

Challenges and Opportunities for the Global Engagement of Higher Education

Patti McGill Peterson

Presidential Advisor for Global Initiatives
American Council on Education

Robin Matross Helms

Senior Program Specialist for Research Initiatives
American Council on Education

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This series of occasional papers explores key issues and themes faced by higher education institutions around the world as they respond to an increasingly complex and interconnected global landscape. Papers include a variety of national and international perspectives, expert commentary, and recommendations for policy and practice.



Leadership and Advocacy

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American Council on Education

One Dupont Circle NW

Washington, DC 20036

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The American Council on Education (ACE) in 2010 convened a panel of experts from a variety of countries to discuss the changing role and priorities of higher education in an increasingly globalized world. The panel, composed of presidents and other leaders of higher education institutions, observed:

Higher education exists in, and is very much affected by, a world that increasingly operates across sovereign borders. Just as countries have become more interconnected worldwide, so, too, have colleges and universities. This new reality is much more than just a phenomenon; rather, it embodies a wholly new way of thinking and working. In the 21st century, higher education is explicitly, and fundamentally, a global enterprise. (American Council on Education 2011)

The term “global engagement” is often used to capture the interconnections and activities that define this new way of thinking and working. These activities vary in scope, and take place at a variety of levels within higher education systems.

Levels of Engagement

At the level of individuals, global engagement often refers to student mobility, as well as to student and faculty exchanges; faculty-to-faculty research partnerships and faculty-based research networks; participation in jointly taught courses; and other cross-border educational collaborations. At the institutional level, the term refers to formalized relationships explicitly defined by memoranda of understanding, joint and dual degree programs, branch campuses established in other countries, cooperative research projects, and other related ventures. These are sometimes initiated by faculty and then adopted by institutions as high-priority partnerships.

While global engagement at the individual level has been occurring spontaneously for many years, data suggest that institutional-level engagement is becoming an important priority for many colleges and universities. For example, the International Association of Universities (IAU) report *Internationalization of Higher Education: Global Trends, Regional Perspectives* notes that among institutions worldwide that responded to an IAU survey on internationalization, 32 percent indicated that they offer courses or programs abroad for their own or local students, and 41 percent offer joint-degree programs with partners abroad (Egron-Polak and Hudson 2010). The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education reported that as of the end of 2011, there were 200 international branch campuses established worldwide, with another 37 slated to open within two years (Lawton and Katsomitros 2012)—an increase from 162 in 2009 (Becker 2009).

Most broadly, governments, often represented by ministries of education or sometimes by foreign ministries, may establish nationwide policies and programs to promote global engagement by their countries’ higher education systems as a whole: China’s Confucius Institutes¹ and the Brazil Scientific Mobility Program² present good examples of initiatives promoted by education ministries. The Fulbright Program³ is a good example of a foreign ministry (the U.S. Department of State) promoting global engagement. The 2010 IAU study found that government policy is seen as one of the primary external drivers of institutional internationalization (Egron-Polak and Hudson 2010), suggesting that initiatives at the state, regional, and national level are gaining momentum, and can be an important factor in advancing global engagement in higher education as a whole.

Institutional “Foreign Relations” Policies

While governments may promote global engagement and initiate programs of academic exchange

1 See, for example, the website for the University of Maryland’s Confucius Institute at <http://www.international.umd.edu/cim>.

2 Science Without Borders. <http://www.cienciasemfronteiras.gov.br/web/csf/home>.

3 U.S. Department of State. “The Fulbright Program.” <http://eca.state.gov/fulbright>.

between countries and regions, they are significantly dependent for the success of these efforts on the cooperation of institutions of higher education. Indeed, institutions, particularly prestigious research universities, are developing their own “foreign relations” policies, and often include global engagement as part of their institutional strategic plans. This involves direct relationships and negotiations not only with foreign institutions, but also with government representatives. For example, when the presidents of U.S. institutions such as Cornell University (NY), New York University, or the University of Wisconsin travel to India, China, or any number of other countries, they often meet with government officials as part of their efforts to build educational relationships with those countries. Similarly, the schedules of rectors and vice chancellors of foreign institutions visiting the United States frequently include meetings with officials of the Departments of State and Education (Peterson 2013, 5-8).

Different Actors, Different Motivations

At the broadest level, global engagement in higher education is a response to the greater forces of globalization affecting virtually all aspects of life and society today. As the nature and activities of global engagement vary by level, however, so too do the motivations for such engagement. What is clear is that there are many cooks in the global engagement stew. Activities and interests among the various actors may overlap or diverge. In this kind of scenario, it might even be possible for serious conflicts to arise, particularly if institutions are acting on a “beyond sovereignty” basis and governments are acting on the basis of national interests. While we cannot predict exactly what issues may arise, we can examine some of the motives and behaviors of the actors.

Financial Imperatives

Individual students may pursue international education opportunities for financial reasons, to gain competencies needed to compete in a global labor market, or to broaden their own cultural and

linguistic horizons. Faculty members pursue collaborations with peers abroad in order to advance their own research agendas and their disciplines as a whole, and to bring an international perspective into their classrooms and the curriculum. They may have a stronger sense of affiliation, particularly in the area of research, with their colleagues around the world than with their home institution and government (Cummings and Finkelstein 2011, 131-140).

At the institutional level, global engagement is motivated by a variety of factors in various parts of the institution. All colleges and universities, regardless of national context or institution type, have as part of their mission an imperative to prepare students to participate effectively in society. In the twenty-first century, this means being able to live and work in a globalized environment, and to communicate and interact with people from a wide variety of backgrounds. For many institutions, meeting this imperative is a key motivation for global engagement; indeed, the 2010 IAU study found that “improving student preparedness for a globalized/internationalized world” was ranked by respondents as the most important rationale for institutional internationalization (Egroun-Polak and Hudson 2010).

Given the financial imperatives that face institutions, however, it is perhaps unsurprising that revenue generation is also among the institutional motivations for global engagement. Establishing joint degree programs and other ventures abroad that expand an institution’s student and tuition base, particularly in contexts where operating costs are relatively low, may seem especially attractive when budget concerns are pressing. Global engagement at any level may also raise an institution’s international profile and solidify its brand, helping to attract students from abroad to study at the home institution. International students’ tuition rates are often higher than those for domestic students, again benefiting an institution’s bottom line.

Competition and Collaboration

At the same time that institutions are pursuing cooperation through global engagement strategies,

there will be increasing competition among them for well-qualified faculty. Faculty shortages abound in much of the developing world. In the developed world there soon will be large-scale retirement of faculty members, which may lead to shortages in some fields in these countries as well; in the United States, for example, the nursing field is already experiencing such a shortage, which is described by some as a crisis for nursing education going forward.⁴ Finding ways to cooperate in the sharing of faculty expertise as part of global engagement and using technology to extend the reach and impact of faculty members will become increasingly important.

Following the path of “beyond sovereignty,” a number of institutions are forming partnerships and coalitions to achieve even greater institutional strength within and beyond their national borders through combination with others. In 2011, for example, the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom and Australia’s Monash University joined forces to create the Monash-Warwick Alliance, the goal of which is to “help meet the increasing student, industry and government demand for universities to produce graduates with a global education, and to undertake research that addresses world-relevant and strategically important problems.” Projects undertaken thus far include collaborations in engineering and the physical sciences, an undergraduate research journal co-produced by students at the two institutions, and a joint PhD program. The alliance plans to expand its membership to include additional institutions in the future.⁵ In late 2011, a number of consortia composed of U.S. and non-U.S. institutions submitted proposals to build an applied sciences campus in New York City;⁶ successful bidders included a partnership between Cornell University and the Technion–Israel Institute of Technology,

and a consortium made up of New York University, The City University of New York, Carnegie Mellon University (PA), the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, the University of Toronto (Canada), and the University of Warwick, along with corporate partners such as IBM and Cisco.⁷

National Interests and Public Diplomacy

At the government level, motivations for encouraging higher education’s global engagement largely parallel those of institutions. Chief among these is national economic competitiveness, which is linked to institutions’ goal of preparing students for a globalized world. A country’s economic competitiveness depends on the competence of its workforce; in a globalized world, a competent workforce is one that is able to operate across borders.

Governments, like institutions, are also concerned with their international stature and brand. Global engagement initiatives in the higher education realm are often part of broader public diplomacy efforts through which governments exert “soft power.” In contrast to “hard power,” through which one nation seeks dominion over another by force, soft power relies on a gentler but equally influential approach. Soft power, rather than employing military might or economic leverage, is dependent on the power of ideas and culture to influence the friendship, disposition, and action of others (Nye 2004).

In the United States, the Fulbright program is an excellent example of public diplomacy being furthered through higher education. Though Fulbright has not been replicated by other countries, other well-organized efforts to build goodwill and a positive national image through international higher education activities abound. The British

4 Ingeno, Lauren. 2013. “Who Will Teach Nursing?” *Inside Higher Ed*, July 22. <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/07/22/nursing-schools-face-faculty-shortages>.

5 University of Warwick and Monash University. “Monash-Warwick Alliance.” 2013. <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/about/partnerships/monash/>.

6 Blumenstyk, Goldie. 2011. “Silicon Valley, New York-Style.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 23. <http://chronicle.com/article/Silicon-Valley-New-York-Style/129502/>.

7 Blumenstyk, Goldie. 2012. “New York U.-Led Consortium Wins City Backing for Research Institute.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 23. <http://chronicle.com/article/New-York-U-Led-Consortium/131641/>.

Council, for example, describes itself as the United Kingdom’s international organization for educational opportunities and cultural relations. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the European Commission’s Erasmus Mundus program have similar missions. Examples from Asia include China’s Confucius Institutes, and the newly established Education Malaysia Global Services organization, the purpose of which is to promote Malaysia as a higher education hub.⁸

The Greater Good

While economic goals, institutional and national image, and the exertion of soft power will undoubtedly continue to serve as motivators, the ultimate potential of global engagement in the higher education realm goes beyond the exclusive interests of individual institutions and countries and moves to the prospect of higher education addressing powerful and enduring issues that affect humankind worldwide. ACE’s (2011) *Strength Through Global Leadership and Engagement* report notes:

Many of the most tenacious problems facing humankind are best addressed by a coordinated effort across many nations. The challenges of poverty, public health, environmental degradation, ethnic and sectarian conflict, and human rights all require a commitment and collective effort that can transcend international boundaries. The borderless nature of these challenges encourages collaborative approaches to shared solutions.

Higher education institutions are often home to a nation’s top thinkers and researchers, who are best positioned to address these issues. By engaging globally and bringing together top talent, higher education can contribute to the resolution of these problems on a global scale. Even more broadly, the personal connections and shared experiences built through teaching, learning, and conducting re-

search across borders create mutual understanding, and may ultimately lead to a more peaceful world. As individuals, institutions, and governments consider and plan their global engagement strategies and activities, it is important that all actors recognize and take into account these loftier goals.

Creating Sustainable Partnerships

As noted previously, global engagement by individuals in higher education has been occurring spontaneously for many years, and will undoubtedly continue. Relationships at this level naturally ebb and flow, and will endure as long as they are useful, to be replaced by others when they end. At the institutional level, however, successful engagement abroad requires strategic planning, sustained effort, and a commitment to address the challenges that will inevitably arise as projects evolve. Though government policies and initiatives can play an important supporting role, the heavy lifting of global engagement in the higher education realm is done by individual institutions.

Comprehensive Internationalization

In order for institutions to succeed in ventures abroad, they must first build a solid platform for such activities. As illustrated by ACE’s Model for Comprehensive Internationalization (Figure 1),⁹ collaborations and partnerships are one of six interconnected “pillars” that institutions must attend to in order to create a truly internationalized institution. Institutional mission and goals, staffing structures, faculty policies and procedures, and other elements come together to create an internationalized culture and context that facilitate and support engagement abroad. Given the complexity and investment of time and resources required, without these elements in place, global ventures are likely to founder.

Of critical importance for sustainable partnerships between institutions is leadership for and commit-

8 Sharma, Yojana. 2013. “New Agency to Attract Foreign Students from Asia, Gulf.” *University World News*, April 20. <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20130419150359513>.

9 American Council on Education. “CIGE Model for Comprehensive Internationalization.” <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/CIGE-Model-for-Comprehensive-Internationalization.aspx>.

Figure 1. ACE's Model for Comprehensive Internationalization



ment to a strategic planning process that not only draws the key elements of internationalization together in a coherent way, but also places clear goals and strategies for global engagement in the institutional plan. Criteria that inform a process for determining which countries and institutions will be selected for engagement are crucial. In fundamental ways, global engagement choices need to be informed by and aligned with whatever the institution sets as high priorities for institutional performance.

Idealism, Pragmatism, and Integrity

Once institutions have built a solid foundation through internationalization at home, they must evaluate the myriad models and modalities for global engagement and determine which to pursue. Not every mode of engagement is right for every institution; overall mission and strategy, academic strengths and weaknesses, and resource availability should be taken into account when evaluating potential projects. Key stakeholders should be consulted, and institutions should be prepared to make the case for the selected activities to a wide range of constituents. Those ventures that best align with institutional goals and characteristics are most likely to gain the enthusiasm and support needed for long-term success.

Institutions need to balance idealism and pragmatism in developing and implementing projects abroad. While lofty goals related to public diplomacy and peace building can and should be important drivers for global engagement, institutions must attend to a wide array of pragmatic issues in order for partnerships to succeed. For academic collaborations, for example, curriculum content and requirements must be negotiated with partners, along with overall program purpose and teaching philosophies. For joint degree programs, the number of years to degree and general education requirements may vary from country to country, and creative solutions to account for differences may be needed. Partnerships that focus on research require attention to issues such as data ownership, copyrights, and alignment with ethics policies, all of which should be discussed at the outset of the collaboration and on an ongoing basis as needed.

Finally, sustainable institutional partnerships require that clear expectations be articulated on both sides. Both institutions need to be forthcoming about what resources they can bring to the relationship. There should be agreement up front on how the partnership will be evaluated and what will constitute success. In this process, integrity from all parties will be essential to sustainability.

A Tide That Lifts All Ships

The evolution of the global environment presents both challenges and opportunities for higher education in its various national settings. The context in which institutions engage with one another will be both collaborative and competitive. Knowledge is not a zero-sum game in which some win and others lose. Educational excellence for all as a derivative of global engagement should be an oft-repeated mantra of all parties. In the coming decades, it will be vitally important to ensure that engagement becomes the platform for a wider sharing of knowledge and talent globally.

Whether a collaboration across borders is encouraged by home countries or originates as a self-designed initiative, the need for transparency and clearly stated goals will be essential. As with all sustainable relationships, the character of the parties and the ethical framework in which they operate are all-important. Countries and institutions have an obligation to consider the benefits not merely to themselves but also to their partners. This will be in the best spirit of international diplomacy and internationalization of higher education. If done well, it will be a rising tide that lifts all ships.

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