



Policymaking in the Era of Internationalizing Universities

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Abstract: Universities involved in internationalizing their institutions will be aware of the difficulties of making the correct determinations when considering the short-, medium-, and long-term effectiveness of their policies. Much like other institutions required to change their practices in the modern age, the scope of university policymaking is constrained by the market within which they ostensibly intend to thrive. The trilemma outlined in this paper involves universities making decisions based on three interlinked yet asymmetrically influential factors: identity, modernity, and sustainability. This paper discusses how these three factors influence all universities, albeit to differing degrees at different times. This paper argues for a contextually based approach to university internationalization, fully informed by the various influences on stakeholders in the system, to produce outcomes that can be of lasting benefit for individuals, institutions, and international systems alike.

1. INTRODUCTION

One imagined representation of the classic ‘three-body problem’ is a figure-eight: three bodies with independent gravity running in loops, moving closer and further apart but returning through the loop to once again influence each other’s movements in a varying, ever-changing, and, some say, unpredictable way. The three-body problem is a useful image for considering any institutional decision-making process, as it requires viewing the decision as an interconnected series of events rather than a single point in time, with influences of varying importance interacting in context. Unlike the process described in the scientific allegory used in this introduction, decision-

influencing events in an institutional setting like a university do not occur in a vacuum.

The asymmetric trilemma at the core of this paper was covered in the research project “A comparative investigation of internationalized universities in Japan and the United Kingdom through the lens of English as a Lingua Franca” undertaken from spring 2024 to summer 2026. This project began as an academic exercise looking into patterns of use of English as a lingua franca in linguistic interactions in contexts such as universities, specifically publication of research, evaluation of student competency, and the development of an internationalized university campus environment. The project developed into a comparative

investigation of universities in Japan and the United Kingdom and the experiences of students, faculty, and staff of the process of internationalization in universities.

The three interconnected yet unpredictable factors operating within the system of internationalized universities were identity, modernity, and sustainability: identity was defined as any motivation for a decision that stemmed from an internally held belief, or that was motivated by the publicly stated promotion of an individual's or institution's character; modernity was defined as factors judged to make a person or institution 'good,' worthy of support or patronage, and/or conforming to expectations of the modern age; sustainability is a longitudinal metric of success or otherwise, which cannot be promised at the time of any decision, and remains frustratingly something that must be experienced going forward yet is often only understood when viewed in reverse.

For universities, the number of stakeholders is as high as in any institution, with hundreds, and potentially thousands, of employees, but it differs from a business in that its 'customers' form a short-term population rather than a consumer base. Most university students study for 3-4 years at the undergraduate level, depending on the location, and then for 1-7 years at the postgraduate level, depending on their respective courses. Simultaneously, students are both the customers of the institution and its product, the proof of the effect the university has had upon its on-campus populace. For this reason, although the university ostensibly exists only for the education of its students, students cannot be considered customers in the same way that almost any business would view those who consume its products or services.

The stakeholders in university decision-making include, but are not limited to, the students, their families, their instructors, course administrators, university administrators, senior management, associated sponsor businesses and future employers, and government officials and ministers. Every one of these people will either pay for, benefit from, be subject to, or otherwise be affected by decisions made by any of the others. For this reason, to audit universities' decisions correctly, we

must consider the metrics by which their outcomes are judged. Here, metrics are taken to mean scales of evaluation. They are important to keep in mind because all decisions are open to scrutiny both internally and externally; the question is how success is determined.

Because the stakeholder scope for university decisions regarding internationalization is so wide, the metrics we consider span from individual and personal effects through the institutional level to national and international levels. Therefore, multiple evaluation systems should be considered, with the most relevant parts extracted to form a focused evaluation system. The purpose of this concept paper is not to propose an evaluation system but to begin the discussion of what such a system could look like.

2. EVALUATION METRICS

2.1 Metrics of identity

As stated previously, identity is self-defined. To make the distinction between identity and modernity in economic terms, one's identity is a personally determined moral metric and modernity is an externally defined social metric. One example of an identity metric is the aggregate judgment of character. In her 2014 book "The Culture Map," Erin Meyer used eight scales calibrated using frameworks developed by INSEAD, an international business school located in France. As shown in Chart 1, the eight scales are communicating, evaluating, persuading, leading, deciding, trusting, disagreeing, and scheduling (Meyer, 2014). Using Japan and the United Kingdom as examples, along with the Culture Map metrics, we can compare the two countries (also see Chart 1 in the Appendix). The descriptors can be used for institutional identity as well as personal identity, which means we can address one of the first challenges for institutions like universities: how can institutions appeal to individuals? If Japanese people are high-context communicators, preferring principled leaders and consensus-based decision-makers, and universities want to appeal to these students, they could tailor their visible identities and promotional images to match these expectations; if people from the UK prefer mid- to

low-context communication, a more application-first leadership style, with more egalitarian decision-making, universities are free to encourage such students. From this perspective, we can apply an external judgment on who universities say they are, i.e. how they self-identify in their advertising literature, and consider which institutions might be a good match for certain individuals.

Universities make ‘identity appeals’ to prospective students by publishing mission statements on their websites and online. We can judge their success (or otherwise) by the extent to which they connect the university’s stated aims with those of student prospects who use them to decide where to study. Given here are examples from Japanese and United Kingdom universities used in the investigation from which this paper is derived:

Kyushu University, Fukuoka, Japan

Kyushu University, in line with its VISION 2030 to become a university that drives social transformation through comprehensive knowledge, has set forth the goals of “cultivating value-creating individuals who can thrive globally” and “nurturing leaders for the international community by becoming a hub for international brain circulation through global collaboration.” [O]bjectives include “expanding the acceptance of outstanding international students and increasing diverse overseas dispatches of students in conjunction with education and research,” “creating new international collaboration projects with leading overseas universities to strengthen our international research and educational capabilities,” and “promoting the internationalization of our campus.”

Kyushu University International
Education Navigation Center

Lakeland University, Tokyo, Japan

Lakeland University educates individuals of diverse backgrounds, preparing them to think critically, to communicate effectively, to succeed professionally, and to lead ethical, purposeful, and fulfilling lives.

Rooted in the values of the United Church of Christ, Lakeland integrates the liberal arts and experiential learning to develop the whole person for success in a dynamic, multi-faceted world.

Lakeland Mission and Values

Get an authentic American education in the heart of downtown Tokyo. It’s the best of both worlds — experience life in Japan while receiving top-tier instruction alongside students from all over the world.

Lakeland About

University of St. Andrews, Fife, Scotland

Global St Andrews will play a key role in bringing together staff, students, alumni, and other stakeholders to contribute to the broad range of our international activities, promoting our global brand, and developing our engagement worldwide. We will draw staff and students from across the world to visit and work with us because of our welcoming and cosmopolitan scholarly community.

St. Andrews Global

University of Southampton, Hampshire, England

The University of Southampton is a partner of choice for many global leading higher education, industry, government, and funding institutions. Through our partners, our students and staff have global reach and impact, influencing opinion formers and policymakers, carrying out innovative and world-leading research, gaining valuable international experience, and accessing sustainable sources of funding.

Southampton Global Partnerships

Words such as ‘outstanding,’ ‘diverse,’ ‘ethical, purposeful and fulfilling,’ combined with ‘authentic,’ ‘cosmopolitan,’ ‘global,’ and

‘innovative’ are intended to evoke in prospective students a personal ambition to be part of these academic communities. “I could be that!” or even “That’s me! I’m just like that!” are the reactions universities want to engender as young people with an academic goal read their promotional literature. To quote Simon Sinek, “The goal of business should not be to do business with anyone who simply wants what you have. It should be to focus on the people who believe what you believe” (Sinek, 2009). By deciding upon and publicly defining their identity, universities can appeal to their prospective student customers.

These mission statements were specifically identified as relating to the universities’ goals for internationalization, but this appeal is for both international and domestic students: if the student identifies as outstanding, purposeful, and having international interests for their future career, why would they not be interested in pursuing a degree from one of these or other internationalizing universities? Even if they are not interested in a career overseas or postgraduate studies, their 3–4 years at university will surely be positively affected by a sizeable international student cohort. These mission statements also show both current specifics and references to ongoing university policies, demonstrating an appreciation of modernity and an appeal to the sustainability of the university’s image over time; an example of these factors intervening on the stated appeal of the university.

Having determined and declared a clear identity their identity, universities should, as far as possible, retain it. If the student experience does not meet the expectations set by the identity appeal, they could transfer to complete their studies somewhere they feel is better aligned with their aims, or, at the very least, provide negative feedback that will affect the decisions of other prospective students. As we shall see when considering modernity and sustainability, identity could be the first factor to suffer under external pressure to modernize to conform to the current order and/or remain competitive in the student market. A university without an identity could find itself folding to external pressures; in addition, forsaking self-determined values for

medium-term sustainability could leave an institution being deemed unsuitable for a student to join or a company to invest in.

Until now, we have been looking at how institutions and individual stakeholders view themselves. Looking specifically at institutional activities using external identity judgment metrics, we can consider frames such as the Hofstede ‘six dimensions’ proposed by the Culture Factor Group, which was conducted across 60 countries, and the GLOBE Study/Project, which was conducted in over 150 countries. The indicators of the two agencies are given in Chart 2 in the Appendix. These are examples in the private sector of the monetizing of anthropological frames to create institutional and national personality profiles. These dimensions are alternatives to the ‘Culture Map’ as they come closer to identifying how an institution is viewed as distinct from an individual within the institution and the nation within which the institution resides.

At this point, we can observe themes emerging in identity metrics. These themes, broadly stated, are interconnectedness, motivation, and temporality. Interconnectedness covers communication styles and cooperativeness, how we speak together and how we act together. Motivation encompasses competitive elements, such as internal or extrinsic motivating factors, and an orientation towards performance over process. Temporality is long- and short-term thinking and current or future orientation. These are all indicators of identity-related judgment. They are relevant here because any institution seeking to do business with a customer or form a connection with a prospective partner (or even assess the proclivities of any stakeholder) needs a frame of reference: “Is this someone with whom I can conduct productive business?”

Metrics of identity are generally internally defined but can be evaluated externally. They are how any stakeholder in the system, regardless of size, can place themselves and their actions relative to another stakeholder. They can help determine the value of that player in the system, what qualities these players bring to the process being undertaken, and make predictions about how well these

personalities might work together.

2.2 Metrics of modernity

Having established who universities are or, at best, who they say they are, we can then consider what they do in relation to the expectations we have of them in the modern era. We can say that metrics of modernity demonstrate how closely aligned any given institution is with expectations of the other stakeholder in the system. While a well-established identity is unlikely to change dramatically in short periods of time, expectations of adherence to current ideologies can require high-stakes policy changes in a compressed time frame. Because of this temporal influence, identities are rarely static when modern motivators are added to the decision-making process.

The United Nations' (UN) 'Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) (2015) comprise 17 goals with 169 targets, covering a wide range of indicators the UN has deemed appropriate for evaluating the activities of companies, institutions, charities, and NGOs around the world. Not all goals are relevant to every institution (in reality, only a few are relevant to any single institution), but they serve as indicators of what can be done if an institution is in the right field of influence. For example, a university will not be able to affect Goal 1, "No Poverty" but could work towards Goal 2, "Zero Hunger" specifically target 2.3 which is "By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers" (United Nations, 2015) and Goal 3 "Good Health and Well-Being" specifically target 3.b which is to "Support the research and development of vaccines and medicines for the communicable and non-communicable diseases that primarily affect developing countries," (United Nations, 2015) both of which targets could be assisted by working on research into those areas from the relevant university faculties. For this reason of context-specific relevance, institutional efforts relating to SDGs are usually advertised in a targeted way to emphasize the positive impact of a new policy direction.

The only bodies that might be beholden to all SDGs are national or transnational entities, such as

nation-states or groups like the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) or the United Nations itself. SDGs cover such a wide range of potential activities that only entities with broad responsibilities might need to always consider all SDGs, though for different activities. For this reason, we can consider the SDGs to be of limited relevance to individual universities' policy making. However, because universities are beholden to national policy in the wider consideration of university stakeholders, they must be aware of the SDGs existence and potential relevance to their contributions to the national whole.

SDGs intersect with the metrics of identity and sustainability in a very specific way. We can see that the SDGs are not, despite their name, metrics of sustainability: because so many of them are ideological, they are modernity metrics. They can be defined as external and social rather than related to financial sustainability. In addition, if the ideology of the SDG(s) does not align with the identity of the university, there may be a decision-making impasse that has to be broken by an appeal to the university's individualism; identity could conflict with modernity. Referring to individual Japanese universities' mission statements, we can find examples of them expressing their independent spirit:

Kyoto University: *"Kyoto University states its mission to sustain and develop its historical commitment to academic freedom."*

Tohoku University: *"Tohoku's core character is historically tied to its progressive founding principles."*

Osaka University: *"The university has from its birth inherited the spirit of the citizens of Osaka."*

Tokyo IoT University: *"Every organizational unit has goals and values of its own, while sharing the common goals of the Institute."*

Kyushu: *"...the university's brand—its unique strengths and principles..."*

Waseda: *"Waseda University holds as its*

founding principles the preservation of the independence of scholarship...”

Keio: *“The basic spirit of Keio University is that of independence and self-respect...”*

Are these ideals compatible with the ethos of the SDGs in general, which is the standardization of actions of all people under the UN remit? Could some universities, regardless of location, find themselves ethically at odds with one or more of the SDGs as they strive for academic excellence and the freedom to explore the avenues of research they deem necessary?

I raise this question of institutional independence from the metrics of modernity not because I have any personal moral questions about the SDGs. However, I am concerned that universities (or any non-national institution, for that matter) with a self-identified interest in independent action or thought could find themselves questioning either their commitment to their identity and/or the importance of being judged relative to the transnational standards of the age, standards that are always subject to change over a long enough timeframe.

The best-known metrics used by universities for internationalization are ones often quoted in their promotional materials: Times Higher Education (THE) and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS). These two agencies develop rating methodologies that have influenced universities' decisions for decades. Beginning as a joint enterprise in 2004, the QS and THE rankings have been separate entities since 2010 (Hou & Jacob, 2017, Fauzi, et. al. 2020). Their methodologies have changed several times over the past 15 years, and they currently evaluate universities using the metrics shown in Table 3 of the Appendix.

As shown in the descriptors and their respective weightings, the QS rankings consider universities' activities holistically, including post-graduation student performance as an indicator of overall university success, whereas THE rankings focus more on the university as an educator and hub of education. The THE methodology is also more granular, with 17 sub descriptors forming its ranking metrics, compared to the QS ranking's 9. The differences between the two methodologies,

when placed side by side, clearly demonstrate the importance of the questions “What is being measured?” and “How is it being measured?” Charts 4 and 5 in the Appendix include figures for the top 5 universities in the QS and THE rankings in Japan and the UK.

The first thing one notices is that the top 5 ranked universities are the same in both rankings, but in a different order. From this, we can conclude that, according to the metrics, these are the best universities in the country, but that they are being measured differently. The latter point we already knew from looking at Chart 3, but that different methodologies arrive at rankings that are close to the same suggests that the underlying motivations are similar. This is again not surprising, as the underlying metrics are derived from the same original source; the development of the ranking methodologies since the division in 2010 has led to noticeable but not hugely different outcomes.

As mentioned before, the QS ranking incentivizes universities to pay more attention to the performance of their students post-graduation, meaning that universities can leverage the employability of their students and their performance in their careers as a way of promoting their university to future potential students, preferring to focus on improving current and future performance over past reputation. This means, by definition, universities being guided by international ranking metrics are trading on their current and future performance, not their historical image.

2.3 Metrics of sustainability

When the question for universities is about sustainability, the answer becomes much more difficult. One might think the main question is “Does the institution exist?” and, if the answer is ‘yes,’ the relevant follow-up question is “For how long the institution has existed?” However, neither current existence nor long-term existence is an indicator of future existence: having existed as far as today is no guarantee of a prosperous tomorrow.

As much as the acronym SDG includes the word ‘sustainable,’ none of the goals predict long-term sustainability: national- or institutional-level

efforts do not guarantee success, even when they align with relevant SDGs.

Usual metrics of judging sustainability might be simply mathematical, such as an operating reserve ratio (net assets/monthly fixed costs) when judged against a yearly average, i.e., relative to our historical operational costs: how long can we continue to operate in this financial situation? As universities can plan only around the students they can readily predict, unlike companies that might have to scale up or down quickly based on an ever-changing customer base, metrics like retention rate (repeat constituents over total constituents) would not yield accurate predictions of future success. Regardless of what universities do, when one considers domestic recruitment, their future potential students in two decades' time have already been born. The only question that remains is which universities can remain, even with a strong intention of surviving.

One metric of institutional sustainability we could look at is the 4% weighting from the QS rankings given to 'Sustainability.' The QS website states, "Sustainability is an increasingly important issue for students when picking a study destination, and QS is proud to be the first major university ranking provider to include it as an indicator in our core rankings" (QS, 2026). QS is explicitly tying sustainability metrics to the university's identity. Here is what QS says about what makes up this metric:

- *The Sustainability (SUS) indicator highlights which institutions are demonstrating a commitment to a more sustainable existence and encompasses a variety of factors across environmental, social and governance (ESG).*
- *This includes everything from environmental projects on campus, through to diversity initiatives, institutional governance, and the impact of academic research across the UN's 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs).*
- *It evaluates the social and environmental impact of universities as not only centres of education and research, but also as major employers.*

QS World University Rankings: Methodology 'Sustainability'

These considerations for scoring 'sustainability' suggest that what is being judged is what is being done now to improve the university's image and drive recruitment, using an ideological moral framing. We can see that the sustainability metric is a repurposed modernity metric relative to the ideology of the current age. To be clear: adherence to SDGs, however strictly, is no guarantee of even short-term success. Promoting the furtherance of specific SDGs by a university is an identity appeal that could align it with prospective students over the next decade, but the goals will change in 2030, as this is their stated endpoint. What replaces them will be the next stage of this process, which may well reorient the social and financial incentives of universities around the world.

3. THE THREE-BODY PROBLEM OF UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONALIZATION POLICIES

Any university will find its influences to always be somewhere in 'the figure-eight.' While policy decisions can happen at the micro and macro levels across relevant groups, committees, and forums in any university, they can be judged on their merits within each reducible or scalable element of the process.

The three factors of identity, modernity, and sustainability align with the three drivers of economic activity: moral incentives, social incentives, and financial incentives. For this reason, this paper does not forward a novel approach to university policymaking but foregrounds the fact that universities are subject to the same influences of modern economic theory as any other internationalized institution. However, when competition is no longer local, and promotion of an institution is no longer based on reputation, long-term sustainability is a far more convoluted question.

The image of the three-body problem helps set a method by which any stakeholder can see how their actions fit within the ever-developing state of the

university and therefore feel connected to the entire system. This also includes being able to see how the actions of an individual fit within an internationalized system, out of the complete control of any one decision-making body.

4. CONCLUSION

International higher education is a system of global scale, meaning that any individual stakeholder can see only one part of the moving whole and, in fact, has influence over a smaller area than is readily observable. However, this does not mean that individual efforts are immaterial to the system's movement: with a shared ethos, any group of committed individuals can influence the system.

Chasing future prosperity begins with a past identity upon which a future can be developed. Most, if not all, universities have a story they tell themselves and others about what they have done, what they are doing, and what they intend to achieve in the future. Modern metrics help explain how universities' efforts are judged relative to one another in the current era. The only remaining question is whether following today's incentives will produce a future in which this identity can continue.

NOTE

This is a concept paper exploring the methods institutions use to measure themselves and their achievements relative to one another. As such, it illustrates the process rather than providing a complete discussion of university internationalization metrics. The book "A comparative investigation of internationalized universities in Japan and the United Kingdom: English as a Lingua Franca," which contains a more thorough explanation of the project upon which this concept paper is based, is currently in press and scheduled to be published later in 2026.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: ‘Culture Map’ Comparison

Japan
High context
Indirect
Principle-first/Holistic
Hierarchical
Consensual
Relationship-based
Confrontation-avoiding
Linear time
United Kingdom
Low/Mid-context
Indirect
Application-first
Egalitarian/Moderate
Consensual/Moderate
Task/Relationship-based
Confrontation-avoiding/Moderate
Linear time

Table 2: The Hofstede Six Dimensions (Culture Factor group) and the GLOBE study (GLOBE Official Portal)

Hofstede
Power distance index
Individualism/Collectivism
Masculinity/Femineity
Uncertainty avoidance
Long-term vs. Short-term normative
Indulgence vs. Restraint
GLOBE
Human orientation
Institutional vs. in-group collectivism
Gender egalitarianism
Assertiveness
Future orientation
Performance orientation

Table 3: Quacquarelli Symonds and Times Higher Education ranking methodologies

Quacquarelli Symonds	
<i>Weight</i>	<i>Descriptor</i>
50%	Research and Discovery - Academic reputation - 30% - Citations per faculty - 20%
20%	Employability and Outcomes - Employer reputation - 15% - Employment outcomes - 5%
15%	Global engagement - International faculty ratio - 5% - International research network - 5% - International student ratio - 5% - International student diversity (listed)
10%	Learning experience - Faculty/student ratio - 10%
5%	Sustainability
Times Higher Education	
Weight	Descriptor
30%	Research quality - Citation impact - 18% - Research strength - 5% - Research excellence - 5% - Research influence - 5%
29.5%	Teaching - Reputation - 15% - Staff/Student ratio - 4.5% - Doctorate/bachelor ratio - 2% - Doctorate staff ratio - 5.5% - Institutional income - 2.5%
29%	Research environment - Research reputation - 18% - Research income - 5.5% - Research productivity - 5.5%
7.5%	International outlook - International students - 2.5% - International staff - 2.5% - International co-authorship - 2.5%
4%	Industry - Industry income - 2% - Patents - 2%

Chart 4: Top 5 universities in Japan and the UK according to the QS rankings (numbered by global rank)

Quacquarelli Symonds		
Country	University	Score
Japan	39 - Tokyo	84.8
	64 - Kyoto	78.2
	95 - Osaka	69.5
	97 - Inst. of Science, Tokyo	69.2
	102 - Tohoku	68.4
UK	=2 - Imperial College London	99.2
	4 - Oxford	98.6
	6 - Cambridge	97.1
	= 8 - University College London	96.3
	35 - Edinburgh	85.9

Chart 5: Top 5 universities in Japan and the UK according to the QS rankings (numbered by global rank)

	Times Higher Education	
Country	University	Score
Japan	26 - Tokyo	83.5
	61 - Kyoto	74.0
	=103 - Tohoku	65.8
	=151 Osaka	61.8
	166 - Inst. of Science, Tokyo	60.7
UK	1 - Oxford	98.2
	=3 - Cambridge	97.2
	8 - Imperial College London	94.7
	22 – University College London	87.5
	29 - Edinburgh	82.5