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The End of Internationalization

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Over the last two decades, the concept of the internationalization of higher education has moved from the fringe of institutional interest to the very core. In the late 1970s up to the mid-1980s, activities that could be described as internationalization were usually neither named that way, nor carried high prestige, and were rather isolated and unrelated. The exception was joint international research, which, however, has never seriously become part of the internationalization fashion. In the late 1980s, changes occurred: Internationalization was invented and carried on, ever increasing its importance. In the past two decades, new components were added to its multidimensional body, moving from simple exchange of students to the big business of recruitment and from activities impacting on an incredibly small elite group to a mass phenomenon. In our view, it is time for a critical reflection on the changing concept of internationalization.

FROM SUBSTANCE TO FORM

Gradually, the “why and wherefore” have been taken over by the way internationalization has become the main objective: more exchange, more degree mobility, and more recruitment. Even the alternative movement of “internationalization at home” of the late 1990s has shifted rapidly into this instrumental mood.

This development coincided with the dawn of a second, rivaling term: globalization. In fact, it seems that both terms act like two connected universes, making it impossible to draw a distinctive line between them. Today, internationalization has become the white knight of higher education, the moral ground that needs to be defended, and the epitome of justice and equity. The higher education community still strongly believes that by definition internationalization leads to peace and mutual understanding, the driving forces behind programs like Fulbright in the 1950s. While gaining moral weight, its content seems to have deteriorated: the form lost its substance. Internationalization has become a synonym of “doing good,” and people are less into questioning its effectiveness and essential nature: an instrument to improve the quality of education or research.

THE DEVALUATION OF INTERNATIONALIZATION

On the other side, globalization is loaded with negative connotations and is considered more predominant than internationalization. This formula sees internationalization as “good” and globalization as “evil.” Internationalization is claimed to be the last stand for humanistic ideas against the world of pure

economic benefits allegedly represented by the term globalization. Alas, this constructed antagonism between internationalization and globalization ignores the fact that activities more related to the concept of globalization (higher education as a tradeable commodity) are increasingly executed under the flag of internationalization, as the increasing commercialization illustrated at the conferences of NAFSA: Association of International Educators, the Asia Pacific Association for International Education, and the European Association for International Education.

INTERNATIONALIZATION: FROM INNOVATION TO TRADITION

Effectively, this attitude exacerbated the devaluation of internationalization and the inflation of defensive measures. Nowadays, with the tendency of becoming advocates rather than pioneers of internationalization, we are no longer the spearhead of innovation but, rather, defenders of traditions. This creates the danger of self-depreciation and defensive self-perception—holding firmly onto traditional concepts and acting on them while the world around moves forward. We—and the authors explicitly add themselves to the group of “we”—lament about the loss of real mobility and the commercialization of higher education in general and its international component in particular. Yet, we lose sight of innovative developments such as the emergence of the digital citizen for whom mobility can be at least as virtual as real.

A NEW DAWN? THE POSTINTERNATIONALIZATION AGE

But how can we resume the active role and gain ownership of our own fate? The main points are the following:

1. We have to move away from dogmatic and idealist concepts of internationalization and globalization.

2. We have to understand internationalization and globalization in their pure meanings—not as goals in themselves but rather as means to an end.

3. We have to throw off the veil of ignorance and ask ourselves: Why do we do certain things and what do they help in achieving the goal of quality of education and research in a globalized knowledge society? We also have to regard mobility and other activities as what they really are: activities or instruments—and therefore by definition not goals in themselves.

4. We should carefully reconsider our preoccupation with instruments and means and rather invest a lot more time into questions of rationales and outcomes.

While in need of more philosophy we also require a greater sense of reality. We cannot continue to assume that certain types of mobility and other international activities (such as exchanges and study abroad) are good in themselves and that other types (such as recruitment and transnational education) are bad. We have to dig deeper, place the options within a new set of values and rationales, and ensure that we really achieve what is meaningful.

The future of higher education is a global one, and it is our job to help preparing the higher education world for this. Therefore, what we need are people who understand and define their role within a global community, transcending the national borders, and embracing the concepts of sustainability—equity of rights and access, advancement of education and research, and much more. But essentially, we need to reaffirm the core role of

universities: to help understand this world and to improve our dealing with it. Called for is a common commitment at the institutional and personal level of how we and our students will be prepared to live and work in a global community. Possibly we must even leave the old concepts of internationalization and globalization and move on to a fresh unbiased paradigm. The most important in any case is to rethink and redefine the way we look at the internationalization of higher education in the present time.