

National Internationalization Policies in Low- and Mid-Income Countries

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National governments increasingly see internationalization of higher education as an important factor in economic development, trade, and reputation. In light of intensified student and staff mobility, the growing presence of branch campuses and international providers, and the keen competition to attract international talent, tertiary education institutions and national governments are mobilizing to both leverage and steer internationalization.

National tertiary education internationalization strategies and plans represent the most tangible and direct attempts by governments to play an active and decisive role, but there are substantial differences in their approaches, rationales, and priorities. One can observe a stronger attention to internationalization in the agendas of national governments such as Australia, Canada, France, Germany, New Zealand, and the Netherlands.

A worldwide census of explicit national policies carried out by Crăciun (2018) reveals that only 11 percent of countries have an official strategy for internationalization, most adopted in the past decade. Such strategies have been developed predominantly in high-income countries—three in four by members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). European countries have taken the lead in promoting strategic thinking about internationalization at the national level—two in three national policies are from this world region.

This is not to say that other countries have not taken measures to promote internationalization. In fact, to support internationalization processes, many countries have taken both direct measures (e.g., reevaluating their visa policies to give preferential treatment to international students and scholars, establishing bilateral or multilateral agreements through memorandums of understanding, and promoting transnational education through free-trade deals) and indirect measures (e.g., supporting internationalization in political discourses and giving universities autonomy to pursue internationalization activities).

National Policies as Catalysts

Internationalization strategies and plans are still mostly developed at the institutional level. Indeed, in most cases institutions operate without a national plan in place. Where national plans do exist, institutions may operate in conflict or in alignment with them. National policies can serve as catalysts or drags on internationalization processes, but

Abstract

In low- and mid-income countries, developing national internationalization policies is mostly a top-down process, and policies are mostly directed from South to North. Mobility is central in most policies and plans. There is a degree of “policy mimicry” in the adoption of many aspects of the Western paradigm, which appears to sustain the dominance of high-income countries. More attention to regional cooperation and a stronger focus on internationalization of the curriculum at home would allow these countries to break through the established paradigm.

are mostly seen as a highly positive element for the advancement of internationalization. They align internationalization with other key national priorities, such as economic growth and national security. They incentivize institutions and individuals to assist in meeting national strategic goals through internationalization. In short, not only do national internationalization strategies and plans offer a good overview of the manifestations of internationalization, they also shape key action.

However, it would be a misconception to assume that these national plans have common rationales and approaches. Differences exist between and among high-income, low-income, and middle-income countries with respect to policies and practices. Also, there are differences in explicit and implicit policies and practices, some countries having well-documented plans while others have no plans but well-defined activities.

Key Indicators

Overall, the literature points to several key indicators that can be used to guide a more systematic reflection about national internationalization policies:

- *Involvement*: Government involvement can be direct (i.e., through explicit policy documents to advance internationalization and by earmarking funds to be invested in pursuing this objective) or indirect (i.e., by supporting internationalization at a discursive level and allowing universities to pursue internationalization, but at their own expense).
- *Stakeholders*: Stakeholders may come from a wide ecosystem of actors related to tertiary education, including ministries (such as education or foreign affairs), other national agencies, the private sector, international organizations, regional bodies and institutions, etc.
- *History*: While there is a long tradition of indirect government support for internationalization, more direct and strategic actions, policies, and plans have only appeared more recently.
- *Geographic focus*: In general, there is a growing regionalization of internationalization. European policies are here a best practice example. When looking at the global picture, national internationalization strategies are prevalent in Europe, but not so much in other regions of the world.
- *Tactical focus*: Some strategies are rather generic, while others have specific focal points or action lines that frame the scope of activity or interest (for instance inbound or outbound mobility).
- *Effectiveness*: Little is known on the effectiveness of national policies. This can be explained by the fact that most policies are quite recent so there are few, if any, studies assessing their effectiveness as instruments. Thus, the evidence is usually anecdotal or reliant on quantitative measures related to internationalization abroad (i.e., international student mobility).

These countries appear to adopt many aspects of the Western paradigm of internationalization by focusing heavily on mobility, reputation and branding, and South–North relations.

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Policy Mimicry

In low- and mid-income countries, the process of developing national policies is mostly top-down, policies are mostly directed from South to North, and they relate either to inbound mobility (as in India for instance), or to outbound mobility (Brazil), or to mobility both ways. Mobility is central in most policies and plans, followed by research and publication collaboration; networks and consortia; and enhancing quality and aspiring to international quality standards. “Internationalization at home” and “internationalization of the curriculum,” as well as national and foreign language policies, are mostly absent. The same applies to attention to social justice, inclusion, and equity. Although there is a noticeable increase in the numbers of these policies, there is also a degree of “policy mimicry,” in that these countries appear to adopt many aspects of the Western paradigm of internationalization by focusing heavily on mobility, reputation and branding, and South–North relations. At the same time, they appear to sustain the dominance of high-income countries through the structure and terms of their scholarship schemes, geographic priorities, and choices with respect to partnerships in education and research. More attention to regional cooperation (South–South networking and partnerships) and a stronger focus on internationalization of the curriculum at home are needed to break through the high-income countries’ paradigm of internationalization and to develop policies and actions building on local, national, and regional contexts, cultures, and strengths. ▲