Redefining Internationalization as Global Responsibility

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Abstract:

For decades, the internationalization of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) was largely driven by the imperatives of a globalizing economy, aiming to educate a generation of decision-makers who could serve the needs of industry and transnational markets. However, the global context has shifted significantly since the 2007 financial crisis. The rise of autocratic regimes, the geopolitical upheaval triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the escalating urgency of the climate crisis have all contributed to a reconfiguration of globalization. As the relationship between nation-states and global governance undergoes profound change, HEIs must reassess their role in this evolving landscape. This discussion paper argues that internationalization can no longer be confined to economic utility. Instead, HEIs must embrace a broader understanding of Global Responsibility. This involves cultivating an awareness that humanity is both the origin and the agent of global developments. HEIs must empower students and researchers to take ownership of their role in shaping the future—socially, politically, and environmentally. Rather than producing graduates who merely adapt to global trends, institutions should foster critical, responsible actors capable of driving transformative change. In doing so, HEIs can reclaim a proactive role in shaping a more equitable and sustainable global future.

Keywords: internationalization, Higher Education Institutions, globalization, Global Responsibility

1. Introduction

For nearly 40 years now, internationalization has become a "hot topic" at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Only between 2010-20, the years before the Covid-pandamic, the number of international students doubled (de Wit, 2020, p. ii). Although most HEIs are following in some way or another an internationalization strategy, it is often not questioned which specific goal internationalization is actually following. Brandenburg and de Wit (2011) even proclaimed the "End of Internationalization", arguing that internationalization became an automatism, resulting in ever more mobility numbers, without questioning the "why and wherefore". In order to revitalize the debate about internationalization, the authors propose "to move away from dogmatic and idealist concepts of internationalization and globalization", understanding "internationalization and globalization in their pure meanings—not as goals in themselves but rather as means to an end", whereas this end for HEIs is to improve the "quality of education and research in a globalized knowledge society" (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011, p. 17). What are the driving forces of internationalization? What does "internationalization of Higher Education Institutions" actually mean? This paper will try to provide some theoretical perspectives for internationalization of HEIs. We will first take a look at the wording of "Internationalization" and what it means in the context of HEIs. It is argued that "Global Responsibility" is an innovative concept for universities that comprises more adequate all aspects of globalization and internationalization, defining a clear goal where internationalization measures should lead to.

2. Internationalization vs. Globalization vs. Global Responsibility

Some confusion derives from the two words **"internationalization"** and **"globalization"**. Unfortunately, the later one is often associated with the economic **"globalization"**, taking place since the 1980s and following a neo-liberal political agenda of global economic integration. Globalization is therefore connotated with something negative, as the negative social and environmental consequences of globalization came into the fore of public debate in recent years. The neo-liberal form of globalization is more and more seen as a dead-end, increasing inequality around the word and causing the rise of nationalism and populism. **"Internationalization"** was therefore seen as a less biased wording, also in the debate of defining internationalization of HEIs (see also Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011).

The main difference between internationalization, globalization and Global Responsibility is the starting point or perspective out of which the need of cooperation is legitimized. Internationalization does still build on the concept of **"nation"**, globalization describes the process of national institutions and structures becoming global, whereas Global Responsibility starts directly from a global perspective. Let's take a closer look at each of the three.

2.1. Internationalization

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines *internationalization* as "[t]he action or process of making something international in character, composition, or scope" (OED Third Edition, 2015). The OED states several definitions for international, the ones most adequate for our context would probably be "(l)ocated or held in one place but involving people of two or more nations; characterized by the presence of many nationalities or cultures; cosmopolitan, multicultural", "[…] advocating cooperation and understanding between nations; looking beyond national attachments or allegiances; cosmopolitan in outlook", and "designating a person from another country; foreign, overseas. Frequently in international student." (OED Third Edition, 2015). The wording "internationalization" emphasizes therefore that we are dealing with an *administrative procedure*. A nationally organized structure, the HEI, seeks to open up its structure for exchange with other nationally organized structures in order to leave for example national attachments behind. Furthermore, despite advocating cooperation and establishing a cosmopolitan outlook, "internationalization" does not say much about why this international cooperation should take place and where it should lead to. In the end, the "nation" remains an important "corner stone" in the concept of internationalization. Internationalization strategies might therefore help to increase intercultural knowledge and reduce some prejudices. However, they will not realize the last step of creating a truly post-national society, a step that might be necessary in the next 30 to 50 years to come, for example to achieve the aim of reducing global warming to 1,5 or to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

2.2. Globalization

There does exist a numberless amount of definitions for globalization (for an overview, see e.g. Al-Rodhan und Stoudmann 2006). It would go beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the phenomena of globalization in detail, this discussion paper will focus therefore on the definition in the OED and

illustrate differences to "internationalization". The OED defines *globalization* as "[t]he action, process, or fact of making global; esp. (in later use) the process by which businesses or other organizations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale, widely considered to be at the expense of national identity" (OED Third Edition, 2009). It describes therefore also a process, this time of becoming *global*, meaning "[…] relating to, or involving the whole world" (OED Third Edition, 2009).

The relationship between globalization and internationalization of HEIs has been analyzed by Altbach and Knight (2007). They defined globalization "as the economic, political, and societal forces pushing 21st century higher education toward greater international involvement", resulting also into "the emergence of the 'knowledge society" (Altbach und Knight 2007, 290). They argue that internationalization strategies of HEIs are "created to cope with globalization and to reap its benefits" (Altbach und Knight 2007, 291). According to the authors, internationalization strategies are created to fulfill the needs of a free trade economy, which needs internationally educated, highly mobile, English speaking students with high intercultural and technological knowledge. In this process, international higher education is in itself becoming a global private good, as private universities seek internationalization strategies, e.g. in the form of creating global branches in other countries and recruiting tuition paying students around the world. Nevertheless, they conclude that "(w)e are at a crossroads—today's emerging programs and practices must ensure that international higher education benefits the public and not simply be a profit center (Altbach und Knight 2007, 304).

In recent years, globalization came under considerable pressure, national movements gained political power in many countries. Brexit, the US-Chinese trade dispute and lately the economic consequences of the Russian assault on Ukraine have lightened the debate of a readjustment of globalization, re-organizing production chains in a more national or at least regional way. Universities do therefore have to find a way to support positive effects of globalization, such as the equal access to knowledge, by avoiding negative effects such as increasing global inequality.

2.3. Global responsibility

This discussion paper argues that the concept of "Global Responsibility" is better suited to incorporate these efforts than the rather technical expression "internationalization". Instead of reducing their role to provide globalization with students educated according to the needs of the industry, HEIs should again actively shape globalization with the most powerful good that they produce: knowledge. HEIs should deliver the right definitions to society to determine where globalization should lead to.

3. (Re-) Defining "Internationalization of HEIs"

Jane Knight, as well as de Wit ad Hunter, has given an important definition to clarify what "internationalization of HEIs" means. Jane Knight defined Internationalization of HEIs as follows:

> "*Internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education*" (Knight 2003, 2).

This definition is derived from the current practice of internationalization at HEIs. Knight argues that "[g]iven the changes in the rationales, providers, and the delivery methods of cross-border higher education, it is important to revisit the question of definition and ensure that the meaning reflects current changes and challenges", which is especially important as "definitions can shape policy". Knight argues further that, in order to be applicable to different countries, a definition should not "specify the rationales, benefits, outcomes, actors, activities, or stakeholders of internationalization" (Knight 2003, 2). Knights definition is therefore a "working definition" in its best sense, derived from current practices at HEIs in order to summarize what is meant with internationalization, also for example to further discuss and shape national policies of internationalization for HEIs. It does therefore not aim to be a "universal" definition, which would also include a (probably subjective and normative) viewpoint on the purpose of internationalization. Knight's definition (of 2003) still assumes that HEIs are mainly regional or national orientated, whose main purpose has so far not been on the international level, as internationalization still needs to be "integrated" into current structures. The term "process" was "deliberately used to convey that internationalization is an ongoing and continuing effort" (Knight 2003, 2), the definition describes therefore the efforts of HEIs in the ongoing megatrend of "globalization" as described above: the process of nations *becoming* global. The "triad" of an international, intercultural or global dimension covers the different aspects of internationalization. The first two dimensions focus on the aspects of relations between two nations or cultures, the last one opens a perspective to "a worldwide scope" of internationalization. Nevertheless, the main emphasis in this definition still lies on the inter-national perspective, as the reason for the scope is not further elaborated.

Knight's definition was further developed by de Wit and Hunter building on a study executed for the European Parliament, in which internationalization of higher education for 17 countries was summarized. Knights definition was augmented as the "the *intentional* process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, *in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society*" (de Wit und Hunter 2015, 3). De Wit and Hunter add therefore the scope that was still vague in Knights definition. It presupposes and defines that the *quality of education and research* are the main purpose of an HEI and it follows that in a globalized world, an international, intercultural or global dimension needs to be integrated to follow this purpose. If only intentional process should be acknowledged as "internationalization" might be questioned, however. What remains to some degree illusive is the expression "to make a meaningful contribution to society", which implies a political agenda for the society. It remains subject to further interpretation what a "meaningful" contribution would be. The universities contribution to society might be its role as "preserver and protectors of universal knowledge and truth" and its social responsibility of free access to education. However, why would every act of internationalization have to be a meaningful contribution to society? It is argued that the concept of Global Responsibility could help to fill some of the gaps of the current definitions.

4. The Concept of Global Responsibility

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *responsibility* as the "[t]he state or fact of being the cause or originator of something", "[c]apability of fulfilling an obligation or duty" and "[t]he state or fact of being in charge of or of having a duty towards a person or thing" (OED Third Edition 2010). Global Responsibility means therefore, to raise the awareness and consciousness that we, the human beings, are cause and originators of what happens on the globe, students and researchers need to be enabled and capable to take this responsibility in order to be in charge for change in the future.

Global Responsibility is an attitude that regards the university in all its aspects and with all its stakeholders. Global Responsibility influences the actions and decisions that an institute takes. Actions have to be tested according to weather they contribute to take Global Responsibility. It is therefore a comprehensive, holistic approach that integrates all faculties, disciplines, research & teaching, as well as students, researchers and staff. Similar to "corporate social responsibility" (CSR), it is a form of self-regulation in order to contribute to global goals of a university. However, in contrast to CSR, Global Responsibility of a university does not aim to contribute to a brand's reputation, it can rather be deeper rooted in the historic responsibility of universities, especially regarding nationalism and globalization, as we have seen above.

As Global Responsibility describes an attitude, it also calls for action. Global responsibility can therefore also be seen as a theoretical concept that backs the existence of "Global Engagement" offices that many universities introduced in recent years. Global Engagement already describes the intention of the university to get involved globally without answering in detail why this engagement is necessary. Global Responsibility focusses on this theoretical basis, Global Engagement is therefore the consequence of Global Responsibility, bringing the responsible attitude into actions on the ground.

Global Responsibility comprises therefore a moral and normative dimension. De Wit called for a "More Ethical and Qualitative Approach" in internationalization and argued that the study for the European Parliament on internationalization in Higher Education was supposed to push the debate into a more normative direction, augmenting the current definition of internationalization with the add-on "[…] to make a meaningful contribution to society" (see de Wit, Howard, und Egron-Polak 2015). The Global Responsibility approach develops this argument further, as responsibility seeks per se to be meaningful and has a clear defined intention.

5. Conclusion

To some degree, HEIs have always been "international" institutions. During the last decades "internationalization of HEIs" became ever more important, following the economic dynamics of globalization. However, the financial and euro crisis and raising populism have increasingly put the current model of globalization into question. Furthermore, HEIs have to find answers to complex global problems, such as climate change. HEIs have to adapt to these new circumstances, questing their current concepts and motivations of internationalization. The question can be put forward, if universities should be shaped by the economic conditions of globalization or if universities should play a stronger and more self-confident role to shape globalization by developing new ideas. "Global

Responsibility" is a concept that could clarify some of the pitfalls of internationalization. It represents rather an attitude than a process. It inherently defines why internationalization should take place. Universities internationalize, because they developed a global perspective, a global identity, and acknowledge their responsibility towards whole. The activities of the HEI, may it be in research or education, can then be organized according to this paradigm. This may regard internationalization abroad, at home; the creation of research alliances, capacity building projects or e-learning programs at all different faculties and disciplines. Furthermore, it remains the tasks of the scholars to define what are global problems that need a global response, Global Responsibility remains therefore also a flexible concept. "Global Responsibility" has a further advantage: it makes the HEI accountable a global society and not to national interests. It shapes therefore, through research and education, the field for a society of the future.

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