

## **Dearth of evidence of value of international cooperation**

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Transnational cooperation in teaching and research has historically been at the core of internationalisation activities in higher education institutions. National governments in every geopolitical region of the world have embraced cooperation as a way to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of higher education systems.

But what do we know about the actual costs and benefits of international cooperation? According to a systematic review of the last 25 years of research, not much.

### **Assumed benefits and costs**

The assumed benefits of international cooperation in higher education spread far and wide:

- Strengthened institutional academic and administrative capacity;
- Improved quality of educational provision;
- Increased diversity of educational programmes;
- Increased efficiency of higher education systems achieved through economies of scale and scope resulting from transnational cooperation;
- Increased quantity and quality of human capital and subsequent economic growth;
- Increasing prestige of higher education institutions abroad;
- Improved diplomatic relations between participating institutions and countries;
- Increased institutional revenue;
- Increased opportunities for students and faculty to participate in international exchanges and collaborative teaching and research projects;
- Better learning outcomes;
- Better labour market outcomes; and
- A higher degree of intercultural awareness.

- There is less discussion of the individual, institutional and macro-level costs associated with international cooperation in higher education. Such assumed costs include:
  - The operational and administrative costs of launching and sustaining international partnerships;
  - Subsidies and other financial incentives offered to institutions and individuals who participate in international exchange programmes and in international collaborative teaching and research projects;
  - Brain drain;
  - Loss of autonomy due to a partnership imbalance;
  - Loss of linguistic or cultural diversity; and
  - The emotional costs of studying, teaching or conducting research abroad.

The benefits of international cooperation in higher education are widely assumed and the costs of such cooperative activities are occasionally acknowledged in the professional and academic discourses on higher education internationalisation.

But until recently, the dearth of empirical evidence on the outcomes and impact of international cooperation in higher education has remained largely unchallenged.

### **Researched benefits and costs**

In a report, titled *Benefits and Costs of Transnational Collaborative Partnerships in Higher Education*, prepared for the European Commission, we undertook the task of systematically reviewing and assessing English-language publications since 1990 that pertain specifically to the benefits and costs of transnational collaborative partnerships between higher education institutions.

With the help of academic database searches, we identified close to 4,000 individual references on the topic.

However, multiple rounds of reviews for relevance and methodological rigour left only a handful of empirical studies that were of high quality and that provided evidence of the benefits and costs of international cooperation in higher education worldwide.

Evidence from the existing body of research supports the long-held assumption that certain forms of international cooperation in higher education are beneficial to individuals, higher education institutions and societies at large.

There is plenty of evidence that international research collaborations result in more and better publications and patents. Policies that promote the internationalisation of university research certainly seem warranted as their assumed positive impact is backed up by empirical evidence from a diversity of higher education contexts.

That international cooperation is beneficial for the research and teaching capacity of participating higher education institutions is also documented in research. There is even some suggestion that economies of scale can be achieved through the joint education of domestic and international students, although the evidence is limited to a single context: Australian higher education.

Empirical evidence suggests that students who participate in international exchange programmes are more likely to display positive attitudes towards open borders and democracy, and that participation in international exchange programmes increases foreign language proficiency. Students who pursue at least part of their higher education abroad have better employment outcomes, both in their home countries and abroad.

There is evidence – both anecdotal and research-based – of a substantial failure of many instances of international higher education cooperation: namely, the failure to achieve benefits for all participants in equal measure. Studies and personal reflections abound that document one-sided, unbalanced or even exploitative international relationships in higher education.

Academics and practitioners alike need to consider why instances of unbalanced partnerships are so common, despite numerous “how to engage with international partners” type of reflections and guidelines. Do asymmetries of power and resources necessarily result in exploitative dynamics in international higher education cooperation?

### **Expectations versus reality**

Not all assumed benefits of international cooperation in higher education are backed up by empirical evidence. In a 2011 special issue of *International Higher Education*, Jane Knight **talks** about the myth of “international students as internationalisation agents”.

She refers to the assumption that the mere presence of international students on campus and in classrooms results in various non-monetary benefits – most importantly, in the development of various intercultural skills among domestic as well as international students.

Unfortunately, we found little indication in published studies that student exchange programmes and instructional programmes carried out collaboratively by universities in multiple countries have led to the acquisition of intercultural competencies, increased intercultural awareness, reduced ethnocentrism or the emergence of some form of a transnational identity.

Also in *International Higher Education* in 2011, Hans de Wit **argues** that the notion that

studying abroad or doing an internship abroad will automatically lead to the acquisition of intercultural competencies is misconceived because international students may seclude themselves from (or may be excluded from) sharing experiences with local students.

Another reason why we see little evidence of the socio-cultural impact of international cooperation in higher education may be because the programmatic characteristics and activities of many international student exchange programmes are not designed in a way that would specifically promote socio-cultural outcomes.

Indeed, if one of the goals of policies that promote student exchanges and international collaborative learning experiences (such as online instruction with involvement from international partners) is to increase the intercultural skills of both mobile and non-mobile students, there is a need to consider the extent to which local and international students are in fact sharing educational and extra-curricular experiences and the extent to which exchange programmes are specifically designed to promote the acquisition of various intercultural skills.

Considering the astronomical number of international collaborative educational programmes worldwide, the dearth of rigorous evidence pertaining to the learning outcomes associated with participation in them in higher education is surprising.

Equally surprising is the fact that there is no research-based evidence pertaining to the assumed political benefits of international cooperation in higher education.

International cooperation in higher education has gained increasing prominence over the course of the past 25 years and empirical evidence is slowly emerging about its benefits – or at least about some of its assumed benefits. The existing body of research tells us very little about the costs of international student and staff exchanges, international research collaborations and the joint provision of international education programmes.

Of course, the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence and the dearth of evidence on certain aspects of international cooperation in higher education may be related to methodological challenges.

But even while recognising the difficulties in empirically testing the claims about the assumed economic and non-economic benefits and costs of international cooperation in higher education, it is perhaps not too much of an overstatement to say that one of the biggest failures of international higher education cooperation over the past 25 years has been the inability to thoroughly demonstrate its added value by means of rigorous empirical research.

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*Hans de Wit has issued a call to readers and contributors to University World News to send him their essays of between 800 and 1,200 words on what went well and what went wrong in internationalisation of higher education over the past 25 years. This is one of the essays he has received. He will select one essay to be published by University World News and at the end of 2019, will bring all these essays together in a book.*

<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190204144538245>