

A

Administrative Staff as Key Players in the Internationalization of Higher Education



Fiona Hunter
Centre for Higher Education Internationalisation,
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy

Synonyms

[Internationalization of administrative/support/professional staff in higher education](#)

Definition

Measures undertaken by a higher education institution to ensure its administrative staff (other than those in international offices) are adequately prepared to perform tasks related to the internationalization of higher education and training administrative staff to become active players in the process. It is recognized that the level of preparation of administrative staff to carry out internationalization tasks will vary significantly in different institutions and world regions.

Administrative Staff and Definitions of Internationalization

There have been many revisions and reiterations in the definitions of internationalization of higher education over the last 25 years or so, each seeking to reflect more accurately the various evolutions in the way the term is understood and enacted around the world. Typically, the administrative staff – i.e., those individuals who do not hold positions focused directly on teaching/learning and/or research – or their functions have been excluded from these definitional exercises, and even when scant reference is made, the administrative role is rarely discussed in the literature. To a large extent, this trend is reflected also in the practice of internationalization where, although administrative staff have always been involved, the focus has been placed principally on academic activities and hence on students and teachers.

As early as the mid-1990s, when internationalization was still a fledging concept, Knight and de Wit (1995) highlighted the need to prepare “faculty, staff and students to function in an international and intercultural context.” While much has been done, or at least debated, about the preparation of graduates for life and work in a globalized world and an increasing attention is paid to the need to train faculty to teach in the international classroom or to encourage their active involvement in internationally coproduced research, it is presumed to a large extent that administrative staff are just getting on with the tasks at hand. They

have been described as invisible actors, expected to adapt to the changing institutional needs and provide the requisite levels of service, with or without the appropriate training (Brandenburg 2016).

As institutions aspire to a more comprehensive approach to internationalization, as defined by Hudzik (2011), the focus and the challenges are typically seen around making the necessary changes in the teaching, learning, and research functions. However, the same definition stresses the importance of engaging the entire higher education community and makes specific reference not only to institutional leadership, governance, faculty, and students but also to all academic service and support units (Hudzik 2011).

The trend to consider the administrative role and ramifications of internationalization is reflected also in the recently revised and closely related definitions for internationalization at home and internationalization of the curriculum. As these dimensions become more comprehensive and inclusive, they include references to the service functions that are required to underpin effective internationalization processes.

The revised definition for internationalization at home by Beelen and Jones (2015) also includes the informal curriculum and thus embraces all aspects of the student experience. This includes the provision of student services and hence the role of administrative staff. Leask's retooling of her own definition for internationalization of the curriculum (IoC) makes explicit reference to the support services and thus includes the administrative role, as well (Leask 2015).

Finally, a recently revised version of Knight's widely accepted definition of internationalization of higher education (de Wit et al. 2015) seeks to provide an overarching sense of purpose to internationalization. It highlights that it is not just a process but one that is purposeful and inclusive. By embracing "all students" in the definition, it seeks to reflect the growing awareness that internationalization must become less elitist if it is to make a real contribution to the quality of education and research. In parallel, by including "all staff," it also reflects an increasing awareness that internationalization is critically dependent

on their active engagement whether they be in academic or administrative functions.

Academic engagement is increasingly being addressed in the literature and to varying degrees is reflected in institutional policies and practice, precisely through greater interest in the "at home" dimension of internationalization and the related development of internationalized curricula. However, much less attention has been paid to the administrative function and on how it contributes not only to the quality of the student experience but also to how it can foster institutional improvement in internationalization.

Internationalization as a Cross-Functional Dimension

There has long been the understanding that the administrative function is principally the responsibility of a specialized unit, generally referred to as the international office or other variations of the term. While well-prepared, professional staff in the international office can make a significant contribution to the success of international activities, it is also increasingly recognized that as internationalization grows in volume and scope, it can no longer remain an exclusive responsibility of a single unit. Rather, it needs to be distributed across a range of administrative units, each with its own specializations and competences. These units however may be in need of specific skills development if they are to become active players in internationalization.

Higher education institutions, that identify internationalization as strategic to the mission, recognize that "*international education no longer can be seen as a fragmented list of activities executed by international offices and a small group of motivated internationalists among staff and students*" (de Wit 2011). This implies the need for a more holistic approach that considers not only the appropriate academic activities but also the support services and the management of resources, financial and human, that work in synergy toward achieving institutional goals. Such an approach demonstrates an understanding that internationalization is a cross-functional

dimension of all institutional activities (Hunter and Sparnon 2018).

As universities declare internationalization to be increasingly important or even essential to their development, a growing number have developed or are developing a strategic plan in order to reach their goals. Naturally, these strategies come in a range of forms and degrees of effectiveness, and having a strategic plan does not always mean that it is reflected in institutional policies and everyday practices. A commitment to internationalization requires a carefully thought-out process that takes into consideration the development of the whole institution. This inevitably implies a long-term change process, and the more open and future-focused the university is, the more likely it will be willing to engage in organizational change as an essential component of its internationalization strategy.

Beyond a strategy that identifies and implements appropriate structures and processes, it will be the people working within an institution who bring the objectives to life and make internationalization to happen. And it is increasingly important to recognize that those working in administrative units, providing high-quality professional services across a broad range of functions, are vital to this endeavor. However, this crucial role is often ignored in many institutions today. Consequently, insufficient attention is paid to providing administrators with the necessary knowledge and preparation to deliver appropriate levels of service in line with the university's aspirations for quality and excellence in internationalization (Hunter 2018).

Fulfilling the Potential of Administrative Staff to Become Key Players in Internationalization

The first step is recognizing the fundamental role these staff play and acknowledging them as active participants or, better still, equal partners in the internationalization process. Higher education institutions that adopt a more comprehensive approach to internationalization will also need to build a shared understanding of – and sense of

commitment to – internationalization in both their academic and administrative communities. Otherwise, they face the risk of dividing people into two groups – those who are committed and convinced versus those who feel distant and disengaged from internationalization (Hunter 2018).

The second step is linking the development of support services to the institution's strategic direction in internationalization. This can be done through the provision of dedicated training for administrative staff, which is often understood in non-English-speaking countries as English language courses. While the ability to speak English is indeed a key skill, staff also need to be able to communicate in a multicultural environment and to have greater understanding of internationalization in general, as well as their own institution's internationalization's strategy. Professional development is not only about gaining appropriate knowledge and skills but also about building team spirit and shared commitment.

Whatever the program developed, it is important to make it meaningful to the staff by tailoring professional development to their specific needs as well as linking it to the human resource policies for career advancement and promotion. If human resource needs are built into the strategy for internationalization, it will be easier to identify the types of intervention required or how current and future human resources might be better deployed. Indeed, in some cases it may be more effective to hire new staff, especially where high-level professional skills are required; this can be a means to accelerate the internationalization process and change the institutional culture (Brandenburg 2016).

Conclusions

Improving the capacity of administrative staff to deliver high-quality international services is not without challenges. These may often be linked to shortcomings in current institutional structures and practices that are not supportive of internationalization, such as workload levels and understaffing, communication and coordination of different administrative units, excessive bureaucracy, and limited

financial resources that can prevent or discourage effective engagement on the part of administrative staff. The starting point is to address these challenges in the strategic planning phase and to undertake the necessary steps to recognize the importance of administrative staff in a way that enables them to emerge as equal partners and key facilitators of internationalization.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Administrative Planning](#)
- ▶ [Globalisation in Higher Education and the Implications for the Design and Implementation of Institutional Strategies for Internationalisation \(Davies and Hunter\)](#)
- ▶ [Higher Education Institutions \(Strike\)](#)

References

- Beelen, J., and E. Jones. 2015. *Redefining internationalisation at home*. Bucharest: Bologna Researchers Conference.
- Brandenburg, U. 2016. The value of administrative staff for internationalization. In *International higher education*. Number 85: Spring. Boston College: Centre for International Higher Education.
- de Wit, H. 2011, October. Naming Internationalization will not revive it. *University World News No 194*.
- de Wit, H., F. Hunter, L. Howard, and E. Egron Polak. 2015. *Internationalisation of higher education*. Brussels: European Parliament. Directorate-General for Internal Policies.
- Hudzik, J. 2011. Comprehensive internationalization: From concept to action. In *Comprehensive internationalization: From concept to action*, ed. J. Hudzik, p6. Washington, DC: NAFSA: Association of International Educators.
- Hunter, F. 2018. Training administrative staff to become key players in the internationalization of higher education. In *International higher education*. Boston College: Centre for International Higher Education.
- Hunter, F., and N. Sparnon. 2018. Warp and Weft: weaving internationalization into institutional life. In *The future agenda for internationalization in higher education: Next generation insights into research, policy and practice*, ed. D. Proctor and L. Rumbley. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Knight, J., and H. de Wit. 1995. Strategies for internationalization of higher education. Historical and contextual perspectives. In *Strategies for internationalization of higher education*, ed. H. de Wit, 5–32. Amsterdam: EAIE.
- Leask, B.I. 2015. Internationalising the curriculum. In *Internationalising the curriculum*, ed. B. Leask, 9. London: Routledge.