

Is the International University the Future for Higher Education?

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In recent past years, international higher education has been inundated by a series of new terms, such as global citizenship, comprehensive internationalization and world-class university. There have been books, articles, and papers written on them; they are referred to in global, regional, and national rankings, and you find them in mission statements and policy documents all over the world. Still, the exact meaning of these terms is unclear, and they are only perceptions and interpretations, not commonly acknowledged indicators or defined concepts.

“International university” seems to be the new fashionable term that fits in this category. Recently, it has appeared in the sphere of rankings: the *Times Higher Education* ranking of the 100 most international universities in the world in 2015. Also, “U-Multirank” recently published a ranking of the international orientation of 237 universities. The last initiative differs from the *Times Higher Education* ranking, in that it does not talk about “international universities” but of international orientation; yet, it fits in the apparent trend to try to identify what an international university is.

What the two have in common is that they rank and that they use more or less the same quantitative indicators. *Times Higher Education* uses, as indicators, the number of international students, of international staff, and of internationally coauthored publications. These are quite similar to the four measures used by U-Multirank: strong incoming and outgoing mobility, a high proportion of international staff and doctoral graduates, and a strong record of research publication in collaboration with academics abroad. But is it possible to define what an “international university” is? Also, is their approach, using only a small number of quantitative indicators, making sense?

If we agree that internationalization is a process that helps universities to increase the quality of their education, research, and service to society and is not a goal in itself, how is it then possible to define an end product: the international university? When there is not a standard model for how universities internationalize, how is it then possible to

define commonly what an international university means to be?

Jane Knight, responding to the trend, wrote a paper on “what is an international university”? in “The State of Higher Education 2014” of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. She starts saying that there is much confusion as to what it actually means for a university to be international. In fact, she states that the term is not important; important is the approach or model used. She identifies three “generations” of international universities: an internationalized university with a diversity of international partnerships, international students and staff, and multiple collaborative activities; universities with satellite offices in the form of branch campuses, research centers, and management/project offices; and most recent, stand-alone institutions cofounded or codeveloped by two or more partner institutions from different countries. But, besides the fact that in her typology there is no reference made to the dimension of internationalization at home, the typology, in particular the first category, is so broad that it does not really help to define an international university. It might even have an opposite effect—i.e., universities can easily state that they fall into one of these categories and thus are international. In my view, one could better say that the first category concerns universities that are internationally cooperative, the second group are universities that are internationally active, and the third internationally operative.

I am afraid that more and more universities in the future will refer, in their mission statements and policies, to the fact that they are an international university, without clearly explaining what they mean by it. They will make use of rankings like *Times Higher Education* and U-Multirank. Universities should not fall into the temptation of using a first-sight attractive, but vague terms, yet focus on the quality of what they are doing. But like in the case of the other terms, I am afraid we cannot stop them from doing so. ■



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