

**Abstract**

Internationalization is a multifaceted and evolving phenomenon, and its theories and definitions continue to be adjusted to match new and evolving understandings. Given the current complicated global environment, it is important to challenge past mostly market-oriented perceptions, and define relevant new directions for internationalization in higher education.

## Internationalization in Higher Education: Critical Reflections on Its Conceptual Evolution

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In 1995, Jane Knight and I wrote that there was no simple, unique or all-encompassing definition of internationalization of higher education institutions and that it would not be helpful if internationalization became a “catch-all” phrase for everything and anything international. In 2018, 23 years later, we wrote that that notion was probably even truer at the time and that internationalization had become a very broad and varied concept, including new rationales, approaches, and strategies in different and constantly changing contexts. Others, too, stress that internationalization in higher education is a multifaceted and evolving phenomenon, and its concept continues to be refined and revised, and theories and definitions adjusted to match new and evolving understandings. It is these two dimensions—multifaceted and evolving—that are the key characteristics of internationalization of higher education. One could also add the same about several of its components, such as study abroad, international students, internationalization at home, transnational or cross-border education, digitalization, Sustainable Development Goals, the use of terms like “global citizenship,” and so on.

Postpandemic and in current complicated geopolitical global challenges, it is important to challenge past perceptions and to define relevant new directions for internationalization in higher education.

**Problematic Sloppiness**

One can argue though that over the past five decades, there has evolved a problematic sloppiness in the use of the term “internationalization” in the context of higher education, mixing and confusing the “why” (the rationales for internationalization), the “what” (its programs and actions), the “how” (its organization), the “impact” (its outcomes) and the “who” (partnerships), and ignoring the “where” (its context). One can also argue that

its perception by higher education leaders, both institutional and national, has moved more toward competition, mobility for a small elite, and revenue generation rather than toward cooperation and global learning for all.

There is no model of, or approach to, internationalization that fits all; its diversity is institutionally, locally, nationally, and regionally defined, and has changed and evolved over time in response to changing contexts and arising challenges. This adaptation to historical and geographical contexts is one of its strengths. At the same time, it is, together with its multifacetedness, its main problem, since the meaning of “internationalization” has been used by stakeholders in a diverse range of—in some cases even strongly opposing—meanings and policies, with an overarching tendency toward competition and marketization; in other words, toward internationalization as an industry.

### Implications for the Meaning of Internationalization

The 2004 definition of internationalization in higher education by Knight as “a process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of postsecondary education” is widely accepted as a working definition and had its foundation in her 1993 institution-focused definition of internationalization as a process. It challenged the international dimensions of the higher education sector from what had previously been a rather static, ad hoc, and fragmented approach, based on activities and related administrative procedures, mainly tucked away in the international offices of higher education institutions, and often related to governmental bureaucracies, termed as international education.

Instead, the Knight definition emphasized a process approach involving a wide range of internal (academics, students, administrators) and external (national and local governments, private sector, international entities) stakeholders. Knight’s definition of internationalization as a process was an important step forward, but it brought new challenges to the forefront as it involved several misconceptions and unintended consequences, and left ample room for different approaches to understanding internationalization, with more competitive and economic revenue-driven forms taking dominance above the more traditional forms of cooperation and exchange. In that respect, the gradual shift from the term “international education” to “internationalization of higher education” did not create sufficient clarity about its meaning and focus, and even rechanneled it into a narrow economic direction.

### A Counterreaction

At the turn of the century, proponents of such ideas as “internationalization at home” in Europe in 1999, “internationalization of the curriculum” in Australia and the United Kingdom, and “comprehensive internationalization” in the United States started criticizing that exclusive focus on mobility and economic rationales as synonym for internationalization. In response to this broad range of concerns it was timely to update Knight’s 2003 definition, making it clear that the internationalization process needs to be intentional and giving it a clearer direction and focus on inclusiveness and social responsibility. Accordingly, a new definition of internationalization emerged in 2015, emphasizing these factors. Although these concepts and the 2015 definition have become part of the common discourse, in reality they are used more as rhetoric than a basis for concrete actions.

### Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation behind the concept of internationalization of higher education has evolved over the last four decades. In 1996, Teichler described research on international education as occasional, coincidental, sporadic, and episodic. In the following years, an evolution in the conceptual thinking about internationalization in and of higher education took place. The *Journal of Studies in International Education*, founded in 1997, was an important factor in that process, but internationalization has also become one of the main themes in other higher education journals, and there are many more books, blogs, and webinars on internationalization as well. At the same time, the notion of internationalization of higher education as a Western paradigm dominated by Western authors is increasingly challenged and addressed by a more diverse global scholar community, even though its overall theoretical foundation is still rather weak.

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### **Critical Reflections for the Future**

One should not ignore the positive potentials of internationalization in higher education, but also be aware of the growing inequality in its dimensions, which has only increased over the recent period. Internationalization as a process of higher education requires more clarity on the meaning, rationales behind it, its programs and its organization, as well as its outcomes/impact. Accepting and describing its multifacetedness and historical and geographic contextuality is an essential starting point.

Owing to sloppy use of the term, internationalization of and in higher education has become an obstacle rather than a solution to the future of higher education, and it is too easy to blame external factors and actors. Both scholars and policy makers need to be clearer about what they mean and about the context in which they use this or that meaning of internationalization and its different dimensions. What remains crucial for the coming decade is the need to move from short-term neoliberal approaches to long-term societal interests, from international education as a benefit for a small elite toward global learning for all, and from a Western paradigm to a global and equal concept. This is truer than ever given the current geopolitical environment and bearing in mind that governments and institutions tend to pay only lip service to inclusion and equality, continuing to give preference to mobility and revenue as drivers of internationalization. ▲