

Executive Summary

Internationalism in Higher Education: A Review

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Introduction

1. Internationalism in higher education is an issue that is the focus of increasing attention. But it is ill defined, and ill understood. The main objective of this paper is to provide an evidence-based review of developments in the internationalization of higher education in order to explore their consequences and implications for the UK in particular.

International trends and developments

2. Five major trends have shaped international developments. First, the number of students studying outside their home country has risen and will continue to rise, though the students are not evenly distributed across countries in terms of either their sources or their destinations. In particular, there has been a large increase in the number of students coming from a small number of Asian countries, and a large increase in the numbers of foreign students in the US, UK, Australia, Germany and Japan.

3. Second, staff mobility has also risen rapidly, in part because of the increase in the mobility of research students. Whereas once this was seen exclusively in terms of “brain drain” and “brain gain”, the notion of “brain circulation” is gaining currency, with a recognition that scientists working overseas very often return to their home countries in due course, or transfer knowledge, expertise and sometimes industrial cooperation to their home countries.

4. Third, there has been a rapid increase in trans-national education, defined as universities in one way or another setting up shop in overseas locations. The countries most actively engaged in the trans-national provision are the USA, the UK and Australia. In some importing countries trans-national provision provides a significant proportion of the higher education offering. This often combines the offshore presence of foreign institutions with e-learning.

5. Fourth, recent increases in international teaching activities have been concentrated in professional subjects such as business and IT. Particularly in countries where students pay (though less so where they do not) sciences and humanities subjects have not attracted as many overseas students as professional ones.

6. Finally, while research has always been an area for international collaboration, there is evidence that international collaboration in research has increased substantially in recent years. One worrying trend is that there is evidence that increases in research students have been modest in comparison with those of non-research degree students in Australia and the UK. This seems surprising, given the emerging understanding about the economic role of science, in which highly trained scientific labour plays an important role in straddling countries to help them develop in synergetic ways.

Underlying interests and factors

7. Underlying these developments are the changing interests of governments, institutions and individual students, which are increasingly being influenced by global competition and markets.

8. Governments have various economic and political interests in their higher education systems, which in turn have an impact on what happens internationally. For example, government policies tend to influence significantly the size and responsiveness of the domestic higher education system in meeting and domestic demand. If the size of the sector is too small for domestic demand, and if the government does not have a framework for private providers to enter higher education, a proportion of their students may end up studying abroad.

9. The regulatory and quality assurance requirements of such countries can also have a powerful influence on the manner in which foreign institutions develop their activities in these countries. Some countries have positively discouraged overseas universities from establishing a presence by highly restrictive quality assurance regimes. Others have welcomed overseas universities, seeing them as a means both of developing their own capabilities and of attracting students from neighbouring countries.

10. For exporting countries, government policies can shape the level of domestic competition among higher education institutions both for students and for public funds. Or, as in the case of the United Kingdom and Australia, government policy can substantially curtail the income universities can receive from domestic students, while leaving unregulated the fees charged to overseas students. In turn, directly or indirectly, this can encourage institutions to undertake international activities. Thus, government policies can be a major driver for countries to turn into importers or exporters of higher education.

11. For developed countries, their geopolitical and economic interests also lead to specific rationales that exporting countries adopt for their blend of internationalism. According to the OECD, developed countries can have three types of rationale for why they support internationalism, which are not mutually exclusive. These are: the development of mutual understanding, acquiring human resources, and revenue generation.

12. Developed countries have traditionally supported internationalism principally to enhance mutual understanding among different cultures; but the economic and competitive concerns of acquiring human resources and revenue generation that have driven many of the new developments are new.

13. Among some countries there is emerging a more integrated economic approach to internationalizing higher education, which emphasizes the development both of scientific research capacity and of education, with a view to developing a knowledge-based economy. Singapore is a good example of this.

14. At institutional level, institutions too are increasingly motivated by their desire to enhance their own international reputation and also by their need to increase their revenues. Such motives are often driven by the tight national competition for students and/or adverse public funding conditions in their home countries – which leads them to seek students and income from overseas.

15. There appear to be commensurate changes in the motives of individual students too. Students increasingly see higher education as a route to employment. Their decisions are influenced by the perceived costs and benefits as well as their ability to pay. It is interesting that the market for overseas students became dominated by Anglophone countries in the 1990s, in spite of the fact that these countries charge full cost fees

whereas other countries, such as Germany or France, charge low or no fees to overseas students. This implies that the perceived benefits from qualifications in Anglophone countries began to outweigh the considerably cheaper costs of studying in others, helped by access to the English language and active marketing.

16. In summary, the interests of government, institutions and individuals appear to be changing in mutually reinforcing ways, all leading to a greater market-orientation of higher education from an international perspective. It is this market orientation that appears to be the new driver of international trends today – both in importing and exporting countries. However, the different capacities of exporting countries, most notably concerning language, appear to have compelled them to take different approaches. Large global markets have emerged around fee paying students. Smaller global markets appear to be emerging around high calibre students, with institutions and countries trying to attract them to enhance their reputation.

Consequences

17. The most significant consequence of such market driven developments is that the impact of internationalism is unevenly (and some would say inequitably) distributed between countries and between individuals. As far as the importers are concerned, poorer countries, or individuals, have more limited options, while larger countries have better prospects to attract competing institutions from abroad.

18. This is not to say that more opportunities to import higher education are necessarily a good thing. Quite apart from the issue of the quality of the provision made by exporting countries, which is not of a uniformly high standard, scrambling foreign institutions can make policy making in higher education problematic for middle income developing countries.

19. And while market-led developments are helpful for the expansion of activities for which students are willing to pay, such as professional education, they may result in an imbalance in provision with a decline in those other activities that cannot attract as many fee paying students, such as research or non-professional subjects. This is so both as regards the subjects studied by students going abroad, and also overseas universities engaging in trans-national provision. As a consequence, the sought-after improvement in capacity may not be available.

20. Against the generality of the trends described here, there are also some counter-market developments. The tradition of openness and collaboration in higher education along with a growing open source software culture is leading to several “open” initiatives such as MIT’s OpenCourseWare and the Open Knowledge Initiative. Nevertheless, though it is too early to tell the overall impact of these initiatives, it is unlikely that they will reverse the general trend towards the market orientation of international higher education.

Implications

21. Internationalism can have significant benefits; it can also have risks.

22. At the **input** level, increased student access and an increasingly international pool of candidates for higher education are the main benefits. Countries without well-developed higher education systems, and the citizens of those countries, can have access to higher education of the highest quality, and this can help build domestic capacity. However, the risk is that international opportunities are likely to be unevenly distributed at national and individual levels, militating against poorer, smaller countries and poorer students.

23. In **process** terms, the main benefits may be international collaboration in offshore courses, multi-cultural campuses and internationalised curricula. On the other hand, market-driven competition may jeopardize the traditional ethos of cooperation.

24. In **output** terms, an important global benefit is an increase in trained human resources in professional fields where demand is significant. On the other hand, a high concentration of students in such subjects could lead to a certain lack of diversity at institutional, national and global levels. Another risk is that research training may be given a disproportionately low emphasis in comparison with taught programs. Finally, there is a risk that international markets may lead to an erosion of quality, unless quality assurance mechanisms are put in place in a collaborative manner.

25. There are several **policy implications for the UK**. First, internationalism that is purely market-oriented may be inadequate to support the scientific research training of high calibre international students which could bring benefits – both to the UK and to the sending countries.

26. A second lesson for the UK as a country committed to international development is that the current thrust of internationalism is unlikely to solve the problems of the least developed countries, and may indeed exacerbate it.

27. Third, domestic funding policies create powerful incentives for institutions in their international activities. The question is whether the current policy framework skews institutional attention away from domestic and European students, and towards international students.

28. Internationalism is clearly a subject that requires significant and continuing policy attention. It is important to engage in systematic data collection both quantitative and qualitative, and to undertake a policy review periodically. The future of internationalism is too important to be shaped as a series of unintended consequences of miscellaneous policies or market forces.