**September 2012**

# Higher Education Internationalization: Seeking a New Balance of Values

By Eva Egron-Polak

There are few higher education institutions that would report disinterest in becoming more internationally connected, more open to attracting international students, or more able to offer broad international research opportunities for faculty. At the same time, few higher education institutions would admit that some of the rationales for "going international" are rooted equally, if not more so, in the need to find new sources of funding, the pressure to climb the prestige ladder, and the race for global talent on which rests their nation's competitiveness.

It is this complex and often contradictory mix of motivations and contextual factors that are shaping the internationalization of higher education; a context that is also profoundly marked by the wider processes of globalization. Just as globalization has strengthened interconnectedness in economic, political, and cultural spheres, it has intensified the mobility of ideas and of people in higher education. The ubiquitous use of information and communications technologies has continuously "shrunk" time and space, thus intensifying and accelerating the many transformations wrought by globalization. These changes bring many positive impacts in the form of expanded possibilities for collaboration and exchanges, but also potentially adverse consequences, such as more uneven global dissemination of knowledge and one-sided benefits of the internationalization process.

The last decade or so has seen an acceleration of certain shifts in internationalization that are worth highlighting. These include:

- a shift from cooperation among higher education institutions for the purposes of capacity building, to cooperation to create alliances to win the competition;
- a shift from offering international students access to programs locally unavailable to them, to a race for access to the best brains worldwide;
- a shift from higher education partnerships of solidarity, to international strategic partnerships linked to economic and geopolitical goals;
- a shift from higher education cooperation as the pursuit of soft diplomacy, to the pursuit of economic competitiveness; and
- a shift from a search for diversity of perspectives and worldviews, to a search for like-institutions in terms of prestige and status in rankings or institutions that can boost one's status.

These shifts, whatever their magnitude, lie at the heart of the unease with current internationalization trends. And the overall expansion of internationalization—both in terms of the depth of institutional engagement in the process, and the number of players, increases potential risks as well as benefits. As stakes get higher, higher education must be mindful that pursuing goals which are more commercial than academic will, in the long run, come at a cost. This kind of internationalization is unlikely to bring the type of improvement in the quality of higher education—the enriched learning environment—that was to be gained. It will also not lead institutions to focus research on solving some of the most pressing global problems or issues. Yet, these are among the important purposes of internationalization of higher

education, included in many rhetoric statements.

These shifts are reflected in the rationales, approaches, and strategies for higher education internationalization, which have multiplied over the past several decades. As a result, the concept has taken on many different meanings, and internationalization is constantly taking on new forms. For example, institutions now offer programs abroad or build branch campuses in other countries, and offer distance-learning programs with a global reach. Asia and Persian Gulf states are teeming with international educational hubs and regional networks. These and other newer forms of internationalization complement the more traditional student and staff mobility schemes, and the various ways in which universities integrate international dimensions to their curriculum including through joint programs and the international institutional linkages for teaching and research. There are also new actors involved in the process—new private sector educational providers, recruiting agents, and various specialized service providers. Their differing motivations and interests in internationalization add to the complexity.

Thus, alongside the well-known and often cited benefits of internationalization, these multiple interests, approaches, and practices have also provoked some negative reactions and led many to engage in a more critical analysis of internationalization. Criticism of the overall process, particularly in some parts of the world such as Africa or some nations of Latin America and Asia, point to internationalization as contributing to widening gaps among nations and institutions and the inability of institutions in some countries and regions to set the agenda or develop partnerships that are truly mutually beneficial.

The growing discomfort with internationalization stems from the need to balance two sets of drivers. On the one hand, internationalization is driven by the pursuit of the lofty goals and ideals of improving academic quality, increasing international understanding, and providing mutual benefits. On the other hand, internationalization is increasingly seen and used as a central lever of economic competitiveness in the knowledge economy and as a source of revenue.

Internationalization can also serve as a demographic re-balancing tool in a world where demand for and supply of higher education are not always co-located, yet massive recruitment strategies are often seen as means to additional revenue from student fees without regard for anything else. Criticism of internationalization as a process that turns education into a commodity, increases the brain drain, and may serve to reduce cultural diversity through the dominant role played by English has become louder.

More recently, the growing importance of international rankings has added another element of possible risk, as the pursuit of the research-intensive university model of excellence has the potential to diminish institutional diversity in higher education. There is a real trend for "exclusiveness" in institutional partnerships built according to ranking results, and leaving out many institutions that could both benefit from and contribute to such international partnerships.

In light of all these trends and developments, some "rethinking" is needed in order to identify ways to address this growing unease and strike a better balance between the academic rationales and benefits of internationalization, and the more economic and self-interested motivations. The rethinking process that was coordinated by the International Association of Universities (IAU), and that ultimately led to the Affirming Academic Values in Internationalization of Higher Education: A Call for Action, sought to describe such a balance, stressing the numerous benefits of internationalization, such as the engagement of institutions with national, regional, and global issues, and the preparation of students as national and global citizens and productive members of the workforce.

The Call for Action also squarely recognizes the potential downsides of internationalization associated with the local and global competition for prestige, talent, and resources, and acknowledges there are many considerations and pressures that confront higher education leaders and staff as they struggle to pursue their multiple objectives and fulfill expectations. It recognizes that balancing academic

rationales with commercial interests is no easy feat in times of budget cuts, and that higher education institutions need policy and financial support if the internationalization process is to withstand the pressures of competition and retain collaboration as the foundation of the overall process.

Since higher education institutions are the essential actors in creating well-balanced and constructive internationalization strategies, it is to them that the *Call for Action* addresses twelve suggestions. At the same time, higher education institutions must also advocate for policy change at the governmental level if the policies are driving internationalization in directions that might not serve long-term academic purposes.

However, the most important and on-going task for all higher education stakeholders remains the continuous examination and evaluation of the effects of internationalization. What has been the impact of a more internationally open program, classroom, and

The International Association of Universities (IAU) calls upon higher education institutions, when designing and implementing their internationalization strategies, to embrace and implement the following values and principles:

1. Commitment to promote academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and social responsibility.

2. Pursuit of socially responsible practices locally and internationally, such as equity in access and success, and non-discrimination.

3. Adherence to accepted standards of scientific integrity and research ethics.

4. Placement of academic goals such as student learning, the advancement of research, engagement with the community, and addressing global problems at the center of their internationalization efforts.

5. Pursuit of the internationalization of the curriculum as well as extracurricular activities so that non-mobile students, still the overwhelming majority, can also benefit from internationalization and gain the global competences they will need.

6. Engagement in the unprecedented opportunity to create international communities of research, learning, and practice to solve pressing global problems.

7. Affirmation of reciprocal benefit, respect, and fairness as the basis for partnership.

8. Treatment of international students and scholars ethically and respectfully in all aspects of their relationship with the institution.

9. Pursuit of innovative forms of collaboration that address resource differences and enhance human and institutional capacity across nations.

10. Safeguarding and promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity and respecting local concerns and practices when working outside one's own nation.

11. Continuous assessment of the impacts—intended and unintended, positive and negative—of internationalization activities on other institutions.

12. Responding to new internationalization challenges through international dialogue that combines consideration of fundamental values with the search for practical solutions to facilitate interaction between higher education institutions across borders and cultures while respecting and promoting diversity.

—From IAU's *"Affirming Academic Values in Internationalization of Higher Education: A Call for Action",* *April 2012.*

institution on students? How has the creation of new knowledge been influenced by exposure to scholars and researchers from other parts of the world? What impacts are the graduates from these institutions going to have on the society or community in which they live?

Ensuring internationalization is fair and balanced is not an exercise in looking backwards or pining for a past that never existed. Nothing is constant, and changing external realities require constant re-examination of higher education's assumptions,

strategies, and processes. Internationalization is no exception.

*To read more on how international education professionals around the world view internationalization challenges, see the* February/March 2012 issue of IAU Horizons.

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