PAPER

Paper

Reflections on the internationalisation of higher education. An intercultural task, a political assignment and a personal dedication

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Many people – international relations officers, teachers, coaches and people active in the international programmes in national agencies – have often asked me why it is so difficult to promote and implement international programmes? Why is there such resistance – often hidden – against internationalising the curriculum or mixing international students with domestic students? Why do issues concerning visa applications remain a major problem? And why is teaching and learning in English – outside the English-speaking world – an issue of increasing concern? Not to speak of why it remains an everlasting challenge to promote mobility among domestic students. And the list is by no means complete. The same people also tell me they love the job, enjoy the intercultural contacts with colleagues in other universities, and take pleasure in working with students from around the world and visiting foreign universities and interesting international conferences. They wouldn't want to do anything else! (Teekens, 2013).

Different stakeholders have very different rationales for internationalisation. Some may overlap, but other intentions will not. One could argue that to a large extent there is agreement on a definition of internationalisation, but no common view exists on the desired outcome. In other words: many authors somewhat agree on what international education is, but not why it is important and what its impact should be. No wonder that the same holds true within a university. Leadership, professors and students will all have different perspectives. Internationalisation is a bag of mixed messages.

Statistics on student mobility, international cooperation and budgets spent – both individually, organisationally and internationally – show rising figures and increased impact. Various voices argue that internationalisation has become a core activity for higher education in most places around the world. But the reality remains complicated. In some cases we actually see developments that suggest a slow-down of earlier achievements, or even a return to a national perspective on the role of higher education. The closure in 2018 of the Central European University in Budapest is perhaps the most dramatic example.

Obstacles to internationalising higher education have a long history, and this explains why they are likely to remain an important and lasting factor in the process. The current political and economic situation in Europe may well have a much greater impact than it did a few years ago. Globalisation, especially as a result of developments in China, will be felt in Europe, although probably more so in Australia and the United States.

I write this contribution from the perspective of a practitioner. Someone, with more than twenty-five years of work experience in the field, who has now enjoyed a period of more than five years of retirement, albeit a period in which I still have been moderately active in international education in various parts of the world. A position that has prompted me to reflect more or less from the sideline. It makes my contribution more of a personal reflection than the result of recent research. It is an open door to say that we are facing a world in change. That has always been the case. The questions are now: why are these changes so profound, and what direction are we heading in?

A vast literature on international education has accumulated since the field was developed as an academic, inter-disciplinary field of study. But these studies are not always of direct use for those dealing with the practicalities of international education. In everyday work it is difficult for those involved to bridge the gap between the leadership, academic domain and administration. In this article I will focus on Europe and will refer to the European Union (EU) when that is explicitly meant. I do not

pretend to have the answers, let alone the solutions to the issues raised above. But in this article I try to explain some of the obstacles that are inherent in the process of internationalising higher education. At the end I reflect on some current developments and what they mean for international education.

Europe

But first a remark on the use of the term 'Europe'. Some may purport that this designation is not a reality. They argue that Europe is an idea, or perhaps more of an ideal, but not a reality. Political, cultural and geographical criteria do not necessarily overlap. So when talking about 'Europe' it remains a bit unclear what precisely is meant. All over the world, and within 'Europe' itself as well, we use the term often and understand it without difficulty or very specific criteria. This would not be commonly done, if this name did not evoke an image that is useful. It also expresses a feeling of belonging. During the time of the Cold War, people behind the Iron Curtain thought of themselves as Europeans, although this notion was not shared by either the Soviet Union or the governments in the various capitals in 'the rest of Europe'. People in greatly different countries, ranging from the far northwest in Iceland to the southeast in Cyprus, will confirm that they are 'European', as opposed to African, American or Asian. Recently the question has arisen whether Ukraine and Armenia are European countries. Using the term 'European' is not very useful in higher education, unless it explicitly refers to the European Union.

Some European values and ideas could perhaps be better classified under the notion of 'Western'. Europeans transplanted them to other parts, where they were further developed and adapted by those who settled in places like The Americas and Australia, and later on in colonies all over the world. In cultural terms, descendants of those early European colonists may still identify with 'Europe' up to the present day, for instance regarding their taste in literature or music. Just take Ludwig van Beethoven, born in 1770. He has a Dutch/Flemish name, was born in Germany, and worked and lived most of his life in Austria, where he died in 1827. The chorale 'All Men Shall Be Brothers' from his ninth symphony is the official European hymn. Tellingly, the chorale is usually referred to internationally as 'Ode to Joy'. Beethoven's legacy has become part of a global appreciation of his music, rooted in the Viennese tradition of classical music.

At the same time, the notion of 'Western' may well be identified as suppressive and non-inclusive. Sometimes Europe is seen as the Old Continent, a place that was good to get away from. So notions of Europe depend on facts, ideas, and very much on emotions. There may not be one European culture, but there is a feeling, even when not always clearly articulated, that people in Europe know each other because they share values, religious beliefs and tastes, and admire important icons of the arts. But having a common background does not imply that it unites the peoples of Europe. At most, it confirms that many Europeans share common roots that have shaped the cultures and societies of its various nations. Higher learning played an important role in creating European commonality. In international education, this means that students often find other European countries not 'different' enough and prefer a destination beyond Europe when going abroad. The United States was always a very popular destination for many European students. The same regards researchers. With the current political climate in the US, this may well be different in the future (Open Doors, 2020).

The university model as a European invention

The university as we know it today originated in Italy in the eleventh century. In the early days of the university, Latin was the unifying language of communication and theology was an important subject, if not the most important one. The Roman Catholic Church had an important stake in university education, shaping the minds of students and reinforcing religious belief as a catholic, meaning universal value. Through a common language, religious belief and the mobility of students and professors, the university was indeed international. But this is actually a contradiction in terms, because at the time there were no nation-states to establish 'inter-national' relations with, or that could feel 'international'. Europeans dealt with each other as individuals with wide and diverse

backgrounds, coming from all parts of the realm but sharing the same frame of mind. This enabled a relatively non-committal travel and interaction within the academic world. Mobility reinforced the universal religious and cultural perspective. Academic mobility was not a danger to established university interests and was thus promoted. But in the sixteenth century the 'universal' view on higher education slowly started to change. National interests took over when powerful kings established centralised monarchies and diminished the 'catholic' influence of the pope. The Reformation meant that not even in religious matters was there a consensus within the confinement of one church. Most churches came under state power, such as in Britain where the monarch became the head of the Anglican Church. The consequences for learning were vast, although change came slowly. National languages replaced Latin, and knowledge and research became tokens of national pride and status. As a whole, the university became part of the economic and political framework of the state. Technical applications represented national economic gain and status. Science and research fuelled developments that brought Europe to the threshold of modernity. Think, for instance, of the stock market in economics, democracy and human rights in politics, the welfare state in social terms, soccer in sports and opera in classical music. The list is endless. But where all countries became part of this modern Europe, the idea of communality faded.

At this moment, renewed nationalism is overtaking the facts. Namely that Europe is strongly interconnected, but apparently not in the hearts and minds of many of its people. In education, the university is again a bastion of national interest. The paradox is that this often comes in the form of internationalisation. Universities want to attract research talent from abroad to rise in the rankings, so that more research money can be obtained. Governments hope that international students will stay, pay taxes and support the national economy. Different departments and interest groups battle for a different piece of the pie within the university. In countries that are strongly dependent on international trade and business, like Germany, support from the government will enhance international collaboration. In countries without such an orientation, the government will further strengthen a national perspective on higher education, like in Hungary for example.

Nation-states need loyal citisens and professionals. Education is a very important way of winning the hearts and minds of the population. Universities educate and prepare the professionals of the state needed to build strong societies. People, once accountable to the church, became subjects, accountable to the state, its monarch and its state-controlled churches. For a long time this related to higher education only, because general education did not become common until the late nineteenth century. In the collective Western view of higher education, the role of the university as a 'motor' for society is persistent to this day. This does not reduce responsibility for teaching and in particular research, but politics places a clear social responsibility on the university as well. The application of knowledge must enlighten the population and provide prosperity. This is not only a national view on the role of universities. In a close reading of strategy papers, for instance of the OECD and the EU, you can clearly read this message. It implies that 'all' countries share the same interests, but in reality within the EU there is still strong national competition among the member states, including in education. National governments are interested in the question: where do the best students go? They will support their universities to attract that talent. This explains why rich countries with well-organised and well-equipped institutions find it easier to attract students. An example of this is the increasing flow of students from Italy and Greece to northwestern Europe. European programmes claiming European solidarity are not really able to counterbalance these trends (Eurostat). Higher education remains highly national, because it depends on national legislation and, most importantly, it is based on national funding (Brooks, 2018).

European universities, while serving the interests of kings, nevertheless remained centres of creativity and free thinking over the centuries. Individual scientists paid the price. Book burnings and exile were commonly experienced. Other, more open countries profited, such as in the case of Descartes and Comenius, who came to the Netherlands where they found shelter and could publish freely. Ever since the eleventh century, universities in Europe have been an agent of change and common European

values. Through the mobility of students and professors they were an important facilitator of collaboration. Born from theological philosophy, universities cleared the ground for empirical research, documented and discussed through written publications that shaped the academic mores of the modern university around the world. The university world create the critical mind of the modern age. Modernity made Europe the motor of the world's economy and technology.

It is important to stress that developments in European higher education were strongly fuelled by industrial and technological developments in the United States. The trans-Atlantic connection became the most important international relationship for Europe. At the end of the nineteenth century, massive migration from Europe to the US strengthened this even further, creating strong national communities and bonds across the ocean, like in the case of Polish and Italian communities.

Universities across the world have a lot in common, all having emulated the same university model as it originated in Renaissance Italy. Globalisation is now creating new academic connectivity, which will transform old 'Western' notions of learning and research with new international standards and values fuelled by technology. Western dominance will fade. In order to maintain their relevance, universities in Europe will seek to strengthen collaboration among themselves and internationally. Although universities worldwide trace their origin to the European university model, education elsewhere is often inspired by other cultural values and religions. Modern Chinese universities, for instance, seek to link their social relevance to the centuries-old respected Confucian philosophy (Nisbett, 2003). But *all* universities worldwide, no matter their background, will face a future where the old notions of teaching and learning will be contested by big data and a global economy (Teekens, 2015). Modernity has been overtaken by technology and the unimaginable wealth of a small number of the super-rich. They do not live in Europe.

For people working in universities, 'internationalisation' represents daily activities on the micro level of their own organisation. But most influences, both push and pull factors, are results of developments that have little to do with education and much more with politics and the economy. This is often frustrating for individual staff when one realises that those realms are outside one's direct sphere of influence in the office or classroom. Think of visa regulations, national laws on using the national language of instruction, or legal rules regarding examinations.

The core of the problem regarding international university programmes is that they 'talk international', but have to comply with national ideas and standards to serve the national interest. European education programmes back up the interests of the EU. It may essentially be true that science is universal, but its application is local and subject to national control. International education goes against the flow of power when it does not serve power structures that are based on the national interest. And that relates also to the interests of individual nationals, domestic students and professors. This may explain why domestic students do not want to be taught in a language other than their own, when they argue 'I just want to be a doctor here in my own city'. Or why some academics do not like colleagues with an international degree and broader experience, who potentially may be competitors for job promotion. Once I was asked what PhD stands for. When I answered, the person I was speaking to shook his head. No, it means 'PushHerDown'. University structures have known longstanding local and cultural traditions. The introduction of the bachelor's and master's degrees in European countries was often felt as a cultural intrusion.

Of course this short flashback does not do justice to the complex history of the university as an institution of higher learning, but it does explain why countries are so proud of their universities and why they find it so difficult to allow foreign influence, perceived or real, to affect these institutions. This relates to cultural, economic, political, social and religious paradigms. International education affects all these aspects. That makes internationalisation policies so complex and at times poorly understood.

Higher education in Europe: A political assignment

In the twentieth century, European rivalry led to the horrors of the First and Second World Wars and consequently the Cold War. The name 'World War' conceals the fact that those conflicts originated in Europe and were the result of national competition between European countries. In 1945, the political will to prevent future wars while at the same time build strong economies was the beginning of a process that connected the historical/cultural notion of 'Europe' with a political ambition for peace and prosperity. Political stability and economic growth are the pillars of the EU. They resulted in the rapid admission into the EU of ten post-communist countries in Central Europe, when it was felt that otherwise a new curtain would arise in the eastern part of Europe.

It is helpful to realise that the notion of 'Europe' in higher education is not of an educational order. To create a European open market, it was felt that the harmonisation of higher education was a prerequisite. Universities have often disagreed and used European programmes to strengthen their position *within* Europe. This explains why there is a strong flow of students and researchers from east to west. The old national interests in the various countries, along with their historical and economic positions, change slowly. It also explains why universities in countries with less international trade feel less inclined to internationalise than countries who are more dependent on it. Universities in the Netherlands are almost bi-lingual and, in many cases, English has taken over from Dutch, even in undergraduate teaching.

Loyalty to the fatherland and the mother tongue are important ingredients for personal identity, or so it appears. Countries in Europe with important regional differences are now seeing, with the demise of strong centralised political frameworks, how the nation-state and the national language are under pressure, such as in Spain with the uprisings in Catalonia, and in the United Kingdom with the cry for more freedom in Scotland. Centuries of power centralisation have not been able to erase deeply rooted feelings of pre-national identity. It is important to realise that in those so-called apostate regions there is quite a positive attitude towards Europe. The current political tendency is to juxtapose national interests and the European idea. That is a pity, but it is understandable as long as the EU acts as a supra-national unit instead of a trans-national organisation. Globalisation will only evoke more local identity issues, having a strong local impact with very different outcomes for the different parts of Europe. It is an assignment for all educators in Europe to remind our youth that peace in Europe is not self-sustaining and needs to be carefully treasured.

Higher education in Europe: An intercultural task

International education in Europe is an intercultural task. This was recognised early on, when in the nineties of the last century the debate on internationalising higher education really got started (Wulf, 1995). And learning goals for primary schools were discussed even earlier, since by the time students go to university their cultural identity has already been strongly fixed (Bell, 1988). But as explained earlier, there is no European culture. The culture of Europe is a collection of different languages and many different customs, rituals and narratives. Cultures admire – even worship – their heroes, and that may be one of the main obstacles to creating more communality in Europe. There are no European heroes. In the end, Beethoven is claimed by Germany and not by Spain. Culture is learned and collectively transmitted. The EU supports education programmes through which the youth of Europe will 'unlearn' some narrow national knowledge in order to create a newly integrated European knowledge*.* But this is a very rational perspective. Learning begins with an effective attitude, as does teaching. By the time children go to school they have already absorbed the cultural narrative of their community. And this is important. We all need to feel rooted and to know where we belong. The task of education is to teach diversity. Dealing with diversity, on an individual level and within one's community, will increasingly be the basis of culture. In spite of what populists proclaim, globalisation has done away with the days of secluded cultures – in fact those days never were! But in times of uncertainty, those fairy tales feel comforting. The task of higher education is to educate Europeans to live together amidst cultural and linguistic diversity.

Higher education in Europe: A dedication

Over the last five decades we have been dealing with the massification of higher education, digitalisation, and the mass mobility of students around the world. At the same time, (higher) education in Europe has retained some of its centuries-old traditions while trying to find ways to educate Europeans. Collaboration and sharing universal values amidst different cultures and interests is quintessentially European: diversity in unity. EU programmes invested and this created a different kind of international collaboration than in other places, Australia in particular, where attracting international students was predominantly a business model for universities. In Europe, aspects of internationalising the curriculum were always part of the discourse. This means that mobility was an element of the policies but was always embedded in learning strategies for both learner and teacher. The personal level in education, and certainly in international education, is very important. It requires from both learner and teacher an open mind, willing to include new ideas. A dedication and willingness to learn from each other across cultural differences (Zull, 2012).

Over the last two decades we have seen that international higher education has become highly commercialised. Attracting international students became for many universities the most important, if not the only reason to internationalise. As long as students came in the way the universities wanted, the 'field' boomed, and cultural aspects and views on intercultural learning and profits, both material and immaterial, were discussed. But in reality, internationalising universities was based on 'Western' ideas and ideals and, in the end, more on money than anything else. Now that massive flows of students from China and other 'sending' countries are drying up, the view on 'collaboration' has changed completely. In Europe, exchange has remained an important aspect of collaboration, and the intention of universities to include cultural aspects of mobility in their educational approach differs from a purely commercial stance.

Education in the twenty-first century is faced with the most important development in teaching and learning since the Renaissance. Education means teaching students to learn and apply knowledge. We are now faced with a future in which computers will not only be able to teach, but also to learn. They will turn us – potentially – into different people (Harari, 2016).

Reflections

What then will be the role of the teacher and learner? Why would you go abroad when the whole world can be reached through the Net? Does this make international mobility obsolete? When we look at the plans of the EU for new education programmes in the period from 2021 to 2027, the contrary is the case. The objective of strengthening the European market is again the most important reason to greatly increase the budget to 30 billion euro. The aim of greater mobility among students and staff remains unchanged. The ambition is to reach a number of 12 million young people and their teachers. Erasmus (the + will again disappear from the name) remains the flagship of the EU. The new programme retains the core values that were first articulated when the programme started – at least for higher education – in 1987. That is remarkable. It also means that the EU has not yet achieved its ambition of creating a truly European education area. However, I think for the vast majority of young people, personal and cultural interests will prevail, not the political ambitions of the EU. Two elements are being focused on: inclusivity and professional skills development. Regional development, albeit across national borders, also remains important. In my view there is not much new under the sun. The way in which Erasmus really impacts inter-European collaboration remains unclear. Nevertheless, I wholeheartedly support the idea of Erasmus and think the money is well spent. Millions of young people have profited and developed themselves, and it has strengthened universities. Whether it has strengthened the EU is doubtful. In other words, what is good on a personal level may not really work macro-economically, or the other way around. It makes clear that the assignment, task and dedication to European commonality, remains unchanged.

Outside of Europe, the most important reason for students to go abroad has always been the lack of good education at home. Increasing costs for higher education are such a burden for many students,

and for international students in particular, that they no longer see it as an investment but more as a financial burden that inhibits personal development after graduation. This applies in particular to students who study primarily to get a job, not because they want to develop themselves in regards to 'Bildung'. It means that people will make different choices and perhaps focus on professional training instead. In fact, international work experience and internships are the fastest growing activities within European programmes. And not only for universities but also in technical secondary education.

Will nothing change? It will. Europe is no longer the motor of the world; in fact, not even the 'Western' world is. The knowledge revolution will place university learning in a very different position. Higher education will take the lead in developing artificial intelligence only in part. Big companies will have a growing influence on research, and those big companies are increasingly located in Asia. A university degree is no longer a guarantee of work. Universities are a result of the modern age. The new age will require people to deal with knowledge in ways that are digitally prescribed and will require very different and novel ways of instruction. Probably largely supported by virtual reality.

My question is: how can we humanise society when artificial intelligence and big data will rule the world? Computers have no feelings. I still feel that the most important added value of international education is the cultural learning experience, which imparts new learning primarily in terms of attitudes, provided that this learning is well contextualised. Hopefully, this learning is still predominantly face-to-face, and exists in international education through real international mobility and exchanges. But following on what was discussed above, this all may well mean that virtual mobility and internationalising the curriculum at home will become more and more important. That implies that educators – more in their role as learning coaches than as instructors – are tremendously important in guiding the next generation through the jungle of big data, and helping students to explore the local environment. The big question will be how to live a meaningful life and how to combine real personal experience with the virtual reality of the net. Finding one's own cultural identity amidst a globalised world will be a matter of shifting modes of thinking. This means dealing with diversity. A lasting phenomenon of a globalised world.

Note: This article was written before the Covid-19 outbreak engulfed the world. My personal reflections on the future herewith have a different colour. It shows that under global pressure, many of the developments are actually shaping up more quickly, and it will be very interesting to see how permanent they will be in the long term.

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