Comprehensive Internationalization in Latin America

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Amidst constant economic crisis and instability during the past two decades, Latin American governments have developed a set of national policies focused on widening access and equity, quality assurance, faculty preparation at the postgraduate level, and infrastructure improvement. However, despite official discourse and government plans citing the internationalization of higher education as a priority, no specific strategies and programs, not to mention budgetary allocations, are being implemented to make it a reality.

The International Association of Universities’ (IAU) 3rd Global Survey on Internationalization reported in 2010 (International Association of Universities 2010) that the primary external driver of internationalization in the region was business and industry demand, well ahead of government policies. This contrasts with the world average (WA) and most, especially European, higher education institutions (HEIs), that rank governmental support first. This highlights how governmental support is perceived as weak in the region because the lack of cooperation between the business and industry sectors and the higher education sector is well known. Furthermore, institutions declare that they receive only 5 percent of their funding for internationalization from governmental sources, compared with 18 percent WA, and 32 percent for Europe.

Internationalization strategies in the region are not linked to broad national strategies for higher education sector improvement and are, therefore, marginal to its core activities. This lack of linkage reduces the potential of internationalization to contribute to the transformation of the higher education system in Latin America.

An Emerging Trend, But Not Without Risk and Barriers

The importance of internationalization has increased in the region’s institutional agendas over the last three years, which is in keeping with global trends. Nevertheless, only 51 percent of institutional leaders give it a high priority in contrast with the WA of 65 percent. The main rationales cited by institutional leaders for internationalization in Latin American HEIs are to improve student preparedness for a globalized world (39 percent); to internationalize curriculum and improve academic quality (18 percent); and to strengthen research and knowledge capacity production (16 percent). The substantial difference between the first rationale and the second and third highlights the regional awareness that students need to develop an international profile—a good reason for increasing student mobility.

This emphasis on international perspectives in higher education is a new regional trend though, as the primary rationale in the 2005 Global Survey was to strengthen research and knowledge. Noteworthy was the then-low-ranking of the “enhancing international profile and reputation” rationale, at 6 percent compared with the WA of 15 percent, confirmed
by the reported absence of adequate strategies to attract foreign students and skilled scholars from abroad (Holm-Nielsen et al. 2005). This could be a consequence of the sector being focused on solving the pervasive regional problems at that time or could be an implicit recognition that the quality of education was not yet up to international standards.

In terms of internationalization benefits, the 2010 report notes institutions in the region rank increased international awareness of students (30 percent) at the top. This figure is higher than the 24 percent WA and congruent with the primary rationale of improving student preparedness; strengthened research and knowledge production (18 percent); enhanced international cooperation and solidarity (10 percent); and increased international orientation of faculty/staff. These findings are all in tune with world trends.

Key potential risks of increased internationalization for Latin America are reported to be brain drain (17 percent), higher than the 10 percent WA and pointing to a regional problem; commodification and commercialization of educational programs (12 percent); and an increase of foreign degree mills and/or low quality providers (12 percent). Noteworthy is the change in perception from 2005 to 2010—the top reported risk in the 2005 IAU Global Survey was loss of cultural identity, which now ranks seventh.

Although it is on the rise, mobility of Latin American students is one of the lowest in the world at 6 percent—only Central Asia is lower at 3.2 percent. This level of mobility is in sharp contrast with 28.5 percent for East Asia-Pacific, 16.4 percent for North America and Western Europe, and 11 percent for Central and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the presence of foreign students in Latin America is low, as the region hosts only 1.9 percent of the world’s international students, with the majority coming from within the region itself.

There is a stark contrast when compared with other developing regions like East Asia and the Pacific (19 percent), Arab States (4 percent), and Sub-Saharan Africa (3 percent) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2010, 174-81). This trend is not likely to change in the coming years as the 3rd IAU Global Survey (International Association of Universities 2010) reports that Latin America is not the priority for incoming student mobility for any region, including the region itself.

Faculty mobility is also reported to be low and mainly occurring in large public universities, and limited to scholars with an international profile or who have been educated abroad—an elite minority. Thus, the great majority of scholars lack an international profile themselves and are not able to support the internationalization process.

In terms of the internationalization of the curriculum, very few of the region’s HEIs report integrating international content into the curriculum or fostering the development of intercultural and global competencies in students (De Wit et al. 2005, 346-350), (Gacel-Ávila 2007, 405) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2010, 284). The major obstacle to curricular internationalization is the focus on the traditional curricular model, professionally oriented, and allowing little flexibility. Not surprisingly, this results in a limited number of international joint- and double-degree programs compared with other regions, such as Europe or Asia. The absence of institutional and national policies; the lack of funding, the low level of proficiency in foreign languages among students and professors, and limited internationalization of the curriculum are all obstacles to joint- and double-degree development.

A Challenge to Close the Gap

All of the described findings point out that internationalization strategies, at both the institutional and national levels, are incipient but lacking support in Latin America. They continue to be focused on traditional activities of student and faculty mobility, without taking into account the broader concept of comprehensive internationalization. As mobility schemes’ mainly affect the individuals involved but have far less impact on the system, the potential of internationalization to improve and transform the Latin American higher education sector is not being effectively realized.

This unrealized transformation of Latin American higher education could be due to a lack of conceptualization by decision- and policymakers about
internationalization’s potential for sector advancement. But in the end, not participating in international trends and on-going global transformation represents a risk for Latin America, leading to a further widening of its educational gap with other regions. It is, therefore, urgent for the region to acknowledge the importance of implementing strategies of comprehensive internationalization that are linked to national programs and educational agenda priorities. Internationalization should be considered as a key strategy with the potential to help the region overcome backlogs and shortcomings at a faster pace.

Actions should be taken to train decisionmakers and senior staff, both at the institutional and regional levels, in the field of comprehensive internationalization strategies. A deeper internationalization of the curriculum is necessary to allow for an updating of the traditional curriculum. This could include a wider academic offering with innovative programs such as joint curriculum development with international institutions and increase levels of international and intercultural competencies of both students and scholars. These actions will also enable university graduates to acquire the global competencies that are greatly needed to make the region more competitive and active in the global scene.

To improve the Latin American higher education sector so that it can face the new challenges brought by globalization and the knowledge society, the aim should not only be to increase higher education quality and accountability, but also to close the gap with developed and emergent countries. This challenge needs creative and innovative approaches to higher education, and it is high time for decision- and policymakers to realize that internationalization and international cooperation might be an effective means to cope with emergent international trends and developments in order to avoid a widening of the present educational gaps.

In sum, it is hoped that tangible government support and encouragement for more comprehensive internationalization of Latin American higher education will develop and go beyond rhetoric. There are encouraging signs but proof will be in the hard evidence of real accomplishments. Regardless of government support and encouragement, there is the responsibility of higher education institutions in the region to undertake this challenge themselves in a comprehensive and serious manner. A key strategy is, not only changing internal institutional cultures and priorities, but developing collaborations with higher education institutions from other regions for mutual benefit.

References


