

## International Networks and Consortia

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One way that institutions can expand their international focus is through participation in multilateral partnerships, international networks, and consortia, as these platforms may dramatically increase an institution's number of international partners and, with them, opportunities for expanded international education, research, and engagement.

International consortia are defined as “voluntary, participatory organisations of at least three higher educational institutions with a primary mission of disseminating and advancing knowledge on an international level” (Denham 2002). Important (if obvious), in this definition, is the fact that these partnerships are not bilateral; they are attractive based on the potential to multiply the activities and benefits of bilateral international agreements and to do so more economically, since the burden of establishing and maintaining programs and activities is distributed across multiple institutions. These partnerships are based on reciprocal benefits—student or faculty exchanges, tuition reciprocity, access to funds for research, or other activities—and assume that all participants are equal partners (e.g., able to both contribute to and benefit from the consortium's activities).

### **Growing Popularity—and Caution**

The number of international consortia increased in the 1990s and 2000s as institutions were attracted to these multi-institutional partnerships to achieve their institutional internationalization or globalization goals, improve their institutional profile, and use their resources more effectively and efficiently. Based on survey results from 180 international institutions and other sources, a dramatic growth was reported in international consortia, from approximately 25 in 1986 to 60 in 2000 (Denham 2002). Growth may have slowed in the past three to five years, as institutions around the world have had to assess the costs and

benefits of their commitment of time and resources. If the resources, both financial and human, that an institution invests in a multilateral partnership are not creating a satisfactory return on investment or no longer reflect institutional priorities, institutions may restrict their participation in these multilateral partnerships.

### **Types of Consortia**

International consortia, as well as domestic consortia with international agendas, develop in a number of ways. Membership may be determined geographically within a state (e.g., the UNC Exchange Program involving all University of North Carolina system institutions), a region (such as the Mid-Continent Consortium for International Education providing study-abroad options for member institutions in Tennessee and Kentucky), or nationally (International Education Association of South Africa—IEASA—coordinating a range of international programs for universities in that country). Consortia may be multinational such as CONAHEC (Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration), which fosters academic collaboration—among Canadian, Mexican, and US institutions—or ISEP, a worldwide network of over 300 higher education institutions in 50 countries.

Some consortia are discipline-based (such as the Global Engineering Education Exchange) or made up of institutions with similar missions such as research universities (Universitas 21, Worldwide Universities Network). They may also consist of institutions focusing on governmental, social, and industry collaborations (as exemplified by Academic Consortium 21, based in Japan but formed by 24 institutions from around the world that share a belief that universities should address “the rapidly transforming needs of society”).

Consortia may be institutionally driven or they might involve centralized higher educational or governmental units, such as university systems or state, national, or multinational agencies. They may be formed as presidential or governmental organizations or they may be faculty-, discipline-, or even student-driven. Some may even be consortia of consortia (e.g., state university system program agreements with other system, state, or national partners).

### **Characteristics of Successful Consortia**

Successful international consortia share several characteristics: a specifically defined mission, a centralized secretariat or administrative office and staff, a clear leadership structure, functional and cross-functional networks, and opportunities for these networks to meet regularly. Funding, usually dues based, must be adequate to cover most of the cost

of the benefits offered to participants (e.g., student exchanges, research funding, or conferences).

These variables influence why an institution may be attracted to a particular consortium. For example, an institution might be more likely to continue participating in a multilateral partnership that is organized or operated by a larger educational organization or government entity (e.g., a university system or a federal department such as Commerce or Education), since there may be political pressure to participate. Organizations governed by institutional chief executive officers are more visible, more likely to involve a number of campus units and thus are more likely to be sustained if the failure of the partnership will reflect negatively on an institution's leadership.

Multilateral partnerships that are more narrowly based may actually be more sustainable because they support activities that the institution would probably continue on its own without the consortium. International consortia that contribute significantly to opportunities for student and faculty exchange, international student recruitment, joint research, or shared degree programs may save an institution staff time and money. Those that require an institution to develop a new set of activities (e.g., distance education, delivering existing degree programs at an international site, or developing new degree programs not offered at home) may be harder to sustain as reduced funding or other new initiatives redirect institutional activities and resources.

### **Factors to Consider in Joining a Consortium**

Before deciding to take advantage of the opportunity to become a member of an international network, an institution should clearly articulate for itself the following considerations:

- Similarities between the institution and others in the consortium (e.g., mission, institutional type, disciplinary interests, location, etc.);
- Expected institutional contributions in both time and money;
- Current involvement in the types of programming and activities that the consortium will provide (e.g., student and faculty exchange, international recruitment, international collaborative research, etc.) and the likely value added by membership in the consortium; and
- Institutional level at which commitment to the partnership resides and how much time and attention both the leadership of the institution and the responsible administrative units can commit to sustaining it.

In practice, while it may be relatively easy for an institution to join a multi-institutional international consortium, it might be harder for

the institution to leave it. Withdrawal may cause the institution and the other consortium partners to lose face, as well as their investment of time and money in the partnership and may affect the perception at home and abroad of institutional leaders, the leadership of the consortium, and its partner institutions. Thus, institutions should consider the costs and benefits of opting in and opting out of any new multi-institutional partnership.

The former chief executive officer of the World University Network, David Pilsbury, has stated, "The acid test of any international collaboration is that it generates genuine additionality. . ." (cited in Sternberger 2005). "Additionality" or value-added may be the most important concept in determining the initial and continuing value of any multi-institutional partnership.

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### References

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