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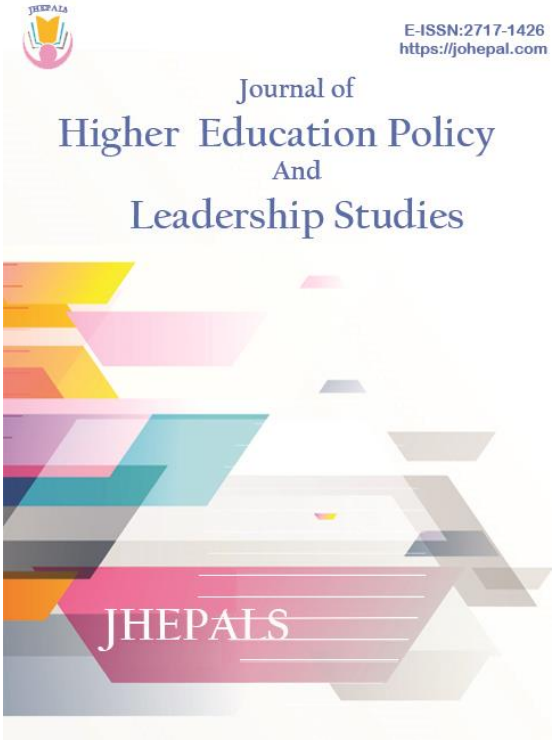

Leading and Managing Internationalisation - Crafting Your Own Unique Story: An Interview with Prof. Betty Leask

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Interview

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Betty Leask *

Betty Leask EdD is an internationally recognised researcher, thought leader and practitioner in the internationalisation of the curriculum, teaching and learning in higher education. An Emeritus Professor in the School of Education at La Trobe University in Australia, a Research Fellow at the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, on the US and an Honorary Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Higher Education Internationalisation (CHEI) Università Cattolica del Sacre Cuore Milan, Prof. Leask is best known for her research focused on engaging academic staff in internationalisation and the development of a research-based conceptual framework and process model of internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC). She has published an extensive range of over 100 single and co-authored publications on a broad range of IHE topics over the last 20 years. She is currently Chief Editor of the Journal of Studies in International Education, the highest ranked journal in the field. Her book, *Internationalising the Curriculum* published by Routledge in 2015 is the best-seller in the series. Prof. Leask also contributes to the international education field globally as a member of committees and project boards and honorary appointments in universities across the world. She was awarded life membership of the International Education Association of Australia in 2021.

https://scholars.latrobe.edu.au/bleask

https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/lynch-school/faculty-research/faculty-directory/betty-leask.html

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Leask, B.

It is an honor and privilege for the Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies to host Prof. Betty Leask as a globally renowned scholar and higher education leader whose research, books, talks, interviews, and notes are extensively cited and acknowledged throughout the world. Prof. Leask's research interests are broad and include internationalization of the curriculum, teaching, and learning in different national and regional contexts; leadership of internationalization at program, school and institutional levels; internationalisation of higher education for society and internationalization as a driver of change and innovation. Her work has assisted higher education researchers and leaders to approach the Internationalization in Higher Education in innovative and authentic ways.

We are sure that Prof. Leask's insightful, illuminating and critical responses to the following questions will be of interest to a broad audience of international researchers, students, policymakers, and leaders in Higher Education.

> "Over the last 25 years much has been said, done and learned about the internationalisation of higher education. However, in the last two years much has changed in the global context within which the internationalization of higher education is enacted. This has created both challenges and opportunities for international education leaders. In answering these questions posed by the editorial team of the Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies (JHEPALS), I explore some of the complexities of the internationalization of higher education and their implications for leaders and policy makers".

Question #1

What model or approach to internationalization do you suggest for higher education systems that are experiencing the initial steps of internationalization (in systems that are facing various policy and executive challenges)? What policy recommendations do you have for the management and leadership of these universities?

Answer:

The framing of this question is interesting. It implies that an existing model or approach could be adopted by those taking their first steps towards internationalisation in a completely different context, and that leaders in this situation might face the same challenges as others faced when they commenced their internationalisation journey. As the internationalisation of higher education is context sensitive, I'm sorry to say that I don't think there is one ideal model or approach suited to all. Therefore, I will answer the question first by explaining why I believe this to be the case and then what that means for leadership and management in universities taking their first steps towards internationalisation.

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Interview

Internationalising a university system or even a single university requires an understanding of the complexity of internationalisation, including its relationship to the local, national context. Internationalisation is in many ways ambiguous and unpredictable and standardised, structured approaches diminish in value with complexity, ambiguity and unpredictability of a situation (Hilligott & Moffatt-Bruce, 2016). To complicate matters further, internationalization strategy is itself still evolving, prompted by the rethinking that began at the turn of this century (de Wit & Jones, 2022). At the same time systems of higher education face many new challenges nationally and globally due to the ongoing COVID pandemic, the war in the Ukraine and political tensions in other parts of the world. No doubt, there are new challenges around the corner, precisely because the world is so interconnected and diverse. In this constantly changing, interconnected world, it is more important than ever that systems and institutions construct and live their own unique internationalisation story, whilst connecting with others' stories. This means thinking outside of existing dominant paradigms of internationalisation and approaching internationalisation as a complex endeavour, a journey towards specific goals relevant to the context of the university, its students and the nation.

I'd like to explore why highly standardised, formulaic solutions are not appropriate when dealing with internationalisation a little further before moving on to discuss what this means for leaders. Glouberman and Zimmerman (2002) describe three types of task – simple, complicated and complex. Drawing on their experience in health care they describe a simple task as one that can be addressed by following a checklist. A complicated task, involving several parts, can be addressed by breaking it down and managing it piece by piece following a simple step by step guide to achieve the result. However, a complex task requires dealing with the whole as well as the individual parts, managing the relationships between the different parts and the unexpected and unusual as the task evolves. While it is important that an internationalisation strategy connects with the strategies of institutions in other parts of the world, it is crucial that it is also relevant for and tailored to the institutional and national context (de Wit & Jones, 2022; Leask, 2015). Managing the complexity of internationalisation means not only understanding how its different parts will work in the local and national context but also how those different parts relate to each other, and how collectively they are influenced by (and influence) the international and global context. This is why approaches and models developed in one part of the world may not be relevant in another.

Despite this complexity, it is common to approach internationalisation as, in Glouberman and Zimmerman's (2002) terms, a complicated task, involving discrete parts such as for example, mobility programs, international research partnerships and internationalisation of the curriculum, teaching and learning at home. For the most part these parts have been thought about, discussed, planned and managed separately. Unfortunately, when internationalisation is approached in this way, the relationships between the various activities and their potential to individually and collectively contribute to broader internationalisation goals are lost. Furthermore, there is a predilection amongst managers to ensure that those responsible for organising the various parts/activities of

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internationalisation are held accountable for their success using simple quantifiable measures related only to that individual activity, rather than more meaningful measures employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative data focused on connection and collective contributions to the achievement of internationalisation goals. Approaching internationalisation as a complex task requires thinking about how the various parts might interact with and influence each other, being aware that this might occur in unusual, unexpected and at times unpredictable ways and exploring hitherto unexplored opportunities to connect activities, constructing a rich, unique and evolutionary internationalisation story for the institution.

Hence I suggest three things for leaders and managers embarking on internationalisation as a new endeavour to consider. First, recognise it is a complex, context specific task and think about what that means for the strategy and policies you will develop, rather than seeking to adopt or even adapt the approaches of others. Second, develop some shared goals for internationalisation – engaging students, staff, and community as partners in their development and ensuring the goals are both aspirational and achievable. Third, when developing the strategy and policy to achieve these goals focus specifically on connecting different areas of international/intercultural activity, supporting people to work together across different spheres of activity, and avoid the use of simplistic measures to evaluate activities in isolation. This approach will require ongoing commitment and leadership across the entire institution (Jones, 2018), including specific attention to engaging faculty, teachers and administrative staff (Whitsed et al., 2022) and time for collaboration, creativity and innovation. The complexity of the task is Illustrated in the rich description of a university internationalisation story focused on providing global learning opportunities for all students at home in a US university in Landorf et al. (2018). Also of relevance is the work of Leask and Green (2021) who explore the idea of curriculum integration as a range of institutional approaches to maximizing all students' international and intercultural learning by integrating mobile students' international experiences and intercultural learning into the curriculum at home and the work of Green and Baxter (2022) on engaging students as partners in international education.

I hope it is clear that these three points are not intended as a checklist, a recipe or a model. Indeed, they are neither specific or comprehensive enough to be any of these things. Rather they are the means to the creation of a unique, context-relevant narrative of internationalisation, informed by, but not mimicking the approaches that others have taken.

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Question #2

What negative or positive effects do you think the new political and military tensions in some regions such as Europe and East Asia will have on the future of internationalization of higher education? Won't these events make international higher education more prosperous in North America? How?

Answer:

It is hard to think of positive effects of political and military tensions. I hope it will stimulate greater cooperation between educators across the world who share common values of integrity, mutual understanding and academic freedom. International education is founded on values of cooperation and collaboration, and a commitment to nourishing international communities of research, learning, and practice to solve pressing global problems. This is perhaps even more important today than it has ever been. As Altbach et al. (2022) have in relation to academic cooperation during the current war in the Ukraine, while we must support those in the Ukraine and condemn institutions and academic leaders supporting the war, it is also important to continue to connect with those in Russia and elsewhere who do not, collaborating with displaced refugee scholars and students from the Ukraine and other places, those who have fled conflict and political oppression and those who have remained under duress. This is one way in which we can strengthen international education and remain true to our values as international educators in the face of current and future conflicts.

In relation to the second half of this question, "Won't these events make international higher education more prosperous in North America?" I am wary of predicting the future in this time of acute uncertainty. There are many social, political economic and academic factors that influence individual students' decisions – and to some extent these are unpredictable now and will continue to be so in the future. Over time there have been changes in patterns and flows of international students at various times including, for example, destination patterns swinging away from Europe, North America and Australia to Asia and the Middle East at the beginning of the pandemic (Altbach & de Wit, 14 March 2020). Any increase in numbers of students seeking to travel to the US, or any other destination country seen as being a safer destination than Europe or East Asia, might result in more revenue and a perception of greater prosperity for the receiving countries. However, the question remains as to whether this will necessarily assist them to achieve their broader internationalisation mission – those goals associated with enhancing the internationalisation of their teaching, research and service missions (de Wit et al., 2015).

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Question #3

How do you think international higher education will be in the post COVID-19 world? What policies and components will be more central to the policy-making circles of HE leadership?

Answer:

Many predictions and even scientific projections by medical experts, statisticians and econometricians have gone awry in the last two years, so anything I say here is equally likely to be incorrect. The pandemic has highlighted how connected the world is and how important it is today, and will be in the future, that all graduates are able to work together across national and cultural boundaries as professionals and citizens. This is the core of internationalisation. The question is, how do we provide all of our students with the learning opportunities needed to achieve this goal?

In the early stages of the pandemic, I argued that the disruption to 'business as usual' in international education should be embraced as an opportunity to step back and consider how we might improve policy and practice in internationalisation so that it is more equitable and socially responsible. For decades global mobility has been reified, quantified, and seen as an end in itself, synonymous with the internationalization of higher education (Leask & Green, 2020; Leask, 2021). Mobility is dominated by students from the Global North, and these students are often white, female and already economically advantaged (Green et al., 2015). Yet despite the growing number of critics, mobility policy and practice has remained largely unchanged and has contributed to the creation of an increasingly exclusive global elite (Wiers-Jenssen, 2011). To summarise, research over the last 25 years has shown that while mobility has enormous potential as a transformative educational experience, it is only ever going to be a realistic option for a small minority of students, and even within this group its impact on individuals is variable. Hence while it may be a valuable internationalisation activity it should not be the central focus of institutional or national internationalisation strategies.

The question now is, will the experiences of the past two years result in some lasting positive changes to international higher education such that we see leaders and policy makers taking action to address fundamental issues associated with equity, inclusivity and social responsibility in international education policy and practice? This might include for example:

- an increased focus on the process of internationalization of the curriculum at home, including support for faculty and staff to develop and teach accredited courses and co-curricular programs that develop all students international and intercultural skills in the classroom, on campus and in the community (Leask, 2015; Brewer & Leask, 2022)
- the incorporation of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and Virtual Exchange programs into internationalisation policy and strategy as a means to provide all students with access to an international and intercultural higher education at home (Helm & Guth, 2022)

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- university leaders taking action to reduce and mitigate the carbon footprint associated with international education, as socially responsible corporate global citizens (ironically the very feature so many international educators say they seek to develop in students) through, for example a more balanced offering of online and face-to face international education conferences and seminars for faculty, staff and students (De Wit & Altbach, 4 December, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption to international education ever known. The future is uncertain because it is not over yet and is not likely to be so for some time. New variants are still emerging. Tilak and Kumar (2022) note that the pandemic has highlighted the importance of having robust higher education teaching and research systems that are able to contribute to knowledge development and reduce inequalities, even during uncertain and unpredictable times. This is critical and urgent for international higher education given its historic dependence on mobility, the likelihood that mobility will continue to be disrupted for some time and the inequities associated with it (but hitherto largely ignored by many policy makers).

Question #4

Why, in spite of all the claims made by scholars about the contribution of higher education to the social, economic and cultural development of today's communities, in practice, have universities rarely been able to make this service the core of their internationalization strategy? How do you think we can achieve more significant success in implementing the global social responsibility strategy through the internationalization of higher education?

Answer:

I think there are several reasons why in practice, we rarely see service to community at the core of a university's internationalization strategy.

First, the service or 'third mission' of institutions has traditionally been domestically focussed. Universities that are nationally funded have a social contract to contribute to national development through the provision of educational programs, research and service first and foremost to their local community. Furthermore, even in the local context the service mission may not have equal status with education and research.

Second, the concept of global social responsibility is more commonly seen in the corporate sector and is a relatively recent phenomenon in relation to higher education. In this regard, it is not surprising that social responsibility is rarely the primary driver for the international activity of universities. It is also difficult to determine the extent to which even service-learning activities which have an international focus have been designed to ensure at least equal benefit to the community being served as to the visiting student and their home university (that is, the extent to which they are primarily service driven).

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Third, in reality, universities often operate as a collection of silos of strategy and activity. Even seemingly obvious connections between the research and education missions are often lacking, and the connections between international strategy and the service mission may not be obvious at all to leaders not connected to the concept of global social responsibility (Jones et al., 2022).

Hence, the service mission has for many years been largely disconnected from the internationalisation agenda of universities.

In relation to the second part of the question concerning how we might achieve more significant success in implementing a global social responsibility strategy through the internationalization of higher education, Jones et al. (2022) argue this requires a sharper focus on the global common good (Marginson, 2016) in both the internationalisation and service agendas. They suggest a focus on the Internationalisation of Higher Education for Society (IHES) as a means to integrate global social responsibility into their internationalization strategy where IHES

> explicitly aims to benefit the wider community, at home or abroad, through international or intercultural education, research, service and engagement. (Brandenburg et al., 2019).

A typology of initiatives and examples of strategic approaches to IHES are provided supported by practical examples from different parts of the world (see Jones et al., 2022, pp. 336-342). The authors suggest leaders make IHES a core integrated mission-related component of teaching, research and service plans, by for example:

- ensuring that all in the institution (staff, faculty and students) understand the core characteristics of IHES and are supported to contribute to it through their teaching, learning, research and/or service activities. This may be facilitated and monitored through, for example, adopting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as a cross-cutting theme in teaching, research and service plans.
- making IHES part of the institutional discourse in strategies and related documentation, in internal conversations (including applications for promotion and annual reviews) and in external conversations with community and government representatives.
- respectfully engaging local and international community partners early in the planning of IHES strategies and activities in order to ensure shared ownership of and commitment to outcomes.
- Supporting, celebrating and rewarding faculty and staff engagement and achievements in IHES to encourage others' proactive engagement in the development of new initiatives. (Jones et al., 2022, p. 341).

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Final Words

Crafting a unique internationalisation story is a core responsibility of higher education leaders and managers. It requires approaching internationalisation as a complex task, involving many different interactive parts, rather than a set of discrete disconnected activities. There is no one recipe, or checklist for success as the context within which universities operate both locally and globally is a critical part of the story which is constantly shifting and changing. Rather it is a process which requires collaboration, agility, and good dose of courage.

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