
Internationalization: Unintended Consequences?

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As we progress into the 21st century, the international dimension of higher education is becoming increasingly important and complex. Headlines from recent higher education newspapers paint a colorful picture: “China could be vulnerable to ‘education dumping’ by overseas universities seeking to exploit the rapid expansion of higher education in the country.” “European Higher Education Fairs ‘conquer’ Vietnam.” “Ten universities in the United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand, and Australia begin sharing education content on iTunes U.”

THE RANKINGS RACE

Over the last five years, international and regional rankings of universities have become both more popular and problematic.

A heated debate continues about their validity, reliability, and value. Yet, at the same time, university presidents declare that an outcome of internationalization will be achieving a higher position in the global ranking game. This focus on gaining worldwide profile and prestige signals a lamentable shift from capacity building to status building as a driving rationale. The intense competition for world rankings would have been impossible to imagine two decades ago when international collaboration among universities through academic exchanges and development cooperation projects were the norm.

DOUBLE AND JOINT DEGREES

In a recent trend, joint programs have been established between institutions in different countries, leading to double (even multiple) degrees or a joint degree. Such programs are intended to provide a rich international and comparative academic experience for students and to improve their opportunities for employment. Yet, with all new ideas, come questionable adaptations and unintended consequences. In some cases, double degrees can be nothing more than double-counting of one set of course credits. Situations exist where two or three credentials (one from each participating institution) are conferred for little more than the workload required for one degree. While it may be attractive for students to obtain two degrees from institutions in different countries, the situation is being described as both innovative and on the brink of academic fraud if course requirements for two full degrees are not completed or differentiated learning outcomes are not achieved.

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THE BRAIN TRAIN

Many countries invest in major marketing campaigns to attract the best and brightest talent to study and work in their institutions to supply the “brain power” for innovation and research agendas. The complexities and challenges of academic and professional mobility should not be underestimated—nor should the benefits. But, it is impossible to ignore the latest race for attracting international students and academics for brain power and income generation. The original goal of helping students from developing countries study in another country to complete a degree and return home is fading fast as nations compete for retaining human resources.

Research is showing that international students and researchers are increasingly interested in taking a degree in country A, followed by a second degree or perhaps internship in country B, leading to employment in country C and proba-

bly D, finally returning to their home country after 8 to 12 years of international study and work experience. Hence, the emergence of the term “brain train” represents a phenomenon that is presenting benefits and risks for both sending and receiving countries. Higher education has gained more recognition as an important actor and is working in closer collaboration with immigration, industry, and the science and technology sectors to build an integrated strategy for attracting and retaining knowledge workers. The convergence of an aging society, lower birth rates, the knowledge economy, and professional labor mobility is introducing new issues for higher education and producing some unanticipated and for many troubling results in terms of international academic mobility and recruitment.

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DIPLOMA, ACCREDITATION, AND VISA MILLS

Who would have guessed two decades ago that international education would be struggling to deal with fake degrees and accreditations; academic credentials that are earned but not recognized; and nonregulated fly-by-night institutions? New cross-border education initiatives are intended to increase access to higher education and meet the growing appetite for foreign credentials, but serious issues relate to the quality of the academic offer. The increase in the number of foreign degree mills (selling “parchment”-only degrees) and accreditation mills (selling bogus accreditations for programs or institutions), and rogue for-profit providers (not recognized by national authorities) is a reality that needs to be understood by students, parents, employers, and the academic community. Of course, what needs to be acknowledged are the innovative developments by bona fide higher education institutions that are delivering high quality, programs and legitimate degrees through new types of arrangements, and partnerships (franchise, twinning, virtual, and branch campuses). But, the perpetual issue of balancing cost, quality, and access significantly challenges the benefits, risks, and quality of cross-border education.

FOR-PROFIT INTERNATIONALIZATION EQUALS COMMERCIALIZATION

The number-one risk identified in the 2005 survey on internationalization by the International Association of Universities

was the commodification and selling of education programs. The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) has been a wake-up call for higher education around the world. Higher education has traditionally been seen as a “public good” and a “social responsibility.” Many people see GATS as presenting new opportunities and benefits, while others see it as introducing serious risks and positioning higher education as a private commodity. In addition, there are those who question why the trade sector needs to impose regulations at all, given that the education sector has been using its own international agreements and conventions.

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INCREASED ACCESS: EQUITY OR ELITISM

While internationalization—more specifically cross-border education—is seen as a potential to increase access to higher education, deep concerns have been raised about the equity of access. Access for whom is the key question: those who can afford to travel, or those who speak English, or those who can afford foreign tuition fees whether they stay at home or go abroad for their foreign credential? The growth in the for-profit sector of international education provision gives fodder to critics who believe that cross-border education rather than education at home is contributing to the perception that internationalization is only available for financially independent students. Furthermore, the small percentage of students actually participating in short-term study abroad, internships, and international research projects provides more evidence of the exclusive nature of internationalization.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY OR HOMOGENIZATION?

The impact of new forms and types of international academic mobility on the recognition and promotion of indigenous and diverse cultures is a subject that evokes strong positions and sentiments. Many observers believe that modern information and communications technologies and the movement of people, ideas, and culture across national boundaries present new opportunities to promote a culture and provide more chances for the fusion and hybridization of culture.

Other people see both the movement and the speed as alarming. They contend that these same forces are eroding national cultural identities and that, instead of the creation of new hybrid cultures, native cultures are being homogenized—usually interpreted as Westernized. Because education has traditionally been seen as a vehicle of acculturation, these arguments focus on the issues of the dominance of English as the

language of instruction, irrelevance of curriculum content, and the standardization of education and its accreditation processes.

WHAT IS NEXT?

These new developments and unintended consequences illustrate that nothing unfolds entirely as planned. It is necessary to stay alert to unexpected twists and turns along the road to internationalization. With innovation come new opportunities, successes, as well as threats. It is imperative that the international, intercultural, and global dimensions of higher education continue to be proactive and innovative, while keeping a close watch on unanticipated spin-offs and implications. As internationalization matures through its ages and stages of growth, a critical eye and strong will are needed to monitor intended and unintended results—for today and 25 years hence.

Is Australia Overdependent on International Students?

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Australia has become a byword for the generation of export revenues by selling education to foreign students. In 2007, 254,414 international students were enrolled in Australian public universities, 26 percent of all students. Another 18,685 were in private higher education institutions. Each year Australia receives about the same number of university students from mainland China and Hong Kong combined, as does the United States.

The only other country running education as an export business on this scale, the United Kingdom enrolls half the share of international students as in Australia. Education is the third-largest export sector in Australia—below coal and iron ore but ahead of tourism, beef, wheat, and manufacturing. It earned \$12 billion in 2007, mostly from the 207,800 students attending institutions onshore in Australia. There were also 65,299 more in offshore distance education and in branch campuses of Australian institutions, mostly in East and Southeast Asia.

THE EDUCATION EXPORT BOOM

The growth of international education has been amazing. Between 1996 and 2007 the number of foreign students multiplied fivefold, from 53,188 to 273,099. However, this trend