



AIEA PROVOST PERSPECTIVES

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Internationalization through Strategic Partnerships

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Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor





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Time served as Provost: 4.5 years as of May, 2014

The University of Sydney is Australia's first university and situated in Australia's largest city. A comprehensive research and teaching institution and consistently ranked in the top 100 universities in the world, it has over 50,000 students in 16 faculties, 10,000 of whom are international students.

Stephen Garton is currently Professor of History and Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Sydney. A graduate of the University of Sydney (BA) and the University of New South Wales (PhD), he served as Dean of the Arts Faculty (2001-2009) before taking up his current role in 2009.



Given all of the demands and constraints facing higher education today, why did your institution decide to internationalize?

The University of Sydney aspires to maintain and enhance its standing as a world class university ranked in the top one percent of universities internationally. Integral to our standing as an international university is our international strategy, something that has been part of the university's operations since World War II. The importance of regularly reassessing and evaluating our international strategy is a paramount consideration to ensure that our strategy remains agile and relevant.

Internationalization operates in an increasingly competitive environment, especially with respect to student mobility and recruitment. In our view an international strategy that is focused too heavily on mobility and recruitment is shallow and not sustainable in such a competitive environment.

A more robust internationalization strategy needs to establish far deeper roots through preferred partnerships and long-term relationship building and research investment. The critical issue is to support deep research collaborations as well as collaborations around teaching and learning. These in turn will have flow-on benefits in enhancing student mobility and attracting international staff, all essential for sustaining our standing as a world-class institution.

Has the role or importance of internationalization at your institution changed over the past five years? If so, how?

Yes – the focus has shifted from seeking a wide range of international agreements in large part to facilitate student mobility to more focused collaborations increasingly based on research and teaching and learning. In my view this trend will escalate in the next decade as deeper relationships with fewer partners becomes more critical than quantity in sustaining an internationalization strategy. In a competitive environment, meaningful partnerships with selected partner universities will better ensure the long-term sustainability of an international strategy than multiple shallow agreements with too many partners.

What were some of the main challenges you and the University of Sydney faced in pursuing internationalization? What are some of assets you and your institution drew on for this work?

The University can draw on a long history of international engagement, some excellent relationships with international universities built up over decades, and a very broad range of disciplines to sustain a wide range of collaborations. The



challenges, even with these advantages, of course, remain significant. They include identifying partners where there is a mutual strategic advantage in building a sufficiently deep and meaningful relationship to warrant significant investment to build sustainability. We have to be agile enough to move from individual academic-to-academic relationships and leverage this opportunity into something larger and more strategic for the university as a whole.

Then there is the challenge of investing sufficient resources in the collaboration to make it viable. Finally, there is the significant challenge of ensuring staff mobility to sustain the collaboration. Too many collaborations fall over because of the difficulty of sending staff overseas to work with our international partners. Research and teaching commitments often constrain the time that academic staff can spend in fostering international collaboration and this is a genuine challenge in terms of sustainability.

What is an example of an internationalization effort on your campus that was not completely successful? Why was that the case, and what did your institution learn from it?

Some years ago the University engaged in a flurry of MOU signing with a large number of universities overseas. These MOUs covered a wide range of areas – from student mobility and exchange to research engagement. While many of the student mobility agreements helped in encouraging exchange and an increased international experience for our students, many of these MOUs, particularly ones focused on research collaboration, foundered through lack of sustained effort and engagement. Too many were signed for the sake of signing, when there was insufficient momentum or commitment from researchers on both sides (and sometimes lack of resources) to turn a nice idea into a meaningful collaboration or partnership. Too much focus was given to quantity over quality and as a consequence a lot of effort by international officers in brokering agreements that then lapsed was wasted.

Conversely, please discuss an example of an initiative that did work, and why.

A recent successful initiative is a long-term research collaboration agreement with a C9 Chinese University, Shanghai Jiao Tong, in the area of biomedical science. Here we built up good relationships over a number of years with SJTU researchers through researchers in our faculties of both Medicine and Engineering. Both faculties invested time and resources in building these relationships. Indeed, through this process, we began working together more closely. *Editor's Note: Members of the C9 League are considered China's most prestigious universities.*



As this process built momentum it was clear that the scale of the collaboration had reached such a significant level that sustained investment from both universities to take the collaboration to a much higher level was warranted.

Thus over time individual researcher collaborations became the basis for institution-wide strategic investment to leverage the biomedical capacity in both universities, ensuring the sustainability of this vital international collaboration. Critical in this process has been the guidance and support of international portfolio staff, who spotted the opportunities, brokered the conversations, guided the discussions and helped finalize the agreement.).

Who are the most important stakeholders you work with regarding internationalization at your institution?

The key internal stakeholders for our internationalization strategy (and its implementation) are many and varied. First and foremost are our academic communities (the faculties, research centres, research institutes and networks and clusters of researchers). Critical here is the leadership provided by the Deans and Centre Directors. At the broader institutional level the senior executive, especially the Vice-Chancellor/President and all the Deputy Vice Chancellors, have crucial input in driving overall international strategy (especially the VC/President). Other key stakeholders include marketing and recruitment staff and student services. Crucially, underpinning the work of all these people, are the international portfolio staff who provide intelligence, strategic advice and broker collaborations (and much else besides).

What are some of the key ways in which senior international officers can help individuals in your role advance internationalization at their institutions?

A critical support role is providing appropriate strategic advice and information to guide key decisions around strategy and implementation. This advice covers a wide range of areas –potential funding schemes, government initiatives and policies that could be leveraged to support collaboration, which institutions might present the right institutional fit for partnerships and collaborations, identification of key individuals in other institutions to contact to advance the relationship, support and advice on key actions if undertaking a visit or receiving a visit and so on.

While the focus should be on opportunities it is also vital that advice and support focus on risks and potential mitigation of risk strategies to ensure that the university does not suffer reputational damage as a consequence of a poorly planned or executed international strategy.



Finally international officers need to be across issues of culture and protocol, to ensure that potential partnerships are not jeopardized by culturally insensitive statements or actions.



The **Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA)**, a membership organization formed in November 1982, is composed of institutional leaders engaged in advancing the international dimensions of higher education. The purposes of the Association are to:

- Provide an effective voice on significant issues within international education at all levels,
- Improve and promote international education programming and administration within institutions of higher education,
- Establish and maintain a professional network among international education institutional leaders,
- Cooperate in appropriate ways with other national and international groups having similar interests.

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