



Values under pressure through internationalisation

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Introduction

There is no question that internationalisation has transformed the landscape of higher education around the world. At the same time, the process of internationalisation has changed itself. Witness the growth in research networks, international branch campuses, joint/double degree programs, franchise universities, academic league tables, accreditation/diploma mills, and MOOCs- to name a few. Many of these changes bring new benefits, others present new challenges. However, there is concern that many of the values traditionally underpinning international academic cooperation are at risk. Are the values of collaboration, partnership, academic integrity, recognition of national culture and context, mutual benefits and academic freedom in jeopardy? The round table looked at the impacts of internationalisation, both positive and negative, on academic values and ideas were shared on what actions may be taken to preserve or enhance those values which are fundamental.

Summary of discussions

Five inter-related themes emerged in the discussions: (1) the need for a balanced approach to internationalisation, (2) the changing rationales driving internationalisation, (3) benefits and potential risks related to internationalisation, (4) relationship between internationalisation and the MCU values of institutional autonomy and academic freedom, and (5) internationalisation and national identity.

Participants highlighted the fact that internationalisation is too often narrowly conceived as mobility of students and staff, which ignores the wide range of internationalisation activities and benefits. Furthermore, focusing only on student mobility, which in most countries outside of Europe involves less than 4% of student enrolment, is leading to widespread criticism that student mobility may lead to an elitist approach to internationalisation given the small numbers that can participate.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that internationalisation should be “a two-way process”, offering benefits, albeit different kinds of benefits, to all parties involved and that it should not deliberately lead to brain drain. Discussants pointed out that some European Union funded international education projects and coordinated approaches to internationalisation work on the assumption of an unequal relationship between the partners and that learning only happens in one direction – from Northern and Western to Southern and Eastern universities. In addition, concern was expressed that some EU programmes are designed to “prepare students to leave”, in other words, that they are actively recruiting students to stay abroad after completing their studies thereby facilitating brain drain. Participants emphasised that more international academic programs which favoured cooperation, exchange and mutual benefits were needed as opposed to those initiatives which promoted competition and one way benefits.



Discussion also focused on the changing rationales for internationalisation which reflect a change in the values underpinning higher education internationalisation. In recent times, internationalisation seems to be driven by national/regional strategic positioning for geopolitical and reputational purposes. Secondly, the increasing emphasis on internationalisation as a source of revenue generation was pointed out given the decrease in public funding in several countries. The contrast between (a) 'internationalisation for academic reasons (institutional point of view), (b) 'internationalisation for immigration' purposes (individual point of view); and (c) 'internationalisation for economic/competitiveness reasons' (system point of view) was hotly debated. This in turn highlighted that some internationalisation efforts (e.g. development cooperation projects, joint and double degree programs, research networks, branch campuses, intercultural training programmes) can have a positive impact on the teaching/learning, research and community outreach functions of universities as well as increasing student access and diversity of programmes. However, there may be negative aspects and potential risks as well. The unintended consequences of internationalisation such as pushing for more English taught programs to attract international students or forced participation in specific international research and academic networks has the potential to jeopardize faculty members' academic freedom to follow their own internationalisation interests and priorities.

Discussants focused on the complex issue of the relationship between internationalisation and national identities. Both opportunities and threats were identified. Internationalisation can help to facilitate learning about other cultures and also gaining a deeper understanding of one's own culture and country and their relationship to the rest of the world. This has the potential to contribute to a sense of national, and in some cases, regional identity. On the other hand, internationalisation can also have an insulating effect. For example, when international students in a country are more exposed to each other than to the students from the country they are temporarily studying in. Another concern raised was the potential homogenisation effect of internationalisation in terms of standardising curriculum or importing programs from other countries through branch campuses or twinning programs without due regard for local context.

In summary, internationalisation of higher education can bring new opportunities and benefits to the teaching/learning, research and community service functions of universities. At the same time, there are clear risks associated with internationalisation if the driving rationales do not focus on academic issues such as improving access, quality and relevance of higher education and its contribution to solving the global issues facing us in the more independent world in which we live. There is increasing evidence that traditional values underpinning internationalisation are under pressure. For example, the long-standing emphasis on international cooperation is shifting to competition; mutual interest among partners is moving towards self-interest; academic partnership agreements are interpreted as trade relationships; and building capacity is trumped by building status. The gradual but discernible shift in the values and rationales underpinning internationalisation is being recognised and addressed by different higher education actors and stakeholders around the world. But further attention is required to ensure that internationalisation brings benefits to higher education and its contribution to society, and most importantly that the fundamental values of academic freedom and institution autonomy are not inadvertently jeopardized by the increasing focus on the international dimension of higher education.