

Raising the academic standing of the Customs profession

...by Professor David Widdowson

The recent WCO PICARD (Partnership in Customs Academic Research and Development) Conference in Abu Dhabi marked a significant milestone in the development of the partnership between the WCO and the academic world. From the inception of the PICARD Programme, our collective aim has been to raise the academic standing of the Customs profession – but it was not always clear how this would be achieved. I remember sitting at a table in Brussels in early 2006 with a small group of WCO officials and fellow academics, discussing possible ways forward.

At that time, there were:

- no established standards for the Customs profession
- no recognised areas of legitimate academic pursuit in Customs-related areas
- no internationally recognised Customs university programmes
- no academic journals dedicated to Customs matters
- no international conferences at which the Customs and academic communities could exchange ideas and research findings

So, how have we achieved all this in such a short period of time? Allow me to provide a short history.

Following the 2006 meeting in Brussels, the International Network of Customs Universities (INCU) was founded and at that time, its membership comprised only four universities. The idea behind INCU's establishment was to promote academic excellence in Customs management and administration and in doing so, to provide the WCO and other organizations with a single point of contact with universities and research institutes that are active in the fields of Customs research, education and training. It was also designed to generate greater public awareness of Customs matters, to promote and facilitate research in the field of Customs and related areas, and to provide a global resource for governments, the private sector, and students wishing to further their knowledge in the field of Customs and international trade.

Later that year, the PICARD initiative was launched and the first PICARD Conference was held in Brussels. There was plenty of lively debate, and one thing in particular that I remember clearly was a message we received from a number of delegates that the development of an international academic journal dedicated to Customs matters was simply too hard to achieve and excessively ambitious. Interestingly, I did not see any of those delegates at PICARD 2010 in Abu Dhabi. Undeterred, at the 2007 conference which was again held in Brussels, we launched the World Customs Journal – so much for the critics!

At the time of the Journal's launch, Kunio Mikuriya, who was then Deputy Secretary General of the WCO, announced that, in his view, the Journal would serve as a valuable source of reference for Customs to meet the requirements of its new strategic environment, and would also serve as the flagship for cooperation between the WCO and the academic world. You can see that Kunio, who is now Secretary General of the WCO, has been a strong supporter from the early days of the partnership – and we thank him for his ongoing commitment and support.



Moving ever forward, work commenced in 2008 on the development of Professional Standards, which were debated at some length during the PICARD Conference in Shanghai. The Professional Standards were formally endorsed by the WCO at its 2009 Council Sessions and this paved the way to address the application guidelines and related matters at the PICARD Conference that was held in Costa Rica later that year. Then, on 26 January 2010 – celebrated annually as International Customs Day – the WCO formally recognized the academic programmes of three universities: Riga Technical University, the University of Münster, and the University of Canberra.

So, here we are today: standards for the Customs profession are in place; several internationally recognized academic programmes are well established and many more are being developed; the ninth edition of the World Customs Journal is soon to be published; and the planning process for the sixth annual PICARD Conference is underway.

We have indeed reached a significant milestone. Having achieved much of what we originally set out to achieve, the implementation phase is well and truly over and it is now time to take things forward. And like any relationship, the partnership between the WCO and the academic world is evolving.

I am very pleased to see the WCO's theme for 2011 is "Knowledge, a catalyst for Customs excellence". This is certainly an area in which the academic community can assist. INCU, through the PICARD initiative, has been increasingly focusing its research efforts on areas of specific relevance to the WCO, its Members and its stakeholders. In this way it is able to provide empirical evidence to help inform

decision making. The themes of the World Customs Journal and PICARD Conferences over the past few years are testament to this.

In the above regard, research topics have included the changing Customs environment, capacity building, trade facilitation, supply chain security, the impact of the global financial crisis on world trade and Customs, coordinated border management, the use of ICT in the cross-border environment, Customs-Business partnerships, revenue collection, the impact of climate change, and performance measurement.



The WCO's focus on knowledge in 2011 therefore neatly paves the way for PICARD to build on its significant achievements to date. For its part, INCU is committed to continuing its work with the WCO in further developing the body of knowledge upon which informed decision making relies. It is equally committed to facilitating a free exchange of ideas and best practice that serve to build closer links between government and the private sector in their efforts to facilitate legitimate trade and to secure the international supply chain.

According to the eminent author, Stephen Covey, "An empowered organization is one in which individuals have the knowledge, skill, desire, and opportunity to personally succeed in a way that leads to collective organizational success". I wish the WCO and its Members every success in 2011 as they seek empowerment through knowledge.

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