INTERNATIONALIZATION: CONCEPTS, COMPLEXITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Internationalization is a term being used more and more to discuss the international dimension of higher education, and more widely postsecondary education. It is a term that means different things to different people and is thus used in a variety of ways. While it is encouraging to see the increased use and attention being given to internationalization, there is a great deal of confusion about exactly what it means. For some, it means a series of international activities such as academic mobility for students and teachers; international linkages, partnerships and projects; new international academic programs and research initiatives. For others, it means the delivery of education to other countries through new types of arrangements such as branch campuses or franchises, and using a variety of face-to-face and distance learning techniques. To many, it means the integration of an international, intercultural and/or global dimension into the curriculum and teaching learning process. Still others see international development projects and alternatively the commercial trade of higher education services as internationalization.

Finally, there is continuing debate and exploration on the relationship of internationalization with globalization. Is internationalization the same as globalization? If so, why and how and to what end? If not, how is it different or what is the relationship between these two dynamic processes? Clearly internationalization is interpreted and used in different ways, in different countries and by different stakeholders. This reflects the realities of today and presents new challenges in terms of developing a conceptual framework that can provide some clarity on the meaning of the term and some principles to guide policy and practice.

This chapter focuses on the meaning, rationales, approaches, and strategies for internationalization and identifies core issues and challenges at both the institutional level and national/sector level. The national/sector level has an important influence on the international dimension of higher education through policy, funding, programs and regulatory frameworks. Yet, it is usually at the institutional level where the real process of internationalization is taking place. Therefore this analysis of internationalization uses a bottom-up (institutional) approach and a top-down (national/sector) approach and looks at the dynamic relationship between these two levels.
A few words about terminology are necessary, as the language of internationalization is changing and differs within and between countries and regions. Even though one of the objectives of this chapter is to examine the meaning and definitions of internationalization, it is important to be clear at the outset how key concepts are interpreted and used. The terms international, transnational and global are interpreted and used in ways that differentiate one from the other (Knight, 1999a, 1999b, p. 10). The term international emphasizes the notion of nation and refers to the relationship between and among different nations and countries. Transnational is used in the sense of across nations, usually in terms of borders, and does not specifically address the notion of relationships. Transnational is often used interchangeably and in the same way as cross-border. Global, on the other hand, refers to worldwide in scope and substance and does not highlight the concept of nation.

The Context: Changes and Challenges

It is impossible to look at the concept of internationalization without considering the realities of the environment in which higher education is operating. Needless to say there are many changes and new challenges in terms of how the environment is impacting internationalization and how the growing international dimension of higher education is an agent of change itself. Globalization is probably the most pervasive and powerful feature of the changing environment.\(^2\)

Globalization is a term and a phenomenon which is on the minds of policymakers, academics and professionals/practitioners no matter what the sector or discipline. Education is no exception. The role of education—particularly postsecondary education—as both agent and reactor to globalization is a critical area of debate and study. The discussion, in terms of the nature, causes, elements, consequences and future implications of globalization on education is prolific, rather controversial and very important (Altbach, 2004; Breton & Lambert, 2003; Enders & Fulton, 2003; Marginson, 2001; Scott, 2000). For the purposes of this discussion, a neutral definition of globalization is purposely adopted, and secondly, globalization is positioned as a key environmental factor that has multiple effects—both positive and negative—on education.

It is important to note that the discussion does not center on the “globalization of education”—rather, globalization is presented as a phenomenon impacting internationalization. In fact, substantial efforts have been made during this past decade to maintain the focus on the “internationalization of education” and to avoid using the term “globalization of education.” This has had mixed results, but some success has been achieved in ensuring that these two terms are not seen to be synonymous and are not used interchangeably.

Globalization is defined as the “the flow of technology, economy, knowledge, people, values, and ideas… across borders. Globalization affects each country in a different way due to a nation’s individual history, traditions, culture and priorities” (Knight & de Wit, 1997, p. 6). This definition acknowledges that globalization is a multi-faceted process and can impact countries in vastly different ways, but it does not take a position as to whether this impact has positive and/or negative consequences.