

Present and Future of Internationalization of Higher Education: Insights from the Sixth IAU Global Survey

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Abstract

The sixth IAU Global Survey comes on time to draw a holistic picture of internationalization of higher education around the world, to capture key changes over the period of 2018-2022, including the COVID-19 pandemic, and to give hints on how internationalization could evolve in the future. Key findings of this survey presented provide a tool to enhance quality, inclusion, equity, and social responsibility through internationalization.

In 2023, five years after the fifth edition, the International Association of Universities (IAU) conducted the sixth edition of the global survey on the internationalization of higher education. Five years is a good time to allow for evolutions to take place and to be analyzed, and at the same time, a not too long time to have a completely different situation, thus allowing for meaningful comparisons over time.

However, the last five years witnessed major changes in the world that influenced the evolution of internationalization of higher education. It is enough to think about the COVID-19 pandemic or the changed geopolitics with new tensions between countries emerging and new wars ravaging the world.

Therefore, the sixth IAU Global Survey comes on time to draw a holistic picture of internationalization of higher education around the world, to capture the aforementioned changes, and to give hints on how internationalization could evolve in the future.

The sixth IAU Global Survey was conducted in three languages (English, French, and Spanish) through an online institutional questionnaire between January and June 2023. It sheds light on the most important trends and evolutions in internationalization around the world and provides for some interesting comparisons between private and public higher education institutions (HEIs), as well as between HEIs across different regions of the world. It also provides information on the evolution of some trends over time, when comparing the results with previous editions, whenever this is possible.

Insights from Survey Results

It is important to mention the high importance that academic leadership all around the world attributes to internationalization, and that such importance has generally increased also at HEIs that consider internationalization of low importance. This result reverses a worrying trend of growing inequality among HEIs that was highlighted in the fifth edition of the survey, and gives hope for the future.

Another positive result from the survey is the fact that HEIs around the world see increased international cooperation and capacity-building as the main benefits of internationalization, a trend already highlighted by the results of the fifth global survey and confirmed by the present edition. Although in terms of priority of internationalization activities there is still a strong focus on student mobility, international cooperation and capacity-building are the activities that increased the most over the last five years, showing a move toward a convergence between expected benefits and activities to achieve them.

The results of the survey also build on the fact that the world is very diverse, and that for some aspects of internationalization, there is no common denominator at the global level, as exemplified, for instance, by the great variety of risks and challenges/obstacles identified. In some cases, regional analysis helps explain this great variety, for instance with the clear identification of "brain drain" as the most important risk in Sub-Saharan Africa. But in other cases, diversity persists also at the regional level, showing that multiple factors other than the geographic location of institutions are important in defining trends.

The survey results also underline the commonly understood nature of internationalization as a strategic process. At the same time, they underline some limitations, especially

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in terms of funding. They also show how internationalization is still a top-down process mainly steered by academic leadership and dedicated internationalization offices. This calls for a reflection on the possible risk of insufficient engagement of the rest of the academic community that such an approach implies.

There is still a geographic imbalance at the global level, with regions in the Global North (Europe and North America) still catching the most attention, while South-South cooperation, besides intraregional, is still not considered a priority. It confirms the tendency towards regionalization in some regions but not in others, and the specificity of North America as a region, which more often than not presents divergent results from other regions.

This diversity reminds us that benefits and challenges are not equally distributed around the world, and that there is a persistent risk of inequality in internationalization.

Another interesting result is the fact that the role played by the COVID-19 pandemic in driving changes in internationalization has been much less prominent than expected. The pandemic did drive some changes, especially in the development of virtual internationalization, but it has not been the only or the most determinant factor behind many of the changes internationalization has undergone over the last five years.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the sixth IAU Global Survey provides insights into the evolution of some specific aspects of internationalization, for example in teaching and learning, research and community engagement, as well as into the links between internationalization and other important priorities, such as sustainable development or diversity, equity, and inclusion. Internationalization also plays a positive role in fighting racism and xenophobia, promoting intercultural understanding, and achieving sustainable development.

Conclusion

In summary, the sixth IAU Global Survey provides a present-time picture of internationalization around the world, its evolution over the recent years, and the possible ways it could evolve in the future.

The positive developments in internationalization, manifested in the responses to the sixth IAU Global Survey, should be celebrated but at the same time, not all results of the survey are positive. Some improvements are still marginal and fragmented, and are present more in the discourse than in practice. Exclusion and inequality are still prevailing.

Moreover, the survey is by no means exhaustive, and it is probably posing more questions than it is answering. For many aspects, the survey results are a starting point for more research. Despite limitations and possible needs for improvement, the sixth IAU Global Survey remains the only comprehensive institutional survey on internationalization at the global level and provides invaluable information that is not available anywhere else. The results of the sixth IAU Global Survey, based on information and perceptions provided by university leaders in internationalization around the globe, illustrate the tension between ambitious intentions, positive initiatives, and major challenges.

The IAU Global Survey results, based on a collaborative effort by IAU and global partners, are best to be seen as a tool to enhance quality, inclusion, equity, and social responsibility as key drivers for internationalization for the coming five years during which current challenges and expectations will not abate. ▲

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The survey was organized by IAU in partnership with 16 lead organizations around the globe. All partners are listed on the IAU website. CIHE and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto, Canada, partnered in the framework of the Future of Internationalization Partnership (FIP) Project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The full report is available on the IAU website for free download.