

Reconsidering the Concept of Internationalization

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The International Association of Universities has started to rethink the internationalization process and practices, so as to position internationalization and its underlying values in the current global knowledge society (www.iau-aiu.net). Beyond just radical change of its concept, one should go back to its original meaning and foundation and understand which contextual factors are influencing the original image and requiring further fine-tuning.

A RELATIVELY YOUNG CONCEPT

Contrary to what many people assume, the significance of internationalization in higher education is not older than two decades. Before the 1990s, the collective term used was “international education.” This was less a concept than an umbrella term, to embrace a whole series of fragmented and rather unrelated international activities in higher education: study abroad, foreign student advising, student and staff exchange, development education, and area studies. Only in the last two decades could one observe a gradual transition from the use

of “international education” to “internationalization of higher education,” and the creation of a more conceptual approach to internationalization.

Several factors—such as, the fall of the iron curtain, the European unification process, and the increased globalization of our economies and societies—played a role in this transfer from a fragmented and marginal notion of “international education” to a more integrated, that is, “comprehensive” concept of internationalization.

WHY RETHINKING THE CONCEPT?

If internationalization is still a relatively young concept, there is even a need for rethinking—based on a number of main factors. In the first place, the discourse of internationalization does not seem to always associate the reality, in which internationalization is still more a synonym of international education—i.e., a summing up of fragmented and rather unrelated terms—than a comprehensive process and concept. In that respect, one has to consider the NAFSA: Association of International Educators report, by John Hudzik, “Comprehensive Internationalization: From Concept to Action” (www.nafsa.org/cizn), more as a wake-up call than as the introduction of a new concept. Comprehensive internationalization is a tautology: internationalization is not internationalization if it is not comprehensive, and then it is old-fashioned international education.

The further development of globalization, the increase of commodification in higher education, and of the notion of a global knowledge society and economy have also resulted in a new range of forms, providers, and products—such as, branch campuses, franchises, and trade in education services. In

addition, as a consequence now, sometimes even conflicting dimensions, views, and elements are emerging in the discourse of internationalization.

Also, the international higher education context is rapidly changing. Until recently, “internationalization” like “international education” was predominantly a Western phenomenon, in which the developing countries only played a reactive role. The emerging economies and the higher education community in other parts of the world are altering the landscape of internationalization. Moving away from a Western, neocolonial concept, as several educators perceive “internationalization,” this principle has to incorporate these emerging other views.

DE-INTERNATIONALIZATION?

Africa—a region with numerous academics with a foreign degree, graduates with a study-abroad experience, as well as imported knowledge and concepts from abroad—probably holds a more internationalized education than any other region. But the impact of that situation is not necessarily positive, and maybe initially Africa needs to go through a process of de-internationalization and liberate itself from these external influences, before it can develop its own position in the global knowledge society.

Furthermore, the discourse on internationalization is overly dominated by a small group of stakeholders: higher education leaders, governments, and international bodies. Other stakeholders, such as the professional field, and in particular the faculty and the student voice are far less heard. Thus, the discourse is insufficiently influenced by those who should be mostly impacted by it.

Related to the previous point, too much of the discourse is oriented to the national and institutional level, with little attention for the program level: research, the curriculum, and the teaching and learning process—which should be more at the core of internationalization, as expressed by movements such as “Internationalization at Home.”

MORE ATTENTION TO ETHICS NEEDED

In the sixth place, internationalization is too much input/output focused—a quantitative approach on numbers, instead of an outcome-based approach. Also, discourse has consisted too little attention on norms, values, or ethics of internationalization practice. The approach has been too pragmatically oriented toward reaching targets, without a debate on the potential risks and ethical consequences. The recent debates on the use of agents in the United States—the problems with diploma fraud and the lack of quality assurance on cross-border delivery—illustrate the need for more attention to the ethics and values of internationalization.

A last point, based on the need for rethinking of internationalization, is the increased awareness that the notion of “internationalization” is not only related to the relation between nations but even more seriously to the relation between cultures and between the global and local.

All these points are rationales for rethinking internationalization. The inclusive reason is that internationalization of higher education is considered much as a goal in itself, instead of as a means to an end. Internationalization is a strategy for enhancing the quality of education and research. That objective is too much forgotten in striving for quantitative goals. The rethinking exercise

initiated by the International Association of Universities, more than an attempt to redefine the still young concept of internationalization, has to be a call for action to bring the core values and objectives of internationalization back to the forefront.