

Same Nationalism, Opposite Internationalization Policies

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Higher education internationalization is in turmoil. For centuries, student mobility and other aspects of global engagement have been dominated by high-income countries and their institutions in the Global North. Inequality in all its dimensions was and still is the case. But things are changing.

Over the past few decades, we have observed a gradual shift toward increased presence of the Global South in research and science production, in South–South cooperation, and in the global higher education rankings. Currently, we see an acceleration in this shift. China especially has increased its presence and has overtaken the United States in science production. Other Asian countries have also improved.

As a reason for this accelerated shift, there is understandably a lot of attention to the current wave of nationalism in the United States and some European countries, including restrictive visa regulations, travel bans, budget cuts, attacks on academic values, and knowledge security measures. But nationalism is not unique to the Global North; on the contrary, it is quite a dominant feature in low- and middle-income countries as well. Yet these countries seem to have opposite policies relating to internationalization—governments, universities, and science are moving toward more international cooperation and competition.

An Accelerating Shift?

The developments are accelerating, especially if we look at the international indicators for high-income countries. The number of international students is declining in the so-called “Big Four” Anglophone countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada), as well as in some other top receiving countries such as the Netherlands. Higher education and research face severe budget cuts in several of these countries. Academic freedom is eroding in some. Knowledge security puts a brake on international collaboration in teaching and research. The United States, traditionally the leading scientific power, is cutting itself off from the rest of the world—this will inevitably have significant implications for the global “balance of scientific power.” This dynamic is self-reinforcing: when talent pipelines are cut, research productivity declines, institutional quality erodes, and the country becomes less attractive to the next generation of global talent, while countries absorbing that displaced talent build capacity that compounds over time.

The latest US national security strategy explicitly rejects the pursuit of “global talent,” decoupling immigration policy from innovation strategy—a link that every previous administration, Republican and Democrat alike, had maintained. Several European governments (Hungary, Slovakia) follow a similar, if less explicit, direction.

A Brighter Picture Elsewhere

The picture looks brighter in some other European countries—Germany, France, and Spain in particular—and also in Japan and South Korea. International student numbers are increasing, and attracting skilled immigrants amid demographic decline is becoming a priority. Although immigration remains controversial, there is significant rethinking of priorities and understanding that highly qualified immigrants are important for local economies. Denmark and the Netherlands, which had previously cut English-language degree programs, have reversed course—restoring funding and recognizing the importance of international students.

The European Commission, while stressing knowledge security, is promoting international collaboration in education and research as well as academic freedom. On 29 January 2026, the Commission adopted its first-ever EU Visa Strategy alongside a Recommendation on attracting talent for innovation, marking an important step toward a more coordinated approach to mobility at the EU level.

In middle-income countries in the Global South, we also observe positive moves. Internationalization is perceived as an important tool for national development and identity. We see sending countries becoming receiving countries for international students. India has just published a major government report on internationalization—promising to welcome branch campuses and joint degrees and expanding policies for increasing international students. Vietnam and Indonesia are also expanding internationalization initiatives; China and Malaysia have already aggressively implemented policies. Soft power is an important rationale, rather than revenue generation. And while these countries expand transnational education (TNE) domestically, they also become active TNE providers in other low- and middle-income countries and the broader Global South.

Opportunities and Challenges of This Shift

In a recent editorial, Simon Marginson provided a [positive perspective on this shift from Western dominance towards a more equal world and higher education](#). It is difficult to disagree with this optimism or his criticism of Western colonialism. But a clear-eyed analysis of Global South internationalization is also necessary. Limitations on academic freedom, curtailed research independence, and overreliance on soft power goals may interfere with the best values of internationalization. [Bamberger, Mulvey and Yan](#) caution correctly that such reinterpretation is not normatively neutral but can imply “co-optation by illiberal or authoritarian actors who may appropriate decolonial rhetoric for their own ends.” The balance of power may be shifting, but the alternatives are not necessarily positive.