of honour to be promoted externally. Where an institution's international KPI is achievement of a particular position in mainstream global rankings, this is effectively demoting almost all aspects of internationalisation beyond research quality and associated reputational prowess.

It is argued in the academic literature (particularly with reference to Business Schools) that a fixation with rankings can lead to institutions focusing on 'looking good' (image) rather than 'being good' (substance),<sup>29</sup> to a decoupling of 'talk' from 'action',<sup>30</sup> and to gaps between rhetoric and reality.<sup>31</sup>

Some leading UK universities appear to be taking this on board and disassociating – at least in terms of the KPIs they share publicly – from the mainstream global rankings. In one Russell Group HEI's strategic plan, the Principal's introduction states that 'this is not about league tables but about the real contributions we make to the world around us. It is, after all, our deeds that define us.'

Thinking more imaginatively about how your institution defines success – and about how to evaluate progress towards the specific institutional priorities that have been selected – is a step towards that elusive characteristic of distinctiveness.

### Key insights:

- Now is the time for rigorous strategic thinking to inform future global engagement plans.
- A good strategy is internally consistent and there is strong alignment between different levels of strategy (e.g. strategic plan and supporting international strategy).
- An effective strategy for global engagement acknowledges the specific challenges the institution faces and explains how these will be overcome.
- A meaningful global engagement strategy needs to prioritise the small number of internationally-focused actions that, together, will make the biggest contribution to achieve the institution's vision. This means deciding what not to do.
- International success measures need to align with institutional mission and values and to reflect what makes the institution distinctive.

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<sup>29</sup> Gioia, D. and Corley, K. (2002). Being Good Versus Looking Good: Business School Rankings and the Circean Transformation from Substance to Image. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, Vol.1(1). 107-120

<sup>30</sup> Rasche, A. and Gilbert, D. U. (2015). Decoupling Responsible Management Education: Why Business Schools May Not Walk Their Talk. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Vol. 24(3). 239-252.

<sup>31</sup> This was a topic at the EAIE Community Exchange virtual conference in October 2020 in a session by Fiona Hunter and Mathias Falkenstein on *Demonstrating the impact of internationalisation: Are we walking our talk?*

## **PART THREE**

### **Next generation strategies: Where are we heading?**

Part Three of this report draws on stakeholder interviews, reinforced by themes emerging from recent webinars, conferences, papers, reports and articles, to speculate on the key areas where the next generation of global engagement strategies may differ from their predecessors.

The chapters that follow are not designed to be a definitive outline of what should be included in future strategies, but rather a prompt for discussion and debate within institutions to help them reach an agreed position on certain important facets of global strategy.

As such, each chapter concludes with a set of questions that institutional stakeholders may wish to consider as strategies are developed or reviewed.

## **CHAPTER 5: Time for a new approach**

After the shock of the pandemic, what can be done to make the next generation of global engagement strategies fit for the range of purposes they must fulfil? These purposes include making a positive impact across different aspects of organisational mission, helping to stabilise institutional finances, and finding a valued and distinctive position for the institution to occupy within the global knowledge ecosystem.

How can we avoid retreating into strategies that are entirely commercially driven, or embracing lofty ideological aspirations that are undeliverable, or developing Janus-faced strategies that say one thing and measure another?

This part of the report is not designed to be a prescriptive list of 'things to include' in a modern-day global engagement strategy. As highlighted in Chapter 4, one of the classic pitfalls is to develop 'laundry list' strategies. Instead, it highlights themes and tensions that it is important to consider as an aid to determining institutional priorities and narrowing down choices.

For example, is it more appropriate, given a particular institution's resources and mission, to invest in Internationalisation at Home rather than building up a suite of TNE partnerships? Is it more sensible to invest in long-term research-led partnerships and networks to address global challenges or in global graduate employability and alumni engagement? Of course, it is rarely a simple either / or decision, but it is hoped that sharing some of the issues will help key stakeholders to guide internal discussions that ultimately result in greater clarity of purpose and enhanced distinctiveness.

The themes articulated in this part of the report are based on stakeholder interviews undertaken in February and March 2021. Where appropriate, they also draw on themes emerging via recent webinars, conferences, articles and reports.

I have observed, over the years, that the forward-looking ideas and new opportunities which excite academics and practitioners when discussed in sector conferences, opinion pieces and working papers often get diluted (or dropped altogether) when institutional strategies are developed. Some may be picked up, but this is generally as evolutions or adaptations of existing activities, rather than in their more radical, raw and, perhaps, risky form. While it may be inevitable that written strategies reflect a degree of caution, perhaps now is the time to embrace some of the more far-reaching changes that could take an institution's global engagement in new and distinctive directions.

The chapters that follow focus on content: the strategic themes which interviewees deemed it important to consider when developing a new global engagement strategy for the post-pandemic era. It was a challenge to categorise them and there is a good deal of overlap and cross-fertilisation between the thematic categories that emerged, each of which is addressed in a separate chapter.

The themes fall into a rough hierarchy, starting with the philosophical (which – in strategic plan terms – aligns broadly with mission, vision and values), then addressing two 'big picture' strategic themes with external drivers, before moving onto two more focused themes, then finishing with two sets of operational considerations that act as enablers.

**Breakdown of Chapters 6 to 12:**

6 (Philosophy):	Considering the 'why' – drivers and differentiation
7 (Big Picture 1):	Addressing global – and local – challenges
8 (Big Picture 2):	Negotiating new global dynamics
9 (Focus 1):	Rethinking partnership models
10 (Focus 2):	'Internationalisation for All' in a digital world
11 (Enabler 1):	Alternative operating practices
12 (Enabler 2):	New ways of measuring success

## CHAPTER 6: Considering the 'why': drivers and differentiation

Several interviewees emphasised the importance of going back to fundamental questions about what the university is for, why it engages globally, and what it really means by internationalisation and global engagement. Considering these questions at the current time, having experienced a global pandemic, may generate a new set of responses and HEIs, as learning organisations, have an opportunity to reset their strategy and (in the words of one interviewee) 'be brave'.

Another interviewee suggested that universities need to revisit the term 'global engagement', which, they felt, hides inequalities and can sweep problems under the carpet. They observed that 'you need to include people from the Global South who can spot problematic notions – such as presenting a deficit perspective on some international students' "lack of understanding" of the employability offer of universities'. It is important to be aware that, in the UK, we adopt an approach to internationalisation which is firmly embedded in the context of the Anglosphere and Global North perspectives. Academics and other key stakeholders need to be reflective and actively challenge stereotypes.

Another challenge to take a different perspective comes from the American Council on Education's 2021 report, *Toward Greater Inclusion and Success: A new compact for international students*.<sup>32</sup> This frames the relationship with students in terms of sustainability, responsiveness, networks, humanism and equity, homing in on societal outcomes, inclusion and building lifelong relationships.

This focus on the student perspective was reinforced by one interviewee who pointed out that: 'The biggest gap in strategies is the lack of student voice. It's a foundational problem – like removing one leg from a three-legged stool. How can it be transformative without the student voice?'

When asked about the influence of the UK Government's International Education Strategy (IES), most interviewees felt that it is too narrowly export-focused to guide university strategies, which generally aim to be much more holistic. They recognised its potential usefulness as a lever for internal investment in areas such as internationalising the student experience, graduate employability, transnational education and widening participation in outward mobility.

However, it was also pointed out that the IES is completely decoupled from the research agenda and misses an opportunity to demonstrate UK leadership in sustainable development and addressing the climate crisis. One interviewee noted the tension between university and government positions when it comes to moral and commercial imperatives, observing that you have to take the 'best bits' of what the government is aspiring to do and use these to advantage while staying true to your own institutional beliefs and values.

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<sup>32</sup> Glass, C.R., Godwin, K.A. and Matross Helms, R. (2021). *Toward Greater Inclusion and Success: A new compact for international students*. ACE, Washington DC. Available to download from: <https://www.acenet.edu/News-Room/Pages/ACE-Report-Outlines-Strategies-for-Supporting-International-Students.aspx>

Another observed that 'part of the schizophrenia of universities is because of these contradictory demands', concluding that HEIs need to recognise their multiple audiences and be clear about where they are working to boost reputation, where revenue generation is the primary driver and where it's about contributing to the local, national or global good.

Most of the interviews took place before the announcement of swingeing cuts to research budgets, particularly those supported by ODA funding. These developments have sent shock waves through the academic community and point to a chasm between the rhetoric of Global Britain as a science superpower and the reality of an approach which screams insularity and devastates both partnerships and projects.<sup>33</sup> Universities may now feel that they are in the position of having to mitigate the damage caused by government policy, much as they were (in respect of international students) during the era of the hostile immigration environment.

Speaking at a University of Bath webinar,<sup>34</sup> Rajani Naidoo urged universities to stand together collectively and regain the ability to speak truth to power. This sentiment was echoed by an interviewee who observed that 'universities have a powerful voice that they're not using; they need to say who they are'.

Sector discourse has long flagged the dangers of sector-wide homogeneity, of institutions seeking to be 'all things to all people', emulating one another and thereby diluting any differentiation of mission. A challenge was issued by Jonathan Grant in his March 2021 book *The New Power University: The Social Purpose of Higher Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*,<sup>35</sup> where he argues the case for placing as much emphasis on social responsibility as on research and teaching. He also urges universities to be more up front about what they stand for, suggesting that this 'would be much healthier because you'd have more diversity in educational institutions and probably a more honest public discourse'.<sup>36</sup>

How might such a stance manifest itself in institutions' approaches to global engagement?

### Key questions:

- How is the institution's approach to global engagement going to reflect its values and support its mission?
- How can the perspectives of those who challenge western and Anglosphere-orientated notions of internationalisation be considered?
- How will the institution negotiate government policies in a way that is true to its values?
- How is the HEI going to 'be international' in this post-Covid context? Will it, for example, address head on issues of climate impact and inequality?
- How will it differentiate itself? Are there global engagement principles that the university community cares about strongly enough to take a public stand?

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, McKie, R. (2021). UK scientists attack 'reckless' Tory cuts to international research. *The Guardian* (14 March 2021): <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/mar/14/uk-scientists-attack-reckless-tory-cuts-to-international-research> and Muscatelli, A. (2021). Cuts to research funding could harm economic recovery. *Policy Scotland*: <https://policyscotland.gla.ac.uk/cuts-to-research-funding-could-harm-economic-recovery-by-professor-sir-anton-muscatelli/>

<sup>34</sup> University of Bath School of Management, Dean's Series, 23 February 2021. *Where are we going? Whither higher education?* Available to view on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ynsl-42DQs8>

<sup>35</sup> Grant, J. (2021). *The New Power University: The social purpose of higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Pearson

<sup>36</sup> Quotation cited in Reisz, M. (2021). Be honest and take sides on big issues, universities told. *Times Higher Education* (18 March 2021): <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/be-honest-and-take-sides-big-issues-universities-told>

## CHAPTER 7: Addressing global – and local – challenges

Emerging from Covid-19, the global and local challenges faced by society are immense. Most interviewees mentioned the role of universities in aiding the recovery in different ways and in using their intellectual resources (often in collaboration with international partners) to contribute to the global common good.

Interviewees highlighted a number of challenges which were present prior to the pandemic and have been heightened as a result of it. On the whole, they viewed them through the lens of sustainability, often referring to the UN's SDG framework. This was seen by several as being an important hook within global engagement strategies, aligning well with research and practice and offering a good way to encourage diverse, discipline-based engagement.

Some raised the issue of whether commitment to the SDGs was always fully embedded. The risk of a 'lip service' approach (so as not to be seen to be lagging behind) was mentioned, as was the tendency to use the SDGs in a vague or tenuous way, particularly in relation to research. However, those who believed their institutions were fully committed saw significant benefits – in terms of building a positive reputation among partner networks, particularly in emerging economies, and responding to the concerns of students and other stakeholders.

The climate emergency was specifically highlighted by most interviewees as a factor which would influence (and, for some, play a core role in) future global engagement strategies. Nonetheless, one interviewee wondered if the constraints of the pandemic period might result in a rush to travel again and push climate concerns back down the agenda.

Some of the practical considerations of reconciling international operations with climate impact are explored in Chapter 11. However, there are many other ways in which climate action and international education are interconnected.

As Joanna Newman observed in an article for *Research Professional*: 'Universities' ability to promote climate action stretches beyond research – from teaching and learning, to outreach activities, to enabling public debate and modelling sustainability in their own activities'.<sup>37</sup> She also stressed, in the run-up to COP26 (the UN Climate Change Conference due to take place in Glasgow in November 2021), the crucial nature of international collaboration on this issue. More extensive consideration of the role of UK higher education in the era of climate change is provided in Keri Facer's HEPI Debate Paper on this topic.<sup>38</sup>

The Climate Action Network for International Educators (CANIE)<sup>39</sup> highlighted, via a February 2021 webinar series, the intersections of climate change and racial justice in international education.

Equality and inclusivity, social justice, equity and fairness were all concepts mentioned by interviewees in connection with future global engagement strategies. One interviewee

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<sup>37</sup> See Newman, J (2021). Solidarity is Survival. *Research Professional News* (3 March 2021). Available at: [https://www.researchprofessional.com/0/rr/news/uk/views-of-the-uk/2021/3/Solidarity-is-survival.html?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=rpMailing&utm\\_campaign=researchFortnightNews\\_2021-03-03](https://www.researchprofessional.com/0/rr/news/uk/views-of-the-uk/2021/3/Solidarity-is-survival.html?utm_medium=email&utm_source=rpMailing&utm_campaign=researchFortnightNews_2021-03-03)

<sup>38</sup> Facer, K. (2020). Beyond business as usual: Higher education in the era of climate change. *HEPI Debate Paper 24*, Oxford. Available at: [https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/HEPI\\_Beyond-business-as-usual\\_Higher-education-in-the-era-of-climate-change\\_Debate-Paper-24\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/HEPI_Beyond-business-as-usual_Higher-education-in-the-era-of-climate-change_Debate-Paper-24_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> See Climate Action Network for International Educators – CANIE website: <https://www.can-ie.org/>

observed that the pandemic has highlighted issues around accessibility and equality in international education, topics that few internationalisation strategies have explicitly addressed to date. It is clear that the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and that HEIs have an important role to play in reducing them.<sup>40</sup>

It was suggested that equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) would become increasingly embedded, with institutions considering what inclusion really means in the context of internationalisation. For example, what is the institution's stance on welcoming refugees? And can we move beyond a position where international students are viewed through the lens of income generation and develop a more continental European approach to the provision of scholarships in order to diversify the student body in terms not only of nationality but also of social and economic background?

A session at the November 2020 Internationalisation in Higher Education for Society conference questioned the separation of the internationalisation and EDI agendas in most HEIs, outlining some similarities in mission and the opportunities that may arise from joining forces.<sup>41</sup> The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests shone a light on systemic inequalities, challenging universities to address these on a number of levels. Although racial justice was not an area specifically highlighted by interviewees, it is highly relevant to future global engagement strategies.

HEI internationalisation strategies have sometimes been positioned as institutional responses to globalisation.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps the next generation of strategies will respond to hyperglobalisation, with its exacerbation of inequalities?

Several interviewees noted how the civic role of universities would be a key part of the response to Covid-19 across the UK's regions, particularly around the levelling up agenda. One person suggested that it was important for civic engagement not to become a 'bandwagon' strategy that is pursued simply because government expects it. Others felt the current situation offered a powerful opportunity to bring together what institutions are doing locally and regionally with what they are doing internationally, demonstrating their common underpinning principles and the mutual benefits (including two-way learning and valuable connections) that can be derived from coordinated civic and global engagement.

### Key questions:

- How embedded is sustainable development within institutional strategy and what are the implications for global engagement priorities?
- How can climate impact considerations be addressed within our strategy?
- What synergies exist between equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), social and racial justice, and international education? Could these be harnessed within our strategy?
- What benefits could our global engagement bring to our local / regional community and how might our civic engagement activities have positive international impact?
- Are there tensions that need to be resolved between the agendas mentioned in the above questions?

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<sup>40</sup> At the UUK International Higher Education Forum plenary on 14 April 2021, Rocky Tuan, Vice-Chancellor and President, Chinese University of Hong Kong, proposed that the most important SDG is Goal 10 – Reduce inequality within and among countries.

<sup>41</sup> This session from the IHES Conference 2020 (*Internationalization and Diversity Competing or Complementary Imperatives*) can be viewed on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5U82Gdl2lo&list=PLHDDaUIG\\_UADnINLExisNifchfgjChvR&index=18](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5U82Gdl2lo&list=PLHDDaUIG_UADnINLExisNifchfgjChvR&index=18)

<sup>42</sup> See, for example Van der Wende, M. (2001). Internationalisation policies: about new trends and contrasting paradigms. *Higher Education Policy* 14, pp.249-259

## CHAPTER 8: Negotiating new global dynamics

Most interviewees spoke about the need for the next generation of global engagement strategies to address the new global dynamics that are evolving. There was recognition of the shifting balance of power from West to East, the rapid expansion of higher education in Asia and a more regional approach to globalisation (including the growth in non-traditional destinations and international education hubs).<sup>43</sup>

They highlighted, in particular, the rapid growth in Chinese higher education and research capacity. Interviewees were acutely aware of how suddenly geopolitical relations can change and how quickly the fallout from international rifts can be felt. As a result, there was emphasis on diversification: on spreading bets and avoiding overreliance on a single partner country.

Looking beyond the trade dimension, a small number of interviewees raised the issue of ethics, observing that global engagement strategies need to address issues of academic integrity and freedom of speech. A HEPI guest blog by John Heathershaw explores how the internationalisation of higher education affects academic freedom (and proposes measures to protect it).<sup>44</sup> Another, by Catherine Owen, explicitly addresses the ethics of internationalisation, recommending approaches to tackle key challenges.<sup>45</sup> Some of these challenges are expanded on, with particular reference to China, in a March 2021 report, *The China question*,<sup>46</sup> which also covers such issues as intellectual property and national security.

Closer to home, Brexit was seen to have contributed to the UK's image as insular, with some interviewees noting the need for institutional strategies to consider the positioning of Europe as a region within the wider 'international fold'. Some were clear on the need to strengthen European links for a post-Brexit world, recognising that the changing relationship with our EU partners, particularly in respect of reduced student flows to the UK, has negative implications for diversity in our wider society and culture. It was observed that the impact would be particularly marked in Scotland, where large numbers of EU students previously enjoyed free tuition.

One interviewee mentioned a strategy of engaging more with ODA-eligible countries,<sup>47</sup> an approach which aligns closely with those aspects of mission linked to making a global contribution. This raises the question of the extent to which universities can claim the space left by diminished government commitment. From a financial (and time) perspective, is a

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<sup>43</sup> For an excellent overview of the shifting dynamics, see: Ilieva, J., Westphal, J. and Harris, S. (2020). International Student Recruitment: Why Aren't We Second? *Universities UK International with Education Insight*. Pdf download: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2020/international-student-recruitment-why-aren't-we-second.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> See Heathershaw, J. (2021). To protect academic freedom from external 'threats', we must reverse the decline of academic participation in governance. *HEPI* Weblog, Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/03/29/to-protect-academic-freedom-from-external-threats-we-must-reverse-the-decline-of-academic-participation-in-governance/>

<sup>45</sup> See Owen, C. (2021). Context, Academic Freedom and the Ethics of Internationalisation. *HEPI* weblog. Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/04/23/context-academic-freedom-and-the-ethics-of-internationalisation/>

<sup>46</sup> Johnson, J. et al. (2021). *The China question – Managing risks and maximising benefits from partnership in higher education and research*. The Policy Institute, King's College London and Harvard Kennedy School. Available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/research-analysis/the-china-question>

<sup>47</sup> Those countries designated by the OECD Development Assistance Committee as eligible for Official Development Assistance (ODA).

university willing and able to invest in relationships in parts of the world which may feel excluded from UK government priorities, or is it more judicious to prioritise those countries which align with UK foreign policy<sup>48</sup> (with its Indo-Pacific orientation) and trade policy (including the priority countries and regions set out in the International Education Strategy update)? Will the repercussions of Brexit and the reductions in ODA funding mean that institutions and organisations in certain countries are less willing to partner with institutions in the UK?

Several interviewees spoke of the need to be more responsive to other parts of the world and their needs, suggesting that we are seeing a rebalancing of global education via strategies that are more orientated towards collaboration and cooperation. Among some, there was a view that, if UK universities are going to interact with or partner with other countries, we need to understand their own strategies and priorities better.

This echoes a point made by Marijk van der Wende in a Centre for Global Higher Education webinar on Eurasia relations.<sup>49</sup> She observed that, unless northern / western countries start to understand Asia on its own terms, we will be supremely ill-equipped over the coming years. Similarly, in a webinar to launch *The China question* report, it was argued that the UK needs to incentivise outward mobility to China (at all levels and career stages) and to be proactive in building up Chinese language skills if we are to engage effectively.<sup>50</sup>

Interestingly, UK HEI internationalisation strategies rarely include any reference to language learning, despite its clear relevance to global engagement. As one interviewee put it: 'The UK's sense of internationalisation is more about showcasing what we do rather than learning from others. The absence of language learning from our strategies says a lot about the culture underpinning "English" internationalisation.' Another interviewee alluded to the 2019 report by The British Academy which refers to monolingualism as 'the illiteracy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century'.<sup>51</sup>

A comment about terminology made by Maddalaine Ansell at the British Council's International Education Virtual Festival in January 2021 sums up the direction of travel for UK global engagement strategies that most interviewees described. She noted that the term 'target markets' (to describe those countries that UK HEIs prioritise in their marketing efforts) sounds inappropriate now, and that we should start referring to 'potential partnership countries' instead. The time of one-way relationships (with UK universities firmly in the driving seat) may be superseded by an era of reciprocal partnerships with a shared long-term vision and deep mutual understanding.

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<sup>48</sup> HM Government (2021). *Global Britain in a competitive age – The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. Downloadable from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>

<sup>49</sup> Van der Wende, M. (2021). *Eurasian relations in higher education in the context of the fast moving world scene*. Centre for Global Higher Education. Webinar (25 February 2021) can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pegweoa47Y>

<sup>50</sup> Centre for Global Higher Education webinar (25 March 2021). *The China question: Managing risks and maximising benefits from partnership in HE and research*. Can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pegweoa47Y>

<sup>51</sup> The British Academy (2019). *Languages in the UK: A call for action*. The British Academy with the Academy of Medical Sciences, the Royal Academy of Engineering, and the Royal Society (p.3).

**Key questions:**

- How does our global engagement strategy address the ethical dimension of building international relationships?
- Does our portfolio of potential partner countries support our institutional mission, spread risk and ensure diversity?
- Are we prepared to invest in building relationships in / with countries not prioritised by the UK Government?
- What strategies can we put in place to build understanding of our partner countries' priorities and to enhance the ability of our staff and students to engage globally? Will these strategies extend to the nurturing of intercultural and linguistic competencies?

## CHAPTER 9: Rethinking partnership models

Almost all interviewees highlighted the changing nature of partnerships and the need for models to be rethought, based on deep consideration of how international partnerships can help institutions to achieve their – and their partners' – overarching strategic goals. This section focuses on new ways of working with partners, including future forms of transnational education (TNE).

### 9.1 Holistic partnerships

It was suggested by some interviewees that HEIs should consider partnerships in holistic terms, working with government or city authorities to build multi-faceted relationships that extend beyond bi-lateral institutional links and support the partner's local ecosystem through agreed, targeted activities such as building research capacity. This aligns with a more general trend within UK HEI strategies to focus a high proportion of energy and resources on a small number of strategic partnerships.

However, as one interviewee pointed out, 'elite institutions collaborate with other elite institutions across the world'. This is problematic for HEIs in low income countries. This interviewee noted that other countries (e.g. Germany) are better at capacity building partnerships at institutional level. The UK may work with partners who are not considered academic peers on a project basis but rarely in the form of an institutional strategic partnership. It was suggested that UK HEIs should take a less restrictive stance in future.

The data show a gradual consolidation of offshore partnerships over recent years,<sup>52</sup> reflecting a more considered and less scatter-gun approach. The pandemic has also resulted in a re-evaluation of the role of TNE in institutions' delivery portfolios.

Interviewees stressed that the prolonged period of travel restrictions has driven home the value of using TNE to take the UK HE offer to those students who want to stay closer to home (as many will, for both health and financial reasons) in the post-pandemic world. It also goes with the grain of existing trends toward greater regionalism (see Chapter 8) and is a way to engage with the growth in the hosting of international students in non-OECD countries.<sup>53</sup>

For interviewees, the drivers for engaging in TNE were manifold, though financial motivations were not high on the list. One interviewee described it as a long-term positioning strategy: 'building relationships now so that we have the potential to do something bigger in the future... [and] to respond to as-yet-unknown disruptions to the global HE landscape'. Others saw it as a strategy for widening participation on an international scale; or as a route to reducing their carbon footprint.

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<sup>52</sup> According to a presentation by Eduardo Ramos, UUK International, at Westminster Higher Education Forum policy conference on *Next steps for UK transnational education* on 15 January 2021.

<sup>53</sup> As evidenced by Janet Ilieva at the Westminster Higher Education Forum (see previous footnote).

## 9.2 Flexible TNE developments

Interviewees foresaw a range of different developments in TNE (reflecting their varied experiences to date and the fact that different models are suited to different countries). Some highlighted increasing opportunities for flexible pathways, for example spending time studying at a partner institution, a branch campus or online in the home country before switching to the UK to complete a degree. It was felt by one interviewee that wholly in-country delivered undergraduate programmes (as encouraged by the Chinese government) might represent a less colonialist mode of delivery.

There was a noticeable expectation that there would be stronger collaboration with partners. New international campuses would be more likely to be established as joint ventures<sup>54</sup> rather than standalone operations. There would be more joint / dual awards and, generally, more curriculum-sharing. Programmes would include innovative elements such as the integration of micro-credentials, opportunities for student exchange (physical and virtual) and joint projects. Almost all interviewees expected more online delivery (where possible enriched by some face-to-face provision), though it was noted that take-up would be greater from students living in those countries where the regulatory environment is favourable for online learning.

The general theme was a broadening of the scope of TNE, a rebalancing of relationships, greater flexibility (and hybridity) and improved student choice. This echoes points made in a UK-NARIC (now ECCTIS) webinar on *TNE and international student mobility* in February 2021. At this event, Nigel Healey observed that TNE will never replace revenue from onshore international students, but it is a way to build deep, sustainable collaboration. It can be positioned as a means to achieve a range of institutional internationalisation aims (such as providing an international learning experience for all, fostering global citizenship and employability, building strong global research teams), while sharing curriculum, expertise and students with a partner. At the same event, Janet Ilieva highlighted the benefits from the partner perspective: building capacity, contributing to the partner HEI's English-medium portfolio, extending access to a UK qualification to students unable or unwilling to travel far from home, and retaining talent in the place of delivery, counteracting brain drain.

One question that emerges is whether distinguishing between TNE students and 'regular' international students is even helpful any more.<sup>55</sup> As Vangelis Tsiligiris argues in this *University World News* article, 'we are experiencing an accelerated convergence of the different modes of higher education provision into one universal approach that can be framed as a "Global Delivery Model"'.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, students are students (wherever they are based – and this may vary over the course of their studies) and education is education (wherever and however it is delivered).<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> For consideration of how international campuses may need to adapt, see: Lane, J. et al. (2021). What is the future for international branch campuses? *University World News*. Available at: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2021031012405285>

<sup>55</sup> See Lewis, V. (2020). Ditching the dichotomies in international HE. *Vicky Lewis Consulting Weblog*. Available at: <https://www.vickylewisconsulting.co.uk/ditching-the-dichotomies-in-international-he.php>

<sup>56</sup> See Tsiligiris, V. (2020). Towards a global delivery model for international higher education. *University World News*. Available at: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2020082111264620>

<sup>57</sup> For additional context, see: Ilieva, J. and Tsiligiris, V. (2021). Globally Engaged and Locally Relevant: Revisiting Higher Education. *International Higher Education*, No.106, Spring 2021. p.13-14. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.36197/IHE.2021.106.00>

### 9.3 New competition and enhanced collaboration

A partnership-related theme is the tension between collaboration and competition. There was broad consensus that it is impossible to disentangle the two. Research is an instinctively collaborative undertaking and universities need to draw on one another's strengths in order to have a competitive edge.

Some interviewees foresaw greater competition, with one observing that: 'The pandemic has generated rhetoric about us learning how important we are to one another, but I see no sign of that continuing. At an individual level, there are many selfless, supportive people who contribute to the common good, but their reward is intrinsic. Our policies are all very individualistic'.

Most interviewees saw competition for international students increasing, leading to new types of partnership with a broader spectrum of organisations. The role of the private sector was expected to grow, with ed tech platforms providing ever more powerful opportunities to optimise applicant conversion, facilitate peer-to-peer interaction and track graduate outcomes. Meanwhile, new breeds of agent aggregators (such as ApplyBoard)<sup>58</sup> and pathway operators (such as MSM HigherEd)<sup>59</sup> are taking root.<sup>60</sup> Online Program Management (OPM) specialists were expected to be in high demand as universities rush to scale up their online provision.

New HE providers, including specialist online HEIs and international institutions seeking a foothold in the UK, were seen as potential competitors, though one interviewee also saw an opportunity to offer vacant campus space to international partners so that they could have a base in the UK and build closer working relationships.

Although most interviewees thought it would be positive for there to be more partnerships and consortia involving small groups of UK HEIs, they struggled to see this happening in the student recruitment space (even though it could potentially serve to spread risk and reduce carbon emissions). Those based in England often referred with envy to the more cohesive promotional approaches they perceived in Scotland and Wales.

An example of imaginative cooperation in Wales was the development of joint curricula so that subjects such as modern languages, which may not be viable at individual universities, could be maintained by dividing up provision across the sector. Other areas of collaboration within the UK sector include consortia that offer international careers fairs with a specific geographical focus (e.g. Greater China) – either in the UK or in-country.

One interviewee observed that UK universities sometimes appear to find it harder to collaborate with their peers in the UK than with international partners. Some felt that the importance of global networks and consortia would increase, providing opportunities to develop activities around shared values and interests, to support multilateral mobility

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<sup>58</sup> See Bothwell, E. (2021). Will international recruitment survive Covid-19?. *Times Higher Education*. Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/will-international-recruitment-survive-covid-19>

<sup>59</sup> See Stacey, V. (2021). Interview with Donna Hooker, President, MSM Higher Ed. *The PIE News*. Available at: <https://thepienews.com/pie-chat/donna-hooker-president-msm-higher-ed/>

<sup>60</sup> Some potential repercussions of the rise of the agent-aggregators are explored in this piece: Nicol, L. (2021). Risks to universities from the rise of agent aggregators. *University World News*. Available at: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210330093254818>

(important for the UK in our post-Erasmus era), to tackle common challenges and to help demonstrate institutional distinctiveness.<sup>61</sup>

**Key questions:**

- How can international partnerships help to achieve our institutional goals – and those of our partners?
- What potential is there for more holistic partnerships?
- What will the position of TNE be within our education portfolio? What benefits are we (and our TNE partners and students) aiming for?
- What needs to happen for us to develop truly flexible provision?
- What would be the benefits of working with new types of partner, including those in the private sector? And the challenges?
- Are there ways in which greater collaboration – with UK-based HEIs or global networks – could help us to achieve our goals?

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<sup>61</sup> The evolution of global university networks is considered, with particular reference to Universitas 21, here: Dixon, J. (2021). University networks extend their reach during pandemic. *University World News*. Available at: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210311143617480>

## CHAPTER 10: 'Internationalisation for All' in a digital world

This section outlines inclusive approaches to developing global perspectives and enriching the student experience, often assisted by digital technologies. Interviewees observed that the pandemic has opened our eyes to wide-ranging possibilities and has accelerated progress in many areas. However, it was noted that significant investment is required to develop and enhance this. One interviewee was concerned that the pandemic may have a reductionist impact, channelling thoughts away from experiential and curriculum-based developments. Another stressed the importance of listening to students and finding ways to embed their views and voices in future strategies.

### 10.1 Internationalisation for All

A common theme that emerged can be summed up by the term 'Internationalisation for All' and is underpinned by the principle of inclusivity. A number of interviewees observed that the pandemic experience has opened up a space to have conversations about 'Internationalisation for All' (the static majority as well as the mobile minority) and suggested that future global engagement strategies would have less focus on physical mobility. One, referring to programme content, suggested that 'ironically, the content has become more internationalised precisely because we can't travel'.<sup>62</sup>

Although outward mobility of UK-based students (whether for study, work placement, field trip, internship or volunteering purposes) was expected to remain a high priority, there was a view that at least as much energy should be devoted to facilitating international or intercultural interactions for those who are not able or willing to travel. Interviewees lauded the aims of the Turing scheme to widen participation in international experiences to more students from disadvantaged backgrounds, but several noted that barriers to participation are more than just financial and suggested the most effective route to broader engagement would be to offer much shorter initial visits than the scheme currently allows (bearing in mind the need to weigh up the benefits of improved inclusivity against the detriment of higher environmental impact). One interviewee posited the idea of 'cohort mobility', which embeds within certain units a short, faculty-led overseas visit for **all** students.<sup>63</sup>

Moving away from physical mobility, several interviewees highlighted the inclusive opportunities presented by virtual exchange,<sup>64</sup> Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)<sup>65</sup> and virtual internships, making the point that there is often strong grassroots academic support for embedding these activities into programmes. One interviewee observed that technology makes joint student projects possible with 'a whole bunch of territories that were perhaps considered too dangerous for physical mobility'. It can be a valuable tool, if used purposefully, not just for enriching the curriculum but for fostering global integration.

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<sup>62</sup> Ideas on moving beyond mobility post pandemic are explored in: Ogden, A.C. and Hulse, A. (2021). Making international education about more than mobility. *University World News*. Available at: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210416132345956>

<sup>63</sup> This approach is facilitated in Australia (for visits to the Indo-Pacific region) by the New Colombo Plan, details at: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/new-colombo-plan/pages/new-colombo-plan>

<sup>64</sup> For an exploration of Virtual Exchange, see Reiffenrath, T., De Louw, E. and Haug Panneman, E. (2020). Virtual exchange and Internationalisation at Home: the perfect pairing. *EAIE Weblog*. Available at: <https://www.eaie.org/blog/virtual-exchange-internationalisation-at-home.html>

<sup>65</sup> An outline of COIL can be found at: <https://www.eaie.org/blog/coil-acronym.html>

It was noted that success depends on adapting pedagogy rather than just grafting these new elements onto existing ways of working – and that staff development is needed to support inclusive, intentional embedding of global perspectives and international / intercultural experiences – whether the delivery mode is face-to-face or online<sup>66</sup> or something in between.

A few interviewees emphasised the need for curricula to be reconfigured to be more inclusive and to reflect the interests and concerns of students. Today's students are often characterised as idealists and activists who value sustainability, social justice and internationalism<sup>67</sup> – and expect these values to be reflected in curricula, extra-curricular opportunities and the wider institutional ethos.<sup>68</sup>

One interviewee felt that the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in summer 2020 provided a valuable (but potentially short-lived) impetus for decolonisation to be embedded. Another highlighted the problematic position of pursuing internationalisation (which is perceived by some as prioritising western – and, in the UK's case, Anglocentric – values and having colonial undertones) alongside decolonisation (with its emphasis on challenging colonial assumptions and enabling alternative perspectives).<sup>69</sup> It was suggested that internationalisation needs to be framed in terms of valuing other cultures and perspectives: in effect, undergoing its own decolonisation process.

## 10.2 Enriching the student experience

The student experience was discussed both in terms of all students benefiting from an internationalised experience and in terms of ensuring the experience of international students – from first contact through to alumni engagement – is as rich and valuable as possible.

The pandemic has shone a spotlight on the enquiry, admissions and pre-enrolment experience of all students. It has meant that engagement techniques pioneered for prospective international students (e.g. virtual tours, virtual open days, 'taster' lectures and courses, peer-to-peer advising) have needed to be mainstreamed for domestic students too. This reinforces the argument, presented cogently by Elspeth Jones in a 2017 article, that – when it comes to services and support – it is increasingly unhelpful to draw hard distinctions between international and domestic students, since both groups are highly heterogeneous.<sup>70</sup> Personalised communication and support are expected, with technology seen as a valuable tool to enable this. However, one interviewee was concerned about the risk of losing the pre-

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<sup>66</sup> An exploration of the internationalisation of online learning can be found in: Fakunle, O., Lock, J. and Johnson, C. (2020). Is Internationalization Intentionally Integrated in Online Learning Environments? Exploring the Challenges and Possibilities. *International Journal on Innovations in Online Education*. Available at: <http://onlineinnovationsjournal.com/streams/editor-s-choice-articles/10a78e56203eef1b.html>

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Reisz, M. (2021). Universities told to harness student activism for global good. *Times Higher Education*. Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/universities-told-harness-student-activism-global-good>

<sup>68</sup> For a US perspective on this, see Lake, P.F. and Buelow, R. (2021). From Surviving to Thriving. *Inside Higher Ed*. Available at: <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/01/06/pandemic-has-forced-institutions-reckon-value-higher-education-student-perspective>

<sup>69</sup> This tension is explored and recommendations made in this blog: Banda, D. (2021). Internationalisation and Decolonisation: Can Two Work Together Unless They Agree. *The University of Edinburgh Teaching Matters* Weblog. Available at: <https://www.teaching-matters-blog.ed.ac.uk/internationalisation-and-decolonisation-can-two-work-together-unless-they-agree/>

<sup>70</sup> Jones, E. (2017). Problematizing and reimagining the notion of 'international student experience', *Studies in Higher Education*, 42:5, p.933-943. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1293880>

pandemic, face-to-face, relationship-based approach to international student recruitment in favour of a more transactional, digital-based sales approach. The pandemic and associated concerns about health, safety and wellbeing have firmly positioned the parents of international students as a key stakeholder group with whom effective (and reassuring) communication is essential.

A theme touched on by a few interviewees was employability. The UK International Education Strategy's focus on supporting international graduate employability and tracking outcomes, coupled with the launch of the Graduate Immigration Route in July 2021, has helped to place this firmly on the agenda. One interviewee was concerned about poor UK employment prospects (as a result of the post-pandemic recession) hampering the success of the graduate route. Meanwhile, HEIs have been urged to expand their efforts to equip international students for their future careers, whether they are seeking employment in the UK, their home country or elsewhere.<sup>71</sup>

In an analysis of International Student Barometer data, Ravichandran Ammigan et al. show that employment-related issues are fundamentally important when it comes to international student recommendations of their institution.<sup>72</sup> This links to the notion, shared by Maria Gallo in an IC Café presentation in February 2021, that alumni are a reflection of their *alma mater* and that the global alumni dimension needs to be better integrated into institutional strategy. She made the point that international alumni need to be treated as valued partners to be involved in the life of the university community on an ongoing basis, rather than a 'resource' to be 'used' to the institution's own ends.

As explored further in Chapter 11, synergies need to be cultivated between internationalisation, employability, alumni engagement and marketing, focused around enhancing the experience of future, current and past students.

### 10.3 A global mindset for staff

Some interviewees stressed the importance of fostering a global mindset in both academic and professional staff, starting by having open debates about what this means. Just as digital technology can facilitate international interactions for a wider pool of students, the same is the case for staff: involvement can be democratised. Sharing expertise virtually (e.g. via conferences and colloquia) was seen as an increasingly central part of global engagement and partnership development, to be used as imaginatively as possible. Ensuring that the experiences and perspectives of international staff working at the institution are tapped into is another priority.

One interviewee observed that, in some institutions, there has been low exposure of academic staff to the international agenda. There may be few staff with international experience, connections or understanding of the key reputational issues, so there is a need to build confidence, hold awareness-raising events and incentivise opportunities.

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<sup>71</sup> Useful resources on this topic are provided in: Universities UK International (2020). *Supporting International Graduate Employability: Making Good on the Promise*. Joint publication with AGCAS, UKCISA and Coventry University (January 2020).

<sup>72</sup> Ammigan, R., Dennis, J.L. and Jones, E. (2020). The differential impact of learning experiences on international student satisfaction and institutional recommendation. *Journal of International Students*, 11(2). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v11i2.2038>

The development of cultural intelligence and intercultural competencies is as relevant for staff as it is for students.

**Key questions:**

- What investments are we prepared to make in order to extend the benefits of internationalisation to all members of the institutional community?
- How can we ensure the views and voices of our diverse students, alumni and staff inform our approach to internationalisation?
- What approaches will we use to make outward mobility accessible to students from disadvantaged / underrepresented backgrounds?
- What support do staff need in order to embed global perspectives and intercultural experiences into curricula and to foster global integration?
- Do we need to stimulate debates about the relationship between decolonisation and internationalisation to determine common principles for curricular reform?
- What is going to be different about our future students' pre-enrolment experience?
- How will we address the needs and expectations of international parents?
- What are we willing to invest in enhancing international students' employability (whether they choose to stay in the UK or return home)?
- What opportunities can we offer our alumni to help them feel like life-long partners within our global community?
- What are the development needs of staff, as we seek to broaden the pool of those who are internationally engaged and extend the ways in which such engagement can take place?

## **CHAPTER 11: Alternative operating practices**

A strong theme running through the interviews was the idea that we cannot simply go back to pre-pandemic ways of working.

As one interviewee observed: 'There is an opportunity to embrace a good learning curve for those HEIs which are willing to do so. I don't think the world (or students) will let us "go back". The old world isn't there any more; there's nowhere to go back to!'

Numerous changes in – or refinements to – existing practice were proposed. This chapter highlights some which have a potential impact on strategy.

### **11.1 From coffee table publication to meaningful, living strategy**

When asked about changes in future strategies, a number of interviewees saw the need for 'less gloss, more meaning'. As one observed: 'it's not about the coffee table version, but about generating meaningful activity'.

Several interviewees highlighted the need for internationalisation or global engagement strategies to have a stronger 'people' focus. This would go beyond simply consulting with stakeholders. It would extend to enriching the strategy with the voices and experiences of future and current students, alumni, parents, employers, academic and professional staff. As one interviewee described it, it is about 'bringing people together and maintaining the heart and soul of internationalisation'.

Most interviewees commented on the need for future strategies to be flexible, agile and less timebound. It is noticeable that many of the most recently published strategic plans either have longer time horizons (generally 10 years) or do not specify an end date. This may reflect an appreciation of the time it will take to recover from the pandemic (and to respond to future bumps in the road), coupled with a determination to define a meaningful, long-term vision to work towards.

As one interviewee whose institution had a very new strategic plan put it: 'Strategies have to have elastic horizons. We're managing this by having a living strategy that is regularly reviewed. It needs to flex around everything else that is going on.' Another went so far as to say that Covid and Brexit have shown us that having a fixed five or 10 year strategy is 'ridiculous'. The general view was that it is less about defining timescales and more about rolling changes and ongoing light-touch reviews that are integrated into day-to-day operations.

This requires the encouragement of strategic thinking as a matter of course, not just as something that takes place when there is a strategy or plan to be produced; or something that is seen as the preserve of a handful of 'strategic thinkers' at the top of the organisation.

### **11.2 From silos to shared responsibility**

Many interviewees commented on the need to spread the global engagement ethos throughout the institution. This was contrasted to centralised or top-down approaches which tend to treat global engagement as the responsibility of specific individuals and departments

(aided, abetted and occasionally hampered by a range of enthusiastic amateurs located elsewhere). One Pro Vice-Chancellor observed that successful global engagement is more to do with culture and behaviour than any written strategy. They saw their job as explaining how global engagement aligns with institutional values, driving it forward and ensuring it is integrated within the institution, its strategies and behaviours.

There were differing perspectives on Pro Vice-Chancellor (International) and equivalent roles. The question was raised as to whether a dedicated international / global engagement role is really needed. If integration is the goal, would it make sense for the responsibilities to be embedded across **all** executive-level roles?

On balance, those interviewees who expressed a view felt that it is helpful to have a dedicated role. They saw the benefits of specialist leadership in catalysing change and noted the symbolic impact of having a senior champion with the term international or global engagement in their title.

Some detected a swing towards incorporating the international portfolio into executive roles with another remit. It was suggested that this would work only if done for deliberate, strategic reasons. For example, including it within an external engagement role might be helpful if there is a clear institutional goal around aligning global and local engagement; or embedding it within a student experience role might work if it is a high institutional priority to internationalise the student experience and boost global employability. An alternative (US) perspective, which argues the case for dedicated international leadership positions to be filled by professional international educators, is articulated in a March 2021 University World News article.<sup>73</sup>

A few interviewees spoke of disconnects between leadership teams and academics and between academics and practitioners when it comes to internationalisation. It was suggested that leaders need to share their dilemmas more openly with academics and explain the consequences of certain courses of action, helping them to see the bigger picture. Another interviewee felt that academics need to do more to show how linkages can be made between their areas of expertise and internationalisation strategy and practice, observing that 'it needs to be understood that developing an international university is everyone's business'.

In order to optimise staff engagement, most interviewees saw the need to bring together formal and informal mechanisms. While effective committees, frameworks and processes were seen as useful to marshal efforts, it was also deemed necessary to plug into the less formal ecosystem of people with knowledge, enthusiasm and energy; to disperse leadership and encourage local projects. Some advocated the Task and Finish group, project-based approach as being more agile and facilitating swifter progress than formal committees. One interviewee from a large, highly internationalised institution said that they planned to move away from 'target markets' and associated country / regional groups and towards a focus on specific initiatives and opportunities. Others spoke about the need for discussion of international issues to be embedded within the main university committees (e.g. Learning and Teaching, Research, Student Experience) to ensure proper integration.

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<sup>73</sup> See Charles, H. and Ogden, A. (2021). Only experienced international educators need apply. *University World News*. Available at: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210322135152178>

One person observed that, having been forced to be introspective while dealing with the Covid-19 crisis, 'most of us are now desperate to leave our boundaries' and suggested that this mentality would permeate strategic thinking, leading to a rejection of silo-based strategies in favour of cross-cutting ones based on mutual reinforcement. Another interviewee noted that joining things up in a pluralistic culture requires you to recognise that apparently competing priorities (such as global engagement, sustainability, social responsibility, EDI, employability, civic engagement, digital technology and TNE) can actually be tackled in a coordinated, mutually supportive manner. The challenge is to understand how different areas of work complement one another and to build on common objectives.

A classic example is the area of international graduate employability, which requires close cooperation between those working in careers and employability, international student recruitment, alumni relations and marketing and communications. It is important to recognise that each party is coming at the issue from a slightly different angle and brings a different skillset to the table, but that sharing out the work (and costs) across different teams can be an ideal way to achieve institutional goals, at the same time as dismantling silos.<sup>74</sup>

As one interviewee said, it is important to get away from 'international' being seen as synonymous with a single department and to broaden it out. We have already seen many international offices change over the years from a standalone, comprehensive function to one where international activities are more distributed and the international office itself perhaps embedded within a larger directorate.

We have also seen the advent of more in-country offices / regional hubs, taking on a large proportion of the travel that used to fall to UK-based International Officers. On top of that, the pandemic-induced shift to digital marketing and recruitment has left many staff with very different-looking jobs. Additional factors such as the need to reduce travel-related carbon emissions and a desire to move away from the colonialist model of operating (where UK-based staff fly in and out of a country, directing operations from 'UK HQ') will likely reinforce some of these changes and lead to a further rebalancing of resource between UK-based and in-country staff.<sup>75</sup>

Less long-haul travel for UK-based international office staff may leave more capacity for working with internal colleagues right across the institution to support initiatives that help to embed global engagement.

### **11.3 From lip service to active changes**

A further theme that emerged from the interviews, which relates to both of the above sections, was the need to 'walk the talk', to ensure that the laudable words in strategy documents are followed through by active changes in behaviour.

One example of this might be by proactively addressing the climate emergency through policies and practice relating to staff and student travel. Some UK universities are starting to

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<sup>74</sup> For further exploration of this, see Lewis, V. (2020). International Graduate Employability. *Vicky Lewis Consulting* Weblog. Available at: <https://www.vickylewisconsulting.co.uk/international-graduate-employability.php?s=a&scr=cmt0>

<sup>75</sup> For more detail on this, see Lewis V. (2020). The changing face of the International Office. *Vicky Lewis Consulting* Weblog. Available at: <https://www.vickylewisconsulting.co.uk/the-changing-face-of-the-international-office.php>

announce their intention to minimise staff international travel. Covid-19 has demonstrated that remote conferences can be effective and more inclusive. The same goes for international student recruitment. As Ailsa Lamont pointed out in a presentation at the IC Café in March 2021, there are opportunities to do more agent training and prospective student interviews online, and to make the move to paperless marketing. She noted that, while the UK HE sector is addressing the climate crisis via resources such as the EAUC toolkit,<sup>76</sup> international office professionals are often not 'at the table'. More could be achieved if they work hand in hand with sustainability professionals.

Another example relates to diversification of the international student body – both to reduce overreliance on a single country and to enhance the student experience. This is starting to become an explicit aim within global engagement strategies, but concrete supporting actions are few and far between. One interviewee pointed out that you have to be deliberate to make this happen, suggesting that universities might 'put their money where their mouth is' and allocate a share of the income from international student fees to scholarships. The same person noted that 'if diversification really is important, scholarships are such a crucial tool. It reinforces the EDI agenda and goals of widening understanding and making a safer world. It is about recognising the wider inequalities in the world and addressing these. It is not wholly altruistic: it would drive more students to the UK in the long run'.

### Key questions:

- How can we ensure key stakeholders see themselves reflected in our strategy?
- What needs to change in order for us to deliver our strategy in a more agile way with ongoing review?
- What is needed from leadership roles in the area of global engagement?
- What mechanisms are needed to help foster cross-institutional debates on internationalisation and to support the bringing together of expertise from different areas of the institution?
- What remit and configuration will our international office (or equivalent) have in the new landscape?
- What active changes need to be made – in policies and behaviours – to show true commitment to our agreed strategic priorities?

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<sup>76</sup> EUAC is the Alliance for Sustainability Leadership in Education: <https://www.eauc.org.uk/>

## CHAPTER 12: New ways of measuring success

Given the findings from the first phase of this research project: namely, that there is often a mismatch between the global rhetoric in strategy documents and the measures of success that are selected, this was an area I probed with interviewees. A variety of responses emerged, ranging from a view that such a mismatch is inevitable and does not need to be a problem, through to a view that the current metrics are misleading and unhelpful and urgently need to change. This chapter seeks to tease out some of these differing perspectives and suggest some alternative approaches to measuring success.

### 12.1 The impact conundrum

Interviewees generally accepted that you should be measuring what is really important to you as an institution but acknowledged the challenge of finding appropriate ways to measure success in global engagement.

One interviewee observed that 'ultimately we're seeking transformational change, placing global at the heart of our thinking, services, provision. But that's hard to measure'. The fundamental conundrum is that KPIs need to be measurable, but impact is difficult to assess. Another commented that there are so many variables involved in most international goals that it is impossible to determine causation of impact.

One person stated that, when reporting back, 'we do try to talk about outcomes (e.g. qualitative feedback) as well as activities, but it's quite crude. You can't draw a straight line between, say, participation in international experience and performance. Sometimes you have to play the game – e.g. focus on growth in study abroad income'.

Some interviewees felt that, behind the 'soft power' rhetoric, it is important to have some hard measures, driven in part by the need for financial sustainability. There are also metrics driven by what external bodies expect or require. And, sometimes, the choice of KPIs is a pragmatic response based on the data that are available. One interviewee did not see lack of alignment as a problem, suggesting that 'it is an inevitable tension and can be a positive thing if the clash causes you to think hard'.

Another observed that 'we need to be able to measure success beyond numbers. Internationalisation strategies need to be able to acknowledge fuzziness and leave some open space for things that can't be neatly measured'. A different interviewee made the point that, when you go beyond numbers and income to experience and development, the impact will be less tangible but more meaningful and enduring. It was noted that many UK universities are now good at evaluating specific funding initiatives, but less so when it comes to broader impact.

Several interviewees observed that publicly available documents and institution-level KPIs do not necessarily reflect the full picture. Other, more nuanced measures and sub-measures may be used internally.

On the whole, interviewees advocated using a balanced range of KPIs – some 'softer' and more qualitative, others 'harder' and more quantifiable.

## 12.2 From rankings obsession to 'inner confidence'?

Even if not used as a formal (or publicly stated) KPI, most UK HEIs are acutely aware of their position in national league tables and, for more prestigious institutions, global rankings. One interviewee suggested that the sector has failed to communicate a clear purpose (what we want to be measured by) so league tables have filled the vacuum.

Many interviewees agreed that league tables represent unsatisfactory and blunt proxies. As one said: 'League tables are a short-hand way of giving a metric to something that it's almost impossible to measure. It's probably not a very useful metric in terms of driving what you do'. Another observed that the weight placed on the reputation element is 'barmy', and that they have a detrimental impact as the efforts made to improve one's position 'take up too many resources and focus energies on the wrong things'.

These observations suggest they may fall into the category of vanity metrics, described by Tableau as:

metrics that make you look good to others but do not help you understand your own performance in a way that informs future strategies. These metrics are exciting to point to if you want to appear to be improving, but they often aren't actionable and aren't related to anything you can control or repeat in a meaningful way.<sup>77</sup>

This resonates with the argument, referenced in Chapter 4 (Section 4.4), that certain institutions seem to care more about 'looking good' than 'being good'.

Some interviewees observed that, for some institutions (particularly those higher up the rankings), it is about being in a 'club'. It was also suggested that mission-based alliances (e.g. the Russell Group) can have negative repercussions since 'everyone benchmarks against each other and mimics each other', resulting in strategies and behaviours that resemble one another.<sup>78</sup>

One interviewee noted that 'there is now a kind of fatigue with the global rankings'. This is certainly reflected in recent commentary in the HE media.<sup>79</sup> The THE Impact rankings (launched in 2019), which rank institutions based on information supplied by them on their progress towards the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, were welcomed by one person. This was partly on the basis that 'it's good to have a ranking we do well in', but also it gives the SDGs more credibility at a senior level and offers a useful counterpoint to HE-centric rankings that have little relevance within non-HE circles.<sup>80</sup> Another felt that 'we need to start pushing the boundaries a bit more to get the mainstream global league tables to broaden their

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<sup>77</sup> For more detail on vanity metrics, see: Tableau. *The definition of vanity metrics and how to identify them*. Available at: <https://www.tableau.com/learn/articles/vanity-metrics>

<sup>78</sup> At the plenary of UUK's International Higher Education Forum on 14 April 2021, Stephen Toope, Vice-Chancellor, University of Cambridge, emphasised the importance of diversity of provision in a post-pandemic HE landscape.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example: Gadd, E. (2020). University rankings need a rethink. *Nature – World View*, 24 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-03312-2>

<sup>80</sup> For a nuanced analysis of how the THE Impact rankings offer something a bit different, see: Skyrme, J. (2021). Universities should focus on what they are good for, not good at. *Times Higher Education*, 21 April 2021. Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/universities-should-focus-on-what-theyre-good-for-not-good-at>

perspective'. This view found resonance in the Opening Plenary at the UUKi *International Higher Education Forum* on 13 April 2021.<sup>81</sup>

However, several interviewees thought it unlikely that the current rankings model would be disrupted unless top tier universities stopped engaging or were ousted by newcomers. It was also noted that a lot of the pressure to do well in the global rankings comes from the behaviour of overseas governments (e.g. using rankings to determine eligibility of UK universities for scholarships or partnership opportunities), so we end up in a vicious circle of 'courting the metrics'.

Improvements in rankings were highlighted by one interviewee as providing a lever for showcasing research credentials, along with other positive side-effects such as boosting academic morale and engaging alumni.

On the whole, interviewees felt that, whatever stance one's institution took towards rankings, it was important to maintain independent thought. As one interviewee put it: 'I think inner confidence is more important than actually competing – being able to excel on your own terms'.

### 12.3 Alternative measures of progress

Several interviewees observed that metrics should reflect what makes individual HEIs unique – or at least distinctive. One person noted that, for this to happen, 'we would need government to reward diversity of mission, which it doesn't currently do'. They suggested that the system is differentiated only in terms of status, not mission, and that this is not helpful if you want the sector as a whole to contribute to a better society.

Some interviewees, however, seemed hopeful that the next generation of strategies would embrace a more nuanced set of metrics. As one said, 'We've used the same indicators for decades, but I think this will change. The current ones are not fit for purpose'. Another observed that: 'We're not getting it right yet. The measurement doesn't speak to the value of internationalisation. Success is defined mainly from the institutional perspective, not from that of individuals engaged in the internationalisation process'. A further interviewee suggested that the emergence of a clearer global engagement narrative from universities may pave the way for better metrics.

Those institutions interested in reviewing their KPIs may find Baxter's 'AMP Model of Good KPIs'<sup>82</sup> useful. This provides a quality check for KPIs on the basis that a good KPI should be actionable, measurable and purposeful. Many of the metrics used by UK universities – including rankings position – would fall down on the criteria relating to measurability. These criteria include timeliness, since 'lag between measurement and reporting can impair the ability to respond'.

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<sup>81</sup> Katherine Fleming, Provost at New York University, challenged global rankings organisations to play a role in changing how excellence is measured by using different sets of indicators.

<sup>82</sup> See Baxter, M. (2020). *The Strategy Manual*. GoalAtlas. pp.173-177. Also downloadable from: <https://goalatlas.com/amp-model-of-good-kpis/>

One function of KPIs is as a tool for self-improvement. With this in mind, QS provides a useful explanation of the difference between rankings and ratings.<sup>83</sup> As QS puts it, 'Rankings ask the question: "Who's the best?"' (and there can be only one 'best' institution), whereas 'Ratings ask the question: "Who's good at what?"' (which is useful if you want to probe your strengths and areas for improvement, while still benchmarking against others). Unfortunately, we are so programmed in the HE sector to think in terms of 'who's the best?' that we have a tendency to turn any kind of rating into a ranking.

Some interviewees made explicit mention of alternative measures. One mentioned the **International Integrated Reporting Framework**,<sup>84</sup> championed by Advance HE, which focuses on the real value of higher education (including its contribution to sustainable development), rather than comparative metrics. Another mentioned the **Positive Impact Rating**,<sup>85</sup> a new tool designed to capture the voice of students to evaluate the positive societal impacts of Business Schools across a range of criteria, to foster collaboration and inspire deep change. The same person observed that this sort of thing can only make a difference if senior leaders act on the insights by resourcing those areas where change is needed.

Certain more mainstream products, such as the **QS Star** ratings,<sup>86</sup> include specific criteria relating to internationalisation, which can help to pinpoint areas for development.

Other indicators with a more directly international focus were mentioned. These included the Education Insight **Global Engagement Index**<sup>87</sup> (GEI), launched in October 2020.<sup>88</sup> This index 'aims to capture the state of international engagement across 30 measures, which have varying relevance to the UK's diverse higher education sector' and seeks to spark conversations about global engagement in support of institutional strategy development. Measures are proxies for different aspects of internationalisation such as: geographical diversity of international students, transnational education for capacity building, international student success (including graduate outcomes), international themes within curricula, environmental impact, sustainable development and engagement with ODA countries, and impact of research produced in international collaboration. One interviewee noted that they have incorporated many of the GEI indicators into their international implementation strategy to provide a broader set of measures. The GEI is freely available and draws on data that are already either reported or publicly accessible. As a result, it rates the vast majority of UK higher education institutions.

Commercial products also exist, each occupying a slightly different space. The i-graduate **International Student Barometer**<sup>89</sup> (ISB) tracks and compares the decision-making, expectations, perceptions and intentions of international students at different universities – from application to graduation. One interviewee observed that 'the ISB is helpful as it

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<sup>83</sup> See QS (2019). *The Differences Between Rankings and Ratings*. Available at: <https://www.qs.com/differences-between-rankings-ratings/>

<sup>84</sup> For more information, see: Integrated Reporting (2020). *What is the real value of higher education?* Advance HE challenges universities to adopt integrated thinking. Available at: <https://integratedreporting.org/news/what-is-the-real-value-of-higher-education-advance-he-challenges-universities-to-adopt-integrated-thinking/>

<sup>85</sup> For more information, see Positive Impact Rating website: <https://www.positiveimpactrating.org/>

<sup>86</sup> See overview of QS Star Ratings at: <https://www.qs.com/solutions/research-intelligence/qs-stars/>

<sup>87</sup> See Education Insight Global Engagement Index at: <https://www.educationinsight.uk/gei/>

<sup>88</sup> For a helpful overview of the GEI, see Mitchell, N. (2020). New global engagement index for UK universities launched. *University World News*. Available at:

<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20201007142508954>

<sup>89</sup> See i-graduate International Student Barometer at: <https://www.i-graduate.org/international-student-barometer>

benchmarks and helps to pinpoint areas for improvement, but it's expensive and, because of this, it's not comprehensive'.

Another i-graduate product (not mentioned by any interviewees), which takes a completely different approach, is the **Global Education Profiler**<sup>90</sup> (GEP). This has a robust academic underpinning, having been developed at the University of Warwick to focus on the factors that lead to 'community internationalisation'. These include levels of intercultural interaction and integration across the diverse university community. There is an emphasis on developing global graduate skills and achieving more meaningful internationalisation by closing the gap between what students – and staff – value and what they are actually experiencing. As such, it is firmly focused on diagnosing areas for development and tracking institutional improvement. To date, it has experienced better take-up outside the UK than it has among UK HEIs. However, it aligns well with the 'internationalisation for all' approach that many UK universities are now saying is important to them.

A useful overview of other frameworks, tools and indicators for profiling internationalisation at different levels (from national through to programme level) is provided by University of Warwick.<sup>91</sup>

Of course, many HEIs use their own internally developed surveys (and other, qualitative mechanisms such as focus groups) as ways of identifying areas for improvement and measuring progress over time. The important thing is to ensure that strategic insights gained from such exercises are fed into overarching strategy. Just as metrics need to align with the priorities articulated in a strategy document, strategy needs to be rooted in the realities of practice and experience.

### Key questions:

- How can we best align our metrics with the most important priorities articulated in our strategy?
- Are there imaginative ways to measure the impact of our actions?
- What is the ideal balance between harder and softer KPIs?
- Which sub-measures best support (and flesh out) our institutional KPIs?
- Are we confident that the KPIs we have selected are actionable, measurable and purposeful (not just vanity metrics)?
- How exactly do our KPIs help us to improve our performance in agreed areas?
- Are rankings an essential part of the mix and, if so, which elements of the strategy do they support? Which measures are needed to address those priorities not touched by the rankings?
- How do our chosen metrics reflect our distinctiveness as an institution?
- Are there alternative measures of progress that we should consider?
- Do our metrics resonate with the priorities of our key stakeholders, based on their experience of the institution?

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<sup>90</sup> See i-graduate Global Education Profiler at: <https://www.i-graduate.org/global-education-profiler-gep>

<sup>91</sup> See University of Warwick Global People. *Profiling Internationalisation: Frameworks, Tools, and Indicators*. Available at: [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/globalpeople2/he\\_institutions/profiling](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/globalpeople2/he_institutions/profiling)

## **Conclusion: Opportunities to make a distinctive impact**

The current context for university global engagement is fraught with tensions: from the geopolitical level through to the institutional level. The pace of change is frenetic. Since I started writing up this report, new agent aggregators and partnership models have come onto the scene and the UK government has slashed budgets for ODA-funded projects.

The maelstrom of challenges and opportunities for universities, discussed at sector conferences and webinars, in academic papers and in the media, is only very partially addressed within UK national policy and strategy, which inevitably lags behind the wider debates and occasionally feels quite disconnected from them.

This time lag and disconnectedness can also occur in institutional strategies. The big ideas can become diluted and bold courses of action reined back. While the most recent strategies tend to be more values-driven than earlier ones, there often remains a disconnect between rhetoric and reality, between what HEIs say is important and the success measures they use. It is easy to get distracted from the big picture by comparing ourselves with others and fixating on the same metrics we have always used (and those everyone else uses). The hunger for genuine self-improvement can be lost, resulting in a vanilla version of what the institution has the potential to become.

Covid-19 has provided us with a structural break to rethink our approach to global engagement and address some of the current disconnects.

A theme which emerged strongly from stakeholder interviews and other sources during the second phase of the research was that of collaboration, joining up and mutual reinforcement. Responses to the pandemic have incontrovertibly demonstrated the power of international collaboration, institutions are starting to see themselves as part of a global knowledge ecosystem, and different functions within universities are recognising that they need to work together by finding common ground and sharing resources and expertise to address institutional priorities.

To capitalise on this, discussions need to take place – within HEIs and between HEIs and their stakeholders – to determine what internationalisation and global engagement mean for the institution and how they can support its overarching strategy and supporting strategies. This means using a global lens to help question core strategies for learning and teaching, research and innovation, service and community engagement, and to explore the relevance of internationalisation to enabling strategies like sustainability, people and culture, finance, and marketing and communications.

Any global engagement strategy, whether it exists as a written document or not, should consider the themes which emerged from this study, bearing in mind that choices will need to be made and that the focus should be on those areas which are of greatest strategic importance and where the greatest transformations are required.

Which shared global challenges can the university position itself to address, how can it channel resources to these and how can global actions and local actions be aligned? How should the institution position itself to negotiate new and ever-changing global dynamics?

Which partnership models are most likely to support its strategic aspirations? What changes are needed in order to ensure that all members of the community benefit from internationalisation? How can digital technology support these changes? What changes in operating practice are required in order to implement, monitor and adapt the strategy in a flexible manner? Are there alternative ways of measuring progress and impact, which truly reflect strategic priorities?

If the right questions are asked to open up discussion as the strategy is developed, there is an opportunity to grasp some of the bold ideas that emerge, to test them against institutional mission and values and, where appropriate, to embed them in a global engagement strategy that helps the institution to cultivate its own distinctive approach to internationalisation and to make a positive impact both globally and locally.

## Overview of key questions for HEIs to ask

In my consultancy work, I find that putting time and effort into coming up with the right questions to ask during the consultation phase of new strategy development – or when a strategy is being reviewed – pays huge dividends. They can be used to stimulate valuable discussions with a range of different stakeholders, serving to challenge assumptions, spark ideas derived from divergent thinking and, ultimately, make the strategy itself richer, more sustainable, more distinctive, and more reflective of institutional values, mission and character.

This is why I conclude each chapter in Part 3 of the main Global Strategies Report with a set of key questions. It is hoped that these will provide a useful prompt for leaders within HEIs as they engage in discussions on the future shape of their global engagement strategy.

This section provides a collated overview of the key questions raised.

### Considering the 'why': drivers and differentiation

#### Key questions:

- How is the institution's approach to global engagement going to reflect its values and support its mission?
- How can the perspectives of those who challenge western and Anglosphere-orientated notions of internationalisation be considered?
- How will the institution negotiate government policies in a way that is true to its values?
- How is the HEI going to 'be international' in this post-Covid context? Will it, for example, address head on issues of climate impact and inequality?
- How will it differentiate itself? Are there global engagement principles that the university community cares about strongly enough to take a public stand?

### Addressing global – and local – challenges

#### Key questions:

- How embedded is sustainable development within institutional strategy and what are the implications for global engagement priorities?
- How can climate impact considerations be addressed within our strategy?
- What synergies exist between equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), social and racial justice, and international education? Could these be harnessed within our strategy?
- What benefits could our global engagement bring to our local / regional community and how might our civic engagement activities have positive international impact?
- Are there tensions that need to be resolved between the agendas mentioned in the above questions?

## **Negotiating new global dynamics**

### **Key questions:**

- How does our global engagement strategy address the ethical dimension of building international relationships?
- Does our portfolio of potential partner countries support our institutional mission, spread risk and ensure diversity?
- Are we prepared to invest in building relationships in / with countries not prioritised by the UK Government?
- What strategies can we put in place to build understanding of our partner countries' priorities and to enhance the ability of our staff and students to engage globally? Will these strategies extend to the nurturing of intercultural and linguistic competencies?

## **Rethinking partnership models**

### **Key questions:**

- How can international partnerships help to achieve our institutional goals – and those of our partners?
- What potential is there for more holistic partnerships?
- What will the position of TNE be within our education portfolio? What benefits are we (and our TNE partners and students) aiming for?
- What needs to happen for us to develop truly flexible provision?
- What would be the benefits of working with new types of partner, including those in the private sector? And the challenges?
- Are there ways in which greater collaboration – with UK-based HEIs or global networks – could help us to achieve our goals?

## **'Internationalisation for All' in a digital world**

### **Key questions:**

- What investments are we prepared to make in order to extend the benefits of internationalisation to all members of the institutional community?
- How can we ensure the views and voices of our diverse students, alumni and staff inform our approach to internationalisation?
- What approaches will we use to make outward mobility accessible to students from disadvantaged / underrepresented backgrounds?
- What support do staff need in order to embed global perspectives and intercultural experiences into curricula and to foster global integration?
- Do we need to stimulate debates about the relationship between decolonisation and internationalisation to determine common principles for curricular reform?
- What is going to be different about our future students' pre-enrolment experience?
- How will we address the needs and expectations of international parents?
- What are we willing to invest in enhancing international students' employability (whether they choose to stay in the UK or return home)?
- What opportunities can we offer our alumni to help them feel like life-long partners within our global community?
- What are the development needs of staff, as we seek to broaden the pool of those who are internationally engaged and extend the ways in which such engagement can take place?

## **Alternative operating practices**

### **Key questions:**

- How can we ensure key stakeholders see themselves reflected in our strategy?
- What needs to change in order for us to deliver our strategy in a more agile way with ongoing review?
- What is needed from leadership roles in the area of global engagement?
- What mechanisms are needed to help foster cross-institutional debates on internationalisation and to support the bringing together of expertise from different areas of the institution?
- What remit and configuration will our international office (or equivalent) have in the new landscape?
- What active changes need to be made – in policies and behaviours – to show true commitment to our agreed strategic priorities?

## **New ways of measuring success**

### **Key questions:**

- How can we best align our metrics with the most important priorities articulated in our strategy?
- Are there imaginative ways to measure the impact of our actions?
- What is the ideal balance between harder and softer KPIs?
- Which sub-measures best support (and flesh out) our institutional KPIs?
- Are we confident that the KPIs we have selected are actionable, measurable and purposeful (not just vanity metrics)?
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## Glossary

ACE	American Council on Education
AGCAS	The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services
AMP	Actionable, Measurable, Purposeful
BUILA	British Universities International Liaison Association
CANIE	Climate Action Network for International Educators
CIHE	Centre for International Higher Education (at Boston College)
COIL	Collaborative Online International Learning
DBA	Doctorate of Business Administration
EAIE	European Association for International Education
EAUC	The Alliance for Sustainability Leadership in Education
ECCTIS	Education Counselling and Credit Transfer Information Service
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
EU	European Union
GEI	Global Engagement Index (by Education Insight)
GEP	Global Education Profiler (by i-graduate)
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
IES	International Education Strategy (of the UK government)
IS	International / Internationalisation / Global Engagement Strategy
ISB	International Student Barometer (by i-graduate)
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OPM	Online Program Management
QS	Quacquarelli Symonds
REF	Research Excellence Framework
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SP	Strategic Plan
THE	Times Higher Education
TNE	Transnational Education
UKCISA	UK Council for International Student Affairs
UK-NARIC	UK National Academic Recognition Information Centre
UN	United Nations
UUK	Universities UK
UUKi	Universities UK International