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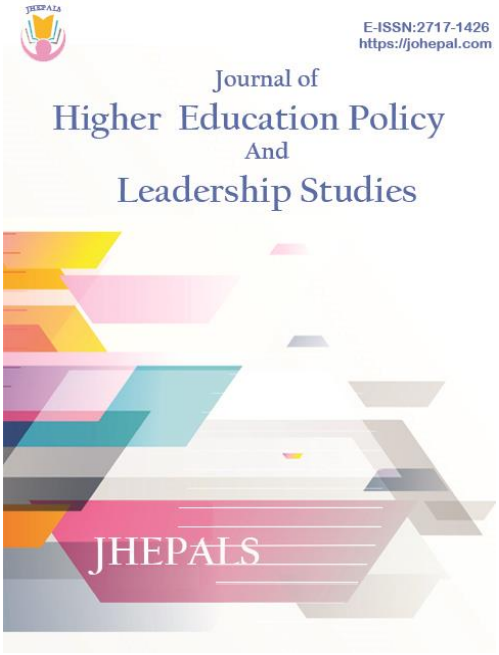


# Assessing the Role of International Offices in Indian and European Universities: Drivers or Facilitators

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# Assessing the Role of International Offices in Indian and European Universities: Drivers or Facilitators

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## Abstract

The international higher education space is characterized by the need felt by higher education institutions to invest in international cooperation. To compete globally, the universities strive to formulate pro-active, long-term, and sustainable internationalization strategies. Considering the direction that strategic planning at the institutional level may offer, the university management and staff in turn may look for resources and personnel to execute the internationalization vision. The role of the international office, in this regard, is instrumental in facilitating the implementation of international activities at the university. The extent to which international offices are involved in the decision-making of internationalization may be shaped by the organizational culture and management at the university. This paper largely explores if international offices play a role of a mediator or driver for international collaborations at the university. An in-depth study was conducted in two universities in India and Europe, to understand the nuances of the functioning of international offices in two diverse contexts. The method of participant observation was employed and researchers further analyzed the field notes. The findings of the study revealed that though both the international offices were involved in similar tasks, they differed concerning the organizational structures and about decision-making on internationalization.

**Keywords:** International Offices; Internationalization of Higher Education; Universities, India, Czech Republic

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## Introduction

Internationalization of higher education (IHE) has become an institutional priority and a key agenda for universities. Knight (2003, p. 2) defined internationalization of higher education as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education". Universities across the world are investing in infrastructure and human resources to facilitate the internationalization processes at their institutions (Paige, 2005). The higher education institutions have come to perceive internationalization as a strategic response rather than an marginal approach (Knight & deWit, 2018). Universities, preoccupied with world rankings have to make important decisions on widening international cooperation (Panchmukhi, 2021). While some universities may tend to focus on scholar mobility, others may concentrate on building capacities for internationalization. While higher education institutions (HEIs) are constantly in the process of devising innovative internationalization strategies, the presence of a functional international office is growing to be a prerequisite for facilitating the internationalization of universities (Taylor, 2010). A well-structured international office may provide essentially systemic support and framework for internationalization of universities. Under the structure and direction provided by the internationalization strategy, the international office could be an instrumental resource in the execution of international cooperation (Bhat & Inamdar, 2019). Though certain universities in different parts of the world recognized the significance of an international office earlier than the rest, institutions, in general, have come to acknowledge the role of international offices in the facilitation of internationalization today.

An overview of the journey of IHE amongst the Western and Eastern European universities reveals that a majority of eastern European universities gained prominence and visibility after their accession to the European Union. Subsequently, the internationalization processes, including the investment in human resources and international offices were established slowly compared to their western European counterparts. On the other hand, the story of internationalization of Indian universities is distinct; given the long tradition and history of Indian universities' global engagement on one hand and dip in momentum towards international collaborations in successive years. Though it is only in recent years, we observe an increased focus on internationalization in terms of policy and priority, in the Indian context. Thus, examples of an Eastern European university and an Indian university offer interesting case studies to be studied.

This study brings out findings from the study conducted at international offices in European and Indian universities through participant observation by the researcher. The paper explores how internationalization strategies at the university provide a framework for decision-making processes at international offices. The paper argues that international offices, in certain cases, might be facilitators in international cooperation on one hand, in other cases the offices might be drivers of international processes at the university. This study provides a scope of further inquiry into factors that shape the decision-making processes and vision for internationalization at higher education institutions.

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## Literature Review

### Higher Education and International Cooperation of Indian Universities

The Higher Education system in a country is a tool towards nation-building. It is a means to achieve the developmental goals of the nation. In light of the complex socio-economic realities prevalent in India, the higher education system would play a pivotal role in building the human resource base in the country. In the past few decades, the Indian Higher Education System has been a subject of several discussions. The importance of the Indian Higher Education system in the backdrop of many higher education institutions and vast population, the strength of the system to cater to the developmental needs of the nation and the way in which globalisation has affected the Indian Higher Education system, have some of the many reflections with regard to the Indian Higher Education system (Heslop, 2014). Higher education, rather than being perceived as a public good, has instead gained precedence in a nation's development. While the shift from a sheer production economy to a knowledge economy is conspicuous, subsequently there has been an increasing emphasis on the largening the human capital, technology, research and development, training in the higher education system (Yerawdekar & Tiwari, 2016). It is interesting to note that the concept of the knowledge economy has largely emerged in the era of globalisation and has come to blend with the internationalization of higher education. The growing presence of Indian universities in the global arena has caught attention, further enhanced by the fact that the Indian higher education system is the third-largest in the world, following the higher education systems in the United States of America and China.

Given the vast populace and the sprawling number of higher education institutions in the country, the ideal scenario of internationalization of higher education in India would be the one which recognises and caters to the demands of massification and differentiation. The efforts to internationalize would be fruitful if there is a differentiated system in place, coordination between the regulatory bodies, and differentiated allocation of funds. With regard to the coordination amongst the regulatory bodies, it is essential for the apex bodies such as the University Grants Commission (UGC), Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Association of Indian Universities (AIU), Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) to have defined roles, collaborative working platforms.

Since the 1950s, there have been initiatives taken by the government of India to reflect on and enhance the quality of higher education in the country. The University Commission formed in 1948-1949, chaired by Dr S Radhakrishnan, brought out a report citing recommendations to enlarge the university system and connect it to the secondary education system. The report came as a pathbreaking achievement then because it carried vision and dynamism then. In the report, it was recommended that the school education, including the intermediate education, would continue for 12 years, followed by post-secondary education and the commission promoted the use of regional languages as the medium of instruction. Driven by the British model, the University Grants Commission (UGC) was established in 1956, which was in charge of coordinating, planning, and monitoring the standard of teaching, research and examinations in the higher education institutions. Moreover, having been appalled by the state of secondary education, brought about by the University Commission in 1948-49, the investigative group, led by Dr Mudaliar in 1952, suggested several recommendations, some of which were incorporated in the successive

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five-year plans. Moreover, in the backdrop of the Nehruvian regime, which worked towards industrialisation through central planning; the focus of the government investment was on techno engineering, which paved way for the success and establishment of the first Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Kharagpur in 1950. The period between the 1950s and 1960s is characterised by initiatives and the formation of agencies such as All India Council of Secondary Education (ICE), the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), the National Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA), and so on.

During the 1970s, there was a growth of privately-owned higher educational institutions, which was a result of the inability of the public higher education institutions to meet the demands of the huge populace of the country (Kaul, 2006). It is important to understand the government's stance during the 1970s and 1980s in higher education. The government embraced a protectionist stand, which saw a lower investment and priority to higher education, compared to the one given in the preceding years. While the other Asian countries were interacting with the Western education systems countries like the US, UK, Brazil moved towards technical and professional education, India was behind in the race in this regard. There were decreasing public funds and increasing private-owned institutions (Yerawdekar & Tiwari, 2016).

It is interesting to note that India has under its belt, the achievement, of being the first country that participated in internationalization. The universities such as Nalanda and Taxila, boast how they valued and pioneered internationalization early in 5 AD. The values and beliefs in these universities since then were underpinned by the notion of merely seeking profits as higher education institutions, but rather vasudhaiva kutumbakam (the world is one family). Nalanda University attracted scholars from Persia, Tibet, China, Greece, and so on and was one of the first few residential universities in 5 AD (Yerawedkar & Tiwari, 2016). The medieval period did not witness major progress, however, the era of British rule in India, saw that the designed curriculum and the medium of instruction were in English. During the British colonial rule, the two universities, the University of Calcutta, the University of Bombay; and the University of Madras were established in 1818 and 1857 respectively.

On the other hand, in the United States of America and Europe, during the advent of the United Nations, the phase following the Second World War was characterised by student mobility. While the Erasmus program promoted student mobility in Europe, the Study Abroad programs worked well towards promoting student mobility in America.

The international higher education in India is characterised by a larger number of outbound Indian students than the inbound international students who come to India, to study. Moreover, there is an increasing trend of private stakeholders guiding the process of internationalization. A few of the many higher education institutions' efforts are bearing fruit in attracting the international students on the Indian campuses, where the institutions are mostly privately owned and the process of internationalization has been driven by the institutional leadership and vision, rather than the government incentives or policies in place. Thus, India represents a distinct story of internationalization of higher education, one characterized by an increased need felt to develop international cooperation amongst universities, followed by a decreased enthusiasm and then recent launch of the National Education Policy aimed at developing the competitiveness of the Indian universities.

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## Higher Education and International Cooperation of Czech Republican Universities

The communist regime had stagnated the development and academic freedom of higher education institutions in the Czech Republic. The dubious appointments of dean, compulsory teaching of Marxism-Leninism, political influence and interference in university matters, and deep-rooted centralisation were some of the distinct features of the system before the 1990s. The steady rise in the number of higher education institutions in the Czech Republic, accessibility, and growing reputation of the universities have contributed to the growth of 110,021 students in 1989-1990 to 243,765 students in 2002-2003 in the Czech Republic. The transformation in the higher education system in the Czech Republic primarily focused on the reduction of state control in the management of universities, increased academic freedom in higher education institutions, participation in the Bologna Process framework and introduction of quality assurance bodies in the country (Baštová et al., 2004).

The TEMPUS program and Erasmus program have been some of the impactful projects which have facilitated internationalization in Europe. The TEMPUS program in East and Central Europe had a considerable influence on higher education in these regions and cooperation with the rest of the European community. It influenced the development of new curriculum, new programs, development of infrastructure and services, improvement of internal structures in the universities, cooperation between the Czech institutions cooperating on different projects, and establishing contacts between institutions and industries (Stastna, 2001). The experience and expertise gained by the Czech universities were vital for their participation in Erasmus and Socrates program. The practical training, the established institutional contacts, as well as their orientation to European funded projects, helped the Czech universities in their Erasmus and Socrates experiences. The Socrates program was a vital tool in strategic planning at the institutional as well as national levels.

## Internationalization of Higher Education and International Offices

Internationalization of higher education is a process, which moves beyond its management of the international office. IHE is a process that includes aspects such as scholar mobility, diversity on campus, staff exchanges, research collaborations, dual degree programs, and others. While the execution of international activities is facilitated by the vision for internationalization, the involvement of the university staff on the other hand also provides collective impetus to internationalization. As Curtis (2012) observes two sides to understanding the role of university staff: an international office centralizes the internationalization activities on one hand, at the same time internationalization as a process that involves the entire institution including faculty members and students. Thus, if internationalization comprises activities beyond student recruitment, it is important to broaden the portfolio of the international offices in universities (University of Hull, n.d). Thus, international office activities also involve investment in non-recruitment activities.

The functioning of international offices needs strategic focus; it also needs an element of decentralization thereby engaging the teaching faculty of the institution. The international offices in universities are borne out of strategic planning and vision for internationalization. The internationalization strategy is shaped by the internal process at the university as well as the national and the global context (de Wit, 2009). The internationalization strategy, very often, is developed by the international office and the

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management of the university. However, it is important to note that internationalization strategy is expected to depict the vision, image, and plans of the university rather than the image of the international office. Though designing an internationalization strategy is an integral responsibility of the international office, as Hudzik (2012) warns, universities must refrain from perceiving internationalization as an 'add on' activity but rather its sustainability and integration in the larger vision of the university.

## Implementation of Internationalization Strategies at HEIs

The internationalization strategy at universities is often influenced by staff motivation, teaching and learning, research, staffing, and institutional management. The inter-disciplinary approach to teaching and learning, innovative pedagogical methods, facilities made available for students on campus, integration of technology in educational practices, building global competencies remain at the heart of the process of designing the internationalization strategy (Taylor, 2004).

Amidst the pressures posed by the external environment, successful execution of the internationalization strategy is shaped by the organizational culture, personnel, autonomy, and academic freedom (Sporn, 1996). Wende (1999) points out that comprehensive internationalization, well laid out vision and mission statements and linking internationalization with quality assurance may help build a viable internationalization strategy. Knight (1994) also provides six stages to effective management of internationalization: awareness, commitment, planning, operationalizing, review, and reinforcement. Ellingboe (1998) states that college leadership, curriculum, curricular units, study abroad programs, integration of international students, and involvement of faculty members are integral to the process of internationalization vision. Schoorinan (1999) argues that short-term and long-term goals are important to internationalization strategy.

Effective implementation of internationalization strategy is determined by the transparency of decision-making processes, strategic planning, and effective institutional management. This largely depends on the implementation of the strategies which is led by international offices. Therefore, international offices act as hubs of international activities. With IHE gaining momentum with the mounting pressures of globalization and regionalization of higher education, international offices only have additional tasks to deliver. There has been a considerable change in their traditional roles of facilitating incoming and outgoing students and teachers, to one that includes facilitating grant applications, research collaborations, and not only establishing but sustaining inter-institutional cooperation.

## International Cooperation of Universities in the Czech Republic and India

There is an increasing number of international students in Czech Republican universities. The increasing number of English taught programs has one of the factors which has attracted international students. The joint research projects, winter, and summer schools are some of the focal areas of universities in the Czech Republic. The international offices play an integral role in applying for Erasmus + cooperation with partner universities.

It was only recently that the University Grants Commission (2021) has mandated that every Indian university is expected to have an office of international relations. Moreover, an in-depth inquiry into the functioning of the international offices of Indian universities by the

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researchers revealed that there are a select few institutions in India that have a full-fledged international office comprising a team with designated roles and responsibilities. As much as internationalization of higher education is an integral part of institutional priorities, some of the key observations found at the select Indian universities were (i) the conventional notions of functions of university structure are so ingrained in the perceptions that internationalization is understood as an added responsibility (ii) the decision making patterns were found to be quite different in private and public institutions (iii) the local issues and community problems compel the public universities to sometimes engage in inward thinking, where internationalization is not an institutional priority, let alone setting up a dedicated international office. There is a handful number of Indian universities which have well-established and functional offices. For many others, investment into international offices is unthinkable.

## Method

To make sense of the expanded activities of international offices, the researchers opted for a case study approach. The focus of the case study approach is to dig out the characteristics of a particular entity and its key distinguishable attributes include a focus on a single unit, in-depth description of a phenomenon, anchored on real life scenarios and uses multiple data collection methods (Njie & Asimiran, 2014, p. 36). Stake (1995) classified the cases into three types: intrinsic, instrumental, and multiple. The case study method was used to have a comprehensive understanding of the organizational and external environment encompassing the university and its influence on the internationalization of the respective university.

Within the identified cases, a field observation method was chosen to garner information about the functioning of international offices in the two different contexts. This qualitative research method involves participation and observation on the part of the researcher, about the day-to-day activities of the people under the study (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Participant observation takes place in a setting, which is believed to be relevant to the research question of the study. This method is rich in itself as it not only facilitates the understanding of the data but also enables to generate questions for other methods such as interviews, focus group discussions, and so on, as the researcher is constantly observing the respondents in their natural settling and drawing questions from those observations.

As the researchers set out to understand the functioning of international offices, they chose two settings one in eastern Europe, particularly the Czech Republic, and one in India. They were chosen on the fact that they were relatively newer compared to their western counterparts and were both private universities. At the time of the data collection, both of them had fully functional international offices and were geared to increase global connections.

To meet the objective of understanding the functioning of international offices in the two different contexts, one of the researchers spent a month each at the international offices of the selected two universities in India and the Czech Republic. The field observation at the international offices helped the researcher attain practical insights into the functioning of international offices. The Directors of these international offices were approached initially for needed permissions from the respective universities. Non-disclosure

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agreements were also signed with both of them stating the observations would only be made and recorded regarding the objectives set for the study. Any other information that was not relevant to the scheme of the study was discarded.

The field observations made, noted, and analyzed are presented here under five sections; roles and responsibilities, hierarchy, reporting structure, decision making, priority setting, and redressal of issues.

## Findings

While both the universities in eastern Europe and India each were private, it was interesting to note the similarities and differences in the functioning of international offices visited by the researcher. If one of them in the Czech Republic was more central to university strategic management and acted as a 'driver' of internationalization, the one in India was more of a 'facilitator' without a major say in the decision-making.

Both of these international offices were headed by Directors with small teams of four people assisting them. Interestingly both the Directors were men assisted largely by a team of young women graduates. Though this depicts the picture of leadership roles for women in the university system, it lies outside the scope of this paper and therefore, is not discussed further.

It was also observed that the Director at the Czech university was someone with administrative experience and profile, the one at the Indian university was a professor with an academic profile taking care of the international office as an additional role for a stipulated period of three years.

Another interesting observation was that, though the objectives of these offices were to build and sustain international collaborations, they were largely composed of teams that were of local origins. For example, it was observed that the IO in the Czech Republic had the all-women team conversed mostly in Czech among themselves though were well-versed in English. Similarly, the staff in Indian university largely spoke among themselves in their native language (language not disclosed as per the non-disclosure agreement to avoid any guesses regarding the university involved in the project).

The general observation was that the staff in the Czech university was dynamic and active while the one in India was quiet and shy. It was probably due to the cultural contexts in which they functioned. Moreover, given that there is a range of responsibilities which university staff has to take care of, including expanding international cooperation, one of the observations was that the staff members struggled for time. Some found it difficult to balance different institutional responsibilities with the limitation of time. Moreover, in terms of cultural adaptation, it was interesting to observe that there was a special mention of the dress code for international scholars on the website of the Indian international office.

### Roles and Responsibilities

While the roles and responsibilities of the person in charge of incoming students remained similar in both the cases, in the Indian university the person focused on more intricate details such as registration of the incoming students with the Foreign Regional Registration Offices (FRRO) and accommodation arrangements. The role of the Director International Office was fairly similar yet different in both cases. They were both reporting to their university

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management, it was found that the one in Czech was reporting to Vice-Rector whereas the one in India reported directly to the Rector (Vice-Chancellor).

While both the international offices had orientation days for the incoming international students, the 'buddy system arrangement' to acquaint the incoming students to the new host culture and system, was not adequately designed in the Indian university. The institution seemed to be in the preliminary stages of arranging for a systematic buddy system to assist the international students; concerning the involvement and participation of the probable students/buddies. This was, however, a little different at the Czech university though the researcher was aware of a few international students complaining about the lack of support.

The international office at both universities took care of the outgoing mobility. In consultation with respective departments within the university, the international office staff laid out the eligibility criteria for sending students from their home institution to the host universities. The outgoing students were nominated based on their language proficiency, academic grades, undergraduate academic background (in the case of master students). The international office staff was also in charge of formalizing cooperation agreements, in terms of building and strengthening inter-institutional cooperation. The staff was in charge of procuring signatures from the director of the international office and rector/vice-rector (vice-chancellor in the Indian case).

The visits by delegations or teams from partner universities were coordinated by the international office staff. They assisted with the invitation letters, establishing contact with respective departments, accommodation for the guests, and organizing meetings with the director of the international office. The visa assistance provided by both international offices was limited to giving invitation letters for visa appointments to international scholars but refrained from connecting with the embassies to expedite processes, as the universities felt that visa procurement is essentially a process that lies outside the realm of institutional management.

The international office at the Indian university organized a fest for international students, which involved cultural activities put up by international students showcasing their cultural and regional delicacies. This particular activity was planned to make international students feel part of the institution as well as provide an opportunity to these students to interact with other students in the university.

In general, it was observed that the directors of both international offices had extensively traveled more than the rest of the international office staff. The international office staff in the Czech Republican university organized international office staff training weeks, which was found missing in the Indian case.

### Hierarchy, Reporting Structure, and Decision-making Process

Both the international offices had a Director who was in charge of international affairs. In the European case, there was a Vice-Rector overseeing the activities of the international office. The post of Vice-Rector for International Relations was not present in the Indian case. The international office staff in the Indian case was in charge of incoming students, outgoing students, and international partnerships. There was a manager for the international office who managed the international office on an everyday basis. In the European case, the

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Erasmus+ Institutional Coordinator was also in charge of incoming mobilities as well as was the Head of the International office.

The reporting structure in both cases remained the same; the international office staff reported to the Director of International Relations. The process of decision-making was distinct in each of the cases.

The decisions on international activities were collectively taken by the international office in consultation with the Director of International Relations in the European case study. The process of decision-making was facilitated by the contacts established by the faculty of the home university and the faculty of the host university. In the case of the decision-making process in the Indian university, it was found to be more of a top-down process where the Director International Office was more in charge of taking decisions on internationalization and the international office team worked towards implementation of those decisions.

The decision-making processes on internationalization consisted of a two-fold approach in the Czech Republican university. Though the process was more bottom-up, there was a perceptible difference found in finer details of the functioning of both international offices. For instance, the process of writing applications/grant proposals for third-party funding was primarily driven more by the Director/Head of the International office in the European case. On the other hand, in the international office of the Indian university, though the decision-making process of internationalization was more of a top-down approach, the process of writing applications/grant proposals for third party funding was driven more by the faculty/departments of the university.

### Priority setting

In the Indian case, drafting invitation letters, coordinating with the accommodation unit, and registration of the international students with the foreign registration department were highly prioritized. In the European case, apart from assisting incoming students with their queries, the focus was equally on writing grant applications and coordinating with the partner universities within the prescribed deadline. While the international office in the Indian case seemed more of a facilitator between different departments and the director, the international office staff in the European case contributed more to the 'decision-making' and execution of international activities. The international office staff in the Czech Republican university had more autonomy in the decision-making of internationalization.

Interestingly, the admissions of international students at the Indian university were routed through the international admissions section. The international office only took care of 'exchange' students. On the other hand, the international office in the Czech Republican university took care of the admission of international students as well as exchange students.

### Redressal of Issues

In both cases, the issues addressed by the international office were more related to the queries posed by the international students. While queries related to grant application and other calls were handled by the Head of the international office in consultation with the Director in the European case, on the other hand, the departments were in charge in the Indian case. Both the international office coordinators had to take care of re-signing the learning agreements; given students could or could not take certain planned courses during

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the semester. The coordinator at the international office in the Czech Republic had to resolve issues related to the semester timetable and examination schedules.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The field observations bring out the characteristics of an international office, the patterns of decision making as well as the implicit and explicit challenges which the international office staff grapple with every day.

In the Indian case, the observations showed certain features brought out implicit peculiarities or rather realities of internationalization in Indian higher education institutions. The international office staff did not have adequate power and authority to make any decisions, ranging from ordinary to complex decisions. Furthermore, the decision-making style did not seem participative or consultative but rather authoritative. The top-down approach was prevalent in the decision-making process of the international office. The international office staff was more of a facilitator between the departments and director, carrying out purely operational tasks.

On the other hand, when similar rounds of observation were carried out in a Czech Republican university, it was observed that the international office staff was more proactive in writing projects applications and taking complex decisions. Compared to the Indian university's international office, the international office staff in the Czech Republican university had greater say in decision-making.

While the tasks handled by the international office in the Indian institution were largely related to the documentation, logistics, and organizational support for the international students and faculty members, they were not found to be drivers of institutional change, but rather facilitators of international cooperation at the university.

For internationalization to be embedded in an institution, the process needs strategy, vision, support, and participation of multiple stakeholders within. There seemed a systemic divide in the perception held concerning the importance of an international office in Indian universities. Barring a couple of policy recommendations at the national level, the above observation may point out the priority given to the internationalization of higher education in the Indian context.

In the context of the Czech Republic, though the start of the journey in comparison with the Western European counterparts was fairly later, the Czech universities seemed to have embraced internationalization of higher education beyond mobility. While the focus of the select Indian university remained predominantly mobility of scholars, the Czech university also gave importance to research grants and collaborative research.

The method of participant observed was found to be a useful method in terms of the insights it provided to the researcher. The first hand experiences after having spent time in both international offices revealed that it was important to observe and passively (and actively) participate during the visits. The participant observation helped the researcher capture the body language, gestures, intonations, working style, temperament, mood at the international office. At times, the researcher gained insights on aspects which were not explicit in nature, but rather could only be captured with the experience of being in the international offices.

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### *International Offices: Drivers or Facilitators*

The field observations and interactions with the international office staff posed some pertinent questions on the very role of the international offices in universities and their significance in different university structures. At the onset, how can internationalization strategy be implemented with the help of the international office? Are resources and personnel such as international office staff always feasible to be established only in the systems which can afford the resources? Are the international office staff drivers of change or mere mediators between faculty and administration? Is there a need for international office staff to be academically driven and not only administrative? The observations of the study would further help arrive at factors that influence the decision-making of internationalization in universities at different levels.

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