

What International Advice Do Universities Need?

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The latest accouterment of world-class universities, or those aspiring to world-class status, is an international advisory group. Heidelberg University, in Germany, has one headed by a former Oxford vice chancellor; the Higher School of Economics committee, in Moscow, is chaired by a Nobel Prize-winning American economist; and several prominent Saudi Arabian universities have committees composed of top-ranking academics and a few business executives. The launch of national Excellence Initiatives in various parts of the world—China, France, Germany, the Russian Federation, Spain, and South Korea, to mention only a few—has often been associated with the creation of such advisory boards at the institutional level.

The laudable goals of such committees, which meet on an occasional basis to review and evaluate the institution's plans and performance, include bringing new ideas and analysis from the experience of academe beyond the borders and especially from the pinnacles of higher education globally, and hopefully assist the institution to understand itself and to improve. The committee members have

a continuing relationship with the university and, presumably, a commitment to its welfare and improvement. They can be called on for occasional advice, generally on a pro bono basis.

These committees may also bring added prestige to the university. A distinguished group of internationally respected academics provides luster—having connections with a Nobel Prize winner helps, even if in an advisory group.

Such committees meet once or twice a year, usually at the university, and their sessions are typically attended by the top management of the university. Sessions last for a day or two and often include a consideration—not only of the broad performance and plans of the institution but often a specific analysis of one or more programs, departments, or initiatives thought to be worth detailed consideration.

WHO SERVES—AND WHY?

Although not based on a careful and systematic analysis of advisory-committee membership, it appears that most committees consist of prominent academics and institutional leaders, from a range of disciplines chosen from top universities worldwide—with a predominance of participation from the major universities in the English-speaking world. The natural sciences and the “hard” social sciences, such as economics, seem to be predominantly represented. Perhaps the largest numbers are senior administrators from top-tier universities—sitting or recently retired presidents, vice-chancellors, rectors, and the like. Few members seem to be from middle-ranking universities or emerging academic systems, and there are rarely members from universities within the country. An occasional business

leader, often from the high-technology sector, is included. Seniority and maleness tend to predominate on the committees. From the university, members are often the senior management team—president, provost, vice presidents, and deans.

Advisory-committee members generally focus on service to overseas colleagues and assisting other universities. Many enjoy a bit of academic tourism, and some wish to learn some useful lessons from the university or committee colleagues. Few, if any, are able to devote a significant amount of time to the enterprise.

DO THE BENEFITS OUTWEIGH THE COSTS?

International-advisory committees, while not a major part of any university's budget, entail considerable costs. While the members typically serve without significant remuneration—with some exceptions—expenses are not inconsequential. Direct costs usually include business-class air transportation and related travel, and hospitality while on campus. Indirect costs, often not considered carefully, are not negligible—including the time of members in the entire senior management team of the university during the meetings, considerable preparation time mainly by the president and senior staff, and logistical arrangements. A two-day international-advisory committee meeting might cost well over US\$100,000.

CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE COMMITTEE

Members must not only be committed to the university but also require being knowledgeable about the institution and its challenges. Thus, they must be

provided in advance with appropriate documentation and be committed to preparing well before arriving to the actual meeting. An advantage of the committee is a continuing relationship with the university, and thus trust and insights are built up over time. Committee members need some hands-on experience at the host institution—through conversations with professors, students, and other key stakeholders plus interactions with top management.

The topics discussed at committee meetings must be relevant and within the purview of expertise of the members. These policies might involve long- and medium-term institutional strategy, proposed policies relating to governance, the academic profession, new curriculum plans, internationalization, and other macro issues. Detailed administrative actions, specific personnel policies—the promotion of academics, for example—and other detailed management and academic decisions are not the purview of advisory committees—although policies concerning promotion and evaluation of academics might be.

The meetings themselves must be carefully prepared, with sufficient time allocated for themes so that the discussion can be effectively organized. Lengthy presentations by university administrators must be avoided. A good balance between providing information on the one hand and allowing for in-depth discussion on the other is of basic significance.

While the size of the university group that participates in the meeting must be small enough to permit productive discussions, the advisory board's contribution can be more useful, along with a wider representation from the academic community. Senior faculty members and also junior colleagues, as well, may constructively be included in meetings. It is relevant that the discussions remain confidential, so the careful choice of local membership is important.

The university must be willing to expose problems and even crises, as well as to present good news and accomplishments. The advisory committee should not be considered as a rubber-stamping group but must be seen as part of the academic community.

Unlike a formal university board of trustees or governors, which exercises statutory supervisory responsibilities that sometimes place university leaders and board members in an antagonistic relationship, a major benefit of an international advisory board is that it can provide a nonthreatening platform for candid feedback on the host university's performance and for sharing relevant experiences to inform the university's strategy and new projects.

CONCLUSION

Distinguished outsiders can bring an original perspective, help raise awareness about new challenges, provide relevant advice based on long experience from a range of institutions, and perhaps present innovative approaches derived from international good practices. Dialogue between the university community and knowledgeable and sympathetic outsiders can yield useful insights. Moreover, there is nothing wrong with the added prestige of an international advisory committee.