



GLOBAL

Is inequality in internationalisation of HE on the rise?

Giorgio Marinoni and Hans de Wit 08 June 2019

The internationalisation of higher education is a phenomenon that has implications far beyond the domain of higher education; it impacts society at large.

According to the definition of Jane Knight, updated in 2015 by Hans de Wit and others, internationalisation is “an intentional process undertaken by higher education institutions in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society”.

Assuming that internationalisation is an intentional process, the question arising is: how strategic is this process? In other words, is internationalisation at higher education institutions supported by a defined strategy, with clear objectives, actions, and point persons, framed within a realistic timeline and supported by the necessary (human and financial) resources?

Is this strategy monitored and are outcomes evaluated? And in the current political climate of anti-globalisation, anti-immigration and increasing nationalism, to what extent is this strategy still relevant and up to date?

The results of the 5th Global Survey on Internationalisation of Higher Education, an online survey conducted by the International Association of Universities (IAU) in 2018, help us address these questions.

The survey was based upon replies from 907 higher education institutions across 126 countries worldwide. For that survey, higher education institutions were asked to state whether internationalisation was mentioned in their mission/strategic plan. A clear majority replied that it was.

This is a sign of how internationalisation has become widespread among higher education institutions around the globe, but it does not reveal how strategic their approach is.

Strategy vs strategic approach

The presence of a strategy does not necessarily align with a strategic approach to internationalisation if there are no activities to implement it and support structures in place,

if the strategy is not monitored and if progress is not evaluated. The IAU survey indicates that the internationalisation policy/strategy is institution-wide in almost all higher education institutions that indicated having elaborated one.

The presence of an office or a team in charge of overseeing the implementation of the policy/strategy is widespread, as is the inclusion of an international dimension in other institutional policies, strategies or plans. The presence of a monitoring framework and of explicit targets and benchmarks is slightly lower, but still present at almost three-quarters of the responding institutions, and a budgetary provision is present at two-thirds of them.

These results seem to indicate that a strategic approach to internationalisation is indeed common at the majority of higher education institutions in the world.

However, previous IAU Global Surveys included the very same questions and an analysis of the evaluation of results over time unveils additional information. A clear growth of the presence of a policy/strategy at higher education institutions can be identified.

The same is true for the percentage of higher education institutions having a dedicated office or team to implement the policy/strategy. In the present survey, this percentage reaches 89%, an increase of 25 percentage points in 15 years.

The percentage of higher education institutions having a dedicated budget has grown in the first three editions of the Global Survey, from 50% at the time of the 1st Global Survey (2003) to 73% at the time of the 3rd Global Survey (2009), then dropped to 61% at the time of the 4th Global Survey (2014) and slightly increased again to 64% in the 5th Global Survey (2018).

The decrease of the presence of a dedicated budget between 2009 and 2014 can be interpreted as an effect of the global financial crisis and of related funding cuts at higher education institutions. The changing political climate of the past years does not seem to have had a negative impact. Still, overall, in the last 15 years as many as one-third of respondent higher education institutions have not had a dedicated budget for internationalisation.

Regarding the percentage of higher education institutions indicating that they have a monitoring framework, the 5th Global Survey indicates a new record with 73%. However, the increase seems to have happened between 2005 and 2009, while in the past eight years the figure has stabilised. Almost one quarter of the responding institutions do not have monitoring framework in place.

Increasing inequality

The results of the 5th IAU Global Survey show that the presence of an institution-wide policy/strategy for internationalisation, as well as the presence of a dedicated office or team to oversee its implementation, are becoming the norm at higher education institutions around the world.

However, in terms of financial resources and monitoring and evaluation, the results, although encouraging, show that there is still room for improvement.

While the allocation of dedicated financial resources may have been hindered by the consequences of the global financial crisis, the stagnation in the development of a monitoring framework in the past nine years suggests that there is a group of higher education institutions for which strategic internationalisation is not yet a reality.

The majority of the respondents to the survey attach a high level of importance to internationalisation, which is an increase over the past three years. However, this increase has happened mainly at higher education institutions where the level was already high.

This might signal a growing inequality between higher education institutions, and is further reflected in the risks of internationalisation identified by survey respondents. Indeed, the main institutional risk cited by respondents is “international opportunities accessible only to students with financial resources”.

This expresses a concern among higher education institutions’ representatives that disadvantaged students may be left out as a result of globalisation and that institutions should be more inclusive. The question is: does this matter, and if it does, how? According to the results of the EAIE Barometer of 2018, there is a positive correlation between the presence of a strategic approach to internationalisation and its perceived success.

The definition of ‘success’ in internationalisation is controversial, but the benefits of having a strategic approach and the reasons why it is a reality at some (but not all) higher education institutions is worth further thought and investigation. It will also be interesting to see in the coming years, as well as in future surveys, whether the current global political climate has an impact on inequality.

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