



# Changing rationales for the internationalisation of higher education

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# Key themes

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**The different perceptions, meanings and rationales of internationalisation in and of higher education, and what are key shifting rationales and paradigms?**

**What have been and are the main trends, rationales and drivers for internationalisation over the past decades?**

**What might be the future rationales and directions of internationalisation in response to current drastically changing global contexts and developments in higher education?**



# Internationalisation: A multifaceted and evolving concept

Two dimensions, *multifaceted* and *evolving*, are key characteristics of the internationalisation of higher education;

And also of several of its components:

Study abroad, international students, internationalisation at home, transnational or cross-border education, digitalisation, the use of terms like 'global citizenship', etc.

Internationalisation is not one model that fits all, its diversity is institutional, local, national and regional defined, and has changed and evolved over time in response to changing contexts and challenges.

That makes it essential to look at the rationales for internationalisation and how multifaceted and evolving they are!



# There is no such thing as ‘The International Student’, for instance:

## Types

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International degree seeking students (bachelor/master/PhD)

International credit seeking students (for study and/or internship, with scholarship or not)

International certificate seeking students (language courses, professional and/or personal development)

Refugee students (with asylum, in process or in refugee camps)

## Virtual mobility

Exchange and COIL (credit)

Distance learning (degree or certificate)

## Geographically

North-North mobility

South-North mobility

South-South Mobility



# A problematic sloppiness, mixing and confusing

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the '**why**' (the rationales for internationalisation)

the '**impact**' (its outcomes)

the '**what**' (its programs and actions)

the '**whom**' (partnerships) and

the '**how**' (its organisation)

the '**where**' (its context).



# Four broad categories of rationales: why internationalisation?

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**Political:** foreign policy, national security, capacity building, soft power, knowledge diplomacy

**Economic:** innovation, competition, labor market, revenue generation, skills development

**Social/cultural:** personal development, soft skills, intercultural competences

**Educational/Academic:** quality assurance, research cooperation, exchange, rankings, reputation, excellence



# Rationales are also multifaceted and evolving

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There is not one rationale, but a mix

Rationales can and in general will shift over time

Rationales are context specific, both institutional, local, national and regional

Different stakeholders can have different rationales and related perceptions

Rationales (the why but also the intended outcomes/impact) are key in policies and strategies but tend to be less defined as such in policies and strategies



# The different phases and dominant rationales for Internationalisation

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## **After WW II and During the Cold War, political :**

- South-North mobility of a small elite
- Development cooperation/aid
- national security
- soft power

## **After the Cold War, 1980s-1990s, educational:**

- A period of Hope (EU/US mainly)
- A shift from aid to trade (UK/Australia)

## **At the turn of the Century-2010s, economic:**

- From cooperation to competition
- From Western Dominance to emerging global internationalisation
- A counter reaction from abroad to at home (although more in theory than in practice)

## **2020s -, political:**

- Inward looking
- Knowledge security: from social towards political responsibility





# Over the past half century, internationalisation in and of higher education has evolved:

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- From a marginal and ad hoc range of activities to more comprehensive and central processes and policies.
- It has become a key strategic agenda for universities but also national and local governments around the globe.
- It is driven by a diverse range of rationales, organizational and program strategies, and includes the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders, internal and external to the system
- But at the same time has resulted in many different approaches and actions, without taking into account the need for clear rationales related to the specific context.



# Looking Back to Internationalisation over the past four decades

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**Education abroad in all its forms is more driving the agenda than internationalisation at home**

**Increasing focus on international rankings are the rules, and favor some over others.**

**The divide between the North and the South and between those universities classified as top world-class universities and the “Others” persists.**

**Internationalisation has become more synonymous to competition and marketization than to its traditional values (cooperation, exchange and service to society).**

**Inequality and exclusiveness has increased nationally and internationally, in part due to elitist approaches to internationalisation and the dominance of economic rationales.**



# A counter reaction: from competition back to cooperation?

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As a counter reaction to the exclusive focus on mobility, movements like *'Internationalization at Home'* (Beelen and Jones, 2015), *'Internationalization of the Curriculum'* (Leask, 2015) and *'Comprehensive Internationalization'* (Hudzik, 2015) have emerged around the turn of the century, trying to shift the focus on internationalization for all students, not exclusively the small percentage of mobile ones.

Recently, also a critique on 'internationalization as a Western paradigm' (Jones and de Wit) and a call for 'decolonization' (Stein and others) are present

Also the rather exclusive focus on only one of the three missions of universities, education, has been challenged with an appeal to more specific attention to *internationalization of research* (Woldegiyorgis et al, 2018) and *internationalization of higher education for society* (Jones et al, 2021).



# The need for change in approach is also present in labels that have emerged over recent years

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*'Comprehensive internationalization'*  
(Hudzik, 2011),

*'Intelligent internationalisation'* (Rumbley, 2015),

*'Ethical internationalisation'* (Andreotti, 2016)

*'Conscientious internationalisation'*  
(Wolhuter, 2008, Ledger and Kawalilak, 2020)

*'Responsible internationalisation'*  
(Stallivieri, 2019, with focus on social, Swedish policy with focus on security) and

*'Humanistic internationalisation'*  
(Streitwieser, 2019).

Another term more frequently used these days as alternative to internationalisation is *'global engagement'*, focusing more on the aspect of cooperation, networking and partnership, although also used as synonymous to internationalisation.



# A call for a more normative agenda for the future

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## **Reflects increased awareness that**

- **IoHE must become more inclusive and less elitist**
- **Mobility must become an integral part of the internationalized curriculum that ensures internationalisation for all**

## **Re-emphasises that**

- **Internationalization is not a goal in itself, but a means to enhance quality**
- **Should not focus solely on economic rationales**

## A direction for the future

(de Wit et al, 2015, European Parliament Study)

The **intentional** process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, **in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society**



# A changing paradigm?

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Appeals for change resonate in words.

But in practice the focus continues to be on internationalization abroad, mobility, and on competition.

De Wit and Rumbley (2018) speak of *rhetoric* more than concrete action, and Leask, Jones and de Wit (2018) of *a struggle to move beyond good intentions and isolated examples of good practice*.

*“Equality, diversity and inclusion, social justice, decolonization, global power relations and geopolitics, human rights, anti-racism, gender identity and equality, ethics, multiculturalism, and sustainability are just some of the related elements which all have a role to play in broadening our understanding of internationalization” (Jones, 2022: iv).*



# A changing global landscape

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## Key challenges

Geopolitical developments and tensions

Health concerns

Sustainability/environment and other SDGs

Increased competition for global talent

Nationalism

Racism

and other factors

## Key questions

*How will internationalisation be shaped by this global landscape?*

*How will those working in internationalisation respond to the challenges they face?*

*And how will they therefore contribute to shaping the future?*





# Key changing rationales and paradigms

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Political rationales are driving again the internationalisation process.

Knowledge security is a key rationale in the Global North

Anti-immigration is another one in the Global North, but conflicting with the economic rationale of the need to attract skilled labor for the knowledge economy

For institutions, economic rationales of revenue generation continue to be important drivers

Academic and social/cultural values are under threat more than ever, while they should be key drivers for internationalisation

Mid-income countries in the Global south become new leaders in internationalisation but one can wonder if they have a different approach

Digitalisation and AI are becoming key instruments in internationalisation, with opportunities but also with ethical concerns.



# Are we/they undoing internationalisation?

## Political rationales are driving again, but now in a negative direction

“We must reconsider what belonging means in an era of geopolitical realignment—international education has moved from

- **‘We will give you a space’** (Cold War), to
- **‘You can buy a space’** (market liberalization), to
- **‘You must secure a space’** (Cold War 2.0).”
- As we enter Cold War 2.0, belonging grows more complex, more contradictory.” (Glass, 2025)

## They (governments/private sector):

- Throwing the baby out with the bath water

## We (HE sector, International Officers):

- Not practicing what we preach
- Not practicing and preaching hard enough

“Internationalisation: Under assault but worth fighting for” (John Hudzik, 2025)



International Students: Not to be seen as a profitable industry, but needs as driving rationales academic and socio-cultural values!

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