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The River

An intriguingly different but simple definition of what IR is all about

Ever since Institutional Research (IR) exists the definition of what it actually means was in the flow. Many of us know about Pat Terenzini's elevator dilemma on sufficiently describing what IR means before the destination level has been reached. This poster presentation will introduce you to an intriguingly different but simple definition of what IR is all about, a definition that not only works for one office in one country but for all offices everywhere. It all starts with a river full of challenges, opportunities, dangers, rapids and imperfections...

Introduction

- **Institutional Research is around for quite some time.** Most of the world, particularly academics have a reasonable grasp of the English language, but still IR is fairly limited to natively English-speaking countries.
- Following earlier studies by Volkwein (1999), Muffo (1999), Lindquist (1999) and AIR (2014), the **structure of IR offices, the tasks they undertake and the name they carry differs quite a bit.**
- In Europe for instance there are different terms used from 'Third Space workers' over 'New Public Managerialism' to 'Higher Education Professions' to describe institutional researchers. Even though hardly any Institutional Research office exists there, many functions still being dealt with – by a series of other offices: quality management, student office, examination office, accreditation, admissions, higher education statistics. However, often valuable links between these fields are lacking.

Why a simple definition?

- Inspired by HEIR and AIR conference sessions, it is intended to undertake a **study to find out: what tasks are being considered IR tasks today, which entities are doing those at universities and what organisational structure have they given themselves** to pursue these. The questionnaire relates to a study by the Association for Institutional Research identifying 1000+ IR tasks undertaken at US institutions.

Why a simple definition? (continued)

- Many recipients of such a survey **won't have a clue what IR is** and hence would be **unable to fill the survey in** properly – due to different names, languages and cultures.
- **Give people that do not know about IR an understanding what IR is** and comprises through a universally fitting, metaphorical definition.
- Institutional Research(ers) **can make themselves understood** when it comes to what Institutional Research actually means. As we know from basic IR literature, it is very important for an Institutional Researcher 'in the wild' at conferences or outside his or her office to be able to explain what IR is, particularly in elevators.

The Greater Context:

- The metaphor / definition was developed in conversations with international colleagues across previous AIR, HEIR(UK), EAIR and the German Higher Education Association conferences.
- It is aiding a study to explore the state of IR around the world as well as to spread the word (in collaboration with the network of international institutional researchers (NIIR) and 'IR Ambassadors')

Illustration 1: setting the scene



Setting the Scene

Imagine a river and you stand on the one side being keen to get across to the other side, which stands for a truly optimal higher education institution, on dry feet:

- we find ourselves in **Beforeland** (*resembles the status quo, provokingly using a dilapidated building to describe the current state*)
- we want to get to **Afterwards Island** (*resembles the state we are working towards to – the perfect, competitive and fabulous HE institution, described by using a castle*)
- There are **obstacles**, that make it not easy to get there: **THE RIVER** (*resembles the challenges, dangers, rapids, controversies, dead ends, opportunities, wrong decisions, genius' approaches that are hidden within a massive and constant stream of data*)

In the river, there are stepping stones. If there are enough stepping stones, it might be possible to get across on dry feet, but the more risky the bigger the gaps.

- There are small and big **stepping Stones** in the river (*resemble the different existing offices (also in size) and bodies undertaking IR tasks (e.g. quality management, student affairs, examination office, accreditation,...). At each institution there will be different stones in the river, many small ones stand for a decentralized environment, few big ones for a more centralized one*)

The Challenge

Crossing 'the River' without getting wet feet or even worse drowning in the stream

Illustration 2: drowning in the stream (no IR)

We see some little and some larger stones in the river:

- they are not linked with each other
- In order to cross the river we have to make our way (*footsteps*) and jump from stone to stone...
- ... and fall in the river (because the gap between was too small or stones were slippery – *person drowning*)

We do not reach our dream castle on Afterwards Island

Illustration 2: drowning in the stream (no IR)



Illustration 3: building bridges through IR



- The stones in the river are connected through a 'bridge' building on them (*IR closes gaps between existing structures, whilst connecting and building on them*)
- As the basis is solid and sound, we can quickly and reasonably safely make our way over to Afterwards Island

We can reach our dream castle

So what has 'the River' to do with an explanation of what Institutional Research is?: *Institutional Research is the substance that is filling the gaps and building the bridges between stepping stones (offices doing IR tasks) in a river of unknowns/data to allow for a safe, dry and speedy crossing over to the target state of an HEI. And no matter what and how many stepping stones exist at an institutions' river crossing, Institutional Research can always link them up and bridge the gaps.*

