SIJBOLT NOORDA

INTERNATIONALISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

FIVE UNEASY QUESTIONS

Humboldt Ferngespräche – Discussion Paper No. 2 – March 2014

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Summary

Internationalisation is generally seen as key element of modernising our universities. But what are we really aiming at with this concept? What do mobility figures signify, which role do we expect to be played by international students, and how do we deal with ethical questions of talent import? In his keynote speech, Sijbolt Noorda critically looks behind the beautiful and omnipresent façade internationalisation often proves to be. He argues that universities will only benefit from internationalisation if they move away from broad, imprecise umbrella concepts and start to seriously reconsider the many dimensions of internationalisation, its traps and its values.

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The theme of internationalisation in higher education is a quite popular topic, maybe not at every breakfast table, but certainly in academic circles. These days hardly any report or policy advice on higher education remains silent on this issue. Just one quote from a recent text of the German Action Committee on Education[1]: *"Forward-looking university policy is crucial to regional development. Excellently trained graduates provide the basis for innovation and competitiveness. To this end, we must continue to modernise the university system. The growing internationalisation of universities is a key part of this."*[2]

Similar quotes can be found elsewhere. Internationalisation is seen as the way to modernise universities, a very welcome positive development in Higher Education. So why carry water to the ocean?

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1 Aktionsrat Bildung

2 *"Eine zukunftsweisende Hochschulpolitik ist Standortpolitik. Hervorragend ausgebildete Absolventinnen und Absolventen sind die Basis für Innovation und Wettbewerbsfähigkeit. Dazu müssen wir die Modernisierung des Hochschulsystems aber weiter vorantreiben. Dabei ist die steigende Internationalisierung der Hochschulen ein wesentlicher Baustein."* Vereinigung der Bayerischen Wirtschaft e. V. (ed.), Internationalisierung der Hochschulen. Eine institutionelle Gesamtstrategie. Gutachten, Münster 2012, p. 7.

Today we meet in Humboldt Universität's classical veterinary anatomical theater while the show space in front of us is empty: no animal cadavers to dissect today. So let us imagine it is the concept of internationalisation that lies before us, for us to dissect and to analyze, to see which parts are functioning well and which are not. Exactly because it is such an important and popular issue, we should take a closer, critical look at it.

Seven years ago I gave a talk in Berlin – as a matter of fact in the premises of the Humboldt Law School – at an international meeting on our topic.[3] The theme then was the many faces of internationalisation. My main message to the audience (all of them converts, believers in the value of internationalisation) was: indeed, we should not leave the global marketplace, global politics and the future of new generations to the powers of international business and all sorts of new modes of neo-colonialism. Higher Education has a key role to play, both in teaching and learning and in research, both in the interests of new generations of students and the sustainable future of life and living on this planet. Exactly because we must be active players, we should carefully see to it what we do, what benefits we are aiming at, which trends we are following and who should be our allies. And stop believing "international" is a magic wand, a miracle drug or a straight road to the modernisation of the university.

As a matter of fact, internationalisation is an umbrella concept encompassing many different ideals, actions and developments. It is about time to identify those individual elements hiding under the umbrella, and take a closer look at each and every one of them and ask critical questions.

It is with this in mind that I have come to Berlin. I have come to comment, not to praise – not to praise internationalisation as a panacea, but to comment on its value and various uses, its strengths and weaknesses, its traps and potential benefits. I shall do this by asking

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3 Annual Conference of ACA, the Academic Cooperation Association, May 14-15, 2007.

five questions. Most of them are relevant to all European universities; one is especially relevant to the German situation.

I

"Over the past three decades, the number of students enrolled outside their country of citizenship has risen dramatically, from 0.8 million worldwide in 1975 to 4.3 million in 2011, a more than fivefold increase. This remarkable expansion stems from an interest in promoting academic, cultural, social and political ties among countries, particularly as the European Union was taking shape, to a substantial increase in global access to tertiary education, and to reduced transportation costs. The internationalisation of labour markets for highly skilled people has also given students an incentive to gain international experience as part of their higher education."[4]

This is the kind of language that is regularly used to show the success of internationalisation. I have two problems with it. In the first place, it is seldom noted that this remarkable increase is only slightly more than the remarkable increase in total student numbers in these years. Like in 1971 it is today still only a small minority of students that study abroad, outside their country of origin.

Secondly, it is seldom asked what these mobility figures exactly signify. Do they indeed indicate a remarkable growth of international higher education, or rather the success of mass higher education and the undersupply of schools in many countries? I am afraid it may be a clear case of valuing what is measurable instead of measuring what is valuable. Mobility by itself may not be a very reliable indicator of the degree of internationality in higher education.

I will rephrase the issue at stake. Why do we subscribe to the great importance of internationalisation for our graduates and at the same

4 OECD, Education at a Glance 2013. OECD Indicators, Paris 2013, p. 308.

time fail to internationalise our curricula, thus failing to guarantee the international dimension of teaching and learning to all students? If internationalisation is so important, why should not all our students benefit from it? It now looks as if the small minority of border-crossing mobile students is the carrier of internationality instead of the curriculum, the classroom and the professorate, the learning conditions of all students.

Should it not be a matter of course that universities translate their well-founded international ideals and ambitions into the regular curricula they offer and offer internationalisation at home? Ought it not be the case that the regular curriculum truly reflects multi-national realities and global challenges? Should every classroom experience in our present globalised world not mirror a variety of backgrounds and points of view while using a diversity of textbooks (be they traditional or digital) and teachers?

At various occasions I have myself been observing and comparing national and international classrooms. And I noticed a huge difference between settings where international perspectives were thematically and structurally presented and experienced on the one hand, and on the other hand settings where there was one clearly overriding home perspective, even if 10 or 15 per cent of participants were foreigners.

Should we not therefore reserve the label "international higher education" for the first category? And distinguish clearly between "studying abroad" and "studying an international curriculum"? And stop using mobility figures as reliable indicators of the degree of internationalisation in higher education?

Since the late 1990s, the idea of the "international classroom" or 'internationalisation at home" has been coined, discussed and embraced by many. Yet universities are very slow to actually reform the majority of curricula in this sense, not only in extreme cases of traditional home based teaching and learning, like in colleges for teacher training or the medical professions. In short, if we all do subscribe to the great value of the international dimension, why do we not reform our teaching and learning accordingly, not by exception, as a sort of

nice to have luxury for the happy few mobile students, but as a rule, as a service to all students?[5]

II

My second question is about the role of mobile students. What do we think of them?

By the way, one of Berlin's best jokes has a visiting international student as its main character. The story goes like this: a Saudi prince has come to study in Berlin. After a while he writes to his father how much he likes the city and how nice the people are. "I have", he adds, "one serious problem. I am ashamed to drive my golden Mercedes, while my teachers all travel by train." To which his father swiftly responds by sending him a ten million dollar check. "You shouldn't embarrass us. You can now have your own train."

Is there a serious point in this? Conflicting cultures? Language problems? Anyway, mobile students go abroad for a shorter or longer period of time, driven by all sorts of ideals and expectations: cosmopolitan, idealistic, economic and/or romantic. Do we, university people, appreciate and treat them as carriers of internationalisation? Or are they rather welcomed as fee-paying customers, contributors to the financial health and stability of our institutions (like universities in the United Kingdom and Australia openly say)? Is our rhetoric of a welcoming culture (to be found on university websites all over the world) really true for all of us, or is it only true for those working in the international office?

Jane Knight – a Toronto based professor of higher education – called it "a long-standing myth" that "more foreign students on campus will produce more internationalised institutional culture". "In

5 See Sijbolt Noorda, Die Internationalität der Hochschule. Luxusware oder im Ernst? in: Freiburger Universitätsblätter, Vol. 194 (2011), pp. 131-137.

many institutions", she wrote, "international students feel marginalised socially and academically"[6] Home students often do not engage socially with foreign students if there is no program context inviting or compelling them to do so. Usually they flock together and ironically, create a kind of multi-national sub-campus among themselves rather than contribute to the culture of the campus as a whole.

From my own graduate student days in New York I remember that almost all foreign students lived in a large international house somewhat off-campus. Theirs was a sort of United Nations experience, while only a small minority – like myself – lived in regular student housing projects and had a chance to mix with their American colleagues.

In my later experience in Dutch universities and in recent years as a member of the German Rectors' Conference[7] International Audit I have come across very few examples of a truly mixed campus life. In my time as president of the Dutch equivalent of the German Rectors' Conference I used to have an annual meeting with some 100 foreign students from all levels and institutions in The Netherlands. Very informative sessions they were, yielding a lot of true to life stories.

On top of their wish list was more and better accessible Dutch language training courses. How else could they fully engage in campus life? In most cases they did not feel they had a chance to contribute to a more international university culture. They did not feel they were being seen and appreciated as representatives of a valuable, different perspective and culture at all.

At the end of the day it looks as if cross-border mobility often is a rewarding individual experience – not to be underrated, by the way – but rarely more than that; in any case seldom contributing to the international culture mix our websites speak such lofty words about.

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6 Jane Knight, Five Myths About Internationalization, in: International Higher Education, Vol. 62 (2011), p. 14.

7 Hochschulrektorenkonferenz

I am afraid this will not change unless we are able to change our domestic manners, students and teachers alike, and create an open international culture to which all contribute.

It is an old truth that you need two to tango. Which most of us find very hard to do, it seems.

III

Third question: Does the internationality ideal apply to all of higher education in the same way? Is there one model of the international university or polytechnic that is valid and applicable to all institutions in all places?

Last summer the German Council of Science and Humanities[8] published a long statement on the future of the German science system. "Profile development" and "differentiation" were among the recurring concepts of this paper. "*The German Council of Science and Humanities relies on a systematic process of differentiation that makes use of multi-dimensional profiling. This will be a lengthy process. Nevertheless, the universities themselves should determine their differentiation and profile development. These should be evolutionary processes, and should not be guided by selected interests that are primarily motivated by science policy.*"[9]

These are no doubt wise words that should be heeded. Variety is indeed an essential positive value in any system of Higher Education. In a way it is the key to success, because only this way Higher Education will be able to respond to the natural variety of demand, in very different local, regional, national and international contexts, in very

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8 Wissenschaftsrat

9 *"Der Wissenschaftsrat vertraut auf einen konsequenten Differenzierungsprozess mittels mehrdimensionaler Profilierung. Dieser Prozess wird einen längeren Zeitraum in Anspruch nehmen. Gleichwohl sollten Differenzierung und Profilbildung von den Hochschulen selbst geprägte, evolutive Prozesse sein und nicht vorrangig wissenschaftspolitisch motivierten Auswahlinteressen folgen."* Wissenschaftsrat (ed.), Perspektiven des deutschen Wissenschaftssystems, Braunschweig 2013, p. 50.

different fields of teaching and learning and research, and last but not least fit for purpose for a broad variety of talent and ambitions.

The paper by the German Council of Science and Humanities, however, is rather silent on how this profiling will come about, on the operational complexities and challenges involved. Are universities and polytechnics really keen on being different from others? In reality there is great attraction in imitation, in following leading brands and thus promoting equality and sameness instead of diversity and distinctiveness.

Let us take a look at business schools.[10] They were among the very first to appreciate international accreditation and rankings as a means to establish and enhance a good, reliable reputation among students and in the market place. Over the years, however, the side effects appeared to be a very strong tendency towards imitation and a trend to be homogenising profiles and programs. Successful business schools are look-a-likes. Especially in the ways they are international business schools, meaning schools collaborating with international business and competing for students worldwide. And not amazingly some very special business schools (like the Institutes of Management in India) do not show up in these rankings that are dominated by the standard US model of a business school.

The case of business schools illustrates the danger of standardising by international ranking. It proves to be hard to escape the attractions of joining the club; the same club leading institutions are a member of.

These mechanisms also operate at a national level. In the German International Audit scheme the hardest thing to do is to explain to university leadership that they are in a different position, that they are not in Berlin or Munich, that they should not compare themselves to the top ten of the funding statement by the German Academic Exchange

10 See Sijbolt Noorda, Future Business Schools, Journal of Management Development, Vol. 30, 5 (2011), pp. 519-525.

Service[11], but rather design their own profile on the basis of what is within their reach. Internationalisation is not a magic means to make a university more visible if it has a limited international relevance to show for or a method to make any university town the equivalent of Cambridge. Striving to the same model may imply either betrayal of essential local and regional responsibilities, or overestimating one's contribution, or both.

The basic question should be, in teaching and learning as well as in research, how the international dimension is implemented and enhanced in all programs in view of present and future developments in our societies, and in relation to the mission of the institution. International collaborations, mobility schemes, international faculty et cetera should also be seen and developed in function of this basic question, rather than vice versa. This no doubt will lead to a variety of answers, and thereby to a variety of profiles. A variety that should be stimulated by rankings and bonuses, not reduced and belittled.

IV

Germany in many aspects is doing well in the international arena of study and research. And Berlin is doing even better. Yet there is one aspect that should worry you.

From the same OECD publication that I referred to before[12] I take this quote:

"All reporting countries, except for Germany, have a larger proportion of international students enrolled in advanced research programmes than in any other tertiary-level programme. In Switzerland, for example, almost one in two students enrolled in advanced research programmes is an international student. In 12 of the 25 countries reporting data on international

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11 Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst

12 Cf. p. 5

students, more than 20% of all students enrolled in advanced research programmes are international. In the United Kingdom, more than 40% of all students enrolled in this type of programme are international students, and in the Netherlands and New Zealand, around 40% are. At least 25% of students in advanced research programmes in Australia, Belgium, Ireland, Sweden and the United States are international students. (....) These large proportions of international or foreign students may reflect the attractiveness of advanced research programmes in these countries, or a preference for recruiting international students at higher levels of education because of their potential contribution to domestic research and development, or the potential for recruiting these students as highly qualified immigrants." [13]

If German research-intensive universities would like to strengthen their position in the international arena they should do whatever they can to better this relative weakness. The introduction of specific research master programs, a growth of well-organised doctoral studies, and an attractive performance based hiring scheme for young researchers should be the ingredients.

Why should German universities accept that a considerable number of junior grantees of the European Research Council from Germany leave the country and do the work they received the grant for elsewhere?

Transfers across national borders have become a quite normal phenomenon, above all for the most ambitious and often more talented among the new generations. And that is exactly why a major player like Germany would not want to remain somewhat outside the arena. You would not want to be on the losers' side of these statistics, but do whatever it takes to become a more attractive destination for ambitious graduate students, even if this implies changing traditional modes of programming and hiring.

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13 OECD, Education at a Glance 2013. OECD Indicators, Paris 2013, p. 312.

V

This brings me to my fifth and last topic. Haiti suffered a devastating earthquake this month four years ago. The country is in a dire state. Recovery is very difficult. One of the many negative factors behind this is the loss of talent. 85 per cent of its educated people live and work abroad, most of them in the USA. On a population of 10 million this is a heavy handicap.

Haiti is one of many small developing countries (like Liberia, Malawi, Afghanistan, Ghana, and Jamaica) that end up as losers from migration.[14] A clear case of negative brain drain. At the same time the few big developing countries like India, Indonesia, China and Brazil see a rapid growth of their graduate work force. They also experience brain drain, but to a much smaller degree and with much more positive side effects.

Brain drain is the flip side of brain gain. And brain gain is exactly what our societies are looking for, corporate employers as well as universities and research institutes, to such an extent that one might stop speaking of internationalisation and call it regular headhunting instead. As a matter of fact we convince ourselves that we are not only gaining brains, but making money as well. To silence immigration critics the Dutch government commissioned a study to find out about the value of imported talent for Dutch society. In 2012 the Dutch minister of Education, Culture and Research wrote in a letter to Parliament: *"An estimated long-term retention rate of 19 per cent has a positive effect of ca. 740 million Euros on public finances. This applies to the present state of student mobility in terms of outgoing and incoming students in the Netherlands compared to a situation where student mobility does not take place."*[15]

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14 Paul Collier, Exodus. Immigration and Multiculturalism in the 21st Century. London 2013, p. 200.

15 Letter of the Dutch Minister for Education, Culture and Research, May 2012, referring to G. Bijwaard, Immigrant migration dynamics model for the Netherlands, Journal of Population Economics, Vol. 23 (2012).

If only 19 per cent stay on after graduation and find employment at graduate level, the benefit to the Dutch state income is about 740 million euro annually. Since then, other European countries – Germany among them – hastened to make similar calculations, and convinced themselves that the cost of international students was in fact a wise investment, with a pretty high return quote. This of course is a relief for the keeper of the public purse. The Dutch or German taxpayer is clearly not paying foreign students for nothing.

What is the relation with the Haiti brain drain situation? I see it this way: should governments and universities not refrain from engaging in or promoting the negative effects of brain drain?

Of course it will not be practicable to refuse individual students from smaller developing countries, deny them access to our institutions. What we could do, however, is entering into bilateral or multilateral collaborations with these countries and their Higher Education institutions to create a stronger local educational infrastructure, strengthen their societies and in doing so enhance the possibilities of return over migration.

In the present worldwide fashionable competitive mode fewer countries and fewer universities engage in this kind of collaborations. I am under the impression that Germany with countries like Norway and Sweden still has a less selfish view on these matters. If that were correct, it would be good to try to enlarge this group and maybe make it an EU policy to do what we can to avoid or dim the effects of negative brain drain. It would be a token of responsible international thinking, exactly the kind of attitude that I would like to see more prominently in our teaching and learning.

This brings me to the end of my talk. I have raised a couple of questions (on the true focus of internationalisation, on the role of foreign students in our schools, on variety of strategies and positions in different types of institutions and locations, on internationally attractive doctoral education and on the ethics of talent import). I called them uneasy questions, partly because they may be disturbing a more pleasant picture, partly because they are not easy to answer. I have not

raised them because I doubt the value and the wisdom of internationalisation, but precisely because I doubt the benefits of internationalisation if we do not think twice, and carefully look into the many different faces and uses. A broad umbrella concept of internationalisation is too imprecise for our purposes. The standard general approach easily misses the point.

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