

The Bologna Process and the Wider World of Higher Education: The Cooperation Competition Paradox in a Period of Increased Nationalism



Hans de Wit

Introduction

The Bologna Process, launched with the Bologna Declaration of 1999, is nowadays implemented in 48 states which define the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Internationalisation has always been at the core of the Bologna Process. Additionally, internationalisation is one of the five priorities highlighted in the EC Modernisation Agenda. An EU Parliament study (de Wit et al. 2015) on Internationalisation of Higher Education shows that nowadays institutional and national policies must address challenges, such as digital and blended learning, demographic changes in the student population, immigration, financial crisis or ethnic and religious tensions. An increased nationalist inward-looking trend, as for instance expressed in the UK through Brexit, is another recent phenomenon that impacts on almost all aspects of internationalisation, which involved stakeholders need to take into account.

de Wit and Jones (2017) identify two main paradoxes in the internationalisation of higher education today: “First, we may be striving to increase internationalisation and global engagement, yet in many countries the escalating trend towards isolationism and inward-looking nationalism results in a disconnect between the local and the global. Second, while we see an increase in credit and degree mobility around the world, with some challenge in the United Kingdom and the United States as market leaders in degree mobility, this billion-dollar industry reaches only a small student elite, excluding 99% of the world’s student population.”

de Wit and Rumbley (2018) observe also that there is an increasing disconnect between the notion of the relevance of internationalisation, within and for the sector, and recent trends in society toward greater inward focus, manifested by

H. de Wit (✉)

Center for International Higher Education, Boston College, Boston, USA
e-mail: dewitj@bc.edu

anti-global and anti-international tendencies. They speak like de Wit and Jones (2017) of paradoxes between internationalisation as a collaborative endeavour and internationalisation as a competitive approach; between internationalisation as a key trend in higher education around the world and nationalisation as a rising social phenomenon globally. The Bologna Process has to be concerned about these two paradoxes and address them adequately in the next phase to come.

This introduction to the theme, the Bologna Process and the wider world of higher education, deals with those challenges, in particular with the paradox between collaboration and competition and with resulting misconceptions concerning internationalisation of higher education that have contributed to this inward-looking trend around the world. How is it possible to overcome these misconceptions and paradoxes to internationalisation and create a sustainable and comprehensive internationalisation for all students and faculty?

From Marginal to Mainstream

From a rather marginal and fragmented issue in most countries and institutions of higher education until the end of the 1980s, internationalisation in higher education has evolved over the past 30 years to become a mainstream and central component of policies and practices in higher education, at the international, regional, national, and institutional levels.

An increasing number of institutions of higher education around the world have an internationalisation policy and/or have integrated internationalisation in their mission and vision. More national governments develop strategies and policies for the internationalisation of their higher education systems. The global knowledge economy requires universities, cities, and nations to be key competitors for students, faculty, research funding, and strategic partnerships and to prepare their graduates to be global professionals, scholars, and citizens. Excellence programs, rankings, accreditation agencies are all indicators, and drivers of internationalisation of higher education.

This increased attention for internationalisation is positive news and brings many opportunities, but it also creates many challenges for the sector. The Bologna signature countries, in particular the first ones to sign on to the process in 1999, have been at the forefront of internationalising their higher education. The changing political climate in Europe, the United States of America, and elsewhere is a nationalist reaction to the increased globalisation of our economies and societies and threatens to impact negatively the internationalisation agenda as well as the Europeanisation agenda.

We also see a shift over the past period from a more collaborative approach to internationalisation towards a more competitive focus. Although student and faculty exchange and cooperation in education and research are still an important part of the internationalisation agenda, also, thanks to the European programs such as

Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020, recruitment of international students and faculty, competition for talents, for research funding and for reputation are increasingly dominating the internationalisation agenda.

The Bologna Process and the Wider World

The Bologna Process, initiated in 1999, is one of the major reforms in higher education, and in addition to harmonisation and modernisation, Europeanisation and internationalisation are driving rationales for this reform. This is not the place to describe and analyse at length the process and the opportunities and challenges of its implementation over the past 18 years. Together with the European programs for research (Horizon 2020 and its predecessors) and education (Erasmus+ and its predecessors), the Bologna Process has contributed substantively to the internationalisation in higher education, and has travelled around the world, as analysed in the contribution to this thematic section by Woldegiorgis.

Intended as a reform to harmonize higher education systems and structures in Europe, and to enhance intra-European collaboration and global competitiveness, Evans, in her contribution, perceives it as a neoliberal process, and Bisschof, in his analysis of the effects of the Bologna Process on quality assurance regimes in the Post-Soviet space, concludes that there is more diversity than convergence. The paradox between collaboration and competition as driving motives for internationalisation is manifest in the Bologna Process. That paradox is manifesting itself in the different contributions to this thematic section.

Misconceptions

Ten years ago, the approach toward internationalisation was also still predominantly activity-oriented, even instrumental. de Wit (2011) mentions nine misconceptions, where internationalisation was regarded as synonymous with a specific programmatic or organisational strategy to promote internationalisation, in other words: where the means appeared to have become the goal—the main misconception. The other eight misconceptions were: more teaching in English; adding an international subject to the program is sufficient; more recruitment of international students; more study abroad; more partnerships; little assessment of international and intercultural learning outcomes; all for the sake of output and quantitative targets; while failing to focus on impact and outcomes.

The main misconception is that internationalisation in higher education means “abroad.” The nearly exclusive focus, in most national and institutional strategies, on the mobility of students and faculty (for credit or degree, for short-term revenue or long-term soft policy) is elitist in that it concerns a small minority of students and faculty, worldwide only around 1–2%, with exceptions in Europe

(between 15 and 25%) and the United States (up to 10%). Internationalisation is, by far, not for all students and, thereby, not really *at home*. The leitmotiv of the “Internationalisation at Home” movement in Europe at the end of last century, “what about the other 98%?”, is—even though the percentages are now closer to 80%—still most relevant.

Twenty-five years ago, the focus of internationalisation policies was nearly exclusively on the mobility of students for credits—, in Europe primarily the Erasmus program. At the end of the 1990s, a reaction emerged in Europe calling for more attention to the large majority of students that were not mobile: “Internationalisation at Home.” At the same time, in Australia and the United Kingdom where there was a strong focus on recruiting international degree students, internationalising the curriculum received greater consideration. Internationalisation of the curriculum and Internationalisation at Home, two strongly intertwined approaches, have become part of the agenda of the European Commission and of national governments and institutions of higher education around the world. Implementation, however, is still quite challenging.

The rationale is that all graduates will live and work in an increasingly interconnected globalised world as professionals—economic actors—and as citizens—social and human beings. The need of the labour market for global professionals and of society for global citizens cannot be addressed solely by mobility. International, intercultural, and global learning outcomes are important elements of a modern curriculum.

Responsible global citizenship implies the need to develop social consciousness and a sense of belonging to a global community; cognitive justice; and support to faculty and teachers in developing responsible global citizenship. Education needs to develop a more inclusive understanding of knowledge in order to build capacity to find solutions to complex problems in local and global contexts. It requires curriculum development and content that engages with multiple and global sources of knowledge in which students explore how knowledge is produced, distributed, exchanged, and utilized globally (de Wit and Leask 2017).

Rethinking Internationalisation

In reaction to the dominant focus on mobility and fragmentation in internationalisation policies, a need emerged to rethink internationalisation for the following reasons:

1. The discourse on internationalisation does not always match reality in that, for too many universities, internationalisation means merely a collection of fragmented and unrelated activities, rather than a comprehensive process;
2. Increasing globalisation and commodification of higher education and the development of a global knowledge society and economy have resulted in a new

range of forms, providers, and products, and new, sometimes conflicting dimensions, views, and elements in the discourse of internationalisation;

3. The international higher education context is rapidly changing. “Internationalisation”—like “international education”—was, until recently, predominantly a western phenomenon, in which developing countries only played a reactive role. Nowadays, emerging economies and higher education communities in other parts of the world are altering the landscape of internationalisation. This shift away from a western, neo-colonial concept (as “internationalisation” is perceived by several educators) means incorporating other, emerging views;
4. The discourse on internationalisation is often dominated by a small group of stakeholders: higher education leaders, governments, and international bodies. The voices of other stakeholders, such as employers, faculty, and students are heard far less often, with the result that the discourse is insufficiently influenced by those who should benefit the most from its implementation;
5. Too much of the discourse is oriented toward the national and institutional levels, with little attention to programs. Research, the curriculum, and teaching and learning processes which should be at the core of internationalisation (as expressed by movements such as “Internationalisation at Home”) often receive little attention;
6. Too often, internationalisation is evaluated quantitatively, in terms of numbers or in terms of inputs and outputs, instead qualitatively, following an approach based on outcomes and on measuring the impact of internationalisation initiatives;
7. To date, there has been insufficient attention to norms, values, and ethics in the practice of internationalisation. With some notable exceptions, the approach has been pragmatically oriented toward reaching targets, without any debate on potential risks and ethical consequences;
8. There is an increased awareness that the notion of “internationalisation” is not only a question of relations between nations but even more of relations between cultures and between “global” and “local” (de Wit 2013).

This rethinking process was manifested in a document by the International Association of Universities in April 2012, “Affirming Academic Values in Internationalisation of Higher Education: A Call for Action” (International Association of Universities 2012). Yet, in national and institutional strategies, most of the misconceptions are still prevalent (de Wit 2016, 2017a, b).

Contributions to This Thematic Section

Over the past years, an intense, stimulating, and sometimes provocative debate about the future of internationalisation has taken place. As de Wit and Rumbley (2018) observe, “Internationalisation is still primarily driven by dynamics at the

institutional level. National policies are often fragmented and tend to be focused on the mobility side and on matters of competition and competitive advantage, while institutional policies tend to be more coordinated and integrated and appear to strive to combine the dimensions of “internationalisation abroad” and “internationalisation at home” more intentionally.” As also Crăciun in her contribution observes, national attention in all of these countries seems to be more focused toward the competitive end. In comparison, at the institutional level, references are more regularly made to matters of internationalisation at home and to global citizenship development—although, as de Wit and Rumbley (2018) state, “even at the institutional level, rhetoric around these ideas is still much more clearly in evidence than strategic and sustained action.”

The contributions to this thematic session illustrate that, under the broad concept of the Bologna Process and internationalisation, there is great variety in—as well as disconnect between—national and institutional policies and strategies and between competition and collaboration.

Crăciun in her analysis of national policies calls for internationalisation as active engagement and policy-making and comes to the conclusion that national policies for internationalisation are still limited in number, mainly a European and developed world phenomenon, stimulated by the active inbound mobility of international students. This seems to imply that competition is driving more the national agendas than collaboration.

Perez-Encinas makes in her contribution a strong appeal for a collaborative approach that fosters community engagement and integration between students and staff members, while Fit and Gologan call for a stronger influence of student perspectives of internationalisation, more support systems for students and better information and communication channels.

Denisova-Schmidt illustrates in her contribution that corruption, lack of academic integrity and other ethical issues are prevalent in the Bologna signature countries and calls for more attention and specific measures to address these concerns.

These papers make clear that the focus is still more on competition than on collaboration, something that is in line with Evans’ argument that the European Higher Education Area is essentially a neoliberal higher education area. One can question if that was the intended purpose of the process and if it does adequate justice to its more collaborative dimensions, but the neoliberal factor cannot be ignored.

The calls for a more collaborative (Perez-Encinas) and student-oriented (Fit and Gologan) approach to internationalisation as well as the concern by Denisova-Schmidt to address ethics and academic integrity in the European Higher Education Area align with Evans’ analysis that there is a need to reshape academic professionalism. Similarly, it fits well with the call for rethinking internationalisation in higher education as described above.

The paradox also manifests itself in the internationalisation of the Bologna Process itself, as Woldegiorgis in his contribution describes the policy travel of the Bologna Process to Africa and its sub-regions. This travel can be perceived either as

advantageous and by that collaborative or as an instrument of neo-colonialism and by that competitive. As he makes clear, context is essential and a simple transfer is not possible.

Altbach and de Wit (2017) are less optimistic than Evans that the neoliberal university is coming to an end. They expect that in the current global political climate the commercial side of internationalisation will continue to thrive for some time, while internationalisation at home will encounter more opposition and will depend even more on institutions than on governments for development and support. New challenges, which were not so clear until now, have come to the forefront. These confront us with the need to look even more critically at our misconceptions and try to create opportunities out of these challenges (see de Wit 2017a, b).

Although we use labels like “comprehensive internationalisation” and “global citizenship” as if our approach were systematic and qualitative, the reality is that “internationalisation” has become a very broad term, used for a great variety of (mostly economic) agendas. Whether the changing geographic landscape of higher education will also result in different agendas remains to be seen.

Some major misconceptions in the coming years will deal with:

- Internationalisation being equal to “global” and ignoring “local”;
- Internationalisation being a risk for national and cultural identities;
- Western values and concepts as the sole models for internationalisation; and
- Internationalisation unfolding worldwide without any regard for and alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals defined by the United Nations.

The following definition of internationalisation—an update of an original definition by Jane Knight in 2008, developed in a Delphi Panel exercise as part of a study for the European Parliament—reflects this imperative adequately:

[Internationalisation is] “the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of postsecondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society.” (de Wit et al. 2015)

References

- Altbach, P. G., & de Wit, H. (2017). *The New Nationalism and Internationalization of HE*. University World News, 15 September 2017 (474).
- de Wit, H. (2011). *Misconceptions About Internationalisation*. University World News, 10 April 2011 (166).
- de Wit, H. (2013). *Rethinking the concept of internationalisation going global: Identifying trends and drivers of international education* (pp. 213–218). London: Emerald Group Publishing.
- de Wit, H. (2016). Misconceptions about (the end of) internationalisation: The current state of play. In E. Jones, R. Coelen, J. Beelen, & H. de Wit (Eds.), *Global and local internationalization* (pp. 15–20). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- de Wit, H. (2017a). *Misconceptions of Internationalization, Still Prevailing*. University World News, 16 July 2017.

- de Wit, H. (2017b). *Improving Access and Equity in Internationalisation*. University World News, 8 December 2017 (486).
- de Wit, H., Hunter, F., Egron-Polak, E., & Howard, L. (Eds.). (2015). *Internationalisation of higher education*. Brussels: A study for the European Parliament.
- de Wit, H., & Jones, E. (2017). *Improving Access and Equity in Internationalization*. University World News, 8 December 2017, Issue No: 486.
- de Wit, H., & Leask, B. (2017). Preparing global citizenry, implications for curriculum. In: *GUNI, higher education in the world 6; towards a socially responsible university: Balancing the global with the local*. Barcelona: GUNI-ACUP.
- de Wit H., & Rumbley, L. (2018). Emerging paradoxes of internationalization in higher education. In *Mapping internationalization globally, international briefs for higher education leaders no. 7: American Council on Education*.
- International Association of Universities. (2012). *Affirming academic values in internationalization of higher education: A call for action*. Paris: International Association of Universities.

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.

