Regionalism and Higher Education
By Kris Olds and Susan Robertson

Any account of the forces shaping the continuation, or dissolution, of uneven patterns of student and researcher mobility must account for the phenomenon of regionalism. Why? Because regionalism is a phenomenon that has the capacity to deliberately shape patterns of human mobility, including people associated with both the teaching and research sides of the higher education world. And when nation states join together and seek to be more (versus less) deliberate and strategic about shaping flows of people and information, then it is important to take into account the how, with what effect, and why aspects of the phenomenon.

Regionalism and Interregionalism

But what is regionalism and what is the related phenomenon of interregionalism? And how have these phenomena come to be associated with shaping higher education and research futures?

Regionalism is a state-led initiative to enhance integration between countries within a defined region (e.g., Southeast Asia; Europe; North America) such that security and trade are enhanced. It is a phenomenon that has a long history dating back to the mid-to-late colonial era. Regionalism then evolved as state-society-economy relations in world regions changed with independence in the post-colonial era, the end of the Cold War, and the development of a more integrated world economy.

OECD’s recently released Education at a Glance 2011 report and its Science, Technology and Industry Scoreboard 2011 make it evident that global higher education and research landscapes are rapidly evolving. To be sure, countries including the United States, England, and Australia dominate as sources and/or destinations of flows of students; and countries like the United States and England dominate and control, in an even more profound manner, the production and circulation of knowledge at a global scale. However, there are new players in the game of attracting foreign students (e.g., China, South Korea, and Canada) and knowledge production (e.g., China, Brazil, and Singapore), as well some associated trends and phenomena that bear watching.

Regionalism is formally known as the:
[S]tructures, processes, and arrangements that are working toward greater coherence within a specific international region in terms of economic, political, security, socio-cultural, and other kinds of linkages.

Regionalism is often differentiated from regionalization, which is the tangible material flows that cross borders within a region and in doing so generate an evident intraregional integration pattern when viewed
from a global perspective. For example, family firms in Southeast Asia trade heavily amongst each other, and help bind together the region’s economy. This form of regionalization is thus differentiated from the regionalism associated with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—an institution and reform agenda created by nation-states.

Interregionalism is a phenomenon linked to regionalism. Once a regional state-led agenda and architecture is constructed (e.g., the EU), regions reach out to other regions to facilitate the development process via the building of linkages. An example of interregionalism would be the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) initiative, which was established in 1996 by 25 countries from Asia and Europe, along with the European Commission. The logic behind ASEM is to build society-to-society ties between Asia and Europe, with higher education as a key targeted sector.

In doing so—in reaching out—the assertive region also builds up and shapes its own identity while facilitating the construction of its partner region’s identity.

Thinking about regions and interregionalisms is important for in doing so we can make more visible the ways of organizing economic, social, and political relationships in a globalizing era. Recognizing these rather different forms of organizing is important because they are also new or different ways of doing political work. And this is where higher education becomes important—as an increasingly valuable sector through which to enable the building of new political-economic projects and alliances to build knowledge economies and societies.

To What Degrees Is Higher Education and Research Wrapped Up in the Regionalism and Interregionalism Agenda?

While regionalism and interregionalism have been focused on enhancing trade and security for hundreds of years, it is only over the last decade or so that we have seen higher education and research explicitly become incorporated into these development agendas. Why? Because policies related to the reform of higher education and research systems, worldwide, are increasingly driven by ambitions to facilitate and strengthen knowledge economies and societies. Two aspects of this broad development agenda are (a) the emergence of supra-national, regional-scale higher education visions, policies, and programs (which generate distinctive mobility patterns) and (b) new forms of experimental interregional relationship building.

The most well-known example of the incorporation of higher education into the regionalism dynamic is the Bologna Process that led to the construction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). As readers of this article likely know:

The Bologna Process aims to facilitate mobility by providing common tools (such as a European Credit Transfer and accumulation System – ECTS and the Diploma Supplement) to ensure that periods of study abroad are recognized. These tools are used to promote transparency in the emerging European Higher Education Area by allowing degree programmes and qualifications awarded in one country to be understood in another.

An overarching structure (incorporating these elements) is being implemented through the development of national and European qualifications frameworks, which aim to provide a clearly defined system, which is easy for students, institutions, and employers to comprehend.

The Bologna Process has facilitated a regional higher education area in an incremental fashion to the map (click map for larger image).
A linked European Research Area (ERA) is also in the process of being constructed, though its developmental dynamics are somewhat different than the EHEA.

The Bologna Process, in particular, was the trigger for a series of efforts to construct regional higher education areas of various types in other parts of the world, and the development of linkages between higher education (and research) systems in a variety of ‘world regions’ continues apace.

Developments in Asia, Africa, the Persian Gulf, and Latin America, albeit uneven in nature, point to the desire to frame and construct regional agendas and architectures. These include the Brisbane Communiqué Initiative (launched in 2006 though now moribund), the Southeast Asian Higher Education Area (launched in 2008), and the Latin American and Caribbean Higher Education Area (launched in 2009). In addition, a series of notable higher education elements are contained within broader regional initiatives like the West African Monetary and Economic Union, and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Similarly, in late 2010 the Maghreb Ministers of Education, Higher Education, and Scientific Research (collectively representing Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria) agreed to facilitate “cooperation and networking in the areas of education, higher education, and scientific research.”

The incorporation of higher education and research into the regionalism agenda is starting to generate various forms of interregionalisms as well. What we mean by this is that once a regional higher education area or research area has been established, at least partially, relations between that region, and other regions (i.e. partners), then come to be desired. This is often deemed an external or global dimension to region building. These may take the form of relations between (a) regions, such as Europe and Asia; and (b) a region and components of another region, such as Europe and Brazil, Latin America and the United States, and Southeast Asia and Australia. The latter form of engagement—between a newly formed region and a nation (e.g., Europe and the United States; Southeast Asia and the United States; Europe and China)—enables relations to be built, in theory at least, on a more level playing field.

One example of regionalism leading to interregionalism comes straight from an July 8, 2011 newsletter from the European University Association (EUA), one of the most active and effective higher education institutions forging interregional relations of various sorts. In this newsletter, the EUA outlines the ALFA PUENTES project, a three-year initiative:

[A]imed at both supporting Latin American higher education convergence processes and creating deeper working relationships between European and Latin American university associations. Thematic sub-regional projects (Meso-America, Andean Community, and Mercosur) will be connected with a series of transversal activities including a pan-Latin American survey on change forces in higher education, as well as two large Europe-LA University Association Conferences (2012 and 2014).

As the EUA carries on to note:

[T]he ALFA PUENTES will be utilized to generate a discussion on qualifications frameworks and how this may accelerate the Central America objectives of degree convergence. European experience via the Bologna Process will be shared and European project partners as well as Latin American (LA) partners.

The ALFA PUENTES initiative is one of many the Europeans are currently constructing. Others include relations via the ASEM Rectors’ Conference and ASEM Education Ministers’ Meeting—two linkage mechanisms meant to bring European and Asian higher education systems into much closer alignment.

And the Broad Implications?

First, it is important to recognize that regional higher education areas are designed to facilitate regional integration, which means enhanced intraregional flows of student and faculty mobility. An alignment of sorts takes place, and in doing so higher education regions are constructed. What this means is that regionalism, and interregionalism as well, has the potential to facilitate the direction of
flows of student mobility within designated regions, thereby enabling regional development, but possibly reducing mobility to regions not factored into the alignment agendas. For example, a strong Asia-Europe relationship has the potential, at least, to guide more students between Asia and Europe, and thereby reduce the flows out of Asia to other countries and world regions. This said, the numbers of tertiary students in such regions are growing, not stable nor declining, which will likely mute any realignment effect.

Second, these forms of regionalism and interregionalism are at their core facilitative in that they enable the development process to be advanced so that all potential partners (in the future) benefit, at least in theory. For example, the ALFA PUENTE project has the potential to better enable Latin American universities to improve their quality and better engage with universities in many other parts of the world (i.e., not just European universities). The same goes with respect to the Bologna Process and the EHEA—to be sure there is much more intra-European scale mobility, and sharing of resources; but this does not mean others are barred from engaging with what are really much more internationally oriented higher education systems and universities. In other words, the Bologna Process and the development of the ERA are effectively opening up the region to more international engagement, not less, by creating a more open disposition and greater capabilities (strategies, infrastructure systems, policy changes, etc.) to engage across national boundaries. Thus, regionalism is building a platform for enhanced levels of internationalization. The only real hurdle is that potential partners to link up with might be progressively busy and more heavily courted.

Our third comment is a more general one, and it relates to the forces of convergence that regionalism and interregionalism can potentially generate. For a start, increasingly similar institutional architectures might reduce the transaction costs an institution faces in the recognition of qualifications, for example, but it might also tend to place new limits on institutional autonomy, as well as close down the space for a diversity of knowledge bases being produced from very different kinds of institutional and organizational practices. The potential tendency to limit diversity, we would argue, matters in a world where the world’s problems will require creative and imaginative responses and considerable out-of-the-box knowledge production.

And the United States?

The discussion above raises this question: is the United States a country or a defacto region, and what challenge does this emerging phenomenon present for U.S. institutions of higher education?

It is possible to argue that the United States both is and is not a defacto region. It is in the sense that the U.S. higher education system is a large, comprehensive, and diverse one that is reflective of large and widely scaled capabilities (indeed it is stronger than any other world region), while also being thought of as a coherent whole (at least from outside). But it is not a real nor defacto region in that while there is integration across the United States (e.g., via accreditation, credit transfer, student loan system, research funding agencies, and a variety of associations), there is no single or even broadly agreed upon agenda, nor voice, representing the United States. The United States arguably has an assemblage of systems. For example, the U.S. Department of Education cannot effectively act as a representative of the United States in the formation of an interregional linkage among Europe and the United States and the emerging Southeast Asian Higher Education Area (assuming it gets institutionalized). But if not the Department of Education, who else? In short, the United States has a huge presence in the global higher education and research landscape, but it has no singular higher education and research voice when it comes to speaking to emerging world regions.

Given this situation, the key challenge for the United States regarding the incorporation of higher education and research into regionalism and interregionalism agendas emerging around the word is to first enhance its understanding of the phenomenon. Relevant actors in the United States should also find effective ways to participate positively in region-building initiatives, even when the United States is not a formal party to the initiative. It is in the interest of U.S.
higher education, as it is in the interest of everyone else, to ensure that regionalism and interregionalism helps build up stronger higher education and research systems. The alternative—closing down innovation and squeezing open-ended collaboration—is not advantageous to anyone. The development of stronger higher education and research capabilities in any region benefits everyone, for this is not a zero-sum game sector.

Kris Olds is a professor in the Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Senior Fellow, NAFSA. Susan Robertson is a professor in the Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol.

Endnotes


