

Internationalization of Higher Education and the Future of the Planet

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Abstract

International mobility, the hallmark activity of internationalization of higher education, relies heavily on air travel, which is contributing directly to the global climate crisis. Commitments to immediate and creative solutions to offset these detrimental environmental effects must be embraced by the international higher education community.

Climate scientists have been warning us for years about the shifting ecological realities of the planet, with the understanding now coalescing around the idea that we have a veritable climate emergency on our hands.

For higher education specialists who take a particular interest in matters of internationalization and global engagement, these developments highlight two profoundly important, and ironically contradictory, truths. Namely, the internationalization of higher education, as it is commonly operationalized globally, contributes directly to the climate degradation we are witnessing all around us. At the same time, international collaboration in higher education can and must play an active role in addressing this planetary crisis. How will this story unfold over the next several decades?

Internationalizing with Purpose

There are a multitude of motivations to internationalize. Studies from the American Council on Education, the European Association for International Education, the International Association of Universities, and others, indicate that higher education institutions

around the world are keen to foster internationalization in order to do everything from enhancing student learning outcomes and employability prospects, to attracting top academic talent, advancing research agendas, and raising institutional visibility and prestige, among other rationales.

Meanwhile, a broader public good agenda, which has long been implied in relation to internationalization, is becoming more explicit. A widely used definition for internationalization—coined by Hans de Wit, Fiona Hunter, Eva Egron-Polak, and Laura Howard for the 2015 European Parliament study, *Internationalisation of Higher Education*, insists that internationalization should be a process undertaken “in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society.”

Aspiring to exert a positive influence on key actors and society at large is laudable. However, the champions of internationalization of higher education cannot expect to succeed in improving the human condition without also attending purposefully to the realities of the faltering natural world around us.

Internationalization’s Dirty Little (Climate) Secret

Ironically, student mobility—the signature manifestation of internationalization around the world—is highly damaging to the planet. Recent estimates have put the number of internationally mobile students at around 5 million worldwide. The benefits of this activity are well documented. The Erasmus student mobility program in Europe, for example, shows evidence of a range of personal, social, academic, and professional advantages accruing to students who take part in Erasmus international study experiences. An extensive body of literature over the last several decades supports these findings. Meanwhile, the benefits of mobility can extend beyond those directly participating in the experience. For example, hosting international students can generate enormous revenue streams for individual institutions and entire economies; indeed, the impact of international students in the United States is estimated to have topped \$42 billion in 2017.

But is there a cost to the global student mobility phenomenon? When it comes to the health of the planet, there may very well be. A recent study published in the *Journal of Cleaner Production* looked at the international mobility figures for degree-seeking students as calculated by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, and specifically considered the likely air travel patterns connected to these movements. The study found that global greenhouse gas “emissions associated with international student mobility were between 14.01 and 38.54 megatons of CO₂ equivalent per year in 2014.” These figures are largely double the estimates for 1999 and, at the high end, at a similar level to the greenhouse gas emissions outputs of entire countries, such as Croatia and Tunisia. For a community of educators who believes in the overarching premise that internationalization helps to make the world a better place, this is bitter pill to swallow.

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The Road to Redemption

Luckily, there is movement afoot to align higher education generally, and the aspirations of internationalization more specifically, with an Earth-friendly agenda. A range of organizations and institutions are galvanized around considerations of sustainability. These include the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative, the International Sustainable Campus Network, and the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. Individuals are offering creative solutions, as well. For example, the winning poster presentation at the 2018 EAIE annual conference, authored by Scott Blair and Laura Howard, issued a call for “the greening of comprehensive internationalization.” While small in scope yet in comparison to the challenges they aim to address, these efforts are raising awareness and securing commitments to action at the level of individuals and institutions in new and innovative ways. One clear sign of the traction that this topic has gained in recent years is the fact that, since 2010, Universitas Indonesia has overseen the UI GreenMetric international ranking of institutions, which aims to draw attention to efforts by universities around the world to foster green campuses and sustainability agendas.

Much more profound, however, is the game-changing potential that a commitment to internationalization at home may bring to this effort. Focusing on ways to reduce mobility,

yet still ensure transformational international and intercultural learning—through local community resources, technological innovations, and other creative strategies—offers a vitally important way forward.

Meanwhile, our collective thinking about international mobility for students (and academics) also needs to be carefully reconsidered. At a minimum, particularly in high-density/high-mobility regions, such as Europe, incentives for using alternatives to damaging air travel should be the norm. Increasingly, higher education institutions that foster student mobility consider and enact carbon-offsetting actions, and these efforts should be pursued widely and aggressively.

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The internationalization of higher education—when designed and deployed intelligently and responsibly—can yield powerfully positive results in the world. However, the community of individuals, educators, policy makers, and others, who believe in the potential for internationalization to build bridges of deeper knowledge and foster human compassion, must work quickly and collaboratively to understand our planetary impact and change our habits. Our shared future is at stake. ▲