Practical Networking as an Internationalisation Tool:

A case study of the Businet Organisation

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Abstract

Higher education in Europe continues to evolve rapidly, mirroring industry, and is becoming increasingly global. Globalisation is described by Charles W.L. Hill (2009) as "the shift towards a more integrated and interdependent world economy. Globalisation has several facets, including the globalisation of markets and the globalisation of products". In higher education the term globalisation is seldom used, instead we refer to "internationalisation". Universities and colleges of higher education need to examine what globalisation (internationalisation) means to them. Do our products need to be adapted? Have our markets changed? What do we need to consider in terms of both market and product? Is it a threat, an opportunity, or indeed both?

This article will examine internationalisation in higher education, the goals, both in terms of aims and objectives that institutions set for themselves, and the part that networking plays in the internationalisation process. A case study of the Businet organisation, "a network for the development of business education programme," will be used to examine the practical role that an educational network can play in helping to enable and support an institution to achieve its institutional goals.

Keywords: Internationalisation, Networking, Enabling, Businet

Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education has been usefully defined by Jane Knight and Hans de Wit (1997) as "the process integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution."

Most Universities and colleges of higher education are committed in principle to the process of internationalisation and generally have established what their aims and objectives are. Some institutes have already made significant progress towards achieving an integrated policy on internationalisation. Some are at the very start of the process. Many institutes may have started the process but are still looking at ways of operationalising their initial goals. This article examines what institutes should consider when they are looking at the issue of "internationalisation", and proposes some practical suggestions which institutions may find useful.

The European Union's Lisbon Agenda initiative set out the aim of making Europe the most competitive and dynamic economy in the world. Education has a major role in achieving this ambitious goal. The International strategy of educational institutions is particularly significant when considering the European Unions Lisbon aims.

The Lisbon Agenda is strongly linked to the "Bologna Process". The over-arching aim of the Bologna Process (established by the 1999 Bologna Declaration) is to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) based on international cooperation and academic exchange that is attractive to European students and staff, as well as to students and staff from other parts of the world[1].

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....

The envisaged European Higher Education Area will

- facilitate mobility of students, graduates and higher education staff;

- prepare students for their future careers, and for life as active citizens in democratic societies, and support their personal development and

- offer broad access to high-quality higher education, based on democratic principles and academic freedom.

The Bologna Declaration and process provides the framework for internationalisation across the Higher Education (HE) sector. EURASHE (Eurashe, the European Association of Institutions of Higher Education) is part of the Bologna follow-up Group (BFUG) and a consultative member to the Bologna process. Eurashe's views on "The implementation of the Bologna Process in Professional Higher Education" (cf. The official Bologna Process website 2007-2010, at: http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/about/) based on a report published in 2010, will be considered later in this article.)

The second issue to be considered in this article is the role networking can play in achieving the goals of internationalisation. A broad definition of networking can be found in Webster's dictionary, which describes the process as "meeting and interacting with individuals who have similar interests in an effort to build relationships that will produce current and future benefits".

A case study exploring the activities of an established educational network and how the organisation facilitates successful activities will be used. The network identified is Businet, a network for the development of Higher Education, which was established in

1987. The organisation was established by 6 forward thinking institutions, many of whom are still involved within the network today. Businet now operates across 24 countries and has a membership of almost 100.

The case study demonstrates the part an active educational network can play in helping organisations to achieve their institutional goals. It will also consider elements of relationship management and relationship marketing that are required to achieve the desired levels of internationalisation.

The Businet network seeks to provide something for all of the stakeholders associated with higher education institutions. This article will examine those activities.

1 Internationalisation of Higher Education

There are many definitions of internationalisation and what internationalisation is in relation to education. The definition of De Witt and Knight (1997/8), as proffered in the introduction is interesting because of the elements of the definition and what can be interpreted from them

- This definition refers to internationalisation as a *process*; this differs from many definitions in which it is seen as a *product* (study abroad, mobility….).

- Internationalisation is seen as being a response to (driven by) outside factors.

- Internationalisation includes what occurs at the home institution as well as outside the home country.

De Wit and Knights definition would indicate that internationalisation has to be part of the ethos of an organisation and not just a hollow statement of intent.

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Internationalisation will mean different things to different institutions and the variety of definitions just serves to underline this fact. Internationalisation is seen differently by different organisations; reflecting both the organisational and respective, national cultures. It may be that in some countries, internationalisation is driven by commercial motives, whilst in others the "educational benefit" is the major driving force. It is apparent however that internationalisation has to be driven by the institution and that the "ethos" of the organisation has to have an international focus for it to be successful.

1.1   In the publication "Academy Exchange" (issue 5 Winter 2006) issued by the UK organisation, The Higher Education Academy, Professor Ella Richards, Pro-Vice-Chancellor at Newcastle University examines Internationalisation at her institution and asks the question, "where are we going and how do we know when we have got there?" This is a valid question that we can all ask ourselves about our own organizations

The methodology applied by Newcastle University and described in the journal was:

- Mapping exercise "where are we".
- Consultation with staff as to what the University's international strategy should be.
- Explore literature and issues.

This reflects the "Egan Model B" approach to organizational change. The model identifies three stages to change approach: Diagnosis, Future Vision and Strategy. Newcastle University identified two key areas that their strategy had to address, "internationalisation at home" and "internationalisation abroad".

Professor Richards states in her article that, "implementing this strategy and ensuring that our student-focused activities were centred in a wider, more clearly articulated

University strategy, involved a complex change process. The key to this change was to give a clear message, at both central and faculty level, from the Senior Management Team on what the University was aiming for, and to ensure that champions and enthusiasts were supported in taking change forward. We had to learn from and disseminate expertise from across the institution… Finally staff need to be supported and valued in accomplishing change".

Professor Richards concludes her article with a list of helpful principles that in part reflect the Change Approach identified in Kotter's "Eight Step Model" (Kotter, 1996)

Taking the advice of Professor Richards and putting it into the model of Kotter the following could form a model of change for other institutions – this model would incorporate the following elements, namely:

- A "Guiding Coalition", in other words, champions from different areas of the organization that will promote change, led by a committed senior management team.

- A vision and a strategy – making a clear strategic commitment to an international aspiration.

- Communication of the vision – the vision must be communicated across the organization and to all stakeholders – it is vital that everyone understands why internationalisation is important.

- Empower broad based action – ownership is the key to success, by empowering individuals and teams they will take forward the vision of internationalisation.

- Generate short-term wins – short-term wins will encourage and demonstrate the benefits of internationalisation, Professor Richards refers to developing more

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effective induction programmes, because they have immediate benefits to students.

- Consolidate gains – it is important to communicate that change is occurring, and to demonstrate the "wins" that have been secured. This can be done by the sharing of good practice, both across the institution and with partners.

- Anchor into the culture – it is important to make internationalisation the "norm" by embedding international practices into the everyday life of the institution.

An important message to keep reiterating to the stakeholders is that internationalisation is not just about what happens outside of your country, but it is about what happens in your institution.

1.2   Eurashe

Eurashe, the European Association of Institutions of Higher Education, was established in 1990 as an International association that promotes professional Higher Education at a national and international level and through cooperation, promotes internationalisation within Professional Higher Education (PHE). It has a vital role within the Non-University sector, as it represents the sector on the Bologna Follow-up group.

In a recent report "Implementation of the Bologna Process in Professional Higher Education" (Eurashe, March 2010), Eurashe takes stock of the implementation of (progress towards) the Bologna objectives. The text identifies the commitments that Eurashe feel essential if the vision for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is to be achieved by 2020.

Eurashe states that "during the next decade, nations and governments must cooperate to remove all social, economic and cultural barriers where they still exist". It is evident that for this aspiration to be realised education providers will need to work effectively with government agencies. It is, however, still the case that in a number of important EU countries artificial barriers are still in place which limit progress and that some traditional establishments are not moving at the same pace as other organizations.

Eurashe goes on to articulate its ambition for the establishment of National Qualifications Frameworks, and the employability of graduates and lifelong learning to be central to the higher education curriculum. In short the aim is for coherence, transparency, innovation, flexibility of approach and acceptance of these aspects of higher education. The vision of Eurashe would allow for "real internationalisation" across the HE sector.

Eurashe goes on to express its commitment to International openness: "Our vision for 2020 is an European Higher Education Area where the international dimension is perceived as an integrated part of the mission and role of higher education institutes (HEI); where all study programs will offer students the possibility to carry out at least one semester abroad; and where the positive significance of international openness also considers immigrant students as important contributors to the internationalisation of higher education (HE). We urge governments to abolish all legal obstacles relevant to this vision."

This would seem like the dream scenario for many people working in internationalisation. The question is whether it is realistic and achievable? The answer is a qualified "Yes".; However, HE across Europe is still restricted by government

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education policies and practices and to achieve this proposed dream scenario governments must be fully committed to achieving the goals of Eurashe. Are all national governments represented in the EU really committed to such goals? Currently it would not appear so.

Where educational establishments can exert their influence is in providing as many opportunities as they can for both staff and students in terms of mobility. The Bologna process sets a target for students mobility at 20% by the year 2020. In some countries this target would seem to be achievable. In others it remains a fantasy. Government again must play their part if the 20% target is to be met. Institutions however must look at the way that their programmes are structured and how mobility is promoted within the institution to maximize the possibilities for students, and equally important, for staff. The role of staff as "international ambassadors" should never be underestimated, as they can promote the concept, and extol the virtues of internationalisation to students and colleagues.

Eurashe state that the "mobility of students and staff remains an important goal of the Bologna Process. Mobility is important for sharing and dissemination of knowledge and skills among students and professionals; it contributes to the personal development and responsible citizenship of the individual; and it underpins the European identity and the multilingual tradition in a global context.

Eurashe state that we will inform our students about the specific advantages of studies or practical training abroad, and we will stimulate the interest of employers who accept foreign students for practical training as a part of their HE studies. We will stimulate multilingualism and multi-cultural competencies, and promote mobility in a harmonious

way, avoiding the brain drain phenomenon. And we will enter into a discussion with those of our member institutions who might still believe that a mono-lingual and mono-cultural approach is to be preferred".

To achieve the 20% target of student movement across the EU would, at this stage, seem almost impossible. Despite what the politicians would like to believe Europe is made up of a number of states that are not homogeneous. What may be more realistic is to set national targets based on current performance rather that set targets that are unrealistic across all countries. Unachievable targets are a deterrent not a motivation – this truth needs to be acknowledged.

1.3 Internationalising Higher Education: Enhancing learning, teaching and curriculum

In the book entitled *Internationalising Higher Education: Enhancing learning, teaching and curriculum,* Elspeth Jones and Sally Brown (2007) propose that the "international student lies at the heart of the university as a source of cultural capital and international diversity, enriching the learning experience, enhancing staff experience, and building a more powerful learning community". This book provides a very useful introduction for anyone new to the concept of internationalisation and it provides a valuable checklist of the top factors that institutions need to reflect on if they are seeking to implement a meaningful move towards genuine implementation of internationalisation within their organisation. The author poses questions surrounding Internationalising Higher Education, and provides academic consideration of the key issues of implementation of a cross-cultural strategy.

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Topics considered include:

- the impact of internationalisation on the organisation;

- considering and facilitating cultural change within an organisation;

- quality issues surrounding the organisation and internationalisation;

- assessment, teaching, learning issues;

- student support issues for home and international students;

- the process of inducting, welcoming and guidance for students;

- heightening the awareness of the impact of internationalisation on employability and

- fostering engagement of students and staff within the wider community.

An edited extract from the book, published by the Higher Education Academy in the UK (issue winter 2006), summarises the key factors referred to above in "Internationalising higher education". These factors are broken down into categories: institutional, staff, students, curriculum, and support. Incorporated in institutional factors are:

- Vision.

- Values.

- Policies and strategies.

- Partnerships.

- Visible internationalisation.

- Management information.

These factors serve to emphasize that for internationalisation to be successful it must be embedded across the organisation. There needs to be a visible commitment throughout the organisation. Internationalisation will flourish in the right environment –

an environment that supports what is trying to be achieved, an environment where there is a culture of shared values and an understanding of the benefits of internationalisation.

- Incorporated in the staff factors are: breadth (range) of activity, international staff, enthusiasts, support for international perspectives, staff development.

- Incorporated in the student factors are: communication, diversity.

- Incorporated in the curriculum factors are: internationalised curriculum, exchanges, volunteering and internationalisation at home.

- Incorporated in the support factors are: services, pastoral, linguistic, cultural and academic.

Later in the article we will explore how an active Educational Network can help achieve these key factors.

Networking as a tool of Internationalisation

By the very nature of internationalisation it is necessary to work with organisations outside your home country. When working with these organisations it should be the objective to develop a strong long term relationship. It is preferable to work with organisations that you can feel comfortable with, which have similar values to your own, and where a relationship of mutual respect and trust is established. These are the characteristics of a partnership. In this process both organisations and individuals are equally important. Institutes where internationalisation is embedded in the organisation

will have established their own group (network) of partners with whom they feel comfortable. Institutions new to internationalisation will need to develop their own working links, which may, or may not develop into successful working relationships. All working links, because of the dynamic nature of education will be fluid, as the needs of all partners will change and the key players in the institutions also move on.

Some institutions make a positive decision to become involved with network organisations. There are many such organisations. These networks can be defined by size, range of activities, range of partners, curriculum specialisation and aims and objectives. The benefits to members will vary according to the type and scope of the individual networks. The number of networks in Europe alone is surprisingly high. Many have been in existence for a number of years, and many are growing, consequently it can be assumed that their existence meets the needs of their members and that new parties are seeking to enter into these networks. Membership of a network will generally incur payment of an annual fee. The level and types of fee charged will vary. The majority of networking organisations are non profit organisations but will charge a fee to cover their costs.

Various definitions of networking, which are noted in the text "Brilliant Networking" by Steven D'Sousa (2008), give a flavour of what networking means to different people:

- "Networking is like a road trip. Working with others to reach a common destination and enjoying the journey", Carole Stone, Journalist.

- "Networking is using connections with others intelligently", Martin Berger.

- "Networking is about developing even further your professional reputation and building a support network that you can call upon", Melvyn De Freitas

- "Relationship building is at the heart of professional success", Arti Patel.

Whilst these definitions are diverse it can be concluded that they express a common core of thought, namely that:

- Networking can help to achieve goals.

- Networking can be used to enhance your working environment.

- Relationships are at the heart of successful networking.

The key to finding the right network is practical field based research. It is necessary to search for the networking organisation that meets the needs of your organisation. It is however equally, if not more, important to find a network that shares your values. If you find people who share your values it is most likely that you have found someone that you can work with and develop a relationship based on mutual respect and trust

Networking is of course not an activity exclusive to the work of educators. It is part of what effective business is about. Websters dictionary defines business networking as:.

"the exchange of information or services among individuals, groups, or institutions; *specifically* **:** the cultivation of productive relationships for employment or business".

There are networking enterprises where business and education meet. One such organisation is Businet, an organisation which serves as a useful case study vehicle to further explore the relationship between internationalisation and networking.

Businet – Network for the Development of Businet Education Programmes – A Case Study in Networking

Businet was established in1987 by a group of institutes that had the vision to bring together education providers of institutes from across Europe working together to meet

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....

their institutional needs and provide opportunities for the institutions, their staff and their students. The activities of the organisation have changed significantly over the 25 years of operation but the organisation has remained true to the initial core aims.

The network now has almost 100 members in 23 countries. The network took the strategic decision to expand beyond Europe last year and has recently recruited its first member in India. It is anticipated that in the near future members will be recruited from other parts of the world.

There are two types of members: Full membership is available to any educational institution delivering a business curriculum at a higher education level and Associate membership is available to any public or private enterprise, which supports the aims and objectives of the Association, thus complimenting the activities of the full members of the network. Associate members bring a valuable additional resource to Businet through their business connections, industrial experience, expertise and varied experience. They also provide a valuable link to industry for educational partners.

Businet aims to provide a vehicle to facilitate the networking of the stakeholders associated with education, the institutes themselves, the staff and students of those institutes and industry. Businet provides a structure to enable successful and effective co-operation. ("*specifically* : the cultivation of productive relationships for employment or business").

The aim of Businet is to enable its members to achieve their institutional goals in respect of internationalisation.

The rationale for including this case study is in order to provide an example of an active networking organisation.

The Businet network is an active one, offering a range of opportunities to meet the diverse needs of the member institutes. It has established an effective model for facilitating networking through the activities of the organization and its members.

Member organisations work together on activities such as:

- Student exchange.

- Staff Exchange (non-academic staff) and Teacher Mobility, (with and without European funding).

- International work placements, both funded and unfunded.

- Leonardo da Vinci project such as partnership and mobility projects.

- Multi-lateral projects, both funded and non funded.

- Intensive short term courses, both Erasmus (e.g. Intensive Programmes – IP's) and non-funded.

- Student conferences.

- Curriculum specific working groups.

- Interdisciplinary working groups.

- Thematic working groups

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Student Exchanges

Student mobility for study abroad is a core activity that member institutions work on together. Most member institutes have active mobility programmes and members have bilateral agreements that allow for study abroad activities (within Europe) within the framework of the Erasmus programme. The relationship between members ensures that mobility activities are enhanced. Members will use formal networking events, such as the Annual Conference of the network, to negotiate student, staff and teacher mobilities with their established partners. They can also seek out new partners to develop their own network of partners. Bi-lateral agreements are often established during the Annual Conference and subsequent events.

Staff Exchange and Teacher Mobility, Erasmus activities

The networking opportunities afforded by the organisation are ideal when looking for and setting up teaching and staff mobility assignments. Having an ongoing relationship with other organisations / individuals in the network facilitates this type of activity. The establishment of personal relationships assists when looking to put movements in place. Members can use the internal communication system of the network to search for, or offer, opportunities for staff and teacher mobilities.

An example of good practice is of a Finnish college that organises an international week at its institution where home and guest lecturers deliver an international intensive short course of a themed study. It promotes the event, and offers the opportunities for partner institutions to participate in it, via the Businet communication system – using its membership of the network to facilitate the international activities of the institution.

International work placements, both funded and unfunded

Member institutions make applications for the mobility of students on Erasmus, or Leonardo, funded placements within Europe.. They often use fellow member institutions as placement "finders/identifiers" outside their home country - sharing information to help each other.

Where members are approached by employer organisations offering work experience possibilities the member institute can share those opportunities with other institutes via the internal communication system.

Businet also offers certification of the placement period with the "Certificate of International Business Practice". This enables those students who wish to, the opportunity to gain formal recognition for the successful completion of a period of work experience outside of their own country.

Multilateral Projects

The network provides the opportunity for like-minded organisations to work together to consider and develop project funding applications (to access regional, national and international funding mechanisms) EU. Members build trust based relationships and therefore are aware of who they can look to when developing a project idea.

An example of good practice, in relation to a major project, was the development of a project called "Framework". Framework came about as a result of a brainstorm held at the Annual Conference, where members identified issues that they had in relation to providing good quality work experiences for their students, and potential solutions to those problems.

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....

What this culminated in was a Leonardo "Thematic Action" project that received very significant funding from the EU. Members of the network were given the opportunity to become members of the project at the planning stages. A significant number of members (19 in total) chose to become partners in this project and were involved in the development and delivery of the project.

The Framework project was established to meet the needs of 3 stakeholders groups, in relation to periods of work placement. The stakeholders are the educational establishments, the students and industry (the placement provider).

The project aimed to provide a quality framework to underpin the learning experience of students working on an industrial placement. The needs the project sought to provide are:

- A quality placement experience for which the student is appropriately prepared and through which the student is properly supported, enabling maximum benefits to be gained from the work based learning taking place.
- A quality system that supports the role of the placement provider in offering an appropriate learning environment for the work based learning to be undertaken.
- A system that enables education institutions more effectively to integrate the academic curriculum with work based skills development, and which offers a more attractive means of encouraging employers to provide quality placements.

Curriculum specific and special interest Work Groups

The Businet organisation has always incorporated a number of "working groups" to establish good practice, address issues, establish a common ground and promote development of the curricular in business related subject areas.

Many of the networking activities of the organisation take place within the working groups. These working groups are established by either curriculum area or by a common area of special interest.

The activities of these groups involve managing teacher and student exchanges, the conferment of Higher European Diplomas and Certificates, the organisation of international short courses (e.g. IP's) bringing students from across Europe together, and the accessing of opportunities provided by European funding mechanisms.

The curriculum (working) groups currently are:

- Financial Services and Accounting.

- Information and Computer Technology.

- Marketing and International Trade.

- Tourism.

- Communications.

- Business Languages and Information Systems Business Law.

Additionally there are three special interest groups

- International Relation Managers.

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- Lifelong Learning.

- Decision Makers Forum.

Short programmes (Intensive Programmes), both Erasmus and non funded

Businet member organisations organise intensive programmes together with fellow members. Thus providing added value to the students programmes of study. Intensive programmes are organised within the curriculum grouping, for example the Finance group hold events every year at different institutes across Europe. These types of activities are becoming increasingly more popular as they provide a very interesting and worthwhile experience for the student. They will always involve representatives of industry (future employers) and this strong "industry" involvement also benefits the education institute.

Erasmus funding for intensive programmes is restricted to those programmes that have a minimum duration of 10 working days. A number of members do have projects that are funded working with their Businet partners. There has been a trend for partners to develop short programmes that are either institutionally funded, student funded, or more commonly both. These intensive programmes tend to be organised within the curriculum groupings. An example of this is within the Marketing group where they hold a series of short events that they call "Busidays" events, annually. An example of Busiday events was a short programme held in Eindhoven, which involved Phillips. The student newsletter referring to this event is displayed in Appendix 2.

Other curriculum groups specialising in Tourism, ICT and Communications also run very successful events annually.
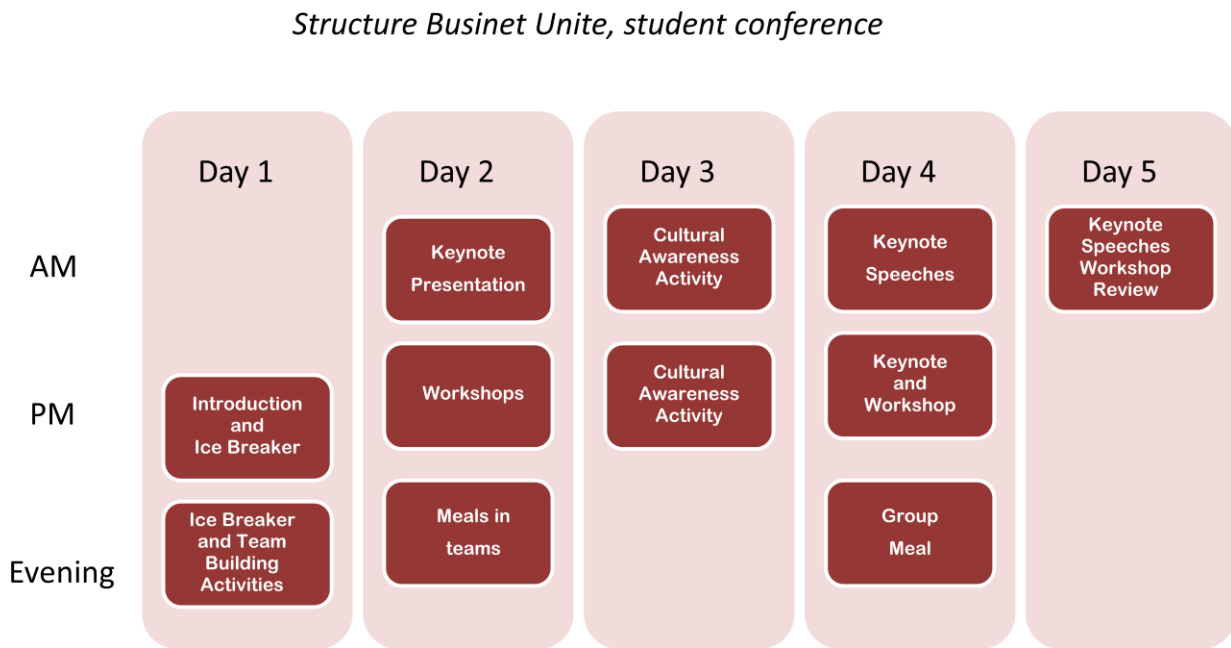
Student conferences

In addition to the student events organised by the curriculum groups, Businet organises an Annual Student Conference (established in 1999) open to students of all member institutes. The primary aims of this conference are to bring students from a range of countries together to experience a "real conference" and to undertake activities surrounding a theme.

The Businet "Unite" Student Conference, as it is known, is held annually and is of 5 days duration. The most recent event was held in Edinburgh in November 2009. The theme of the conference was "Employability Skills and Cultural Awareness", with 110 students from seventeen institutes of Higher Education, from nine EU countries attending the event. Speakers from a variety of backgrounds (Human Resource Management, specialist recruitment organisations, academia, journalism and business) provided plenty of stimulus material for the students to think about. The conference is designed to encourage reflection, and self analysis and stimulating thoughts about future opportunities. Evaluation after the event regularly indicates that this is achieved.

The event also promotes networking amongst the students and the sharing of experiences and best practice. Students continue to share experiences after the event using social networking systems.

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....

The network places great value on the education of employability skills, and feels that the blend of nationalities at the event makes for a perfect vehicle to promote, educate and use the defined skills.

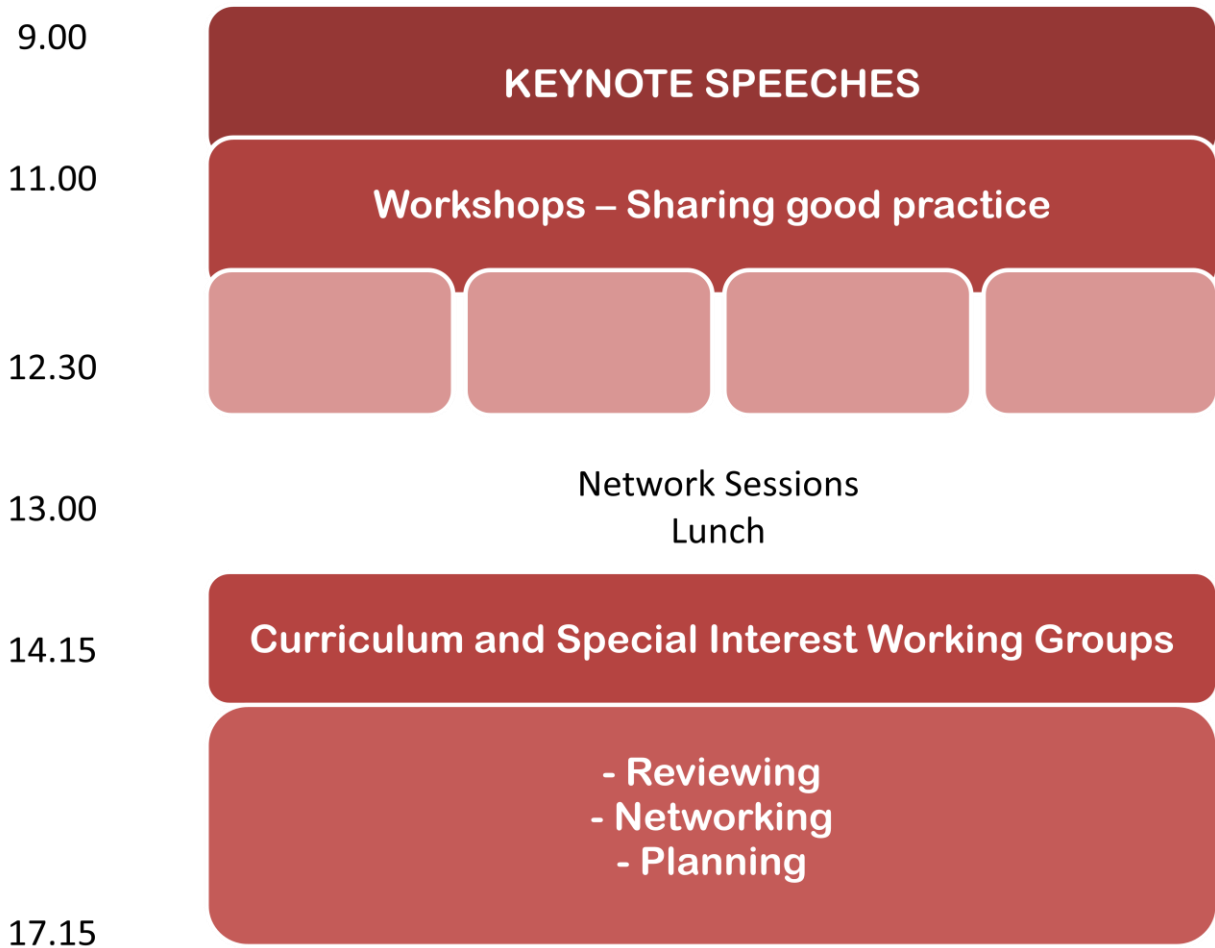The structure of the event is indicated below:

Structure Businet Unite, student conference

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
AM		Keynote Presentation	Cultural Awareness Activity	Keynote Speeches	Keynote Speeches Workshop Review
PM	Introduction and Ice Breaker	Workshops	Cultural Awareness Activity	Keynote and Workshop	
Evening	Ice Breaker and Team Building Activities	Meals in teams		Group Meal	

Annual Conference

The Businet Annual Conference is central to the activities of the organisation. It is the networking event where relationships are developed, activities planned and ideas turned into actions. It is the formal networking event of the organisation.

The conference is a three day event (plus optional social day) with keynote speakers, workshops for the sharing of good practice, and curriculum / special interest working group meetings. There is also a full social programme during the event, which enhances networking opportunities.

Structure of the Annual Businet Conference

Time	
9.00	**KEYNOTE SPEECHES**
11.00	**Workshops – Sharing good practice**
12.30	
13.00	Network Sessions / Lunch
14.15	**Curriculum and Special Interest Working Groups**
17.15	- Reviewing / - Networking / - Planning

By design the conference is always held in a hotel with a conference facility, allowing delegates to stay on. This enables delegates to meet and to maximise the networking time available. Businet is very conscious of the needs of the delegates and strives to create a welcoming environment that makes the event both useful, and enjoyable. Newcomers are introduced to the organisation and welcomed prior to the start of the main event. This introduces them to key individuals and the "language" (jargon) of the network. Newcomers are seen as bringing new ideas and experience, so ensuring that

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....

they are comfortable at the event is a priority. The reflections of a first time delegate can be found in Appendix 1.

The "success" of the event is evaluated each year and the suggestions of the members are considered when planning the next event. Over time the structure of the conference has developed to allow members to pursue their institutional and personal goals. The conference has to provide opportunities and be suitable for a range of delegates. The roles of the delegates range from Senior Managers, to International Managers and teaching staff.

The conference is designed to offer both formal and informal networking opportunities. It is the organizations show piece annual event. An aim of the organizers is to encourage and facilitate the creation of a suitable environment that enables the delegates to maximize the time / opportunities available. Evaluation tools are used to ensure that a suitable environment was present throughout the conference. When identifying future venues, factors such as conference facilities, networking areas, cost and accessibility are considered. These factors are the key to providing the correct physical environment. The physical environment has to be right in order that the correct "facilitating environment" can be achieved.

Conference networking is enabled by a series of activities (such as a rational ice breaking event referred to as the "European Aperitif "and social activities), with supporting organizational materials (such as personalized information packages).

Conclusion

It is evident that to achieve international objectives institutions will be required to work together with other institutions in other countries. Although it is possible to source partners individually it is clear that strong networking organizations can assist in the development of suitable partnerships. In addition, it nurtures an environment in which the concept of internationalisation is encouraged to the point that it becomes the norm. An active network provides the impetus for staff development, student development, the internationalization of the curriculum and the institution, and international research, all of which are considered to be key reasons for internationalization (J. Knight, 2003).

As the working title of Businet is 'a Network for the Development of Businet Education Programmes', networking needs to be central to the activities of the organization. The organization needs to be constantly reviewing its activities and what 'added value' it can offer the members, particularly in relation to networking. The methods of networking, including the modes of communication, need to be considered in order to take the network forward.

The strength of the network is based on the trust between member institutes and the individuals within them. Consequently there is a strong sense of community within the network. This is fostered by the willingness of members to share best practice and knowledge, which enables them to benchmark and consider their own aims, and objectives. Businet also provides a platform for the provision of information about trends and developments in Higher Education, with a special emphasis on Vocational Business education. Businet members are so familiar with the "idea" of thinking beyond national

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"European perspectives on internationalization: Sharing policies and good practices"
....

boundaries when they plan curriculum activities, events, projects etc, that for them the internationalization is truly embedded, it is not a 'bolt on' that is pursued because external forces require it, but because the members are already persuaded of the added value it brings.

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Reflection on the Annual Businet Conference regarding networking from a newcomer's point of view

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When I registered for the Annual Businet Conference for the first time, I had already heard about Businet on a few occasions. Especially the always varying locations roused my interest. I understood that a main concept of this educational network is indeed about networking. However, I did not know what to expect. Therefore, I went to the conference free of expectation and with only little background knowledge or people I knew.

At the Conference

The first point of contact after arrival was at the Reception Desk. A very warm welcome was made by Businet staff. The reception desk was directly in the reception area of the hotel. Already you got a glimpse of how Businet was operating: people who were arriving, were welcomed with a very warm smile, one or two comments were made about how the children were doing and everywhere around you could see little groups of Businet member hugging each other and trying to get up to speed with what has happened since the last conference.

And although I was new to the "Businet family", I already felt like a part of the whole. So, I made my way from group to group, got introduced, introduced myself or people came over to say hello themselves.

After the first steps were taken, the next big event was the Newcomers' meeting. This meeting was meant to introduce new members to the network and get to know its structure, aims and objective and likewise to meet other newcomers. I thought it was a very good idea to attend this meeting as it took away my nervousness a little.

An interesting observation for me was that during lunch breaks and within the bar area, people were chatting loosely or exchanging ideas and thoughts all the time. Not rarely I picked up sentences like "I was thinking about a project..." or "Now that I see you, can we talk about..."

These ideas were then further developed in the free time between key speeches and working group meetings that have been particularly dedicated for networking activities in the conference programme. During this time, people met and discussed new or current projects in the hotel bar, reception area or on the hotel terrace.

The key speeches were very interesting and closely related to day-to-day issues I deal with in the International Office. During the speeches and in the working groups I then got the opportunity to exchange ideas and discuss the speeches with like-minded people. What a wonderful chance to broaden my horizon which got enhanced further by the evening programme. Simply because some ideas can be better discussed with a nice glass of red wine...

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Advantages of the Businet Network:

I have been to various conferences and seminars – and never did I experience such a dynamic and almost informal / familiar atmosphere. What definitely helped effective networking was the fact that the conference venue and accommodation were in the same hotel. Participants could use their time most efficiently and use every single opportunity from breakfast to nightcap for networking activities.

Another very useful fact is that the "Working Groups" were divided into interest groups. This gave you an optimal opportunity for exchange with like-minded colleagues. Instead of unwillingly being put in a room with a bunch of people with different interests, the working group rooms of this conference seemed very lively and you could observe on a stroll to the ladies room people engaging, mind mapping and discussing law, marketing or travel and tourism topics.

On a voluntary basis, members could sign up for the "Saturday's Social Visit" where you have been given the opportunity to experience local landmarks. And even though some members looked extremely tired (from the Gala dinner the night before), the networking seemed to have reached its peak.

Last but not least, as already mentioned earlier, during the entire conference you could feel this warm, open and welcoming "family" atmosphere. What an experience to remember!

Now What:

When I went home, I was reflecting on the outcome of this conference. I could not believe the long list of things to do on my writing pad. Things like:

- To develop networking contacts further
- To use new contacts for projects (e.g. International Weeks) and exchange activities between colleges for staff and students
- To consider outcomes for the requirements of European Exchange Programmes which brings European funding opportunities
- To use activities and key speech notes for enhancement for the college as well as for its students
- To follow up conference ideas and email potential partners

Not bad, I thought, for a newcomer of the Businet Conference. But the most important insight I took away from the conference is the following:

If I find the right partners within this vibrant network, then there are no limitations for my creativity, scope or type of projects and exchanges. New doors were opened and I very much looked forward to report this to my colleagues at home.

Appendix 2

Newsletter Busidays