

A Personal View on Two Decades of Recent IAU History



Eva Egron-Polak

It is customary to share the successes and joys with those who are celebrating an anniversary. Looking back at my own relatively long history with the IAU, I am tempted to do the same. Yet, there were both highs and lows during these nearly two decades, and a sense of satisfaction with achievements was often coupled with frustration as well. Despite these sentiments, I, and nearly all the leaders of the IAU, continue to share an unwavering belief that if the association did not exist, it would be invented. This is so, not only because there is a real need for such an organization, but also because of what IAU has contributed to the world of higher education over the seven decades it has existed. My brief note will highlight some of these sources of satisfaction and share the obstacles and difficulties encountered along the way as well.

1 Serendipity

International relations among nations are complex, delicate, and not always logical or easily understood. The fact that Canada is part of the Europe Region within the UN system, a quirk in history and a lucky break for me, as the first among several factors that led me to become involved with the International Association of Universities. Eventually becoming its Secretary-General in 2002. Working for what is now known as Universities Canada, in the mid-1980s I joined a network of higher education representatives from the Europe Region who regularly met within the framework of UNESCO's regional office for higher education in Europe—CEPES. In the context of these meetings, that in large part focused on facilitating collaboration among

E. Egron-Polak (✉)
International Association of Universities, Paris, France
e-mail: e.egronpolak@gmail.com

© The Author(s) 2021
H. van't Land et al. (eds.), *The Promise of Higher Education*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67245-4_6

universities in a Europe (defined broadly) still divided by the Cold War, I became familiar with the IAU. It was often the only Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) that regularly participated in these meetings. During these discussions, I realized that IAU acted as an essential bridge spanning gaps and working to overcome the various barriers that prevented cooperation in higher education between East, West, North, and South—divides that largely characterized the world in the 1980s.

2 IAU Often Avant-Garde

During this time, and thus just prior to the full implementation of the ERASMUS program in Europe and its commitment to easing the recognition of credits, as well as the Council of Europe and UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention, the IAU was spearheading an international project—TRACE—designed to make information about higher education institutions and credentials worldwide available to all. The project, in part supported by UNESCO, proposed a technology-based, decentralized data entry system which, by using a standardized and agreed-upon structure, would make the data comparable. The goals of this project were to facilitate information sharing for recognition purposes, to ensure that only *bona fide* information was included and to promote collaboration on a level playing field among the world's universities. With hindsight, the TRACE project was simply too ahead of its time in terms of technological capacity and too poorly financed to overcome the multitude of obstacles. Predating widespread use of the internet, Google, and other search engines, but led by visionary practitioners from North America and Europe, it never came to fruition. For me, however, as the Canadian member of the initial voluntary team that steered this initiative for more than two years, it was a direct introduction to the ideals for which IAU stands—a global collaborative effort, facilitating and promoting international cooperation and mobility, committed to being inclusive, adhering to the principle that free access to accurate information is an essential basis of inter-institutional cooperation in higher education and a strong conviction that universities need to be in the driving seat of any such initiative.

I became a fan of the IAU and was very grateful to be offered an opportunity to join its Secretariat in Paris from 1996 to 1998 as Director of Cooperation while on a two-year leave of absence from Universities Canada. This experience, a kind of wishful prequel to my eventual appointment as Secretary-General in 2002, confirmed my view that IAU had huge potential to be an even greater positive force within the global higher education landscape.

3 A Unique Vantage Point

This direct experience truly opened my eyes to the global and diverse nature of the IAU membership, and the diversity of higher education systems and institutions

worldwide. It was my role to increase membership by identifying services that the IAU could provide while positioning the Association more firmly as a global platform for networking and collective advocacy in the interests of higher education. This was the run-up to the first UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education (WCHE) held in 1998, and IAU worked hard to play a constructive role in this watershed event on behalf of higher education institutions. In preparation for the WCHE, an IAU working group drafted a policy statement on Institutional Autonomy, Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility. I was invited to join the UNESCO Working Group preparing the program of the WCHE as well, and even more importantly, became one of only two NGO representatives to join the Drafting Group for the final WCHE 1998 Declaration. This WCHE remains, until today, a global milestone in the history of higher education, and its values enshrined in the WCHE Declaration and Action Plan were both ambitious and inspiring.

The IAU input to the WCHE Declaration focused on issues such as higher education as a public good, access based on merit but taking into consideration each learners' circumstances, equity, academic freedom, and autonomy as well as other topics of importance to universities. Together with the representative of Education International (EI), we often faced fierce opposition from representatives of ministries of higher education from around the world who represented the bulk of the Drafting Committee. But having IAU and IE at the table was an important recognition that universities and their staff members were essential partners in the design of the future of higher education. Unfortunately, though many argued for the presence of students, they were absent from the Drafting Group, though present and active in the conference.

In the 1990s, the global governance of higher education was not really on anyone's mind, or indeed in anyone's interest at that time. Yet, given the challenges of the moment—the recent end of the Cold War and rapid privatization of higher education especially in East and Central Europe; concerns over the quality of higher education in an era of rapid massification; more and more preoccupation with the Brain Drain facilitated by the ease of travel and growing competition for the best brains; the creation of new European programs to promote mobility, and many other developments—speaking with one voice, expressing concerns or demands for certain policies, defending key principles that universities around the world cherish was needed. It was the role that IAU, in collaboration with other associations, wanted to play. A role it had been created to play 70 years before.

4 A Unique Frame of Reference

Armed with prior experiences both in Canada and the IAU, assuming the position of Secretary General should not have had any secrets for me and, though I knew it would be demanding and challenging, I thought that I was ready for the reality in which IAU operates daily. I had already experienced the complexity of issues that higher education institutions were facing in a rapidly changing world; the diversity of their

points of view; the vastly different circumstances in which IAU members operate; the personalities and agendas of the actors with whom IAU interacts; the distance, language and cultural barriers as well as the incredible shortage of resources—both human and financial—at the secretariat.

What I had not anticipated and what in my view is most important is the IAU's unique frame of reference—it is global, and to serve its membership and the interests of higher education worldwide, it is not pertinent to use any single anchoring point of view. When working for a single institution of higher education, a national association or system, it is natural to use it as the frame of reference for comparisons, for the identification of strengths and weaknesses. Joining IAU, assuming its global perspective, meant that this safety was pulled away. I became highly sensitive to the continuous need to balance the voices, preferences, and demands of strong universities in powerful nations with the needs, interests, and contributions of newer universities often in developing or emerging systems. In fact, the very notion of what constitutes a university was a frequent and hotly contested debate during numerous IAU Board meetings and conferences, as there was no global consensus around the table, or around the world.

A second challenging aspect for the mission of the IAU, and thus for me as Secretary-General, had to do with identifying what matters most for the Members; what is impacting their institutions, and what unique service IAU could offer that would be useful. This may sound simple, but on the one hand, the list of issues was always very long, and on the other hand, given the point above, the list was also quite diverse. However, as globalization continued its advance and the level of interconnectedness between nations deepened in all domains, it became clear that in different ways, most changes experienced in one higher education system were quickly felt by most others. What differed and continues to differ today, as well, is the capacity to respond and to implement solutions that serve institutional, local, and national needs.

The last couple of decades are full of examples of how institutions and policymakers mimicked what was taking place elsewhere, whether it was suitable or desirable in their context or not. The IAU was expected to address these issues, to adopt a position, though just about every time, the actual response in terms of action could only take place at the local level. To cite merely a few examples, public funding for universities, of course, features near the top of the list. For most of the recent years, public funding for higher education was decreasing in most nations around the world if per student funding is considered, but the capacity and ideological or political acceptance to replace the lost funds by revenue from private sources differed greatly from nation to nation and continues to be a source of hot debate. As the IAU does not operate at the national level, the Association could only offer strong, international support for a position that valued public responsibility and support (including financial) for higher education above that of the market.

Another example of trends that swept across the global landscape regardless of the state of higher education was the love affair with 'world classness' for universities and the related 'excellence' initiatives that many countries adopted. This trend also saw its heyday during the last two decades and to a large extent owes its conceptual origin in

the various international rankings that began to become the barometer for excellence, especially for decision-makers. Again, the relevance of seeking to climb the rankings and to meet the criteria that would enable institutions to be considered ‘world class’, mattered relatively little in this race, though it had a major impact (often negative) on institutions and systems, and was lived as a burden by many higher education leaders within the IAU family of universities. The IAU continuously argued that rankings were not only an incomplete measure of quality but that furthermore, their impact could harm the quality of higher education systems by concentrating support on only a few universities, leaving others impoverished.

The two first decades of the 21st century, which coincided more or less with my direct experience in leading the IAU, were an era when many other trends were felt in all universities around the world—the pressure to be more international; the potential to expand or improve in various ways by using technology; the growing preoccupation with social responsibility which, in some ways included concern with equity and inclusion; but also the requirement to justify the economic utility of universities to society and individuals in terms of employability; the growing consciousness of the demands of sustainable development and the recognition that higher education was a critical actor for change in this regard, yet a growing disenchantment with universities, with expertise, with scientific knowledge in many quarters.

These were indeed the central themes that IAU addressed with policy statements, conferences, research projects based on data that IAU gathered from its membership and through partnerships and collaborations with other groups.

In all of this, IAU remained and is today still deeply rooted in its initial values. Though at times this has brought criticism of a lack of pragmatism, too much idealism, and even naivete, it is also the reason why IAU inspires loyalty—from Board members, from the staff of the secretariat and from all institutional representatives who get directly involved in the work of the association.

Despite all of this, the value and purpose of the IAU are not obvious to everyone. Those who represent the IAU are often asked why a university should join the IAU. This is not, and never will be, an easy question to answer. We can enumerate and recite the activities and services that the association offers, but these cannot be quantified or justified in Euros or Dollars. The work of the IAU is, in my view, a great example of a Common Good—it serves the collective interests of higher education and all of the members of the global community benefit. Furthermore, the benefits are felt long-term and indirectly, but they are nevertheless real.

If understood in this way, it is not difficult to see why the Association continues to flourish after 70 years and why, if it did not exist, it would be invented today by some visionary and idealistic higher education leaders. I was honoured to have had the opportunity to work with and learn from many such visionary leaders over the years, and to devote almost two decades to successfully bring IAU closer towards its 70th year. I know it has at least another 70 glorious years ahead of it.

Eva Egron-Polak was Secretary General of the International Association of Universities from 2002 until 2017. Prior to becoming IAU Secretary General, she worked for nearly two decades at Universities Canada, holding various positions including that of Vice President, International. She is a member of many Boards and international advisory committees of organizations such as the Magna Charta Observatory, the Global Access to Postsecondary Education initiative, the Global Centre for Higher Education, StudyPortal and the University of Granada. She is Senior Fellow of the IAU.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

