

**WHERE IS THIS LEADING?**

Three issues can be observed from OBOR's impact on higher education relations between Central Asia and China. First, education sector developments follow China's cultural diplomacy discourse, emphasizing building people-to-people relationships through education. However, it is still uncertain whether China's educational investment will contribute to the economic transformation of Central Asia, e.g., help the region move from dependency on extractive industry to a diversified economy. Second, China's frontier regions appear to be "quiet achievers" in internationalization of higher education under OBOR, and further development can be expected in Xinjiang. Third and most importantly, China's growing presence in Central Asia's education sphere may challenge Russia's dominant role in the region. There is much research regarding the competition between China and Russia for economic and political influence, but little is known about the competition in the educational sphere and its implications for the economic, political, and cultural transformation of Central Asia. ■

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## Training Administrative Staff to Become Key Players in the Internationalization of Higher Education

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As definitions of internationalization have evolved over the last 25 years or so, they have typically excluded—or made only scant reference to—the administrative function. However, in the more recent definitions that advocate a comprehensive approach, there is increasingly evident reference made to support functions in the university context, and yet the role of administrative staff is rarely discussed. To a large extent, this trend is reflected also in the practice of internationalization, where, although administrative staff have always been involved, the focus has been placed principally on academic activities and hence on students and teachers.

While they have often been left in the background, at

times invisible actors, administrative staff have nevertheless been expected to adapt to the changing institutional needs and provide the requisite levels of service, with or without the appropriate training. A current Erasmus+ project, Systemic University Change toward Internationalization (SUCTI), seeks to play a part in addressing this oversight by recognizing the fundamental role these staff play, and by enabling them to become active participants in the internationalization processes at their institutions through the provision of dedicated training.

In order to better understand their needs and the context in which they operate, the SUCTI team undertook a two-part survey, which included a questionnaire to international directors at universities in the European Higher Education Area and interviews with a range of administrative staff (from junior to senior levels) in the six universities that make up the project consortium. A number of key findings emerged that will inform the development of the training provision to be delivered within the project, but they also have broader implications for the management of internationalization.

**BUILDING COMMITMENT**

As is to be expected, universities surveyed declare internationalization to be increasingly important or even essential to their development, and the majority note that a strategic plan is in place. Naturally, these strategies come in a range of forms and degrees of effectiveness, and having a strategic plan does not always mean that it is reflected in institutional policies and everyday practices. The study revealed that where there is a comprehensive approach to internationalization, it is more likely that the institution is also seeking to build a shared understanding of, and sense of commitment to, internationalization. On the other hand, weaker processes tend to divide the administrative community into two groups—those who are committed and convinced versus those who feel distant and disengaged from internationalization, may have limited understanding, or resist involvement.

A commitment to internationalization requires a carefully thought-out strategic process that takes into consideration the development of the whole institution. This inevitably implies a long-term change process, and the study highlighted that the more open and future-focused the university is, the more likely it will be willing to engage in organizational change as an essential component of its internationalization strategy.

**SHIFTING ROLES**

Furthermore, a more comprehensive approach leads inevitably to an increasing volume and scope of international activity and this requires the involvement of a more profes-

sionalized administrative community. Universities that recognize this need shift their traditional understanding of the administrative role to one where these staff play a decisive role in internationalization as equal partners. A shorter-term, more ad hoc approach to internationalization, often succumbing to external pressures rather than planning ahead, leads to frustration, tension, overload, and sense of inadequacy for those at the coalface of delivery.

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The administrative staff interviewed highlighted that many of the challenges they faced in dealing with international activities lay in institutional structures and practices that were not supportive of the needs of internationalization. The most frequently mentioned were typical organizational challenges: coordination, communication, and excessive bureaucracy. A lack of alignment of goals between central management and the faculties/schools and the absence of an enabling policy framework for internationalization strategies led to tensions and miscommunications between the different administrative units, and also between the administrative and academic communities. Study participants also stressed their own lack of adequate preparation to deal with their new and often rapidly shifting roles.

**THREE KEY SKILLS**

Whatever the stage of development in internationalization or the traditions in strategic management, there was general consensus that the current level of administrative capacity is insufficient to deliver high quality services, and that there is room for improvement everywhere. The study highlighted a broad range of general training provision in the institutions but, typically, very little specific training on internationalization for administrative staff. Where training is provided, it may or may not be linked to the internationalization strategy, is rarely offered in a systematic manner, tailored to specific administrative needs, or formally recognized for career advancement.

Indeed, training in internationalization is typically understood as participation in English language courses, and while this is indeed one of three key skills that emerged from the study as important for administrative staff need to acquire, it is in itself not enough. The study also pointed to the need for staff to be able to communicate in a multicultural environment and to have an understanding of internationalization. Surprisingly (or not), many expressed

a lack of knowledge about their own institution's internationalization strategy, highlighting the importance of effective internal communication if people are to feel part of an initiative. Indeed, many staff pointed out that training is not only about gaining appropriate knowledge and skills, but also building team spirit and shared commitment.

**INTERNATIONALIZATION AS A LEVER FOR CHANGE**

The study has underlined the SUCTI project's conviction that a strategic approach to internationalization recognizes the value of administrative staff as equal partners and actively builds on their involvement. When training provision is aligned with strategy, it gives administrative staff not only the appropriate skills and competences to support the internationalization plan, but also builds their confidence and commitment to making an active contribution through the development and delivery of high quality services.

It has also underlined the belief that internationalization is also about institutional change and that there needs to be willingness to learn new practices at both individual and institutional levels. The study revealed that there is a greater sense of institutional happiness when internationalization is planned and implemented with care, when decisions are communicated effectively, when appropriate structures and processes are put in place, and when staff are adequately trained to carry out the tasks expected of them. Internationalization exposes and magnifies institutional weaknesses and any university serious about internationalization must also be willing to take an honest and critical look at its traditional modes of operation and undertake the necessary change. ■

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## Disparities and Parallels in Internationalization: The Ethiopian Experience

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**I**nterest and involvement in the internationalization of higher education are unavoidably on the rise across both