



GLOBAL

## A changing view of the benefits of HE internationalisation

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Until recently, internationalisation of higher education was largely considered an end in itself. In the past few years, however, the conversation has changed considerably, and internationalisation is framed as a means of improving the quality of education and research as well as serving larger social goals.

In 2018, the International Association of Universities (IAU) conducted its fifth global survey, an online survey about higher education internationalisation whose first edition was conducted in 2003.

Replies to the current survey were received from 907 institutions from 126 countries around the world. Full results will be published later in 2019. Included in the most recent survey, as well as in earlier editions, were questions about respondents' perceptions of the benefits of internationalisation and the reasons their institutions chose to engage in it.

### Ranking the benefits of internationalisation

Respondents were asked to select and rank the top three expected benefits from a proposed list of 10, presented in the following order:

- • Enhanced international cooperation and capacity building.
- • Enhanced internationalisation of the curriculum/ internationalisation at home.
- • Enhanced prestige/profile for the institution.
- • Improved graduate employability.
- • Improved quality of teaching and learning.
- • Increased international awareness of/deeper engagement with global issues by students.
- • Increased international networking by faculty and researchers.
- • Increased/diversified revenue generation.

- Opportunity to benchmark/compare institutional performance within the context of international good practice.
- Strengthened institutional research and knowledge production capacity.

Although respondents had the option of choosing ‘Other’ and identifying a benefit that was not included in this list, only a minimal percentage of respondents did so.

Slightly more than one-third (36%) of the respondents chose ‘enhanced international cooperation and capacity building’ as the most important benefit of internationalisation, while ‘improved quality of teaching and learning’ was the second top choice, cited by 17% as the most important benefit.

No clear overall third most important benefit can be easily identified among the proposed options as all other benefits were selected by significantly lower percentages of higher education institutions than the top two, and several options were chosen by similar percentages of higher education institutions.

Looking at the respondents’ first, second and third choices together underscores that ‘enhanced international cooperation and capacity building’ and ‘improved quality of teaching and learning’ are considered the two most important benefits.

These results are quite unexpected if one considers that the practical benefits that are often cited by policy-makers and institutional leaders, and which were on the list of options as well, were not identified among the top three benefits.

For example, respondents to the current survey in most regions did not select benefits such as ‘improved graduate employability’ or ‘increased/diversified revenue generation’. Only in North America was ‘increased/diversified revenue generation’ ranked as the third most important benefit.

### **Regional analysis**

Due to the number of replies received in the fifth survey it was possible to do a regional analysis, even if the statistical relevance of results is not the same for all regions. Care is needed in analysing results for North America and especially the Middle East because of their statistical relevance.

Respondents were asked to specify the country where their institution was located and countries were then classified into six world regions: Africa, Asia and Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, Middle East, North America.

‘Enhanced international cooperation and capacity building’ was the most important benefit cited in all regions except North America, where it was the second.

It is worth mentioning that 48% of respondents from Mexican higher education institutions

listed this as the most important benefit. At the country level, Mexico also constitutes the single country from which the IAU received the largest number of replies in this edition of the survey.

‘Improved quality of teaching and learning’ is ranked as second in all regions except the Middle East, where it is ranked third, and again in North America, where it is not even ranked in the top three.

It is also worth noting the importance given to ‘enhanced internationalisation of the curriculum/ internationalisation at home’. It is ranked second by respondents in Asia and Pacific and the Middle East, and it is ranked third in North America.

North America is an interesting case as it is the only region that diverges quite significantly from the overall global trend. The most important benefit reported by North American respondents is ‘increased international awareness of/deeper engagement with global issues by students’.

However, as noted above, caution should be used in interpreting results for North America as the number of replies collected for North America in the fifth Global Survey is low compared to the overall population of higher education institutions in the United States and Canada, which constitute the North American region in this survey.

In order to test these results, they can be compared to the findings of the American Council on Education (ACE) 2017 survey *Mapping Internationalization on US Campuses*.

The ACE survey, which focuses only on US higher education institutions, had the same finding as the IAU survey. ‘Improving student preparedness for a global era’ was the most important reason for internationalising selected by respondents to the ACE survey, which is similar to and thus confirms the IAU results, at least for the US higher education institutions within North America.

### **Change of perception of benefits over time**

Comparing the results of the IAU fifth Global Survey with those of the previous editions, and especially with the fourth Global Survey, conducted in 2013, a significant change in the perception of expected benefits of internationalisation can be seen.

In the previous surveys, the majority of respondents identified ‘increased international awareness of/deeper engagement with global issues by students’ as the most important benefit. In contrast, this option is not even in the top three in the current list of perceived benefits at the global level, and, at regional level, it retains the top place only in North America, while it is ranked third in Latin America and the Caribbean and it is absent from the top three in all other regions.

Though the focus on quality of teaching and learning and on the curriculum (listed as two separate benefits in the survey) might be viewed as very closely related benefits, the fact that

the option specifically focusing on student learning was not ranked as important, as previously, is interesting.

On the other hand, the importance of ‘enhanced international cooperation and capacity building’ has grown over time. This benefit was ranked third most important in both the third and fourth editions, and rises to become the most important benefit, by a significant margin, in the current survey.

The importance of ‘improved quality of teaching and learning’ remains stable over time, as this was ranked the second most important benefit in all previous surveys except in the second Global Survey.

This is a noteworthy result, suggesting that higher education institutions are viewing the benefits of internationalisation in a more balanced manner, focusing not only on the students but also on institutional strengthening and beyond the institution on external societal issues.

There can be multiple interpretations of these changes from previous editions of the survey. One explanation could be that higher education institutions are taking for granted that the benefits for students are already being achieved and that the most important benefit of internationalisation right now is that it strengthens cooperation between higher education institutions and capacity building for higher education institutions in need.

Although the latter benefit is still about improving and strengthening higher education, the rise in its importance in the survey might be interpreted as higher education institutions’ concern with global inequity and a view that internationalisation can be an instrument to narrow these gaps between institutions, communities and countries.

Another explanation might be that in the current climate of growing nationalism and xenophobia in some countries around the world, higher education institutions see internationalisation, and especially cooperation and capacity building, as an answer to the challenges posed by this climate.

Finally, this result might also be a partial reaction to the often cited invitation to view internationalisation in a broader sense, focusing in equal measure on students, their mobility and other institutional and societal goals.

If this is true, it means that higher education institutions are seeing internationalisation of higher education as not only a process that contributes to improving the quality of education, but also as a process that brings a positive contribution to society.

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