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Unprecedented Challenges, Significant Possibilities?

Hans de Wit and Philip G. Altbach

Perhaps the most fundamental realities of higher education in the past 25 years have been the joint effects of the massification of worldwide postsecondary education, on the one hand, combined with the contradictory force of the emergence of the global knowledge economy, on the other. We have also experienced the development and maturing of information technology, including the Internet, artificial intelligence, and a myriad of related aspects.

The effects of these seismic shifts have been dramatic and have introduced new challenges into higher education systems around the world. Massification stimulated the rise of the private sector and commercialization. The global knowledge economy contributed to the dominance of English as the global scientific language, dramatic increases in student and faculty mobility, and internationalization in multiple forms.

Yet we must recognize that higher education has failed in some ways to meet these important challenges. While offering unprecedented access, universities have also contributed to social divisions and inequalities. In many countries, large numbers of students do not complete their degrees, and the cost of study has greatly increased in most places. Higher education is also facing worldwide challenges of increased nationalism and populism. For the most part, universities have failed to emphasize social responsibility.

We are devoting Issue #100 of *International Higher Education* to critical analyses of some of the key challenges and possibilities for the coming decade and beyond. We have asked experts to reflect—and perhaps to point to solutions. We have also asked the next generation to look at the future, by soliciting entries to an essay contest from current students and postdoctoral scholars. We are publishing the winning entry in this issue, and four other ones will be published in *University World News*. Finally, we have taken the opportunity presented by this issue to reflect on 25 years of contributions in *International Higher Education*.

America Abdicates Leadership in International Higher Education

For our part, this issue gave us an excuse to look back on our own work, thinking about the time of the journal's founding. In the first issue of *International Higher Education*, Spring 1995, we wrote that America was abdicating leadership in international higher education. Our argument was that "internationalism is mandatory for any higher education system in the 21st century." What was amazing to us was that "while the rest of the world's universities are becoming more international, the United States shows signs of de-emphasizing internationalism in its higher education system." We stated that "higher education is a major 'export industry'—one that deserves stimulation and not contraction." We concluded that "the slide has begun, and growing insularity will mean that the United States will fall behind its competitors. Internationalism in higher education permits us to understand the rest of the world, as well as to function in the new international economy of the 21st century. Others understand this—Americans must too."

In this issue #100, 25 years later, we could write nearly exactly the same words—as the broader political atmosphere in the United States has become highly nationalistic. But, in the past quarter-century, there has been massive change. The numbers of international students in the United States have grown from 450,000 in 1995 to one million in 2019, and international education now produces over US\$40 billion for the US economy, compared to US\$7 billion in 1995. Many universities have adopted international strategies to try to ensure that their students have greater opportunities for overseas study and to understand diverse cultures. Yet, throughout this period, the United States has lagged behind much of the rest of the world. The United States’ “market share” of international students has been declining, as has its share of universities at the top of the rankings. Knowledge of other cultures, languages, economies, and societies has also declined. This was already the case before the Trump administration came into office in 2017, but has become even more obvious in the past three years.

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Looking Ahead

Looking back with today’s perspective, we might have been too pessimistic back then, but we are also not very optimistic now. These negative trends are not limited to the United States but reflect broader worldwide threats to higher education, internationalization, and autonomy and academic freedom. Several of our contributors to issue #100 write about how important it is that higher education takes a leading role in addressing the Sustainable Development Goals, while others express concern about autonomy and academic freedom, and other pressing issues for the future of higher education worldwide. ▲