

Beyond the Ranking: The Hidden Cost of Internationalization

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Setting

Global university rankings have shaped the intense competition among institutions, particularly in non-English-speaking countries. Within these rankings, the internationalization component, which includes metrics such as international faculty and student ratios, has gained significance, even though it accounts for only 10% of the total score in certain ranking systems. Therefore, many institutions have prioritized increasing their international student and faculty numbers to improve their global standing.

The admissions office at a research-intensive university in South Korea enrolls a student population of approximately 10,000. Recently, the university president established a new institutional vision proposing various innovative strategies across education, research, and internationalization. As a result, the administration strongly emphasizes internationalization efforts, primarily by seeking international student enrollments.

The university ranks within the top 100 universities globally, known for its strong academic reputation, competitive admissions process, and English-medium instruction for all courses. Despite these strengths, the university struggles to attract international students because of its location in a non-English-speaking

environment. Compared to leading institutions in the U.S., U.K., Australia, and Canada, international students perceive the university as less desirable due to language barriers, limited opportunities for English language and cultural immersion, and few post-graduation employment prospects within South Korea. Further, there is a notable absence of comprehensive support systems to facilitate international students' academic and social integration into campus life.

Case

On the day a well-regarded set of global university rankings is released, Jiyoona, an international admissions officer at the university, learns that the institution's ranking has dropped from the previous year. The "internationalization" metric, which considers international student and faculty numbers as key ranking factors, is identified as the main factor contributing to the decline in the university's global ranking. In response, Jiyoona's university leadership expresses concern over the university's international recruitment efforts and requests an improved plan to increase international student admissions.

For Jiyoona, this request is not surprising. Recruiting international students has long been framed as a numbers game rather than a commitment to student experience. While increasing international student enrollment is a priority in her communication with university leadership, expectations for international students' post-admission success remain high among both leadership and faculty members. The performance of the admissions team is evaluated not only based on recruitment numbers but also on how well international students adjust academically and culturally at the university, including their academic progress, engagement in campus life, and overall satisfaction.

At the same time, the university's global office frequently expresses concern that the admissions team recruits more international students than the global office can effectively support. At times, the admissions team finds itself receiving criticism from academic departments or individual faculty members, who express concerns about whether some international students are fully prepared academically or linguistically for the demands of the university.

These tensions are exacerbated by the internal culture of the university, which is not structured to support a growing international student body. Although English is the official language of instruction, many administrative staff members, and even some faculty, have limited English proficiency. The human resources department offers English tutoring and other language-related professional development programs for staff and faculty members, but these initiatives are limited in scope and participation remains voluntary. The language issue creates significant barriers to essential student services, leaving international students without adequate support in both learning and campus life. Instead of being addressed at the departmental level, international students' concerns are often redirected back to the global office or the international admissions officers, reinforcing a cycle of inefficiency.

The consequences of these tensions fall on international students, as becomes evident in focus group interviews conducted by Jiyoona and other international admissions officers. During these focus groups, several international students express their struggles on campus. One student shares that Korean students often prefer collaborating exclusively with other Korean students in group projects because it is easier to communicate in Korean, making it difficult for international students to integrate academically and to develop a sense of belonging among their peers and the campus community. Others share that the university's services are designed with domestic

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students in mind and lack structured support programs to help international students transition successfully into academic and social life at the university.

As such, despite efforts to attract more international students with the goal of “internationalization” and improving global rankings, dedicated resources to support the long-term success of international students remain limited. The administration continues to be primarily focused on metrics, particularly enrollment numbers, rather than the lived experiences of those students on campus. As a result, Jiyeon finds herself spending much of her time planning and managing recruitment cycles aimed at boosting international enrollment to elevate the university’s global standing. In light of the recent ranking drop, she is now tasked with preparing a five-year analysis of international student trends and proposing strategies to further increase enrollment—raising the question: at what cost?

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What are the benefits and detriments of the emphasis on global rankings in higher education?
- What actions should Jiyeon take in response to the administration’s request for an improved plan?
- How can Jiyeon and her department work to change the university culture so that every department takes responsibility for international student success?
- How should universities balance enrollment demands with meaningful student support systems?
- How can all of the different units within a university come together to create a shared vision and strategy for internationalization?
- How can institutions better train faculty, staff, and domestic students to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for international students?