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Internationalization of Higher Education: Past and Future

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*This essay is based on the preface of the book *The Future Agenda for Internationalization in Higher Education*, edited by Douglas Proctor and Laura E. Rumbley (Routledge, 2018).*

Over the past 25 years, internationalization has evolved from a marginal and minor component to a global, strategic, and mainstream factor in higher education. Having been active participants in and analysts of that evolution, it seems appropriate to ask ourselves the question: where have we come from and where are we going?

In 1995, we cowrote “Strategies for Internationalization of Higher Education: Historical and Conceptual Perspectives” as the introductory chapter of what can be considered the first comparative international study on internationalization strategies, building on a small number of previous studies emanating primarily from American and European sources. Since then, while the meanings, rationales, and approaches to internationalization have evolved, as has the context in which it is taking place, the foundation for the study of internationalization has not substantively changed. Internationalization has become a very broad and varied concept, including many new rationales, approaches, and strategies in different and constantly changing contexts. It is revealing to see how the terminology used to describe the international dimension of higher education has evolved over the past five decades.

Who would have guessed in the past century—when the emphasis was on scholarships for foreign students, international development projects, and area studies—that we would today be discussing new developments such as branding, international programs and provider mobility, global citizenship, internationalization at home, MOOCs, global rankings, knowledge diplomacy, world class universities, cultural homogenization, franchising, and joint and double degree programs? International education has been a term used commonly throughout the years—and is still preferred in many countries.

NATIONALISM AND ISOLATIONISM ARE NOT NEW

Rereading our 1995 chapter, it is striking that the current anti-global, anti-immigration, and inward-looking political climate in different parts of the world was already announcing itself at that time: “The danger of isolationism, racism and monoculturalism is a threatening cloud hanging over the present interest in internationalisation of higher education.” That cloud has only become bigger and more threatening since, and may define present and future challenges of internationalization more than ever. We also referred to Clark Kerr’s analysis of the “partial convergence” of the cosmopolitan university. Did the twentieth century indeed become, as he stated, more universal? It may seem so, but the international dimensions of higher education today may have become too disconnected from the local context.

INTERNATIONALIZATION IS BROADER THAN UNDERGRADUATE MOBILITY

In the discourse and study of internationalization, a great deal of attention has been paid to all modes of international academic mobility—people, programs, providers, policies, and projects—but not enough has been paid to the internationalization of graduate education and research, including international coauthorship and other international research benchmarks. Research has become more complex in recent years. It requires, and is distinguished by, more international collaboration than in the past, and it is in-

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creasingly competitive in nature. National and institutional needs to acquire academic talent are urgent and processes around issues such as the awarding of patents and knowledge transfer require more support than ever. Growth in international research funding, patents, publications, and citations requires the development of internationalized, or globalized, research teams. Bibliometric analysis yields evidence of increasing collaboration within the international scientific community.

The generation of new knowledge through the production and application of research has introduced the notion of international education and research as a form of soft power. The use of knowledge as power is a development requiring serious reflection because soft power is character-

ized by competitiveness, dominance, and self-interest. An alternative to the power paradigm is the framework of diplomacy. Knowledge diplomacy involves the contribution that education and knowledge creation, sharing, and use make to international relations and engagement. But knowledge diplomacy should be seen as a reciprocal process. Mutual benefits and a two-way exchange are therefore essential to the concept of international education and research as a tool of knowledge diplomacy. In short, knowledge sharing and mutual benefits are fundamental to the understanding and operationalization of knowledge diplomacy.

IS INTERNATIONALIZATION REALLY COMPREHENSIVE?

There is no doubt that internationalization has come of age. No longer is it an ad hoc or marginalized part of the higher education landscape. University strategic plans, national policy statements, regionalization initiatives, international declarations, and academic articles all indicate the centrality of internationalization in the world of higher education. The popularity of the phrase “comprehensive internationalization” does not reflect widespread reality, however: for most institutions around the world, internationalization is still characterized by a collection of fragmented and unrelated activities. Meanwhile, the increasing commodification of higher education remains primarily oriented toward reaching targets without a debate on potential risks and ethical consequences. Yet, there is increased awareness that the notion of “internationalization” not only touches on relations between nations, but even more so on the relations between cultures and between realities at the global and local levels.

Economic and political rationales are increasingly the key drivers for national policies related to the internationalization of higher education, while academic and social/cultural motivations are not increasing in importance at the same rate. Because of the more interdependent and connected world in which we live, this imbalance must be addressed and recalibrated.

SOME FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

It may behoove us to look back at the last 20 or 30 years of internationalization and ask ourselves some questions. Has international higher education lived up to our expectations and its potential? What have been the values that have guided it through the information and communication revolution; the unprecedented mobility of people, ideas, and technology; the clash of cultures; and the periods of economic booms and busts? What have we learned from the past that will guide us into the future? Is the strong appeal for internationalization of the curriculum, international and intercultural learning outcomes, and global citizenship to be perceived as a return to the former days of cooperation

and exchange, or a call for a more responsible process of internationalization in reaction to the current political climate and the increased commercialization of internationalization? Who could have forecasted that internationalization would transform from what has been traditionally considered a process based on values of cooperation, partnership, exchange, mutual benefits, and capacity building to one that is increasingly characterized by competition, commercialization, self-interest, and status building?

As we look backward and forward, it is thus important to ask, what are the core principles and values underpinning internationalization of higher education that in 10 or 20 years from now will make us look back and be proud of the track record and contribution that international higher education has made to the more interdependent world we live in, the next generation of citizens, and the bottom billion people living in poverty on our planet? ■

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Battle of the Brand: Independent “American” Universities Abroad

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Earlier this year, Iraq’s ministry of higher education announced the opening of a new university for the academic year 2018–2019. The American University of Iraq–Baghdad will be the country’s third “American” university. This latest undertaking exemplifies a trend that has gripped the region and reverberated around the world over the past quarter century: the establishment of higher education institutions located outside the United States using the name “American” and issuing degrees at the bachelor’s level or higher, entities referred to here as “American universities abroad.” There are now 80 such institutions in more than 55 countries around the globe—from Nicaragua to Nigeria to Vietnam—with an estimated combined enrollment exceeding 150,000 students. While some American universities abroad can trace their histories as far back as the American Civil War, more than two-thirds have been established in the past three decades. Unfortunately, many of these newer enterprises offer only the name and not the content of American higher education. Indeed, slightly more than half

of all independent American universities abroad appear to be impostors, neither possessing nor actively pursuing US regional accreditation.

A QUALITY BRAND

Much of the interest in American universities abroad, in the Middle East and elsewhere, can be attributed to branding. A former president of the American University of Beirut once observed that the word “American” is to education what “Swiss” is to watches. With limited legal protections on the highly valued “American” name in many countries undergoing privatization, entrepreneurs have found its use an increasingly attractive option. Some serial entrepreneurs have even established multiple American universities abroad. Serhat Akpınar has created American-labeled higher education institutions in Cyprus and Moldova. Alex Lahlou has done so in Algeria and Libya. Manmadhan Nair

The median institution enrolls between 1,000 and 2,000 students on a \$20 million operating budget.

has taken the “American” brand to several Caribbean countries. While academics, clerics, and politicians have set up American universities abroad, the more dubious operations are associated with those from business backgrounds. The chairman of a Kuwaiti consulting company attempted to establish an “American University” in Maribor (Slovenia), but was forced to abandon the project when the town’s mayor was presented with criminal charges for selling the campus land significantly under market value. A similar controversy is unfolding in Malta, where the prime minister rezoned a protected beach to persuade a Jordanian hotelier to launch his American university project.

When founders of these “American” universities abroad do get their campuses up and running, they too often fall short of the mark of educational quality the label is meant to signal. Among the most egregious examples is the American University for Humanities in Tbilisi, Georgia, which was exposed as a degree mill during the mid-2000s. The episode led the US department of education to suspend and eventually revoke the authority of the American programmatic accreditor that had validated it. It is more common, however, for bad faith American universities abroad to fly under the radar. The “American” brand is strong enough in many locales that it obviates the need to engage US accreditors at all. Students continue to enroll regardless of external quality assurances. And when there are limited checks on