

Managing Internationalization in a Complex Research Landscape

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In the past decade, internationalization has received stronger attention in the strategic documents of universities all over the world. With regard to research, internationalization refers to activities and processes that seek to integrate a global dimension in order to improve research impact and quality. Empirically, internationalization has demonstrated a number of positive effects on research, such as stronger productivity and quality, increased dissemination of findings, widened access to resources, and more intensive cultivation and circulation of ideas. While it is acknowledged that internationalization has created added value for nationally embedded research and higher education institutions, recently it has also become an issue of strategic concern at the national and institutional levels, since a broader diversity of countries today participate in high-level and high-quality scientific activities. Some of these countries have not traditionally been considered strong science nations.

China in particular is standing out from the crowd. It is today the largest producer of scientific articles in the world and is a counter pole to the United States and Europe within many fields, also with respect to quality. The total amount of research and development investments in China exceeds that of the European Union. China is not the only country that has experienced rapid growth in research output. Countries such as India, Qatar, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, and others have also quickly improved their scientific capacity. In Europe, this development has not gone unnoticed in academic and policy circles, and it is the topic of many discussions at both the national and multilateral levels.

Increased Awareness in Europe

Lately, university administrations in Europe have had to increase awareness and take action on a broad number of issues with respect to internationalization of research, such as export controls regulations, national security issues, data regulation, ethics dumping, etc. The need to deal with these issues in a structured way has arisen in other parts of the world as well, not the least in the United States. In Sweden, representatives of academia, civil society, and government show increasing concern that internationalization should be pursued responsibly. University administrations focus specifically on the need to assess challenges and opportunities related to international collaborations. This need is particularly pertinent when cooperating with partners in countries with rapidly developing research systems or with histories of corruption or human rights violations, or in countries that are not governed democratically.

Recently, a network of research-intensive universities in Sweden consisting of Lund University, Karolinska Institutet, and KTH Royal Institute of Technology, together with the Swedish Foundation for Internationalization of Research and Higher Education, has started working together to provide guidelines for responsible internationalization and push for deeper reflection among researchers building collaborative relationships in an international context. There is a particular focus on collaborations with countries governed by authoritarian governments, or whose research systems have developed rapidly. In such collaborations, it is particularly important to balance the benefits with the risks associated with working in such an environment. While collaborations are most often formed between individuals, we must be aware here that research activities are embedded in institutional contexts with diverse norms and regulations. Some of the risks that have been identified are related to different areas. In my discussions with researchers,

Abstract

Universities seeking to produce relevant research need to be involved internationally. This creates opportunities, but also causes clashes related to research norms and practices. A new tool set is needed in order to internationalize research responsibly.

The long-term solution must be to maintain open borders and freedom to conduct science—with responsible research practices.

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administrative staff, and university management in Sweden, some of the most pressing concerns include actual risks for the personal safety of test subjects or researchers; ethics dumping; dual use of technology; restrictions on academic freedom; reputational risk to the university or the researchers; and guilt by association (by working with researchers from certain countries).

Such risks are of course not only present in collaborations with researchers in emerging science nations, they may also concern collaborations with researchers in higher-income/Western countries. However, the rapid development of a research system is sometimes associated with a lag in regulation and a lack of experience in handling, for instance, ethical transgressions or infringements on intellectual property. Moreover, authoritarian states have often been criticized for their attacks on academic freedom and lack of respect for human rights. However, these conditions alone should not be reasons to restrict global scientific collaboration, with the exception of obvious cases where, for example, collaborations violate human rights, academic freedom is clearly affected, or test subjects are in immediate danger.

Toward a Structured Approach

The long-term solution must be to maintain open borders and freedom to conduct science—with responsible research practices. As history has shown, this is indispensable to advance science for the benefit of humanity and to find solutions to global challenges. Nonetheless, we should not ignore the obvious challenges that we are facing with a more diverse science landscape and blurred lines between science, politics, and business. Today, internationalization needs to be conducted in a more informed and responsible fashion—down to the individual researcher. In this respect, the Swedish university network has crucial dimensions to consider: with whom, why, and how a collaboration takes place; institutional autonomy; cultural and social contexts; legal contexts; and research ethics.

Universities and their management teams need to be aware of their responsibility in setting up an enabling, well-informed, and structured environment for researchers engaging in international collaborations. A structured process, administrative support, and resources are needed to identify, assess, handle, and monitor opportunities and risks of international collaborations. Rather than setting up barriers, the way forward for universities must be to enhance their competencies and abilities to manage internationalization, in order to reduce risks and increase possibilities for mutual benefits. ▲