

Can We Still Stop the End of Internationalization?

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Abstract

Twelve years ago IHE published the essay “The End of Internationalization.” It critiqued the focus on its commercialization and made a plea to rethink and redefine the way we look at the internationalization of higher education. This essay looks back and notices that things have not changed substantially and places the debate in the current context of multiple crises. It advocates the need for an active personalized internationalization with emphasis on our own social responsibility.

In 2011, two of us, Uwe Brandenburg and Hans de Wit, published an essay in *International Higher Education* with the provocative title “The End of Internationalization.” We argued that internationalization of higher education had moved from the fringe of institutional interest to the very core, but that while gaining moral weight, its content seemed to have deteriorated. We observed an increasing commercialization under the flag of internationalization, and in our view this attitude has exacerbated the devaluation of internationalization and the inflation of defensive measures. In our view, “gradually, the ‘why and wherefore’ had been taken over by the way internationalization has become the main objective: more exchange, more degree mobility, and more recruitment.” We pleaded that we have to understand internationalization and globalization in their pure meanings—not as goals in themselves but rather as means to an end—and to throw off the veil of ignorance and ask ourselves: Why do we do certain things, and how do they help in achieving the goal of quality of education and research in a globalized knowledge society? We stated that we have to regard mobility and other activities as what they really are: activities or instruments—and therefore by definition not goals in themselves. And we concluded that “the most important in any case is to rethink and redefine the way we look at the internationalization of higher education in the present time.”

12 Years later, Is There an Afterlife?

The essay felt like a wakeup call which resonated broadly at that time, but where do we stand now, 12 years further, and has the end of internationalization come closer or have we changed the tide? On the occasion of the EAIE Conference in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in September 2023, we organized a session together with our Chilean co-author Paulina Latorre with the title “10 Years after the End of Internationalization, Is There an Afterlife?” to discuss these questions. Looking back 12 years, the picture is not positive. For many, internationalization is a process that is just copied from northern institutions and does not make real sense to their contextual realities or resonate with their institutional priorities. Education abroad in all its forms is still more driving the agenda than internationalization at home. Increasing focus on international rankings is the rule and favor some over others. The divide between the North and the South and between those universities classified as top world-class universities and the “others” persists. Internationalization has become more synonymous to competition and marketization than to its traditional values (cooperation, exchange and service to society). Inequality and exclusiveness have increased nationally and internationally, in part due to elitist approaches to internationalization. Recognition of the importance of addressing all aspects of education in an integrated way in university policy and strategy progress is only slowly and unevenly increasing.

Although there are counteractions to this dark picture in the form of internationalization of the curriculum at home, virtual exchange and COIL, internationalization for society, and movements of decolonization and for action on climate change in international education (CANIE), the move toward a more socially responsible internationalization is at the institutional level more rhetoric than active, and often limited to some good intentions and isolated practices. The 2015 definition of internationalization, with an emphasis on equity, inclusion and meaningful contribution to society, as well as labels such as ethical, humanistic, and responsible internationalization, illustrates the feeling among international educators that a radical shift from competition and marketization is needed, and we see good intentions and initiatives, for instance during the

EAIE Conference in Rotterdam in 2023. At the same time, the observation in the 2011 article about the commercial dimensions of its exhibit and those of sister organizations like NAFSA Association of International Educators is still valid. Are we really practicing what we preach (in other words, is internationalization as we perceive it still alive)—or is it indeed coming to an end?

Multiple Crises Asking for Action

This question is even more urgent now than 12 years ago. We are not facing one crisis (neoliberal marketization) but multiple crises at the same time: COVID-19 and the threat of new pandemics, anti-international movements of nationalism, attacks on democracy, racism, digitalization and artificial intelligence (AI), geopolitical tensions, increased inequality and exclusion, and climate change, to name just a few. They ask for more than nice words and declarations. They ask for an internationalization which focuses on action by university leaders, international educators, teachers, scholars, and students to make internationalization socially responsible and respectful of diversity in all forms. If we do not do so, the end of internationalization is closer than ever, particularly in the Global North where, after the pandemic, the return to the old normal of marketization seems prevalent, while in the Global South there is more awareness of the negative consequences of such an approach and where they feel the consequences of exclusion and inequality most. “The Global South is coming” was said with pride by the participants from Latin America in the EAIE session.

The question now is: Why did nothing really change and what needs to happen so that we finally see internationalization taking the responsibility that is required? In our view, while internationalization 1.0 was defined by more or less unstructured mobilities of a few with mainly personal gains (up to the early 1990s), since then internationalization 2.0 has been mainly concerned with institutional internationalization. On one hand, this institutionalization of internationalization led to good movements such as the structured Erasmus program, comprehensive internationalization, sustainable campus projects and SDG universities. However, it also meant that responsibility and accountability was on the institution, not the individual, and as we have seen institutions in general are extremely slow when it comes to change and social responsibility. This allowed us, individuals, to separate ourselves from the crises, the consequences, and the responsibilities, claiming that it is the institution which is responsible and needs to change and exculpating us as individuals when needlessly traveling to conferences by airplane or not getting involved in the refugee crises or in Russia’s war on Ukraine. Accountability in internationalization has been at best institutional but never personal.

The End—or the Beginning of a New Era?

Therefore, at the EAIE conference, we dared to declare the end of dependence on institutional internationalization and advocated for the need for an active personalized internationalization with emphasis on our own social responsibility and inclusion.

This means: we all need to identify the goal/crisis that matters for us most personally—we cannot solve everything, so we need to prioritize. This may mean focusing on climate change, inclusion, the North–South gap, or any other major issue. We then need to shape internationalization in our work in a way that can help address the issue and feel personally responsible.

In this way, the end of one internationalization may well define the beginning of a new internationalization. ▲

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