A Missed Opportunity and Limited Vision for Internationalization

Hans de Wit and Elspeth Jones

Abstract

The *Common Statement in Support of International Education and Mobility*, recently issued by the international education organizations of nine Western countries as a result of their 2021 summit is a missed opportunity. It does not include the perspectives of other regions of the world, and promotes physical mobility, in contrast to the impetus given to more inclusive virtual mobility initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

On October 21, 2021, international education organizations from nine Western countries (the Canadian Bureau for International Education [CBIE]; the Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI]; Campus France; the German Academic Exchange Service [DAAD]; the Centre for the academic promotion and study orientation in Italy [Uni-Italia]; the Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education [Nuffic]; the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills; the British Council; and the Institute of International Education [IIE] in the United States) published a Common Statement in Support of International Education and Mobility as a result of their 2021 international education summit. The statement is accompanied by brief national reports from the nine organizations (in the case of the United States, the report is by the US Department of State, the US Department of Education, and Education USA).

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

The title of the summit and resulting document, *What's Ahead: Building a More Equitable, Sustainable and Peaceful World through International Exchange in a Post-Pandemic World*, appear at first glance to be quite advanced and promising as a comprehensive and inclusive approach to international education for the future. Both in this title and throughout the statement and national reports, reference to inclusivity, equity, and sustainability suggest a focus on what had certainly become key action lines for the internationalization of higher education before the pandemic, and have become even more so since then. Policies and initiatives of these nine organizations, such as the Scholars Rescue Fund, the work on refugee access to higher education, capacity building and cooperation with other regions, internationalization at home, and internationalization for society, are mentioned in the national reports by most of the nine organizations. It is positive that these organizations set their objectives for the future on international education and mobility.

Unfortunately, the short statement itself might at best be described as one step forward and two steps back in advancing the internationalization of education.

Western Orientation

In 2014, we argued that internationalization should no longer be considered in terms of a westernized, largely Anglo-Saxon, and predominantly English-speaking paradigm. Many other scholars and policy advisors have argued for a more inclusive and less elitist approach to internationalization than international exchange and mobility can offer. Voices calling for decolonization of the curriculum and for less emphasis on the Anglosphere and Western dominance grow increasingly loud, and articles on these topics are frequently seen in news reports as well as in peer-reviewed journals. When the Nelson Mandela Bay Global Dialogue was convened in 2014, it included associations from all regions in the world. The resulting Declaration on the Future of Internationalization of Higher Education stated that *"internationalization must be based on mutual benefit and development for entities and individuals in the developed, emerging and developing countries."* Have we gone backward since 2014? Why a summit and common statement from nine organizations, which only represent the westernized, developed world, instead of actively involving perspectives and positions from other regions?

Voices calling for decolonization of the curriculum and for less emphasis on the Anglosphere and Western dominance grow increasingly loud.

Focus on Physical Mobility

Perhaps even more surprising is the statement's rather explicit appeal to reinforce degree mobility toward the nine countries, as well as exchange between these countries. It asks "leaders at every level to support measures to allow more students around the world to spend part of their education in other countries and to keep our own academic doors open to incoming students from abroad." And although it is followed by a call to respond to the needs of refugees, the impression remains that the most important postpandemic action is to support inbound mobility into the nine countries.

This is particularly strange, since each of those nine countries faces very different student recruitment challenges. On the one hand, in the Netherlands, the overall growth in student numbers has increased dramatically. As a result, international students are now making up 23 percent of the total student population—causing Dutch universities to urge the government to provide legal options to curb their number. On the other hand, the United States has seen a significant drop in the number of undergraduate students; as a result of this overall reduction, US universities—especially those with the steepest declines—are encouraged to become more active in recruiting international students and using agents to do so.

The individual reports of the European and Canadian organizations suggest a more comprehensive and inclusive approach that, unfortunately, is not sufficiently reflected in the common statement, nor in the report from the United States. The national focus of that document is quite overt, with the following statement: "We recognize that the U.S. government has a unique role in international education because of its responsibility to the American people; its purview over foreign affairs, national security, and economic and border policy; its capacity to provide national and global leadership; and its role in affecting how the United States is perceived globally."

The common statement also explicitly promotes physical mobility and exchange, which has only ever been an option for a very small percentage of the global student body. It does not refer to virtual mobility and exchange, collaborative online international learning or virtual work placement. All these alternatives to physical mobility received added impetus as a result of the pandemic, although many institutions had already begun to develop creative approaches to such initiatives before then. The power of these alternatives to offer more inclusive and sustainable forms of international engagement has become increasingly recognized, enabling more students to be involved than is possible through physical mobility alone.

A Missed Opportunity

The national reports make frequent reference to the importance of digital internationalization, but in the common statement it is surprisingly absent. Also missing from it is reference to the crucial role played by internationalization of the curriculum at home, the social impact of internationalization (internationalization for society), and global learning for all students. The overall impression given by the common statement is that of a Western, physical mobility-focused approach to international education, something that may have been relevant in the past, but is much less so in the present and for the future.

It has to be said, this is a missed opportunity and does not appear to reflect what several of the organizations involved are advocating. Partners in the Global South may continue to wonder what it takes for their voices to be heard in the internationalization debate. ◢

Hans de Wit is professor emeritus and distinguished fellow at the Center for International Higher Education, Boston College, US. Email: dewitj@bc.edu.

Elspeth Jones is professor emerita of internationalisation of higher education at Leeds Beckett University, UK. Email: e.jones@leedsbeckett.ac.uk.

This article is an updated version of an article published in University World News.