

Internationalization: North, South, East and West

Has internationalization lost its way?

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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, international declarations, and academic articles all indicate the centrality of internationalization in the world of higher education.

Not only has internationalization transformed higher education, it has dramatically changed itself. The growth in the scope and scale of cross border initiatives including branch campuses, international double degree programs, regionalization initiatives, faculty and student mobility schemes, franchised programs, and research networks is staggering. Education hubs, virtual mobility opportunities, and bi-national universities are recent developments. Internationalization of education and research is closely linked with economic competitiveness, the great brain race, the quest for world status, and soft power. Economic and political rationales are increasingly the key drivers for national policies related to the international higher education, while academic and social/cultural motivations appear to be decreasing in importance. But perhaps what is most striking is that the term 'internationalization' is becoming a catch all phrase used to describe anything and everything remotely linked to the worldwide, inter-cultural, global or international dimensions of higher education and is at risk of losing its meaning and direction. But, it is prudent to take a close look at the policies, plans and priorities of the key actors such as universities, government ministries, national/regional/international academic associations, and international government agencies.

Recent national and worldwide surveys of university internationalization priorities show that establishing an international profile or global standing is seen to be more important than reaching international standards of excellence or improving quality. Capacity building through international cooperation is being replaced by status building projects to gain world class recognition. International student mobility is now big business and becoming more closely aligned to recruitment of brains for national science and technology agendas. Some private and public education institutions are changing academic standards and transforming into visa factories in response to immigration priorities and revenue generation imperatives. More international academic projects and partnerships are becoming commercialized and profit driven as are international accreditation services. Diploma mills and rogue providers are selling bogus qualifications and causing havoc for international qualification recognition. Awarding two degrees from institutions located in different countries based on the workload for one degree is being promoted through some rather dubious double degree programs. And all of this is in the name of internationalization?

As we enter the second decade of this century 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? 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.

The unbundling of the academic role

Bruce MacFarlane (Hong Kong University)

We used to know what academics were. They taught, did research and took on administrative and managerial responsibilities. They were all-rounders; jacks of all trades. Maybe they were better at teaching than research or perhaps the other way round. Such differences were tolerated and somewhat idly excused on the basis of 'academic freedom'. Being an 'academic' reflected the broader aims of the university to educate, create new knowledge and serve the community. But talking of the academic profession in this way today looks out-of-step with a new emerging reality.

An important and accelerating trend in recent years is how this tripartite academic role has unbundled. The teaching role is now seen as a specialist function for which pre- and in-service training is needed. Such courses are effectively compulsory for new faculty in British and Australian universities. This has been prompted in part by the expectations of students in a less deferential and more consumerist age. In terms of research, scarce funding, university rankings and audit exercises mean that academics must win research grants and publish in highly rated journals if they wish to retain backing for this element of their role. Failure to do so increasingly results in 'demotion' to teaching-only positions for established faculty or little opportunity to gain tenure for new academics.

If academics are career-tracked too early, opportunities for their future personal development will be stifled and they may choose to leave the profession altogether. Inflexible career tracks also risk undervaluing intangible aspects of academic work that add quality to universities, such as the performance of service roles. The academic profession needs to be flexible to respond to future challenges and institutions need to be cognisant of the importance of attracting and retaining high-calibre faculty. There is a risk that unbundling will damage the student experience unless academic careers can be managed to take account of the need for 'horizontal' development.



“Critics question whether internationalization is now an instrument of the less attractive side of globalization instead of an antidote.”

