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Higher Education institutions at the interface between internationalization, interculturality and diversity management

114 – Internationalisierung von Hochschulen – Der globale Diskurs im
Kontext der Fachhochschulen

Abstract

Today, higher education institutions are confronted with ever-changing challenges brought about by dramatic changes in demographics, the ongoing massification of higher education and globalization trends that force them to also critically assess their strategies for attracting future students. One strategic approach that has long been regarded as a winning formula was the change of the domestic language of instruction into English which, as a consequence, serves as a basis for the recruitment of internationally mobile students. This contribution attempts to identify the junction between critical elements such as internationalization efforts, intercultural competencies and diversity-related factors that seem all relevant for higher education institutions (HEI) but are frequently treated as synonymous without clear terminological and conceptual boundaries. What is more, activities in these fields are often undertaken in a sketchy and stand-alone fashion without a cohesive frame or overall strategy. On this note, this paper seeks to put forward a conceptual model that draws on all relevant variables to provide a meta-level picture of the phenomenon of internationalization of higher education. In a second step, it is sought to discuss internationalization strategies and their implications in relation to intervening factors that may impact, enable or impede specific strategic approaches. For this purpose, a closer look will be taken at the sector of second-tier higher education institutions and their underlying rationales for going international.

Keywords:

Higher education institutions; diversity management; internationalization of the curriculum; internationalization at home; internationalization of the mind

Introduction

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On this note, this paper seeks to put forward a conceptual model that draws on all relevant variables to provide a meta-level picture of the phenomenon of internationalization of higher education. In a second step, it is sought to discuss internationalization strategies and their implications in relation to intervening factors that may impact, enable or impede specific strategic approaches. For this purpose, a closer look will be taken at the sector of second-tier higher education institutions and their underlying rationales for going international.

The wider setting

The graph below shall serve as a frame of reference with regard to internationalization of higher education since it illustrates the broader context in which this phenomenon is placed. First, the context is provided and global forces are depicted that heavily impact further internationalization efforts. For one, changes in demographics and entrepreneurial drivers result in increased internationalization. Second, the current trend of massification of higher education together with the global reach for new Internet-based technologies lead to an opening-up to previously excluded or widely ignored student populations. When zooming in into the context of second-tier higher education institutions, it was found that a so-called bandwagon effect is noticeable among university of applied sciences due to the overall fear to fall behind competitively when the “entire sector is moving in the direction of greater international involvement” (Haan, 2013, p 15). Such a “mainstreaming of internationalization (de Wit, 2011, p 1) suggests that an international orientation is considered a necessity or, for some institutions, even a burdensome obligation to have sustainable competitive advantage (Gaisch, 2015, p 5). Like everywhere else, this gentle pressure exerted by the phenomenon of entrepreneurial higher education has left its traces in the sector in view of an initial quantification of higher education partnerships and increased mobility (Dailey-Hebert/Dennis 2015).

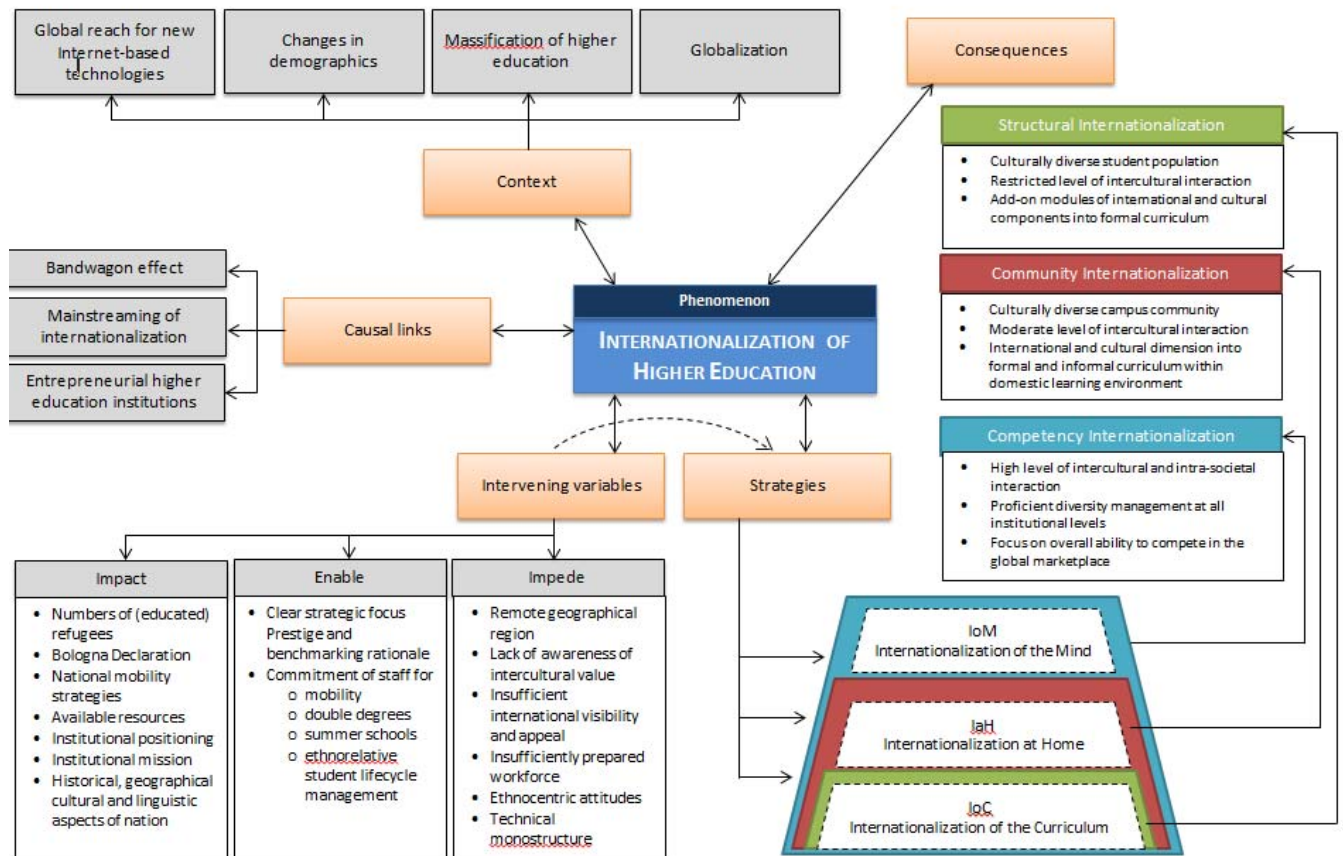


Table 1: Conceptual frame for the interplay of internationalization factors at the tertiary level

Intervening variables

Despite the overall pressing agenda for higher education institutions to go international, there are still a number of factors that impact, enable or impede internationalization efforts and, as a result, set the appropriate strategy in line with societal, industrial and institutional needs. First, countries are embedded in their historical, geographical, cultural and linguistic heritage and hence have varying priorities when it comes to internationalization, be it in terms of language of instruction, recruiting policies and markets and the usage of Internet-based technologies. Second, most nations in Europe are no “free floater”, they are part of the Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area with an eye on increased compatibility between educational systems on all levels. Third, there are national strategies that - mainly in line with EU regulations – further seek to standardize specific processes such as national mobility strategies. Then, there is the institutional positioning of each HEI that may see internationalization as a key mission for reasons of prestige, benchmarking and international visibility. With such a focus in mind, the institution reinforces activities with regard to mobility, double degrees and summer schools, and in doing so, needs to strive for an ethno-relative student lifecycle management where the entire workforce learns to appreciate a service culture for the benefit of a multiculturally diverse student population. On a more critical note, it needs to be emphasized here that not all university members accept such measures with open arms or see the relevance of such action. Especially, universities of applied sciences that are situated in more rural and remote areas and consist of a predominantly regional student body may have a certain reluctance to see the international and intercultural value. In addition, it was also outlined that further aspects may impede internationalization efforts, one of which being –

what Pechar calls - the technical monostructure (2009, p 117) of universities of applied sciences in particular. By this, he means the pronounced focus on specialization, often in niche markets, and a tendency towards an overspecialization in segmented areas which may make international academic recognition more difficult (also see Gaisch, 2016, p 3). What is more, students that take a degree in such a technically monostructural field may have difficulty finding an equivalent exchange programme abroad. In other words, insufficient international visibility and appeal coupled with lacking awareness of ethnocentric barriers and a mismatch of programmes may be the biggest defordances for an internationalization strategy that draws on an inclusive and sustainable repertoire of shared practices.

Internationalization strategies

In the scholarly literature much attention has been paid to two strategic approaches, namely internationalization of the curriculum (IoC) and internationalization at home (IaH), which, so it seems, have developed into two competing labels. Although both concepts are frequently discussed in the literature (Gaisch, 2014; Leask, 2013; Clifford/Montgomery, 2011) they appear to be characterised by both terminological and conceptual inconsistency (Clifford, 2009; Green/Mertova, 2011) which may be further reinforced by the general “conceptual confusion about what international education means” (Mestenhauser, 1998, p 4).

While internationalization of the Curriculum (IoC) seems to be the overarching term, the concept of IaH is particularly valuable in domestic learning contexts. To flesh out the slippery notion of Internationalization at Home, Beelen and Jones (2015) propose an additional definition and refer to it as “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments.” Thus, a particular focus is placed on the intentional inclusion of international and intercultural elements at all levels of institutional action which suggests that stand-alone and random internationalization efforts do not suffice, even more so if they are only directed towards the internationally mobile student community. From this perspective, then, IaH not only seeks to bridge the international and intercultural dimension of higher education teaching and learning, but, more importantly, to “promote broad-mindedness and understanding and respect for other people and their cultures” on campus without necessarily focusing on activities that are “far away and for others” (Teekens, 2007, p 5). Despite abundant rhetoric around “internationalising the experience of all students and staff” (Welikala, 2011, p 15), there is limited evidence to show that this is actually taking place, and if so, what effect it has on both student body and faculty. This is the reason why so far IaH appears to be political talk rather than a practical path to be followed (Gaisch, 2014, p 14).

At the same time, an updated definition of IoC which suggests that “Internationalization of the curriculum is the incorporation of international, intercultural and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods and support services of a program of study” (Leask 2015, p. 9) brings these two twin terms again closer together.

On a more critical note, it may be interesting to recall the five myths of internationalization brought forward by Knight (2011) which are 1) foreign students indicate an internationalised university; 2) international reputation is a proxy for quality; 3) international institutional agreements indicate internationalisation; 4) international accreditations indicate internationalisation and 5) global branding is a sign of internationalisation. All of those statements seem to refer to structural internationalization and take little, if any, account of community and competency-based internationalization efforts. Yet, experience has shown that enhanced mobility activities alone may be misleading assumptions for excellence, most often driven by competitiveness and commercialization. They may not have the potential to truly and genuinely internationalize the campus, its students and staff. Especially in terms of

social mobility it may become clear that not all students can be internationally mobile since they may have financial constraints, family commitments or professional obligations. While IaH goes one step further and appears to foster community internationalization where some kind of intercultural interaction may unfold at all levels if facilitated and promoted by interculturally competent staff, we propose a further approach that involves a large number of additional factors.

What we would like to call “Internationalization of the Mind (IoM) is an inclusive, sustainable and intra-societal approach that draws on international, intercultural and intersectional experiences of diversity management. In this regard, intercultural goes beyond exchanges of different ethnical cultures but also embraces interdisciplinary, crossfunctional and demographic border crossing (Gaisch/Aichinger 2016a; Gaisch/Aichinger 2016b). This is also in line with Dunne (2011, p 612) who supports the view that all human interaction is to some extent intercultural which facilitates bridge building between intercultural practices and domestic, intra-societal diversity. In Knight’s (2004, p 11) terms, internationalization is about relating to the diversity of cultures that exists within countries, communities, and institutions, and intercultural is used to address the aspects of internationalization at home. She also refers to the controversial notion of global to provide the sense of worldwide scope. In this regard, we would like to enrich global citizenship with diversity management competence and combine the skillset for innovation, leadership and entrepreneurship with values such as social cohesion, equality and inclusion.

In this sense, IoM can be understood as “internationalization for society” since it draws on the breadth of international, intercultural, global and diversity-related dimensions. This modern notion of internationalization demands a diversity concept and strategies that contribute to genuine internationalization measures that go beyond adjustment and coping capacity on the part of internationally mobile students alone (Leenen, 2015, p 25). What is more, future graduates will operate at a global scale across international borders and in order to achieve good results they will also need intercultural and diversity competencies, which can no longer be instrumental and piece-meal add-on courses. They require an open attitude and respect towards diversity with teachers that serve as transformative intellectuals and a campus culture where a cosmopolitan identity is fostered and local engagement is contextualised within a wider frame of reference (Gaisch, 2014, p 17). This is all the more relevant in a time characterized by ever-increasing complexity and insecurity due to demographic shifts, changing workforce structures and global trends that reshape all aspects of our existing conception of the world. While there is no denying that expert knowledge is the entry ticket for graduates into the world of work, they will need to possess a much wider range of skills to handle the complexities of today’s requirements. Hence, IoM is not just an approach that proposes a set of shared practices in terms of international, intercultural and diversity-related cooperation. Rather, it is a mind-set that spreads through all levels of the institution with a clear commitment of staff, students and all other stakeholders that diversity is an added value for society and a high level of international, intercultural and intra-societal interaction is a prerequisite for graduate employability and future challenges.

The impact of the different strategic approaches

All the three previously discussed approaches are important and of high relevance for the internationalization of higher education and despite frequent overlaps between IoC and IaH (Beelen, 2011, p 262), they still seem to differ with regard to the purposeful and immersive integration of intercultural and international elements in both formal and informal curricula for the benefit of all students within domestic learning environments. IoM as the third, and we would argue, the most inclusive approach then looks at cross-border encounters that go beyond a one-dimensional perspective of cultural diversity by taking account of differentiation at multiple axes, be it on a socio-economic, socio-demographic, ethnical or disciplinary basis. Such a stance then includes all intersections in historically, geographically and institutionally specific settings. In this regard, the HEAD Wheel (short for Higher

Education Awareness for Diversity) (Gaisch/Aichinger, 2015) may serve as a frame of reference for a holistic diversity management that embraces five interconnected diversity segments (demographic, cognitive, disciplinary, functional and institutional diversity).

This contribution does not seek to artificially divide the strategies into competing paradigms. Rather, it seeks to draw on all three strategies to allow for structural, community and competency internationalization (Spencer-Oatey/Dauber, 2016). For these purposes, structural internationalization may be seen as the first step towards an internationalized higher education institution with a focus on an increased number of international students, enhanced diversity of staff and an increased percentage of students on some form of outward mobility. With an intake of more internationally mobile students context-sensitive teaching based on a truly international mind-set needs to lie at the heart of internationalizing the curriculum and teachers that engage in English-medium instruction play a crucial role in this process. Obviously, to really facilitate intercultural learning, academic staff needs to draw on international students as a resource, and by doing so, may act as enablers for fruitful intercultural interactions. Such a shift of perspective, however, requires a number of transversal and intercultural competencies that cannot be taken for granted and need to be acquired, developed and imparted. The same holds true for domestic students and in order to avoid ethnocentric blocking (Gaisch, 2014, p 155), so to say sticking together in familiar patterns and keeping their socialized institutional and societal practices implicit, it is crucial to follow the second strategic approach, namely Internationalization at Home. This would entail appropriate (across-the-curriculum) intercultural awareness and diversity trainings for all students and staff, not only to learn about others but, most importantly, to learn about themselves, their cultural socialisation, biases and prejudices and encourage self-reflective and critical citizenship. Bringing internationalization to the next level would mean a higher level of intercultural interactions, more social and academic integration as well as upgraded skills and enhanced employability for an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

In order to develop a campus life where a high level of inter- and intra-societal diversity is a matter of course, it requires a comprehensive, ethnorelative and inclusive student lifecycle management. This may go hand in hand with –what Stangel-Meseke, Martina et al, 2015 call – an Intercultural DiM strategy that seeks to establish an overall structure for effective management of cultural diversity sustained by academic staff and implemented in all administrative levels. It therefore needs a fundamental shift in attitudes where a service culture is foregrounded that sees mutual understanding, appreciation and inclusion as the key parameters for a sustainable diversity mainstreaming.

Conclusion

In this paper it was argued that HEI draw on different internationalization strategies depending on their institutional positioning, their historical, cultural and linguistic heritage and their overarching rationales for going international.

After sketching the intervening variables that come with internationalization efforts, three strategies are discussed and their rationales are outlined in more detail. Another point raised was that through strengthened internationalization implicit cultural differences become relevant that require reflexive intercultural competence in terms of teaching and learning but also as to a service-oriented student lifecycle management that embraces all institutional levels.

It is suggested that IoC, IaH and IoM are strategies that may complement each other in successive stages and that each HEI may go through these developmental stages of internationalization in their own time and speed and in line with their institutional mission.

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