

Internationalisation in Higher Education: A Western Paradigm or a Global, Intentional and Inclusive Concept?

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Abstract

Internationalisation of higher education is still mainly considered in terms of a westernised, largely Anglo-Saxon, and predominantly English-speaking paradigm (Jones and de Wit, 2012), and, as Teferra (2019) states, is a coerced form of internationalisation. This article analyses the challenges and need for internationalisation in low- and middle-income countries to move from coercion to intentionality and inclusion.

Key words: Internationalisation of higher education, coercion, intentionality, Africa, low- and middle-income countries

L'internationalisation dans l'Enseignement supérieur est toujours principalement considérée du point de vue d'un paradigme occidental, largement anglo-saxon et principalement anglophone (Jones et de Wit, 2012) et comme Teferra (2019) l'affirme, est une forme forcée d'internationalisation. Cet article analyse les défis et le besoin d'une internationalisation dans les pays à revenus faible et intermédiaire pour passer de la coercion à l'intentionnalité et l'inclusion.

Mots-clés: internationalisation de l'Enseignement supérieur, coercion, intentionnalité, Afrique, pays à revenus faible et intermédiaire

Internationalisation of higher education (HE) is still mainly considered in terms of a westernised, largely Anglo-Saxon, and predominantly English-

1. This article builds on de Wit, 2019a.

speaking paradigm (Jones and de Wit, 2012). Over the past decades, most scholarly and public attention with respect to this phenomenon has focused on the Western world. Upenyu and Ress (2018, p. 4) state that “very little research has aimed to understand and conceptualise internationalisation efforts in the context of the historical particularities of the postcolonial condition.” It is important “to learn from other non-western national and cultural contexts – to understand the full extent of internationalization as a phenomenon and what we can learn from each other in order to benefit students, employers and nations” (Jones and de Wit, 2012, p. 50). Teferra (2019) asserts that “African higher education is the most internationalised system in the world – not by participation but by omission” and as a result cannot be intentional but is coerced.

As a concept and strategy, what is now called ‘internationalisation of higher education’ is a recent phenomenon that has emerged over the last 30 years, driven by a dynamic combination of political, economic, socio-cultural and academic rationales and stakeholders. With an increasing number of countries and types of institutions around the world engaging in the process of internationalisation, new perspectives from those whose voices do not normally have a strong presence in the discourse are important. It is time for critical reflection on the current and future state of internationalisation in HE, particularly in the current nationalist, populist and anti-global political climate and the COVID-19 pandemic. Is there a perspective of a more global, intentional and inclusive internationalisation of HE?

The International Higher Education Context

Internationalisation must be seen in the context of the changing role and position of HE in the world. Rapid changes are taking place in this sector that have increased in range and complexity over the past decade, in particular its massification, the global knowledge economy, and the emphasis on reputation and rankings. These three key factors have had an important impact. The emphasis in internationalisation has traditionally been on exchange and co-operation and rhetoric continues around the need to understand different cultures and their languages. Nevertheless, a gradual but increasingly visible shift has been apparent since the second half of the 1990s towards a more competitive internationalisation. Van der Wende (2001) calls this a shift in paradigm from cooperation to competition. There is strong competition for students, scholars, talent for the knowledge economy, funding of complex research, and access to the top 500 in global rankings as well as high impact publications. Recruitment, excellence in research and reputation are driving the internationalisation agenda of institutions and national governments, at the cost of the large majority of tertiary education institutions and their students and staff.

According to de Wit et al. (2015), internationalisation needs to evolve into a more comprehensive, more intentional, and less elitist (for all students and staff) process that is less focused on mobility and less economically driven, with the goal of enhancing the quality of education and research and making a meaningful contribution to society. How successful are we in reversing the more competitive approach described above? And how we can make this process less coerced and more intentional and inclusive?

From Mobility Focused and Elitist to Inclusive Global Learning for All?

Internationalisation in HE has evolved over the past 30 years from a somewhat ad hoc, marginal and fragmented phenomenon to a more central and comprehensive component of HE policy – although still more in rhetoric than in concrete action, and more focused on internationalisation abroad (mobility) and competition than on internationalisation at home and cooperation.

However, in the past decade, one can observe a reaction to these trends. While mobility is still the most dominant factor in internationalisation policies worldwide, increased attention is being paid to internationalisation of the curriculum at home. This phenomenon emerged at the end of the 1990s as a movement in Europe to reverse the focus on a small number of mobile exchange students in the European ERASMUS programme (at the time approximately 5-10%) towards the development of international and intercultural learning outcomes for the non-mobile majority of students. It evolved into a global movement, not only addressing the elitism of mobility of exchange students but also of degree seeking students, worldwide less than 2% of the student population. De Wit and Leask (2019) call for new ways of becoming and being international, while Brandenburg et al. (2019) advocate for an internationalisation of HE for society, more directed to its role in solving global problems and addressing the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals.

However, Leask et al. (2018) observe that the implementation of “internationalisation of the curriculum at home” appears to be struggling to move beyond good intentions and isolated examples of good practice at the programme or individual level without institutional intention and purpose. They add that we are still far from any form of internationalisation that is inclusive and accessible rather than elitist and exclusive.

Working towards inclusive international and intercultural learning for all, means that we become more respectful of diverse contexts, agendas and perspectives on a global scale. The following updated definition of internationalisation reflects these broader understandings of its nature and purpose:

“The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-

secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 29).

This formulation adds the word ‘intentional’ to Knight’s (2004) generally recognised working definition of internationalisation and stresses that it cannot be a goal in itself but should be a means to enhance quality that is directed to all students and staff and serves a public purpose. It gives Knight’s more neutral working definition a normative direction. Intentional and inclusive are key components of this definition. Intentional means planned and with purpose and inclusive implies that nobody is left out. Both aspects are key in the discussion on the direction of internationalisation in the developing world.

According to the most recent survey results from the 5th global survey on internationalisation by the International Association of Universities (IAU), two-thirds of university leaders around the world are considering internationalisation as an important issue. This suggests that it is intentional, although Marinoni and de Wit (2019) observe that there is an increasing divide between institutions that consider internationalisation as of high importance and those that do not. They observe that:

“the reasons for such a divide between HEIs that consider internationalization extremely important and those who do not is worth a reflection and deserves to be studied more in depth, especially if one considers internationalization to be an essential part of all HEIs’ mission and a sign of quality.” (p. 1)

Institutions encounter diverse challenges in their internationalisation strategy, including the pressure to generate revenue, competition for talent, and branding and reputation (rankings). Other factors include pressure to focus on international research and publications, and to recruit international students and scholars, and the use of English as the language of research and instruction. As Teferra (2019) states, coercion is a further challenge. These challenges and pressures conflict with a more inclusive and less elitist approach to internationalisation that builds on the needs and opportunities of own students and staff. In other words, there are tensions between a short-term neoliberal approach that primarily focuses on mobility and research, and a long-term, comprehensive quality approach. What does this imply for internationalisation in low- and middle-income countries, where coercion has strongly defined HE and its internationalisation?

Internationalisation in Low- and Middle-income Countries

One of the main risks is that internationalisation continues to be perceived as strengthening the dominance of the existing powers in international HE: regions, nations and institutions (Egron-Polak, 2012).

Internationalisation in the developing world has to avoid simply mimicking the priorities of Anglo-Western forms of this phenomenon, and develop distinctive forms which better reflect local needs and priorities; in other words, moving away from coercion to defining intentionally own purposes. A recent study on national tertiary education policies and strategies (NTEISPs) in middle- and low-income countries, seems to point to the first (de Wit et al., 2019).

A worldwide census of explicit NTEISPs carried out by Crăciun (2018) reveals that only 11% of countries have an official internationalisation strategy, with most having been adopted in the past decade. Such strategies have been predominantly formulated by developed countries – three out of four NTEISPs emanate from members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

This is not to say that other countries have not adopted measures to promote internationalisation. Indeed, to support internationalisation processes, many countries have embraced both direct measures (e.g., re-evaluating their visa policies to give preferential treatment to international students and scholars, establishing bi-lateral or multi-lateral agreements through memoranda of understanding, and promoting transnational education through free-trade deals) and indirect ones (e.g., supporting internationalisation in political discourses and granting universities autonomy to pursue internationalisation activities).

De Wit et al. (2019) observe that low- and middle-income countries are becoming more active in defining national policies for internationalisation, and on South-South cooperation, thus departing from the “westernized, largely Anglo-Saxon, and predominantly English-speaking paradigm” identified by Jones and de Wit (2012). They thus point to a shift from a coerced and copied internationalisation towards one that builds on own purposes and priorities.

However, serious caution should be expressed with regard to this trend. Copying of the Western paradigm continues, with a strong focus on mobility, reputation and branding, and on South-North relations. There is also little continuity in national policies, due to political and economic factors. The NTEISPs of low- and middle-income countries appear to be sustained through their scholarship schemes and terms, their geographic focus and partnerships in research and education, and the dominance of high-income countries. In other words, coercive internationalisation remains dominant. Concerted attention to regional cooperation, for instance among ASEAN countries, more South-South networking and partnerships, and a stronger focus on internationalisation of the curriculum at home, are needed to break this coercive high-income paradigm in internationalisation, and to develop policies and actions that build on the own local, national and regional context and culture.

From Coerced to Intentional and Inclusive?

Is internationalisation in middle- and low-income countries more coerced than intentional, as Teferra argues? Teferra (2019) acknowledges “that some institutions are vigorously pursuing aspects of internationalisation intentionally,” but adds that many others are doing so under coercion and contestation. This is certainly true, and for that reason, I stated in my response (De Wit, 2019b) that African universities dealing with the issues of decolonisation and Africanisation in their internationalisation strategies should be strongly guided by their own context. I added that Africanisation should not be seen as the opposite of internationalisation. Rather, they are two sides of the same coin. An exclusive focus on Africanisation will mean isolation while exclusive internationalisation will imply ongoing dependency and the copying of Western approaches which are not embedded in the local context. Teferra (2019) also regards ‘internationalisation at home’ as coerced: “Even the idea of internationalisation at home – as innocuous as it sounds – is not that fully intentional, after all.” He adds: “For instance, the re-curriculation of academic programmes, in reaction to and interest in the growing global realities of institutional cooperation and competition, is not an intentional process with unanimous voices.” While his observations are correct, ‘internationalisation at home’ in the African context should be intentionally directed towards embedding internationalisation in African values, needs and priorities and developing an African approach to internationalisation.

For this to happen, in the words of Teferra (2020),

“dumb decolonisation – in its formation, expression, and persistence – must give way to smart internationalisation that advances African academic, economic, social and political interests in the present and the future. It is time to re-focus on creating an enlightened cadre of African intellectuals, scholars and professionals who fully recognise their history but are confident – and competent – in navigating the international landscape in the national and continental as well as global interest.” (p. 78)

There is no one-size-fits-all model for internationalisation. Local values, needs and priorities should direct the why, what and how of internationalisation. In this way, African institutions as well as those in other low- and middle-income countries can intentionally break away from the coercion of the Western paradigm.

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