

10 Years of promoting the academic standing of the customs profession

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From its humble beginnings in 2005, the International Network of Customs Universities (INCUI) has come a long way. The primary motive for establishing the network was to promote the academic standing of the customs profession – something that was clearly needed at the time, and which, I am pleased to say, has been well and truly achieved in the intervening ten years. As the INCUI celebrates its 10th Anniversary, it is worth recalling at least part of that journey, and contemplating what might lie ahead.

I recall the day I first proposed the development of a Masters degree with a customs specialisation. One of my professorial colleagues asked why one would need a Masters program to teach people how to search bags. Those of you who are involved in trade and customs matters and who understand the breadth and complexity of the subject would have shaken your head as I did. There is far more to the customs profession than baggage search! But that was the perception some 15 years ago and it was that perception which prompted the establishment of the INCUI.

Recognising the academic significance of customs and border management, a small number of universities had already developed customs-specific qualifications and research streams in the 1990s, notably Münster, Germany and Canberra, Australia. And while national endorsement of such programs represented a significant step forward, it was international acknowledgement that was required before customs studies could be recognised as a true academic discipline.

To this end, the INCUI has been working closely with the World Customs Organization (WCO) to further this cause, and together we have developed formal standards for the customs profession, globally recognised academic programs, an academic journal that is about to enter its tenth year of publication, and a series of international conferences that focus on academically recognised research and development.

Notably, neither the WCO nor the INCUI could have achieved this outcome independently of one another. While international policymaking is beyond the jurisdiction of the INCUI, it can significantly support such decision-making through its extensive research initiatives. Similarly, the WCO lacks the credentials to issue academic qualifications, but can influence the development of programs that lead to such qualifications by formally recognising those which meet the professional requirements of its members.

The experience to date has served to highlight the natural synergies which exist between the two organisations. Like many partnerships, the whole has proved to be much greater than the sum of its parts. The key to such a synergistic relationship lies in the fact that competition does not and cannot exist. While common areas of interest are shared, each organisation has its own agenda and its own imperatives. Each pursues its charter to the satisfaction of its members, and each is given the opportunity

to further the achievement of its objectives by actively participating in the activities of the other. This is recognised by the fact that both organisations feel compelled to collaborate with other organisations in areas which touch on their particular sphere of activity. From an INCU perspective this includes some 20 international organisations. For the WCO it involves many more, as it recognises the important role that many international organisations play in developing and facilitating international trade and travel, including the associated customs and border management policies.

The INCU sphere of engagement includes several fields of interest that receive little attention by the WCO but are considered by some of its members to be high on their list of priorities. That is not a criticism of the WCO. Like many governments around the world, the WCO is coming to terms with the fact that the role and responsibilities of what has traditionally been termed “Customs” can no longer be clearly defined. I discussed this phenomenon in my article, ‘The changing role of customs: evolution or revolution?’¹ in which I concluded:

... it is no longer possible to clearly define the role of ‘Customs’. While the responsibilities of border management continue to be carried out, the nature and mix of relevant government agencies is changing. Consequently, what may represent core business for one administration may fall outside the sphere of responsibility of another. Indeed, ... the organism known as ‘Customs’ appears destined for extinction.

For example, the WCO recognises the need for coordinated border management in the context of rallying the support of other agencies to assist in strengthening a country’s economic competitiveness, including through the facilitation of legitimate trade. However, a number of countries have integrated their traditional customs functions with immigration responsibilities, resulting in organisations with priorities that fall outside the scope of traditional WCO membership. For such administrations, priority issues include the management of asylum seekers, people smuggling and human trafficking.

While the WCO is doing its best to maintain its relevance to all its members, like any international organisation of its size, it has the turning circle of the *Queen Mary* and will take many years to effectively respond to such significant shifts in focus. That is where the agility of the INCU can be used to greatest effect. Its hundreds of researchers, including research students across some 100 countries, have the ability to focus on emerging trends and help inform the decision-making processes of the border management community through empirical studies that contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

To achieve this requires robust interaction among policymakers, practitioners and academia. To this end, the INCU recently introduced global conferences that are designed to complement the WCO’s PICARD² Programme by establishing a forum that provides its members with a greater opportunity to explore research priorities with policymakers and present the findings of their research; and for younger researchers and students to present their research proposals to a broader audience.

The Inaugural INCU Global Conference was held in Baku, Republic of Azerbaijan in May 2014, with the theme “Trade Facilitation Post-Bali: Putting Policy into Practice”. The conference brought together delegates from over 70 countries including representatives of customs administrations, 20 international organisations, the private sector and academia. The conference was also the first of its kind to provide simultaneous telecast via YouTube – clearly a sign of the times!

Proceedings included a welcome address by the Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO), H.E. Roberto Azevêdo, keynote addresses by three eminent Nobel Laureates, the Assistant Secretary of International Affairs of the US Department of Homeland Security and a number of other highly respected speakers. Amongst them was the Chairman of the State Customs Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Professor Aydin Aliyev, who was admitted as an Honorary Fellow of the INCU in recognition of his significant contribution to the objectives of the organisation, and an existing Honorary Fellow, Lars Karlsson, who first established the WCO’s PICARD Programme.

A key outcome of the conference was the Baku Resolution which recognised and built upon the significant achievement of the WTO in reaching its Agreement on Trade Facilitation (the Bali Agreement). Among other things, it was resolved to formally engage with a broader cross-section of the international community and identify further ways of providing opportunities for academics, students and less experienced researchers to present and publish their research.

Another important resolution was to develop a definition of the term “customs profession” which includes both public and private sector members of the international trading community; identify the requisite knowledge, skills and competencies of those engaged in the customs profession; and develop guidelines for accrediting education and training programs that meet the identified knowledge, skill and competency requirements. This further builds upon the excellent work undertaken to date in collaboration with the WCO.

To further support the development of accredited qualifications, it was also resolved to encourage mutual recognition of INCU Member education and training programs through credit allocation, cross-institution arrangements and other means. This is already occurring, with formal arrangements having been established across a number of educational institutions in Australia, China, Germany, the Maldives, Qatar, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and the United States.

Further collaboration with the WCO, other international organisations, and member institutions will certainly provide the basis for future activities, as will focused research designed to inform strategic policymaking. It is in this context that the INCU looks forward to its next ten years of working closely with the WCO as we collectively progress our endeavours in customs academic research and development in order to further raise the academic standing of the customs profession.

Notes

- 1 *World Customs Journal* 2007, vol. 1, no.1, pp. 31-7.
- 2 Partnership in Customs Academic Research and Development.

