

Student Mobility and Internationalisation: Rationales, Rhetoric and 'Institutional Isomorphism'

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on interviews with Canadian and Australian officials, this article examines the frame of student mobility within the broad discourse of internationalisation. Difficulties in definition and admitted shortfalls in achieving progress even on the more easily articulated benchmarks of student mobility, do not seem to stanch the enthusiasm of a variety of officials for the idea of internationalisation. This article will examine some of the contradictions framing these institutional discourses of internationalisation. These include the gaps between institutional claims and their substantiation, between lauding the internationalism inculcated by student mobility programmes and the more mixed motivations or engagements of student clients, and between claims for the entrepreneurial potential of internationalisation as against the uncertainty of its outcomes. I argue that a long-standing Western view of travel as a vehicle for self-cultivation and transformation combined with competitive efforts to keep up with perceived trends in the fields of post-secondary education are producing a momentum that is elusive even as it threatens to bulldoze its way across important institutional practices and procedures.

KEYWORDS: internationalisation, travel, students, university exchanges, work abroad

Quite frankly the students are kind of lazy when it comes to learning languages as you've probably found at other institutions too.... (Gillian, Canadian university official¹)

When you look at biology programs that are three weeks, when you look at a whole range of opportunities that are short, I would say that we were, in this way, mirroring the United States in its trend to go towards shorter experiences abroad ... well, its much more practical to fit in study abroad in a short way than a long way. (Arnold, university administrator)

What we would like to see though in terms of non-traditional destinations is much more interest in studying in Asia for example, in Africa ... and I would think that, you know, one of the

things that our institutions are aiming at broadening their offerings to include those countries. By the by I forgot to mention the most popular – well maybe I shouldn't say that, but one of the rising stars in terms of Canadian exchange program interest is Australia.... (Caroline, an NGO official)

In 2006, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) conducted a survey of internationalisation at its 89 member institutions; 64 institutions completed at least one of the seven questionnaires provided. In a May 2008 fact sheet highlighting the key findings of the survey, the AUCC reported that '95 percent of universities reference the interna-

tionalization of teaching, research and service in their strategic planning'; 94% consider the preparation of 'internationally knowledgeable students' as a key reason for internationalisation, and 81% provide some financial support for students to study abroad for credit. But this apparently pervasive support for internationalisation among Canadian universities, including the particular importance accorded to student training and international mobility, needs to be set against the types of qualifications expressed in the quotes by officials and administrators with which this article opens. These three officials all work either in Canadian university 'international' centres or in non-governmental organisations that advocate some form of internationalisation in education. While their work involves enabling and encouraging student mobility, they are all aware of some of the contradictions endemic in this field. Gillian's department was trying to diversify academic exchange destinations beyond students' most popular preferences for the United Kingdom and Australia but the effort had to contend with the monolingual limitations of many of these students². Given its location on Canada's west coast, her university was emphasizing partnerships with Asia-Pacific universities but had found it necessary to cancel all but one of their agreements with Korean universities because of limited student interest. Arnold's university had announced a goal of increasing opportunities for study abroad but a growing number of outgoing students were only spending a few weeks abroad rather than the more traditional expectation of a year away; so if more students were studying abroad, they were investing less time doing so. Caroline's organisation wanted to increase student interest in study abroad at 'non-traditional' Asian or African destinations but was aware that in spite of this ambition, students were usually more interested in spending time at affluent, English-speaking destinations such as Australia. And while there are some disputes about the accuracy of

AUCC estimates that only 2.2% of Canadian post-secondary students participate in accredited study abroad experiences, neither these officials nor their counterparts in other institutions and organisations would dispute that only a small minority of Canadian students participate in these kinds of international sojourns. Yet shortfalls such as these have not, it would appear, led Caroline, Arnold, or Gillian to question academic internationalisation in and of itself, even when they are willing to express ambivalence or uncertainty about some of its modalities.

In this article I explore factors that may be at play in rendering the discourse of internationalisation – if not its practices – impervious to counter evidence or even the weight of its own substantive ambiguities. If it is difficult to define internationalisation as a programme, and if progress even on the more easily articulated benchmarks of student mobility seems spotty, why is there so much institutional talk of internationalisation? In exploring this question, I draw on interviews conducted with 20 university, government, and NGO officials in Canada, comparative interviews conducted with 12 university officials in Australia, and a variety of government, university, and organisational documents as well as participation in several events associated with international education or exchanges.

Internationalisation

Over the last 20 to 25 years, internationalisation as a term or its various synonyms such as international education appear to have become popular in the university sectors of a number of countries (Lemasson 1999; Knight 1999). But the increasing popularity of the term does not necessarily connote either consensus about what it is meant to convey or a particularly *new* set of activities. Indeed according to Jean-Pierre Lemasson, what is new about the term is 'the idea of bringing the many and dis-

parate international activities of universities under the umbrella term internationalisation' (1999: 3). While many university activities have international dimensions, most notably with respect to research, certain activities are much more likely to be gathered under this umbrella term than are others. Most notable among these is the recruitment of international students, university exchanges, particularly of students, the export of educational products and services, and finally the fuzziest, albeit frequently invoked, the internationalisation of the curriculum. In short, a good deal of internationalisation appears to be concerned primarily with the movement of students and educational commodities across state borders.

According to scholars such as Jane Knight (1999) and Nelly Stromquist (2007) who study higher education in Canada and the United States, respectively, internationalisation in this sector needs to be viewed as a set of institutional responses to globalisation rather than as globalisation in and of itself. But it would also appear that internationalisation is not simply a response to global connectedness but to the diffusion of a particular ideological paradigm of the university in a 'global marketplace' (Brody, 2007). According to Simon Marginson, an Australian scholar: 'In the neo-liberal imagination, global higher education is conceived as a network of stand-alone universities scattered across every country of the world, trafficking with each other and competing with each other (and hence similar to each other)' (2002: 413).

However simplistic this neo-liberal vision may be, its promulgation in countries like Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia has had some substantial if uneven effects. In these countries, higher education systems, which had enjoyed significant expansion during the three decades following World War II as nation-building public institutions, have now experienced substantial reductions in their state revenues (Marginson 2002). Secondly in accord

with the tenor of GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) negotiations, in countries such as Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia, there is a 'growing trend to see education as an export product, rather than as a cultural agreement' (Knight, 1999: 202). Combined, these shifts in the status and organisation of the higher education sector have certainly had the effect of 'persuading' universities to seek out new sources of revenue, notably through the recruitment of international students and to a lesser degree through the export of various forms of educational products (curriculum packages, consultancy, off shore campuses, and so on). The notion of the entrepreneurial university has also been associated to some extent with the development of new forms of governance, augmenting the decision-making power of administrators at the expense of input from faculty and students (Stromquist, 2007). So although international contacts and collaboration have long been and continue to be an important aspect of academic research and networks, the formalisation of 'internationalisation' as a field of university activity has tended to be an administrative rather than a scholarly initiative. In Canada, this has meant for example that university administrators are often included in trade missions or that some of the most strenuous advocates for internationalisation have been those national educational organisations in which universities are primarily represented by senior 'executives' (to use the word of an official working for one of these organisations).

Drawing from a distinction defined by Philip W. Jones, Nelly Stromquist argues that, in assessing shifts in universities' responses to globalisation, we need to distinguish between internationalism and internationalisation. In this distinction internationalism is used to convey common sense notions of international community and global citizenship while internationalisation involves a push towards a

greater international presence guided by principles of marketing and competition (2007: 82). Similarly Jane Knight distinguishes between a declining emphasis on political-cultural rationales for international education in favour of a greater emphasis on an economic rationale (1999: 202). Much of the discourse of internationalisation, however, relies not so much on drawing attention to such distinctions as on blurring them. As John, a Canadian provincial official working in this field, explained:

I mean if you don't align yourself with these kinds of international trends you get left on the outside looking in. So I mean part of it is obviously driven very much by trade and economic considerations and, you know, I suppose that's why the lead on this is with economic development. So in our sector, in education, I think the kind of, I guess you would call it almost like a mission statement underlying this, it's probably two-fold. I think the people in the post-secondary institutions recognise that there's a business around international education as well as it being a matter of education. You know there is a business here, there's revenue generation, there are other impacts in terms of often student mobility ends up providing a foundation for future business and other kinds of relationships. I mean the kind of notion that, you know, we go on a trade mission to China or India, and you encounter people who have ... received their university education in [*name of province*], and those personal relationships end up having an impact in trade and business. But the other aspect to it and probably we should put this one first because, I mean this probably first and foremost in the minds of the educators, is the whole notion of internationalisation. So that you know, the motivating factor is in order to equip our own graduates with the skill and knowledge and so on that they need to function in today's world, never mind the world of the future, they need those skills of working across cultures and understanding of other cultures because it's that phenomenon of internationalization is the reality out there.

The blurring of the boundaries between business/trade models and notions of global citizenship or international community occurs as

a frequent subtext in discussions of various aspects of internationalisation. Rowena, an official in a Canadian university federation, argues that both international full degree students and students returning from international exchanges 'enrich' Canadian campuses. Similarly, according to Gillian, recruitment of international students helps to promote the broader mission of internationalisation:

I think maybe it's a good thing that we are forced to think about more international recruitment because from that will flow other international activities and international, as such, becoming more of a ... have more visibility on campus. I think it will, yeah, because once you have more international students and once you have a more diverse international study body, new services will be needed. Those students have demands, they have needs that need to be met so a whole range of things might flow from that. So I see that as a positive thing, you know, rather than saying 'oh well, now they're focusing on the marketing and everything else will fall by the wayside', I don't think so, you know, I don't think so. I think it will boost the overall visibility of internationalisation programs.

The stronger the accent placed on the revenue-generating or business dimension of internationalisation, the more self-conscious can be the effort also to insist upon its overlap with less instrumental ambitions. This self-conscious insistence on the synergy between transactional and altruistic notions of internationalisation can be illustrated by the discussion of 'knowledge exports' in a report on an AUCC-Scotiabank workshop on internationalisation:

Workshop participants identified three streams of offshore delivery of education and training: traditional academic partnerships, international development capacity building and business transactions. Participants most readily associated knowledge exports with pure transactions – or the provision of educational products and services for a fee – but they emphasised that all three categories are interconnected. (AUCC, 2007: 14)

Student Exchanges

But if university and government administrators, policy-makers, and lobbyists are anxious to soften or justify the more transactional aspects of internationalisation by appeal to collaboration or development, in the case of university exchanges the thrust of the legitimating effort tends to operate in reverse. In their most classic form, university exchanges involve the payment of tuition fees to one's home institution rather than to a host institution, so that incoming exchange students do not generate revenue for the institution they are visiting, at least not directly. Students working through their own arrangements for a semester abroad, that is on what has been called 'study abroad' as distinct from formal inter-institutional exchanges, do indeed pay international student fees directly to their host association and, in Australia some universities have focused on this class of – largely American – visiting students for precisely this reason. Even these students, however, rarely remain for more than a semester and often their stay is shorter, so they generate a modest revenue in relation to the investment of university resources in accommodating them. One could argue that the tendency of some exchange students to combine study with forms of tourism might at least generate some revenue for the youth tourism industry and there does appear to be some interest from this sector in this potential. But institutional advocates are usually anxious to argue against any notion that exchange programmes are just a form of frivolous 'academic tourism' and claim instead that this type of student mobility is a critical and serious part of educational internationalisation. Indeed most of the by-now ubiquitous university statements on internationalisation make particular mention of exchange programmes.

When I asked education and government officials in Canada and Australia why exchanges and study abroad received such prominence, a common response reproduced John's assertion

that 'international experience' was important for providing students with the 'skills' to operate in a globally interconnected world. Malcolm, an Australian university administrator explained that:

The benefits from a student's point of view: one that they will get a broader education and their degree will broaden if they've been exposed to other ways of approaching the disciplines that they've been studying; that they will be better equipped for the modern workforce if they've actually had some experience and if they've been studying in a foreign country when they enter the workforce...

Reginald, a Canadian government official working on international academic mobility used a similar rationale to explain that:

... we talk about international skills and competencies, um ... cultural understanding, knowledge of diversity, of different ways of doing things, language skills, looking at innovative ways to address issues or solve problems. Um, flexibility, you know, being able to work together in teams, all that sort of thing within an international context. Um ... I know there's been work done, I think it's the Conference Board of Canada puts things out, in terms of what do we mean when we talk about international skills and knowledge, and that sort of thing. So the idea is to give our students the advantage that they're going to need when they enter the work force in terms of, you know, talking about a global competitive marketplace. And which hopefully they can acquire either by studying in another country for the time being and or through the development of curriculum in the courses that a lot of these projects are doing.

Another ground for asserting an economic advantage for a non-revenue-generating form of internationalisation involves the argument that providing and publicizing attractive opportunities for exchanges will serve as a useful asset in recruiting and retaining students. Ernest, a coordinator of student exchange at a metropolitan Australian university, argued that:

Some of the faculties have come to the realisation that going on exchange is a good marketing tool

when they're recruiting students for a full degree, whether it be locally or internationally...

Sheila, his counterpart in a large urban Canadian university, similarly argued that it was a major incentive for recruitment: 'Increasingly, we're hearing students tell us, this is why I choose to come to _____'.

But this kind of rationale is often more easily asserted than substantiated. Rowena argued that the opportunity to study abroad would provide students with skills and especially language skills that they could take into the workforce, but acknowledged that:

I mean we can't say definitively it makes them more productive but we know that employers value these types of skills in the labour market and that they see it as something that strengthens the quality of the employee that they bring on, but there's no empirical evidence that really proves that, so I think I would say that there's a lack of appreciation of what they actually get from that...

But when I asked Rowena what kind of data or information she had about employer preferences, she wasn't very sure:

And we did do some survey work and I have to admit that it was before my time so I can't speak authoritatively about it but I can dig it out, I think around 2001 or 2002 we did some survey work with some select employers, but, Vered, I can't – I'm not sure who it was with but it did – this is where some of my understanding of the impact that – I know that there are – employers that signalled that this was of value to them. And it seems to me that it was in conjunction with some work done by the Conference Board but I can't remember...

Sheila remembered a poll of returning students conducted by another advocacy group but she acknowledged that:

There needs to be much more done in this regard... So there is the employability side for sure but um, in terms of other factors and other studies, gee, you know you've caught me a bit off guard, we should do more of them and I'm sure there are ... there have been many studies

done in the [United] States I'm sure. In Canada I would really like to think about that....

So international experience supposedly imparts language skills, and yet the majority of students are going on exchange to countries where they can study in their mother tongue, hence the popularity for outbound Canadian students of the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, and France (for Quebec students), and of North America and the United Kingdom for their Australian counterparts. International experience is supposed to aid employability but there is very little empirical evidence collected by Canadian universities, advocacy groups, or government departments to support this. Meanwhile the supposed capacity of short-term mobility programmes to recruit or retain students is mitigated by the small number of students who, at the end of the day, actually take up these opportunities. Thus Lionel and Brooke, two officials in an Australian university, argued that their institution was able to use its 150 partners as a 'marketing tool' for recruiting students but acknowledged that '[the students] come in because of that and because of various other things but once they get here, they don't actually want to go anywhere.'

One could be tempted to argue that the blurring of the boundaries between internationalisation and internationalism is simply a cynical exercise in public relations and indeed this kind of motive was hinted at by a few of the officials working in this field. Winifred, an official in charge of mobility programmes at an Australian university explained:

You know Australia is very good at getting fee-paying, international students into the universities and gets criticised for its crassness in this regard, you know, its out and out commercial approach to education. And that in the last ten years, they've tried to soften this by also encouraging and supporting education abroad offices, developing offices, employing people to assist in the mobility issue, so that we can be seen as not only interested in the dollars, but truly trying to internationalise and provide a global education.

A more common complaint from officials in Canada as well as in Australia was that despite strategic plans extolling a commitment to mobility and internationalisation, their institutions did not actually invest many resources in developing and promoting programmes such as university exchanges.

Yet what is striking about these criticisms, as with the shortfalls in student mobility programmes noted by Gillian, Arnold, and Caroline at the start of this article is that none of these officials was questioning the value of university internationalisation generally or student mobility particularly, which they tended to view as intrinsically valuable. Furthermore, even if tenable, an accusation of cynical PR still begs the question why university executives would regard internationalisation as a useful goal to promote even if only superficially, or why the adoption of this as a formal institutional goal would have proliferated among so many universities in affluent, industrialised countries.

‘Institutional Isomorphism’³

Nelly Stromquist identifies convergences or isomorphism between American universities as well as between units within universities as a product of the strong links developing between business and educational institutions. She argues that internationalisation is simply a more palatable term for a new kind of highly instrumental academic entrepreneurialism:

Universities, especially private universities, consider imitating the business world a safe approach and thus introduce criteria of competitiveness, marketability, and profitability that have done well in the marketplace. A second reason for the imitation, however, is that universities feel compelled to actually join the market and its strategies. (Stromquist, 2007: 101)

But of all the possible initiatives that tend to be associated with internationalisation as a supposedly broad based strategy, only the recruit-

ment of international differential fee-paying students can be viewed as a reliable vehicle for generating new revenues. As I have noted, exchange programmes by definition do not produce extra revenues for either the sending or the receiving universities. If anything, they tend to involve extra costs in staff that administer bilateral agreements and relationships with international education consortiums as well as processing incoming and outgoing students. Also some universities provide some financial support as an incentive for students to take up these opportunities. Much of the talk of knowledge export, while often entrepreneurial in tone, seems more speculative than actual in its generation of profit. In Australia, an administrator explained to me that her university was seeking out new uses for an expensive network of campuses and centres it had established offshore. If the offshore campuses were primarily intended to recruit international students abroad, the university was trying to ‘leverage’ their investment by trying, not very successfully, to persuade its students based in Australia to spend some time there. In Canada, Gillian explained to me that university staff and administrators viewed their participation in government trade delegations as an ‘opportunity to make new linkages’ but ‘sometimes, you know, it’s not necessarily clear what the nature of these linkages may be’.

In other words, many aspects of internationalisation actually require an infusion of additional investment by universities to support extra staffing, travel, communications, student financial incentives, with at best very uncertain future returns. If the neo-liberal model of entrepreneurial universities competing with one another internationally has any practical salience at all, it is in terms of their competition for a limited but lucrative pool of students crossing state borders to purchase an expensive education. So why bother at all with a broader version of internationalisation?

There are a number of different factors that may be at play here. First there is by now a

fairly well organised inter-institutional infrastructure that lobbies for an expansive version of 'international education' and 'internationalization'. The largest of these organisations is 'NAFSA: Association of International Educators'⁴. While NAFSA is an American organisation, its conferences draw international participation and it has its counterpart organisations in other countries such as Canada. So a diffuse career structure has formed that incorporates a sector of 'international educators' with concomitant associations, journals and university offices. In other words, there are organisational structures and individual careers at stake in the promotion and adoption of an expansive version of internationalisation.

But in my experience, this is usually not simply a matter of self-interested lobbying for vested career interests. Most of the people that I encountered appeared to be sincerely enthusiastic, some even passionate about the notion of internationalisation. The field of international education has tended to attract people who believe in it. As William, who has worked in both university and inter-institutional offices of international education explained: 'Basically you get a lot of starry-eyed young people who are so excited about working in international education'. Of course it also makes practical sense for employers to hire people who are committed to and excited about their work in this kind of field. What incited this excitement for many of the online staff in this field is what Stromquist referred to as 'internationalism', that is, the espousal of international community, of sensitivity to and interest in 'other ways of doing things'. While almost all these members of staff were aware that other kinds of instrumental goals or interests might be attached to the notion of internationalisation, they tended to view these as unavoidable compromises variously situated on a sliding scale from 'fruitful accommodation' to 'necessary evils'. So, if necessary and/or useful, non revenue generating activities like exchanges, one could argue, might still have market-oriented

applications, for example in imparting desirable work skills or in recruiting new students, but the main onus for many of these 'international educators' remained the goal of imparting the values of internationalism to students.

Nonetheless, as I noted at the start of this article, they were often aware that this effort at educating students in this way was also often imperfect or incomplete. Students might choose destinations, durations of stay, or languages for reasons that stray, to a greater or lesser degree, from the effort to stretch them cross-culturally. But in the face of this shortfall, most of the people to whom I talked were still inclined to view even less than ideal circumstances for international student mobility as worthwhile. They often asserted this faith even though they usually had little information about or ability to track the effect of the stay abroad on the students participating in exchanges or other programmes of mobility.

This belief in the power of 'international experience' seems to draw on a long-standing Western view of travel as a vehicle for self-cultivation and transformation. Since the European Grand Tour that began in the latter part of the seventeenth century, one version or another of the adage that 'travel broadens the mind' has inflected Western notions of voyaging. Or as Rowena put it: 'the opportunity that study abroad presents and what it creates in terms of a more well-rounded student, a student whose horizons have been expanded and broadened'. So the notion that study abroad is a good, in and of itself, tends to be accepted as a common-sensical truth, largely impervious to countervailing or unavailable evidence.

But even the most ardent exponent of this version of 'international education' would be unlikely to claim that this was a primary concern of all the key institutional stakeholders, whether politicians, university 'executives' or board members, at least some of whom are likely to be as, or even more, interested in an entrepreneurial interpretation of internationalisation. For these kinds of internationalists,

what is the incentive of adopting activities that require a further investment of university resources with either no pecuniary or at best uncertain returns? According to William, who has dealt with both government and university patrons, activities such as international exchange, are now the ‘flavour of the moment’ in post-secondary educational institutions:

Most people have felt compelled to do it and, you know, because they don’t want to look like country rubes for not doing it. And I think that’s, so there’s the institutional prestige but also the prestige value.

There is considerable variation in the stances toward internationalisation taken by different governments in Canada, some taking a hands-off approach, others establishing offices or funds to help support particular activities. But university administrators may feel that in their relationship to government and other sponsors, they could benefit from international activities in ways that extend beyond direct patronage. In the competition for limited government and donor financial support, the notion of ‘international’ standing or reputation has increasingly been claimed as an indicator of excellence. Among the various criteria that universities use as the basis of their claims for international prestige or networks, they might well include their foreign exchange partnerships, international student intake, knowledge export, and so on.

Some universities can highlight their partnerships with well-known and highly regarded foreign universities, others might point to the number of these partnerships, and, for others, being able to point out exchange partnerships of any kind could be regarded as useful in making more modest claims to their having a role of some kind on the international stage. Universities can, and do, argue that their capacity to attract international students is an indicator of their international prestige. Whether or not universities are actually drawing profitable revenue from their efforts at ‘knowledge

export’, their engagement in these kinds of relationships may be offered as an icon of their practical contributions in helping to establish potential trade networks in emerging markets. Earlier I noted that some officials argued that exchange partnerships could provide a recruitment incentive for prospective students. But, given the small numbers of students involved in exchanges, it may be that their greater promotional value might lie less in whether they will appeal to students than how they speak, or at least how it is hoped they will speak, to potential sponsors.

‘Fishing’ Together

In an attempt to work through the capacity of myriad small-scale decisions to generate larger institutional patterns, Fredrik Barth (1966) describes the aggregate effect of individual choices made by skippers in the herring fisheries off the Norwegian coast. Instead of dispersing over the sea, hundreds of vessels congregate in small areas. ‘[M]ost attention is concentrated on discovering the movements of other vessels, and most time is spent chasing other vessels to such unplanned and fruitless rendezvous’ (Barth, 1966: 10). While a vessel’s chances of success might be better were it to move out on its own, the risk, especially for the skipper, would be increased. On the other hand, if the skipper joins the cluster of vessels and fails, then this failure is mitigated because it is shared with his colleagues. This pattern is self-confirming, and certain vessels tend to lead the way. Because they are first, they are likely to catch more herring than the other vessels and hence to be regarded as elite vessels which it is an advantage to follow and on which crew would like to serve.

There are two aspects of Barth’s transactional model, which can be usefully applied to the situation with which we are concerned here. Firstly the apparent ‘institutional isomorphism’ between universities tends to mask a

good deal of variation both in the resources on which they can call and the resources they are willing and/or able to commit to the various activities identified with internationalisation. Indeed as Stromquist observes, this variation can occur between units within universities. In the competition for the most lucrative form of internationalisation, that is, international differential fee paying students, some post-secondary institutions and some countries have also been much more successful in recruitment than others. But the promotion of an internationalised version of education by a range of multilateral and national organisations from GATS to NAFSA in the United States or AUCC in Canada means that should a university defer altogether from this paradigm, there is a risk of being left behind or, to use William's term, appear like 'provincial rubes'.

Nonetheless some universities are committing a fair amount of effort, resources, and self promotion to a number of the activities associated with internationalisation, some commit to only one aspect, and still others are not doing much more than paying lip service. Should this become a critical feature of university revenues and ranking, some institutions would be well placed to gain, but others, who have made less of a commitment, can at least continue to glide in their slipstream. If internationalisation fails to gain further momentum, many post-secondary institutions will have put relatively little at stake. But as Barth also noted in his model, this kind of policy-making can be self-confirming; the more institutions that sign up to this kind of paradigm, the more impetus it gains. Barth found that the herring fishermen were paying more attention to discovering the movements of fellow vessels than of the herring and similarly it is possible that university administrators may be paying more attention to the policy initiatives of other post-secondary institutions and lobby groups than to the actual possibilities enabled by internationalisation. As a result, this particular thrust for internationalisation also may be, albeit for

different reasons, as impervious to the actual evidence for or against institutional gains as is the valorisation of student mobility promoted by online staff.

When anthropologists attend conferences such as the annual gatherings of the American Anthropological Association, they might well encounter the effort of some participants to discern which sessions are most likely to reveal important emerging trends; put more crudely, some conference-goers are trying to discover 'what's hot' and see if they can position themselves accordingly. In the process, however, this flow of audience participants plays a major part in creating the very trends for which they are looking. But neither the audience for, nor presenters in, nor the organisers of, these events operate in a vacuum. They may have different motivations for and interpretations of these events but to some extent they have to take account of each other. Their respective calculations can turn out to be incorrect: organisers assign a ballroom to a session that attracts only a small audience; presenters are unable successfully to engage with each other; audience members drift away. But it is nonetheless the mutual calculation of and engagement between these kinds of interlocutors as well as their reckoning of the broader social and institutional context for these events that generates a more or less evanescent trend. The generation of institutional policies such as internationalisation is no less elusive and compelling. It can melt away the longer it is looked at, even as it threatens to steamroll across important institutional practices and procedures.

Conclusion

In this article, I have framed university student exchanges within the impetuses towards internationalisation that have been felt in Canadian universities as well as in their counterparts in other affluent western industrialised countries.

In spite of promotional language that constructs internationalisation as a systematic and widespread programme of activities, there is little consensus about what kinds of initiatives are actually encompassed under this rubric, considerable variation between post-secondary institutions and very different impetuses for and interpretation of this mandate on the part of participating officials, lobbyists, and students. Claims that exchanges will broaden the horizons of, and inculcate a spirit of internationalism or 'global citizenship' among, participating students are regularly juxtaposed along with more instrumental arguments about the entrepreneurial potential of these types of activities. Yet neither claim seems to be supported by much in the way of clear substantiation and what material there is – for example on the most popular destinations selected by students – is as likely to contradict these ambitions as to support them. This gap, however, does not appear to have tempered the promulgation of internationalisation among an increasing number of universities or the willingness to highlight student mobility within this statement of policy.

I have argued that it is possible that these apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in the thrust towards internationalisation are being overridden by two mitigating orientations/motivations. First, a long-standing belief in the educational value of travel, from the European Grand Tour of the seventeenth century to recent forms of youth travel, appears to be underpinning the faith of some committed advocates of internationalisation that student mobility has an intrinsic formative value regardless of the actual practices and motivations of student participants. Secondly, a wide range of more or less committed university officials may well be hedging their bets about the future institutional benefits of internationalisation by 'fishing' in the same stream as some of the institutional 'leaders' most active in developing and promoting this policy.

The fragmentation and elusiveness of this sphere of activity does not, however, preclude its generative capacity. Any particular set of participants may have only a very partial view of this field but they still have to take cognizance of activities in which they are not directly involved and agents who are differently positioned and motivated. On a daily basis, administrators have to contend with the gap between the rhetoric of internationalism and the activities students can be persuaded to take on and their superiors to finance. Senior university administrators are constantly assessing the current and prospective fields in which they will have to compete for standing as well as the relative scarcity of resources. And lobbyists seeking to promote these activities and their own roles in them have to seek corporate, political, and institutional support, both constituting and drawing on this field as a coherent sector. In certain key respects then, this is an inter-institutional set of interactions and supplications, in which the effort to construe and keep up with the prevailing momentum also generates that momentum.

In their introduction to a volume on the *Anthropology of Policy*, Cris Shore and Susan Wright note that under close examination, 'policy [in effect] fragments – it becomes unclear what constitutes a "policy"'. Shore and Wright go on to argue that 'much of the work of organizing is to make these fragmented activities appear coherent, so it can be claimed that an intention has been realised and a successful result achieved' (1997: 5). As I have illustrated in this article, Shore's and Wright's observation could well be applied to the field of activities and discourses identified with internationalisation. As employees of the institutions implementing these policies, many anthropologists are as vulnerable to the obscuring partialities, rationales, and incentives as are other players in this fragmented field of activities. Our training in anthropology does not, therefore, ensure in and of itself a critical understanding of

the formulation and implementation of these kinds of policies. The incidental observations that we are able to make as part of our regular round of academic duties are not likely to be sufficient fully to comprehend this fragmented set of activities. But given that inquiry into the modalities of academic internationalisation has often been dominated by already committed institutional advocates, and that there is little in the way of rigorous qualitative investigation of how this policy actually operates on the ground, an anthropology informed by a critical understanding of policy formation can make an important contribution. In short, anthropologists need to investigate, both as engaged participants as well as ethnographers, policies such as internationalisation that are shaping the institutions in which many of us are working.

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Notes

1. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this article in order to preserve the confidentiality of people participating in our project.
2. Similarly Malcolm, an official in an international exchange office in an Australian university explained that the U.K. and the U.S.A were by far the most popular destinations for students going on exchange from his institution: 'The use of foreign languages in Australia, which has always been so small, has become infinitesimal and they're scared to go somewhere that's not English speaking'.
3. This term is drawn from Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio 1991.
4. The 'National Association of Foreign Student Advisers' or 'NAFSA' was initially founded in 1948 as the professional association of American university and college officials advising foreign students studying in the United States. Its scope subsequently expanded and in May 1990, while retaining the acronym as a reminder of the past, the association was renamed 'NAFSA: Association of International Educators'. (NAFSA, 08/28/2006)

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