

Five Myths about Internationalization

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As internationalization matures, it is becoming a more important and complex process. Yet, it is also becoming a more confused and misunderstood concept. Internationalization is definitely past the “new flavor of the month” stage. It is firmly embedded in institutional mission statements, policies, and strategies as well as national policy frameworks. This signals that internationalization has come of age and is a legitimate area of policy, practice, and research in higher education. However, because of internationalization’s high profile it is now used to describe anything and everything remotely linked to worldwide, intercultural, global, or international. In short, it is a catchall phrase and losing its meaning and direction. This article suggests that over the years implicit assumptions have developed about internationalization, myths perhaps, that need to be exposed and discussed. A brief overview of five prevalent myths follows.

MYTH ONE: FOREIGN STUDENTS AS INTERNATIONALIZATION AGENTS

A long-standing myth is that more foreign students on campus will produce more internationalized institutional culture and curriculum. While this may be the expectation of universities, reality often paints a different picture. In many institutions international students feel marginalized socially and academically and often experience ethnic or racial tensions. Frequently, domestic undergraduate students are known to resist, or at best to be neutral about undertaking joint academic projects or engaging socially with foreign students—unless specific programs are developed by the university or instructor. International students tend to band together and ironically often have a broader and more meaningful intercultural experience on campus than domestic students, without having any deep engagement with the host country culture. Of course, this scenario is not applicable to all institutions, but it speaks to the often unquestioned assumption that the primary reason to recruit international students is to help internationalize the campus. While this is a well-intentioned rationale, it often does not work out that way and, instead, serves to mask other motivations—such as revenue generation or desire for improved rankings on global league tables.

MYTH TWO: INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION AS A PROXY FOR QUALITY

Myth two rests on a belief that the more international a university is—in terms of students, faculty, curriculum, research, agreements, and network memberships—the better its reputation. This is tied to the false notion that a strong international reputation is a proxy for quality. Cases of questionable admission and exit standards for universities highly dependent on the revenue and “brand equity”

of international students are concrete evidence that internationalization does not always translate into improved quality or high standards. This myth is further complicated by the quest for higher rankings on a global or regional league table such as the *Times Higher Education* or the Academic Ranking of World Universities. It is highly questionable whether the league tables accurately measure the internationality of a university and, more importantly, whether the international dimension is always a robust indicator of quality.

MYTH THREE: INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONAL AGREEMENTS

It is often believed that the greater number of international agreements or network memberships a university has the more prestigious and attractive it is to other institutions and students. But practice shows that most institutions cannot manage or even benefit from a hundred plus agreements. To maintain active and fruitful relationships requires a major investment of human and financial resources from individual faculty members, departments, and international offices. Thus, the long list of international partners often reflects paper-based agreements, not productive partnerships. Once again, quantity is seen as more important than quality, and the international agreements list is used more as a status symbol than a record of functional academic collaborations. In fact, a more recent trend is the paring down of the number of agreements to 10 or 20 institution-wide priority partnerships. This can lead to more comprehensive and sustainable relationships but also to a sense of disgruntlement among faculty members and researchers about a top-down approach to internationalization and the curtailment of individual international research or curricular interests.

MYTH FOUR: INTERNATIONAL ACCREDITATION

International accreditations from foreign external national quality assurance agencies (especially from the United States) or professional engineering and business accreditation bodies are currently quite popular with universities in all parts of the world. The premise is that, the more international accreditation stars an institution has, the more internationalized it is and ergo the better it is. This is simply not true. A foreign recognition of quality does not speak to the scope, scale, or value of international activities related to teaching/learning, research, and service to society either through public engagement or private enterprise.

MYTH FIVE: GLOBAL BRANDING

Myth five relates to the incorrect assumption that the purpose of a university's internationalization efforts is to improve global brand or standing. This confuses an international marketing campaign with an internationalization plan. The former is a promotion and branding exercise; the latter is a strategy to integrate an international, intercultural, and global dimension into the goals and teaching, research, and service functions of a university. The objectives, anticipated outcomes and investment in a global branding initiative, are different from those required for academic internationalization. Thus, it is a myth that an international marketing scheme is the equivalent of an internationalization plan. This does not deny the fact that a strategic and successful internationalization agenda can lead to more international visibility, but recognition is not the goal—namely, it is a by-product.

A common element in many of these myths is that the benefits of internationalization or the degree of internationality can be measured

quantitatively—the number of international students, foreign faculty, institutional agreements, cross-border education programs, research projects, foreign accreditations, branch campuses, and so on. While trying to quantify outcomes as key performance indicators may serve accountability requirements, they do not capture the human key intangible performances of students, faculty, researchers, and the community that bring significant benefits of internationalization.

SUMMARY

These five myths do not apply to all higher education institutions or to all countries, but they reflect very common and misleading assumptions. Of course, there are additional myths, as well as fundamental truths, about internationalization that require further reflection and discussion. The purpose of identifying and reflecting on these myths and truths is to ensure that internationalization is on the right track and that we are aware of intended and unintended consequences as higher education sectors weather these rather turbulent times where competitiveness, rankings, and commercialism seem to be the driving forces.