

Five Truths about Internationalization

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After several decades of intense development, internationalization has grown in scope, scale, and value. University strategic plans, national policy statements, international declarations, and academic articles all indicate the centrality of internationalization in the current world of higher education.

My recent article on the “Five Myths of Internationalization” (*IHE* no. 62, 2011) brought to light some misconceptions about internationalization. The myths challenged internationalization as a proxy for quality, foreign students as agents of internationalization, institutional agreements and international accreditations as indicators of the level of internationalization, and internationalization as a strategy for high rankings in league tables.

BUILDING ON AND RESPECTING THE LOCAL CONTEXT

Internationalization acknowledges and builds on national and regional priorities, policies, and practices. The attention now given to the international dimension of higher education should not overshadow or erode the importance of local context. Thus, internationalization is intended to complement, harmonize, and extend the local dimension—not to dominate it. If this fundamental truth is not

respected, a strong possibility exists of a backlash and for internationalization to be seen as a homogenizing or hegemonic agent. Internationalization will lose its true north and its worth, if it ignores the local context.

A CUSTOMIZED PROCESS

Internationalization is a process of integrating an international, intercultural, and global dimension into the goals, functions, and delivery of higher education. As such it is a process of change—tailored to meet the individual needs and interests of each higher education entity. Consequently, there is no “one size fits all” model of internationalization. Adopting a set of objectives and strategies that are “in vogue” and for “branding” purposes only negates the principle that each program, institution, or country needs to determine its individual approach to internationalization—based on its own clearly articulated rationales, goals, and expected outcomes.

BENEFITS, RISKS, AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

While there are multiple and varied benefits of internationalization, to focus only on benefits is to be unaware of the risks and unintended negative consequences. Brain drain from international academic mobility is one example of an adverse effect. The current concept of brain circulation does not acknowledge the threat of academic mobility and the great brain race for those countries at the bottom of the brain chain. Second, the desirability of an international qualification is leading to bogus certificates from degree mills, multiple credentials from double-degree programs, and the rise of accreditation mills certifying rogue operations. Third, in some countries, the overreliance on income from international student

fees is leading to lower academic standards and the rise of “visa factory programs.” Fourth, increased commodification and commercialization of cross-border franchising and twinning programs are threatening the quality and relevance of higher education, in some regions of the world. Moreover, recent surveys show that higher education leaders still believe that the benefits of internationalization still outweigh the risks. However, it is imperative to be vigilant to the different impacts, both positive and negative of internationalization.

NOT AN END UNTO ITSELF

Internationalization is a means to an end, not an end unto itself. This is a common misunderstood truism, which can lead to a skewed understanding of what internationalization is or can do. The suffix of “-ization” signifies that internationalization is a process or means of enhancing or achieving goals. For example, internationalization can help develop international and intercultural knowledge, skills, and values in students—through improved teaching and learning, international mobility, and a curriculum that includes comparative, international, and intercultural elements. The goal is not more internationalized curriculum or increased academic mobility per se. Rather the aim is to ensure that students are better prepared to live and work in a more interconnected world. Understanding internationalization, as a means to an end and not an end unto itself, ensures that the international dimension is integrated in a sustainable manner into the major functions of higher education teaching and learning, research and knowledge production, and service to the community and society.

GLOBALIZATION AND INTERNATIONALIZATION ARE DIFFERENT BUT LINKED

Globalization focuses on the worldwide flow of ideas, resources, people, economy, values, culture, knowledge, goods, services, and technology. Internationalization emphasizes the relationship between and among nations, people, cultures, institutions, and systems. The difference between the concept of worldwide flow and the notion of relationships among nations is both striking and profound. Internationalization of higher education has been positively and negatively influenced by globalization, and that the two processes, while fundamentally different, are closely connected. For instance, the competitiveness and commercialism agenda, often linked to globalization, has had a major impact on cross-border education development. In turn, the growth of cross-border education and its inclusion in bilateral and regional trade agreements have strengthened globalization.

The fundamental principles guiding internationalization always means different objects to various people, institutions, and countries. Yet, forecasting that internationalization would have evolved from what has been traditionally considered a process, based on values of cooperation, partnership, exchange, mutual benefits, and capacity building. Now, internationalization is increasingly characterized by competition, commercialization, self-interest, and status building. More attention is called for discovering truths and values underpinning the internationalization of higher education.