

Internationalization Brings Important Benefits as Well as Risks

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While the process of internationalization affords many benefits to higher education, it is clear that there are serious risks associated with this complex and growing phenomenon. According to the results of the 2005 International Association of Universities (IAU) Survey there is overwhelming agreement (96 percent of responding institutions from 95 countries) that internationalization brings benefits to higher education. Yet, this consensus is qualified by the fact that 70 percent also believe there are substantial risks associated with the international dimension of higher education. (Information on the 2005 IAU Global Survey Report on the Internationalization of Higher Education: New Directions, New Challenges is available at iau@unesco.org.)

The top three risks associated with internationalization are commercialization and commodification of education programs, the increase in the number of foreign "degree mills" and low-quality providers, and brain drain. It is a sign of the times that each of these risks relates more to the cross-border aspects of internationalization than the campus-based activities. It is somewhat surprising that both developing and developed countries identified commercialization as the number-one risk over brain drain—a clear testimony to its importance.

It is also revealing that the loss of cultural or national identity, jeopardy of the quality of higher education, and the homogenization of curriculum were identified as the least important risks. When these results are compared to a similar 2003 IAU Internationalization Survey, brain drain was considered as the greatest risk. Thus, we are seeing a definite shift over the last three years toward mounting concern about commercialization, commodification, and marketization trends. It is fascinating, but also of some concern, that about 60 percent of the institutions were not aware of the General Agreement on Trade in Services, which proves that GATS is not the primary catalyst for the distress about the commercialization of internationalization.

Regional Views of Risks

Eighty-one percent of the universities in Africa, versus only 58 percent of those in North America indicated the importance and existence of risks related to internationalization. This is probably a sign that more African institutions are vulnerable to the threats of commercialization and low-quality cross-border providers than their counterparts in North America.

Latin America stands out from the rest of the regions as it ranks commodification and commercialization lower in importance than brain drain, elitism, and loss of cultural identity. This perception may be related to the fact that private education at the domestic level is a fundamental and long-term part of higher education provision and to date, for-profit cross-border education is not as prevalent in Latin American countries as in other regions of the world. In the Middle East, the loss of cultural identity is definitely the number-one risk attached to the process of internationalization. Increasing attention is being given to the importance of the international dimension of higher education in the Middle East. It will be revealing to see whether increased involvement in internationalization brings new and different threats to higher education in this region over the next three years when the IAU Internationalization Survey will again be distributed. This triannual survey meets the imperative need that we have a long-term perspective and regular monitoring of changes and challenges facing the international dimension of higher education institutions around the world.

Benefits on Student and Faculty Development

The two most important benefits identified by higher education institutions are more internationally oriented staff/students and improved academic quality. The three least-important benefits according to these same institutions are national and international citizenship, revenue generation, and brain gain. To some, it may seem hard to believe that revenue generation is seen as such a low-priority benefit (and rationale). One might ask whether this was a "socially desirable response" on the part of the responding universities. While this is a fair question, a more accurate explanation may rest on the fact that institutions from 95 countries responded to this survey—58 were from developing and 37 from developed countries. When all responses are tallied, they show that income generation is still not a primary reason or a benefit associated with internationalization. Little evidence exists at this time that internationalization is seen primarily as a profit-making enterprise for the majority of universities around the world. While internationalization is a top priority for some institutions, this policy perspective is limited to probably 8 or 10 out of the 95 countries.

Again, there are noteworthy differences among regions in terms of perceived benefits. Of interest is the high priority given to academic quality in both Africa and Latin America. The benefit to foster national and international citizenship is generally seen to be of low importance, but more institutions in North America see it as an important benefit than in any other region of the world. Revenue generation also has an overall low ranking, but more universities in Asia Pacific see it as both an important rationale and benefit. Brain gain ranks lowest for the majority of the regions, except the Middle East.

Perspectives on Benefits in Developing and Developed Countries

A gap between developing and developed countries exists in terms of the importance attributed to the benefit of more internationally oriented students and staff. Developed countries see it as the number one benefit but developing countries rank it in fourth place. The developing countries put more emphasis on the benefits of academic quality, research, and curriculum, which are fundamental elements of any higher education institution. Developing countries may assume that these elements need to be firmly in place before it is possible to reap the benefits of more internationally oriented students and staff.

Interestingly enough, there is no difference in the low importance given to brain gain between developed and developing countries. One might have expected developed countries to see internationalization bringing more benefits in terms of bright foreign students and promising faculty members or researchers. There are active campaigns in developed countries to attract the best and brightest to augment national human resource capacity and to replace retiring and mobile faculty. Many experts believe that international brain drain/gain, a term that most educators are uncomfortable with, is one of the most critical issues for the next five years as the higher education sector faces demographic changes, increased labor mobility, and growing national competitiveness for knowledge production and distribution.

The findings from the IAU survey paint a relatively positive picture of the sustained importance attributed to internationalization and the increase in the number of institutions that have moved to a planned approach to internationalization. The picture is less encouraging at the national level as institutions believe that national governments are giving inadequate attention to international education and do not play the role that they should in terms of national policy and funding to facilitate international research, mobility, and development projects. The benefits are clearly articulated but so are the risks. The future of internationalization faces many challenges as the trends of commercialization and commodification are seen to threaten the human development, research, and national capacity benefits of internationalization.

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