

UK: Knowledge the only currency

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Date: 30 March 2008

Lord (Digby) Jones, the ebullient Minister for Trade and Investment and former Director General of the Confederation of British Industry, delivered a rousing introduction to the "Rethinking higher education" conference in London. Jones expressed a strong belief in the importance of universities as businesses to help promote 'Brand Britain'. He said he had persuaded Prime Minister Gordon Brown to include five vice-chancellors in the delegation he took recently to China.

"Knowledge is the only currency a developed economy has in the 21st century. Britain has a fabulous advantage in the global war of talent to develop, exploit and transfer knowledge."

The UK is the world's second most popular destination for international students after to the US but, as Shaun Curtis, head of the UK Higher Education international unit said: "There is a prudent absence of complacency as the competition intensifies." His unit was established last year with money from the higher education funding councils to support British universities in the global marketplace. It commissioned its first report from John Fielden, director of CHEMS Consulting, to study how internationalisation is managed in British universities and find examples of good practice.

Fielden said there was a case for making oversight of international activities at the highest level: the vice-chancellor. In some 31 UK institutions, the international office reported to 14 different job titles with 21% reporting to the deputy vice-chancellor or pro-vice-chancellor, compared with 68% in Australia. For many years, Australia has given internationalism much greater importance strategically due to its reliance on international student numbers, he said.

"The prime motive for much of the work of Australian international offices still appears to be financial. In Canada, the financial motive has never been the main driver and internationalism has always been based on academic or developmental objectives. Many UK internationalisation strategies are still in a state of flux or transformation from being an international strategy. The trend is for them to become more all embracing and to require the involvement of the community."

Among the 10 points for 'good practice', the report says vice-chancellors must strongly support internationalisation by placing it in the corporate strategy, providing a budget and making one member of the senior management team responsible for its implementation. Senior managers should chair country groups of specialists to coordinate efforts in key countries. Overseas offices should work with these groups to give all-round support services for staff and students as well as providing marketing and promotions.

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