

BARBARA M. KEHM

## STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF INTERNATIONALISATION PROCESSES: PROBLEMS AND OPTIONS

**ABSTRACT.** In the framework of their first SOCRATES/ERASMUS applications in 1996, institutions of higher education in Europe were asked to formulate and submit a European Policy Statement (EPS) expressing the managerial and strategic thrust of their European goals and activities for which they wanted to receive support. As this was a new exercise for many institutions, especially from countries in which mission statements are not the rule, the resulting EPSs often contained a number of inconsistencies with regard to institutional strategies and policies and with regard to the relationship between institutional and European goals and policies. The contribution discusses typical problems of the strategic management of internationalisation processes at higher education institutions by presenting results of an analysis of these EPSs. It also draws some conclusions regarding implications for future developments in the context of institutional management of change and the concept of the learning organisation.

### EU PROGRAMME INCENTIVES

With the advent of SOCRATES, the European Action Programme to foster international cooperation and mobility in education, into which ERASMUS was integrated as a sub-programme, the latter programme was modified to a certain extent. More emphasis was placed on curriculum development, recognition issues and the promotion of innovation in higher education through 'thematic networks'. However, the most visible changes of ERASMUS in the new context of SOCRATES were of a managerial nature. For the purpose of being awarded support from the academic year 1997/98 onwards,

- (a) each institution of higher education had to submit one application encompassing all its exchange and cooperation activities. This application became the basis for an institutional contract between the European Commission and the individual institution and replaced the previous submission of applications by networks of cooperating institutions,
- (b) the institutions of higher education applying for SOCRATES were expected to provide evidence that cooperation between them and



*Tertiary Education and Management* 5: 369–382, 1999.

© 2000 Kluwer Academic Publishers. Printed in the Netherlands.

other European institutions had been established through bilateral agreements, and

- (c) each institution submitting an application for SOCRATES support was requested to include in its application a European Policy Statement (EPS). This statement was supposed to provide a framework for the actual European activities to be carried out within the applying institution and to define the role SOCRATES support should play in this framework.

This managerial change of the SOCRATES programme was generally conceived to imply more change than a mere shift of bureaucratic procedures. Implicitly, SOCRATES challenged the applying higher education institutions

- to reflect and put a stronger emphasis on the coherence of goals to be pursued and the coherence of European activities to be undertaken,
- to strengthen the responsibility of the central level of the higher education institutions regarding European activities, notably in taking priority decisions, in providing a support structure and in ensuring the resource basis for European activities, and
- to develop and reinforce strategic thinking in terms of setting clear targets and pursuing them successfully.

This managerial and more strategic thrust of the SOCRATES programme with regard to the European policies of higher education institutions stirred up quite a few controversies and was obviously seen as a major challenge for a majority of institutions. One could expect from the outset that the first round of applications in this new framework, which had to be submitted in the summer of 1996, was based on an interesting experimental period of deliberations, debates and efforts towards strategic decision-making.

#### AN ANALYSIS OF STRATEGIES FOR INTERNATIONALISATION

These changes gave cause to submit a proposal for an analysis studying the quantitative and qualitative changes incurred in the process of submitting the first application for SOCRATES support. At the request of the Association of European Universities (CRE), the European Commission provided support for undertaking a study which aimed to assess at a very early stage of the implementation of SOCRATES whether the SOCRATES approach is taking root and likely to contribute to the achievements envisaged.

The study consisted of three stages:

- (1) An analysis of all European Policy Statements (EPS) submitted by higher education institutions in Europe as part of their application for SOCRATES funding within the framework of the institutional contract;
- (2) A number of site visits to selected institutions in most EU Member States in order to conduct interviews with the key actors involved in decision-making about strategies of Europeanisation, in formulating the EPS and other persons concerned at the respective institutions; and
- (3) A series of three workshops to which academic leaders of higher education institutions (rectors and principals), heads of international offices and other key experts were invited to discuss results of the first two stages of the project, exchange experiences, disseminate innovative approaches in policy, management of the contract and activities and make proposals for the future of SOCRATES.

The results of this study have been published (Barblan et al. 1998). The European Commission has decided to support a follow-up study based on the same methodological approach but increasing the site visits and interviews of key actors and putting the emphasis on successful implementation of those strategies for internationalisation which had been formulated in the EPS. This study is currently still ongoing. This contribution will present and discuss some of the main results of all stages of the study. An emphasis will be put on the managerial aspects of internationalisation processes within higher education institutions.

#### THE EUROPEAN POLICY STATEMENTS

It should be kept in mind that the requirement to formulate a European Policy Statement was a first time exercise for institutions in many countries with regard to put into writing (on three pages maximum) their institutional profile and self-understanding in relation to a specific policy and strategy. Institutions in those countries in which it is customary to formulate and perhaps periodically review a mission statement certainly found the request easier to deal with than institutions in countries where such an exercise is – so far – not the rule.

During the phase of preparation of the application and the European Policy Statements, many rumours were going around among institutions all over Europe in regard to the tactical aspects of formulating the EPS, ie what kind of issues the European Commission expected to be included in the EPS and application in order to make it successful. Thus, for example,

we find a surprisingly strong emphasis on recognition issues and the application of a credit transfer system. Rumours and hearsay could spread in particular as the result of the lack of information about what exactly was expected, in which way the quality and content of the EPS would be considered in the decision to accept or refuse the application and whether it would be evaluated as part of the institutional contract. An aide-mémoire from the CRE and preparatory seminars organised by national agencies and SOCRATES promoters were obviously not sufficient in order to make all institutions feel secure about what they were doing and what was expected. This led to a number of inconsistencies in the EPSs concerning the formulation of proper institutional strategies and policies. To give a few examples:

- There was frequently no proper distinction between goals and activities eligible for SOCRATES support, ie goals were formulated in a rather operational way. Planned increases of existing cooperation and exchange activities or intentions to become involved in new activities were often presented as goals.
- The programme logic of SOCRATES actually tends to favour a certain degree of prioritisation in goals and activities. Many EPSs, however, opted for quantitative increases and/or qualitative improvements of typical ERASMUS activities. Thus, the coherence and clarity of goals stated in the EPSs left some scope for improvement.
- The relationship between institutional and international/European goals remained unclear in a considerable number of EPSs although institutional development is clearly seen as being dependent on further internationalisation/Europeanisation.
- In many EPSs strategic reasoning was not highly developed and corresponded to a relatively low proportion of EPSs discussing opportunities and constraints. There was a visible tendency that institutions rated to be more centralised in their institutional decision-making structures also received better ratings on strategic reasoning and overall strategic thinking.
- As a rule, those SOCRATES-eligible and related activities for which an increase was envisaged also had a high policy relevance. However, the relationship between envisaged increase and policy relevance was not always without contradiction. This corresponded to a frequently unclear picture of the vertical consistency between policy, management and activities.

In general, those institutions in which policy is based on an institutional mission formulated their European and international goals in a clearer and more targeted way, although they did not necessarily favour the most

ambitious European goals. The EPS analyses also showed that institutions which seemed to favour more centralised decision-making did not only express European and international goals in a more targeted manner but also wanted to pursue more ambitious specific goals in the context of their SOCRATES activities than institutions with decentralised decision-making structures.

The general orientation towards goals and strategy of higher education institutions seems to be relevant to the extent to which an institution harbours clear and specific European and international goals. However, the linkage is not so pronounced that a targeted Europeanisation and internationalisation policy seems to be principally dependent on a strong emphasis on mission and strategic orientation. Altogether, the findings suggest that a strategic attitude and a clear set of goals might have some impact on the European and international goals of the institution. Intentions to undertake or increase specific European and international activities are at most loosely linked to those general orientations.

#### PROBLEMS AND OPTIONS IN THE INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT OF EUROPEANISATION AND INTERNATIONALISATION PROCESSES

The first study has shown that many institutions seized the opportunity to set up a permanent process of more or less strategic reflection and decision-making. Apart from nominating specific persons at the central and sometimes departmental level, they frequently also formed committees and working groups to increase transparency, to formalise deliberations and decision-making regarding SOCRATES and to create synergies between different European and international activities. Thus, the overall awareness increased at institutional level of the role of European and international issues. As a result, the responsibilities of the international relations offices were often extended and additional resources allocated. The institutionalisation of reflection processes, improvement of infrastructure, establishment of transparency and regulation of responsibilities contributed in many respects to an increase in the institutions' potential for strategic action. Further site visits in the framework of the follow-up study confirmed that international relations offices have achieved a high degree of professionalisation in both collecting and disseminating up-to-date information as well as supporting academic staff in processes of application and reporting. Naturally they also act as premium sources of help for all incoming and outgoing students. In contrast to this, the structure of committees, working groups and departmental contact persons has turned out to be less stable. Once the first round of applications was

over and the EPS formulated, discussions and deliberations became less frequent. An important factor for this development seems to have been the unexpectedly low level of funding coming from Brussels which often turned original enthusiasm into disappointment and frustration.

The question remains as to why the majority of European higher education institutions did not respond to the challenges inherent in the SOCRATES programme by defining clear operational targets resulting from well-founded strategic priorities. Some reasons seem to rest with the institutions themselves: in terms of self-understanding or self-awareness, many until now have not considered themselves as strategic actors. Thus, they were challenged when SOCRATES for the first time offered them an opportunity to enter such a role. This also explains why basic strategic reasoning (e.g. along the lines of SWOT) was seldom demonstrated in the EPSs of the first round of applications. Although the EPSs have not been revised for the following rounds of applications, the later rounds of applications, as well as unwritten policies, have shown to be somewhat more strategic. Universities have tended to be cautious when asked to commit their future to specific priority areas. Finally, university management reforms have been frequently advocated in recent years on the assumption that traditional patterns of management and decision-making in higher education tend to prevent institutions from assuming their responsibilities. Considering these divergent trends, key actors from institutions are unsure about their institution's inclination to determine major targets and priorities as far as their European and international activities are concerned.

In addition, the European Commission's grant policy for the first year of SOCRATES was based on separate assessment of applications for the different strands of support. The aggregation of resulting decisions could not reflect any encouragement of a global institutional commitment to European strategies, as this was not taken into account. This was in clear contradiction with the claimed desire of SOCRATES to encourage institutions to develop innovative strategies and to become clearly responsible for all their activities, thus creating synergies between them. Nevertheless, after initial disappointment the new opportunities are seized in a more targeted manner. As institutions become more and more conscious of costs, they have started to calculate in more detail which activities are worthwhile to pursue according to their individual situation.

Apart from a detailed analysis of the European Policy Statements (EPSs) submitted by higher education institutions applying for support under the institutional contract within SOCRATES, a number of site visits have been undertaken in the framework of the studies. Key institutional actors were interviewed with the aim to analyse the institutional structures,

processes and attitudes which led to the formulation of the EPS and served their implementation and to understand under what institutional conditions policies and strategic reasoning had or had not developed. The majority of the site visits, covering institutions in all countries eligible for participation in SOCRATES, occurred after the award of the Institutional Contract and the disappointingly low level of funding. This, however, was an advantage as well since institutions were forced to think more seriously about prioritisation and conditions and had to adapt to the new situation. Four major areas of change in the institutional management of Europeanisation and internationalisation processes can be noted which will be presented in some more detail.

### *Consultation and decision-making processes*

In the institutional processes of consultation and decision-making in preparation of the SOCRATES Institutional Contract, most institutions used special procedures or managerial constructions which always involved some form of centralisation and increased coordination at central as well as faculty/departmental level. Increased coordination was often achieved by setting up a new consultative or decision-making body bringing together representatives from faculties and/or departments and the central level. In many cases, it was mentioned that the creation of these structures or procedures was felt to be necessary because the number and scope of international cooperation activities had reached a certain level or passed a certain threshold at which more coordination had become necessary.

In addition, we find an extended role of the international relations offices often accompanied by expanding the number of staff and/or centralising the office as such. Apart from additional coordination tasks in terms of mobility and other activities, it was often the international relations officer who organised the consultation process, wrote the first draft of the EPS and managed the contacts with partner institutions in preparation of the bilateral agreements.

Interestingly, a top-down procedure in formulating the EPS did not create serious conflicts between central and departmental levels. Many academics saw the need for policy development as a way of providing more sense of direction, more uniform impact on students and more systematic implementation but did not regard such policy development as their own task. Furthermore, the top-down approach gave little cause for conflict because the policy statement was mostly based on previous and ongoing activities and activity plans of faculties and departments. Thus the central level always played a crucial role in the formulation of the EPS.



Within the framework of many site-visit interviews, the increased importance of professionalised international relations offices was confirmed. They often tend to be the only unit creating an actual link between policy formulation and policy decisions at the top level and actual activities at departmental or faculty level.

*Institutional attitudes in terms of communication, commitment and motivation*

There were no internal tensions between different institutional levels or between administrators and academics. Instead, the latter often saw the former as performing positive services rather than being threatening power-mongers. However, two fears were voiced in this context. One was that the distribution of the limited funds would result in some such tensions; the second one was that the SOCRATES mechanism itself shifted attention away from academic matters to administrative aspects of ERASMUS cooperation.

The preparation of the Institutional Contract generally strengthened transversal communication between the central, the faculty and the departmental levels and led to better intra-institutional cooperation, greater readiness to make compromises and sometimes even paved the way for interdisciplinary or cross-faculty programmes. Increase in communication and coordination also resulted in greater transparency regarding the level of activity of the various parts of the institution, thus also allowing for more targeted support and mobilisation in the future. Attempts to mobilise individual academics or departments and expanding the range of activities had been made at many institutions during the preparation phase of the SOCRATES application. However, respective efforts were often disappointed by low funding awards or even non-acceptance of the proposal, thus many institutions believed that they would revert to their more routine and familiar approaches, ie mainly organising mobility.

The necessity to formulate an institutional European Policy Statement frequently changed the ways in which the institutions conceived of their own international and European profile and their attitudes towards implementing European cooperation activities. European cooperation and with it international cooperation with which it was always inextricably linked, has become a more prominent issue in institutional self-awareness. Sometimes this went hand in hand with a new awareness of institutional needs, eg to develop appropriate mechanisms for international cooperation or to reduce opportunity costs by balancing mobility flows.

Another noteworthy result is the remarkable increase of institutional commitment, particularly at central level, reflected in the amount of human



and financial resources being mobilised for SOCRATES/ERASMUS. Despite the low level of outside support, many institutions are planning to carry out their proposed ERASMUS activities as far as possible. This often includes allocating extra funds from the institutions' own resources to top-up funds provided by SOCRATES. In particular, institutions are making great efforts to realise student mobility numbers as planned. Other examples of institutional commitment consist of reducing the teaching load for those academic staff who are especially active in European cooperation and to increase language teaching provision and course offerings in English.

There were many complaints about the increased administrative burden, especially for the international office. Not only did the work seem to be concentrated on the shoulders of a smaller number of intra-institutional coordinators, but there was also a net increase of necessary acts of communication and coordination because of the addition of the institutional and faculty level to the functioning of the programme. In general, a deep concern was voiced by a vast majority of institutions about the growing discrepancy between institutional input and output in terms of funds received from the SOCRATES programme. The balance between input and output was believed by many to be leading to a more selective use of the programme, ie efforts were still worthwhile for the sake of the students but neither for the institution itself nor for some of the other SOCRATES activities.

The increase of commitment at central and faculty level seems to go hand in hand with a certain decrease of motivation of a number of individual academics. Although many of them appreciated the institutional approach as such, the considerably reduced opportunities to meet colleagues in multilateral networks were strongly regretted. Another demotivating factor was the high rejection rate for project proposals in the field of curriculum development and intensive programmes for which the preparation had required much more effort than for the organisation of student mobility. Some demotivation also came from insufficient recognition of international cooperation involvement with regard to career advancement. In general, there seemed to be a loss of a feeling of ownership of the programme despite the widespread conviction that the addition of institutional support to ERASMUS cooperation had been greatly needed.

#### *Configuration of institutional and SOCRATES-related goals*

Typically, European policy goals are associated with the institution's international policy or activities. Often institutions did not see any reason to distinguish the European or SOCRATES/ERASMUS policy from the rest

of the institution's internationalisation project. Actual European policy goals were mainly formulated in operational terms and based largely on ongoing activities and project proposals with the aim to take established measures a few steps further. Quite a few institutions also wanted to become involved in less familiar cooperation activities, although the wish to increase student and staff mobility was omnipresent. Internationalising course provisions and staff mobility was often seen as an opportunity to provide a European or international experience also for those students who cannot go abroad. The systematic extension of ECTS which was planned by many institutions was intended to provide a tool for quality assurance and an international standard for the description of contents and duration of courses, common scales of grading and workload and improved advance information of students.

The promotion of language learning was widely mentioned and seen as one of the most obvious ways to overcome obstacles to mobility. Institutions in countries with lesser spoken languages regarded it as very important to pursue a flexible language policy in which support for home and host country language courses was coupled with lingua-franca instruction. Other operational goals can all be associated with the aim to enhance the quality of cooperation, e.g. weeding out unsuccessful partnerships, enhance geographic spread of partner institutions, improving infrastructure and services for incoming and outgoing students and staff or increase synergy between various international and national or regional cooperation activities.

Looking at the prioritisation of goals, institutions tended to support as many activities as suggested by faculties and departments and showed a general preference for mobility cooperation. However, at many institutions some form of prioritisation was undertaken after the award decision. Frequently, this was an even stronger focus on mobility or the goal to achieve reciprocity in mobility flows. Although most institutions have not yet developed policies to set priorities, an area of general consensus seems to be to favour mobility over curriculum development activities, mainly because of the disproportionate amount of effort involved in these latter activities compared to rates of success or the level of grants.

### *Strategic reasoning*

Neither site visits nor EPS analyses bore witness to ideas of vertical consistency between the various levels of goals and the mechanisms by which they were supposed to be realised. Institutions seemed to conceive of goals of different orders, from the more philosophical to the more operational, although most goals were clearly of an operational nature. The mentioned

goals and the managerial details were only rarely indicative of strategic thinking. However, some facts suggest that a more fundamentally strategic approach to international cooperation activities may develop in the near future:

- The effect of SOCRATES on what has been termed ‘institutional self-awareness’ has been quite significant. There is a growing perception of a need to develop policy and appropriate mechanisms to enhance efficiency and sustainability of cooperation activities.
- The new bodies, procedures and communication structures have enabled institutions to obtain an overview of ongoing activities and to coordinate them so that targeted efforts of mobilisation and prioritisation can be facilitated.
- There is a growing number of national governments in Europe requiring strategic planning from higher education institutions and fostering internationalisation through targeted measures.
- A growing business mentality in university management leads administrators to take into account factors such as efficient management, opportunity costs etc. This may lead to a certain amount of loss in the incentive thrust of the SOCRATES programme as institutions will begin to calculate more closely the costs they have to come up with to carry out certain activities.
- We found some suggestion of strategic thinking with respect to intra-institutional communication. At many institutions much attention was devoted to the relationship between central and faculty levels and to the need for well-established consensus to obtain lasting results. However, further site visits in the framework of the follow-up study have also shown that the original enthusiasm and intensity of communication had slowed down. Many of the departmental actors were not aware any longer of the contents and details of the EPS but had reverted back to previous routines.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The studies clearly show that higher education institutions in Europe reacted to the new SOCRATES mechanisms in ways which are characteristic features of what has been termed a learning organisation, ie with increased self-awareness, adaptation to external conditions, change and adjustments of intra-institutional mechanisms, prioritisation, development of policy goals and ways to achieve them. In the concluding part of this contribution, the strengths and weaknesses will be summarised and pointed

out as regards the strategic management of internationalisation processes which have become evident.

- (1) The new SOCRATES mechanism of application for an institutional contract including a European policy statement triggered institutional processes of communication, information, coordination and consultation. The trend to centralise responsibilities and coordination became visible. This often led to an extended role of the international relations offices. Thus, SOCRATES was used as an occasion to introduce a change which was felt to be due sooner or later. The strengthened transversal communication among various institutional levels also led to better intra-institutional cooperation just as the increase in coordination resulted in greater transparency regarding the level of activities of various parts of the institution and will allow for more targeted support and mobilisation in the future. Hand in hand with these developments, we find an increase in institutional commitment to internationalisation, especially at the central level.
- (2) Due to the unexpectedly low award of funding, institutions were forced to prioritise more clearly. Although most institutions aimed at the most equitable distribution of funds possible, the organisation of student mobility was clearly favoured. Attempts to expand the range of activities beyond mobility had been disappointed because respective proposals often did not receive funding at all or the award was unexpectedly low. Consequently, the trend was to revert to familiar mobility routines. However, many institutions also allocated their own resources and/or mobilised other external resources to carry out activity plans. This indicates the increased importance of international cooperation not only within the framework of institutional policy but also within the framework of relationships between higher education institutions and the regional economy.
- (3) In contrast to the formulation of the European Policy Statement which tended to follow a top-down approach, and despite the fact that many institutions included a broad consultation process, the activity proposals followed a bottom-up approach. At most institutions, an organised mobilisation process went on beforehand. The European Policy Statements were based mostly on previous and ongoing activities and activity plans formulated in a rather operational way with immediate relevance to the proposed activities.
- (4) The necessity to formulate a European Policy Statement entailed changes in the institutions' perception of their own international/European profile including the status of international cooperation in institutional self-awareness. International cooperation either became

more prominent or a need was seen to enhance it. British and Irish institutions were the first to show an increased awareness of opportunity costs, eg loss of income, emphasis on reciprocity or balance of mobility flows. However, in more and more countries higher education institutions are following this example.

- (5) The perceived growing discrepancy between institutional input to prepare the SOCRATES application and outcome in terms of SOCRATES award of funds led to many complaints about a high level of bureaucracy. The imbalance is believed by many actors to lead to a more selective use of the programme in the future. The trend is to regard the efforts of application still worthwhile for the sake of the students but not for the institution itself. This new perception is also part of a generally increased awareness of opportunity costs.
- (6) No real distinction was made in the European Policy Statements between international and European policy and goals. SOCRATES gave additional thrust to the institutions' internationalisation projects which gained in importance, although the degree of actual integration of international activities varied to a considerable extent. In those Central and Eastern European countries which have become eligible for participation in SOCRATES, this process is reversed to a certain extent. Internationalisation of higher education here means a strong orientation to Western Europe and the EU while other international cooperation is more marginal and still needs to be developed further.
- (7) Individual SOCRATES activities have a strategic role within the institutions' international policy. For example, ECTS is often used as a tool for quality assurance and issues of achieving transparency and defining standards. Teaching staff mobility as well as hosting foreign students serve to provide an international or European experience for non-mobile students. In addition, a flexible language policy is seen to help increase the attractiveness of an institution to foreign students. But there are also institutions which aim to enhance or consolidate their profile and reputation by further internationalisation in order to increase their share on the international education and research market for reasons of income generation, i.e. later franchise agreements and/or attracting foreign students for full paying enrolment. Other institutions want to improve the employability of their graduates through further internationalisation and thus gain a competitive advantage by this.
- (8) Most European Policy Statements did not show much evidence of a vertical consistency between goals, ways and means to achieve them and strategic reasoning. Nevertheless, we found some indication that

a more strategic approach to international cooperation is likely to develop in the near future, namely:

- a growing perception of the need to develop policy and appropriate mechanisms;
  - more targeted efforts of mobilisation and prioritisation;
  - a managerial approach to institutional leadership tending to increase the focus on efficiency and opportunity costs; and
  - improved intra-institutional communication and coordination resulting in better transparency and facilitating a more strategic approach to internationalisation.
- (9) At most institutions of higher education the link is still somewhat weak between the institutional policy of internationalisation and departmental activities within the framework of international cooperation. Many departmental actors are not sufficiently aware of the policy details although they usually share the overall thrust. The most likely unit to strengthen and improve this link seems to be the international relations office, but in centralised institutions it often does not have the remit to pursue this task officially.

Overall it should be emphasised again that the new managerial and policy thrust of SOCRATES has led to a more targeted approach to internationalisation within higher education institutions in Europe. This can certainly be seen as a positive outcome which should be further supported and developed.

#### REFERENCE

Andris Barblan et al. (eds.) (1998). *Emerging European Policy Profiles of Higher Education Institutions*. Kassel: Centre for Research on Higher Education and Work.

*Institute for Higher Education Research Wittenberg  
Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg  
Collegienstr. 62 b  
D-06886 Lutherstadt Wittenberg  
Germany  
E-mail: kehm@hof.uni-halle.de*