

70 Years of Internationalization in Tertiary Education: Changes, Challenges and Perspectives



Hans de Wit and Philip Altbach

Internationalization as a concept and strategic agenda is a relatively new, broad, and varied phenomenon in tertiary education, driven by a dynamic combination of political, economic, sociocultural, and academic rationales and stakeholders. Its impact on regions, countries, and institutions varies according to their particular contexts. Mobility, also known as “internationalization abroad,” is the most referred to activity in internationalization and takes in itself a great variety of forms. Curriculum and global professional and citizenship development, also referred to as “internationalization at home,” is the other key component of internationalization. It receives increased attention, but still less than mobility.

Over the past seventy years, internationalization in tertiary education has evolved from being a marginal activity to becoming a key aspect of the reform agenda. In the last decade of the last century, the increasing globalization and regionalization of economies and societies, combined with the requirements of the knowledge economy and the end of the Cold War, created a context that enabled a more strategic approach to internationalization in higher education. The International Association of Universities (IAU) is playing an active role in this process.

Internationalization has evolved, and during that process, past priorities have been replaced, or surpassed in importance, by others. Economic rationales have become more dominant, but given the extreme challenges faced by global society—summarized in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations—internationalization has also recently been called upon to help contribute to meeting these societal challenges and goals.

H. de Wit (✉) · P. Altbach
Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA
e-mail: dewitj@bc.edu

P. Altbach
e-mail: altbach@bc.edu

© The Author(s) 2021
H. van't Land et al. (eds.), *The Promise of Higher Education*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67245-4_19

1 The Historical Context

One can argue that tertiary education, by nature, has always been international. Kerr (1994) states that universities have always been essentially international, but at the same time acknowledges that “they have been living, increasingly, in a world of nation states that have designs on them” (p. 6). This tension between universal nature and embeddedness in the national and local contexts is a dominant feature of tertiary education. References to the global nature of universities ignore the fact that many universities were established or transformed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with a clearly national orientation.

Political events, most notably two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century led to a focus on promoting peace and mutual understanding through international cooperation and exchange. The creation of the Institute of International Education (IIE) in the United States in 1919, the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) in Germany in 1925, and of the British Council in the United Kingdom in 1934 are illustrations of this development. This trend continued with the establishment of the Fulbright Program of 1946. The creation of the International Association of Universities in 1950 can also be placed in that context.

In the following years, in addition to peace and mutual understanding, Cold War rationales of national security and foreign policy increasingly took over. Similar trends could be seen in the Soviet Union. The Cold War became the principal rationale to foster an international dimension of higher education. What had started as incidental and individual activities evolved into organized international education programs, driven more by national governments than by universities.

2 Cooperation or Competition?

The traditional emphasis in internationalization has been on exchanges and cooperation to contribute to a better understanding of different cultures and languages, as well as for research collaboration. But since the mid-1990s, a gradual but increasingly visible shift has been taking place toward more competition. Van der Wende (2001) calls this a shift in paradigm from cooperation to competition. The optimism at the end of the 1980s that internationalization would move from an ad hoc, marginalized and fragmented activity to a central point on the agenda of higher education had resulted indeed in a broad acceptance of internationalization as one of the core drivers of innovation and change in higher education. But the direction it took was one of copying the already prevalent competitive approach in the United Kingdom and Australia: recruitment of international students and development of cross-border education for revenue, competition for talent (skilled immigration) and reputation (rankings).

This focus on internationalization as a tradeable commodity resulted at the turn of the century in appeals for a return to ethics and values of cooperation by the *Inter-*

nationalization at Home movement in Europe in reaction to the focus on Erasmus exchanges (what about the 95% non-mobile students?), and a call for *Internationalization of the Curriculum* in the United Kingdom and Australia in reaction to the exclusive focus on international student recruitment and off-shore delivery. But the focus on mobility and revenue generation increased even more in the following decade, in part because governments increasingly looked to international student tuition payments as a key source of revenue for higher education.

In 2011, Brandenburg and de Wit (2011) stated that although internationalization “is claimed to be the last stand for humanistic ideas against the world of pure economic benefits,” the reality is that “this ignores the fact that activities more related to the concept of globalization (higher education as a tradeable commodity) are increasingly executed under the flag of Internationalization.” They expressed concern about the devaluation of internationalization as it was meant to be and called for a critical reflection on its concept. This 2011 critical reflection on the reality and direction of internationalization as a tradeable commodity, was not unique. The International Association of Universities (IAU 2012) started ten years ago an action to rethink the concept of internationalization outcomes and the work of national and discipline-specific accreditation agencies.

At the same time, there emerged a move away from internationalization as a purely Western concept: “In the current global knowledge society, the concept of internationalization of higher education has itself become globalized, demanding further consideration of its impact on policy and practice as more countries and types of institution around the world engage in the process. Internationalization should no longer be considered in terms of a westernized, largely Anglo-Saxon, and predominantly English-speaking paradigm.” (Jones and De Wit 2014)

The 2015 study for the European Parliament on the state of internationalization in higher education, in which IAU was actively involved, reflects this new line of thinking. It promoted a new agenda for the future, with the following definition for internationalization:

The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society (De Wit et al. 2015).

This definition gives a normative direction to the process by emphasizing that such a process does not happen automatically, but needs to be intentional; that it is not a goal in itself, but must contribute to quality improvement; that it should not be an advantage reserved for a small elite of mobile students and scholars, but benefit all; and finally, that it should also benefit society.

At the beginning of 2020, although the critique on the notion of internationalization as a competitive and exclusive tradeable commodity became widely acknowledged and notions like ‘internationalization at home’, ‘internationalization of the curriculum’, ‘internationalization for society’, ‘humanistic internationalization’, ‘global learning for all’ have found ample support in reports, documents, statements and even

policies, the reality of internationalization as a tradeable commodity is still strongly prevalent.

The rise of nationalist–populist movements, bans on immigration, attacks on academic freedom, anti globalist protests and, in Europe, anti-integration trends (Brexit), might all have negative implications for internationalization. It is too early to tell what the exact and direct consequences of these developments will be, but most likely they will change and/or accelerate patterns of mobility, autonomy and academic freedom, privatization and commercialization, as well as other key dimensions of global tertiary education. Similarly, through the interconnection of our societies and economies, natural disasters and health hazards have increasingly a global scope, impacting higher education and internationalization endeavours. The current COVID-19 epidemic is a clear illustration.

In general terms, the key characteristics of internationalization these past decades are:

- Greater focus on internationalization abroad than on internationalization at home.
- More ad hoc, fragmented, and marginal than strategic, comprehensive, and central in the policies of universities and governments.
- Benefiting a small, elite subset of students, faculty, and institutions rather than aiming for global and intercultural outcomes for all.
- Directed by a constantly shifting range of political, economic, sociocultural, and educational rationales, with an increasing focus on economic motivations.
- Increasingly driven by national, regional, and global rankings.
- Poor alignment between the international dimensions of the three core functions of higher education: education, research, and service to society.
- Primarily a strategic choice and focus of institutions of higher education, but increasingly also a priority of national governments (for reasons of soft power, reputation and/or revenue) and of regions (European Union, Bologna signatories, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN], etc.)
- Increasing commercialization and involvement of for-profit companies in all aspects of the international higher education agenda.

Although still present in the rhetoric of international education, traditional values such as cooperation, peace and mutual understanding, human capital development, and solidarity, have been moved to the sidelines as universities strive for competition, revenue, and reputation/branding.

3 Institutional Strategies

Overall, institutions are still the main agents that drive internationalization. According to the 5th Global Survey of Internationalization of Higher Education by the International Association of Universities (IAU), based on data from 2018, more than 90% of institutions mention internationalization in their mission/strategic plan, with the exception of North America, where only one-third do so. “Enhanced international

cooperation and capacity building,” and “improved quality of teaching and learning,” are mentioned as the most important benefits. “International opportunities accessible only to students with financial resources,” followed by “difficulty to assess/recognize the quality of courses/programs offered by foreign institutions,” as well as “excessive competition with other higher education institutions,” are mentioned as the highest risks. The main obstacles mentioned include “insufficient financial resources,” “administrative/bureaucratic difficulties,” and “lack of foreign languages” (Marinoni 2019). Further, the survey states that two-thirds of university leaders around the world consider internationalization to be an important agenda issue, although Marinoni and de Wit (2019) observe that there is an increasing divide between institutions that consider internationalization as highly important, and those that do not. They observe that

The reasons for such a divide between HEIs ... is worth a reflection and deserves to be studied more in depth, especially if one considers internationalization to be an essential part of all HEIs’ mission and a sign of quality.

Institutions developing internationalization strategies face significant challenges and pressures: revenue generation; competition for talent; branding and reputation; a need to focus on international research and publications; on recruiting international students and scholars; and on using English as a language for research and instruction. These challenges and pressures conflict with a more inclusive, less elitist approach, catering to the needs of local students and staff and creating opportunities for these groups. In other words, there is a tension between a short-term, neoliberal approach to internationalization, focusing primarily on mobility and research, and a long-term, comprehensive approach, focusing on global learning for all.

4 National Policies

For a long time, international academic activities in the Global North were primarily the domain of national governments as part of their foreign policy, now mostly referred to as “soft power” or “public diplomacy.” Cultural and scientific agreements between nations included references to the exchange of scholars and students and the provision of scholarships, in general in small numbers. Capacity building programs intended for mid- and low-income countries included scholarships, faculty mobility to assist tertiary education and support in terms of infrastructure. Institutions were participating in these activities but did not initiate them proactively. The scope and impact of these measures varied by country.

This changed after the end of the Cold War, when economic rationales became more dominant, and institutions started taking a more proactive role. Over the past decade, however, international higher education has been increasingly recognized by governments as an important factor in national economic development, trade, and reputation. Considering the magnitude of current global student and staff mobility, the increased presence of branch campuses and international providers, and the boom-

ing competition for international talent, tertiary education institutions and national governments in the Global North are mobilizing to both leverage and steer internationalization. National strategies and plans represent the most tangible and direct attempts by governments to play an active and decisive role, but there are substantial differences in their approaches, rationales, and priorities. A study by De Wit et al. (2019) for the World Bank showed that low- and middle-income countries are becoming also more active in defining internationalization policies and fostering South-South cooperation, but also revealed a degree of policy mimicry in adapting western modes of internationalization and focusing heavily on mobility. And they appear to sustain the dominance of high-income countries through their scholarship schemes, their geographic priorities and their choice of partnerships.

5 Challenges and Opportunities for the Future

Internationalization in higher education is entering a new phase. A shift from internationalization abroad with its strong focus on a small elite of mobile students, faculty, administrators, and programs toward internationalization at home for all members of the academic community has become more urgent than ever, certainly after the Covid-19 pandemic. Making internationalization more carbon-neutral (De Wit and Altbach 2020), increasing the contribution of internationalization to society (Brandenburg et al. 2020) and linking the global to the local, are imperative.

Internationalization is a process in constant evolution, which changes in response to the local, national, regional, and global environments. Current global trends appear to be more radical than in the past and require stronger attention and international cooperation than ever.

References

- Brandenburg, U., & de Wit, H. (2011). The end of internationalization. *International Higher Education*, (62), 15-16. Boston, Boston College Center for International Higher Education. <https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2011.62.8533>
- Brandenburg, U., de Wit, H., Jones, E., Leask, B., & Drobner, A. (2020). Internationalization in Higher Education for Society (IHES), concept, current research and examples of good practice (DAAD Studies). Bonn: DAAD.
- De Wit, H., Hunter, F., Howard L., & Egron Polak, E. (Eds). (2015) *Internationalisation of Higher Education*. European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, Brussels.
- De Wit, H., Rumbley, L.E., Craciun, D., Mihut, G. & Woldegiyorgis, A. (2019). *International Mapping of National Tertiary Education Internationalization Strategies and Plans (NTEISPs)*. CIHE Perspectives 12. Boston College Center for International Higher Education, and World Bank.
- De Wit, H., & Altbach, P. G. (2020. January 11). Time to cut international education's carbon footprint. *University World News*. (580).

- IAU. (2012). Rethinking Internationalization, theme *IAU Horizons 17(3) & 18(1)*, 17-18. International Association of Universities (IAU). www.iau-aiu.net
- Jones, E., & De Wit, H. (2014, Spring). Globalized Internationalization: Implications for Policy and Practice. *IInetworker*, pp. 28–29. IIE, New York.
- Kerr, C. (1994). *Higher Education Cannot Escape History: Issues for the Twenty-first Century*. SUNY Series Frontiers in Education. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Marinoni, G. (2019). IAU The 5th Global Survey, Internationalization of Higher Education: An Evolving Landscape, Globally and Locally. Berlin: International Association of Universities/DUZ Medienhaus.
- Marinoni, G., & de Wit, H. (2019, January). Internationalization and inequality, first results from the 5th Global Survey of IAU. *University World News*. (A20534).
- Van der Wende, M. (2001). Internationalization Policies: About new trends and contrasting paradigms. *Higher Education Policy* 14, 249–259.

Hans de Wit is Professor and Former Director of the ‘Center for International Higher Education’ (CIHE) at Boston College, USA. He is Senior Fellow of IAU. He is a founding member and past president of the European Association for International Education (EAIE). He is Founding Editor of the ‘Journal of Studies in International Education’ (SAGE), and Consulting Editor of the journal *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*. He is a leading expert on internationalization of higher education and has written several books and articles on this topic as well as given advice to organizations like OECD, UNESCO, World Bank and European Commission.

Philip G. Altbach is Research Professor and Founding Director of the Centre for International Higher Education at Boston College, where from 1994 to 2015 he was the Monan University Professor. In 2010, he was Erudite Scholar of the Government of Kerala. He has taught at Harvard University, the University of Wisconsin, and the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

