

MANAGING INTERNATIONALIZATION AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: ASSIGNED DRIVERS AND PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE

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Abstract: *The internationalization of higher education has become a central focus in contemporary higher education policies, where various demands, motives, and meanings are attributed to higher education institutions and management in the global and international environment. The complex relationship between globalization and internationalization is briefly explored in the article, as well as motives and drivers for the internationalization of higher education at both national and institutional levels, with university management considering it a strategic priority. Through semi-structured interviews with representatives of Slovene higher education stakeholders, it was found that university management emphasizes the significance of internationalization as a strategic priority and as part of the university's daily activities, highlighting its integration into research, education, various networks, projects, etc. The article underscores that internationalization serves as a means and driver for changes, raising quality, improvements, employability, and innovations in higher education, fostering a knowledge-based society, and addressing the challenges of the globalized world, which were highlighted by the respondents. In the final part of the article, suggestions for improvements and further research activities are presented.*

Keywords: *management of higher education, internationalization of higher education, globalization, motives for internationalization, perceived importance of internationalization*

INTRODUCTION

The expectations, needs, interests, and demands of higher education institutions, management, students, and higher education staff are changing due to globalization and significant technological advancements. Higher education is undergoing radical change and growth (Treleaven et al., 2009). The forces of globalization still cause ongoing increased flows of people, money, services, goods, and ideas around the world (despite the World Health Organization (2020) declaring an epidemic a few years ago). Like nothing else in the modern era, the epidemic's development had a significant negative impact on the social, political, economic, and educational domains (Rumbley, 2020) – however, nowadays, all the latter is only a memory. Students and higher education staff consider the opportunity to study and work abroad as a right and a means of furthering their personal and professional development; higher education institutions and their management see internationalization as a means for improving quality and the institutions' reputation, etc.

The global and international dimensions of higher education are receiving more attention than ever before in international, national, and institutional strategic documents, policies, and mission statements. The dynamics of the twenty-first century have increased the significance of the global context (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009), wherein immediate communication is now easily possible, and scientific, project and pedagogical communication is made easier by the advancement

of information and communication technology and artificial intelligence. In this context, the importance of comprehensive international cooperation of higher education (institutions) and their stakeholders must be strategically and purposefully addressed.

The aim of this article is to present and justify the demands and expectations that the contemporary global and international world places on higher education, clarifying a few concepts related to the internationalization and globalization of higher education and its managing role. Additionally, the article aims to define the motives, dimensions, and importance embedded in international and intercultural currents of higher education management. In some parts, the article represents an upgraded discussion of previously published findings in the field of the internationalization of higher education, but with a different focus and with an emphasis on the management role (e.g., Aškerc Zadavec, 2021).

Internationalization in higher education and related concepts

The international dimension of higher education is increasingly becoming a central topic on the agendas of international policies, national governments, transnational organizations, higher education institutions, and their representative bodies. Over the last two to three decades, the internationalization of higher education has moved from the periphery of institutional interest to the very core of the concept (de Wit, 2011a). In this light, the first definition of the internationalization of higher education was described as “the process of integrating an international or intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of the institution” (Knight, 1994, p. 7). This was followed by a series of definitions of the concept of internationalization of higher education, as well as their negative and positive criticisms from different authors. In 2015, de Wit and his colleagues, in a study for the European Parliament, updated Knight’s definition of internationalization of higher education, defining it as the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education, with the aim to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society (de Wit et al., 2015).

Many authors discuss the complex relationship between the trend of globalization and internationalization in higher education, which emerged at the end of the last century (e.g., Teichler 2004, 2010; Knight, 2008; Maringe & Foskett, 2010; Zgaga, Teichler & Brennan, 2013; Aškerc Zadavec, 2021). However, the normatively simplistic distinction between globalization and internationalization causes a blurring of the differences between the two concepts and the way in which they ‘feed’ each other (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). It appears that the two terms are related, and it is impossible to draw a clear line between them (de Wit, 2011b). The concept of globalization, along with internationalization, originated in general social science studies in the second half of the 1960s (Zgaga, 2009). It was then applied to higher education policies in the second half of the 1990s and became increasingly prominent in the field of higher education, particularly after 2000 (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). According to Marginson and van der Wende (2007), the term “globalization” is not always understood in a neutral sense. For this reason, Beck (2003) draws attention to the term's ambiguity, which makes it difficult to define clearly, leading to its frequent misuse. The term “globalization” is all too frequently substituted with an analytical term or

a process that speaks of reciprocal national and cultural interdependence, along with an ideological definition of “globalism” that limits the term's application to just one aspect – the economic one.

Globalization, according to Knight (2008), is the process of increasing cross-border movement or mobility of people, ideas, knowledge, values, cultures, technology, and economics that strengthens global interdependence. Globalization can have positive and/or negative consequences, affecting each country and nation differently, depending, among other things, on the historical and cultural context. An increasingly interconnected global economy, the creation of new information-communication technology, the influence of artificial intelligence, the rise of international knowledge networks, the growing significance of the English language, and other factors outside the purview of academic institutions are some of the factors driving globalization. Internationalization, according to Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2009), is the range of strategies and initiatives that academic institutions and governing bodies carry out in reaction to globalization. Therefore, education is among those impacted by globalization (Knight, 2008). Since the globalization of education is not the same as the internationalization of education, Zgaga (2009) emphasizes how crucial it is to distinguish between the two ideas in the context of (higher) education. Furthermore, the rise of the nation-state in the 19th century influenced internationalization, which was crucial for the creation of contemporary educational theories and the national systems based on them.

According to Brandenburg and de Wit (2011), globalization is too often characterized as “bad,” while internationalization is frequently defined as “good” and as a means of fostering understanding between people or raising the standard of higher education or research. The latter ignores the fact that activities more directly associated with the idea of globalization (such as higher education as commercial goods) are increasingly being conducted under the aegis of internationalization, and the topic of real internationalization's impacts and goals is becoming less common. Additionally, Knight (1999) wrote that the internationalization of higher education is one of the possible ways in which a country and its education respond to globalization, reinforcing the fact that internationalization is a means to an end and not an end in itself. According to the theoretical foundation in the literature, internationalization is the way higher education reacts to and functions within globalization, which is a social, economic, and political process in which it plays a significant role as an actor (Adams & de Wit, 2011). Thus, internationalization is transforming higher education, and globalization is transforming the internationalization landscape (Knight, 2008).

In addition to the terms internationalization and globalization of higher education, other related terms, such as international education, international studies, transnational education, cross-border, and borderless education, etc., can be recognized. There are also more concrete sub-categories, such as academic mobility, international cooperation, study abroad, international exchange, as well as multicultural and intercultural education, global education, transnational studies, global studies, joint programs, etc. (de Wit, 2002; Hénard, Diamond & Roseveare, 2012). The majority of the concepts and definitions are united in their relationship between (higher) education management approaches in their broader meaning and the inclusion of global, international, and/or intercultural approaches in different aspects of (higher) education institutions. For the purpose of this article, the focus is mainly on Knight's and de Wit's et al. definitions of internationalization in higher education, which are considered to be broad enough to cover all aspects and activities of modern higher education institutions and their management roles.

Internationalization in higher education – drivers and motives

Depending on their goals for internationalization, universities take different routes to it. As the purposes of internationalization vary from institution to institution, the choice of internationalization strategies is contingent upon the objectives that each institution seeks to achieve (Hudzik, 2011). According to de Wit (1998), who defines four categories of motives for internationalization in higher education, the latter can be understood as a final goal or as a means to achieve other or “higher” goals. However, its deeper and broader aim is to achieve new purposes and goals (Hudzik, 2011; Hénard, Diamond & Roseveare, 2012; Middlehurst & Woodfield, 2007) – thus, internationalization is a means and a driver for changes, improvements, and innovations. It creates jobs, develops the skills needed for the twenty-first century, and shapes a knowledge-based society.

As a result of the growing significance of internationalization for higher education institutions, new conceptions of internationalization are being created as a component of a strategy to accomplish core institutional objectives (Green, 2012). There is widespread consensus that, despite notable variations across nations and educational establishments, internationalization, when incorporated into a more comprehensive approach, can lead to substantial advantages for students, staff, and the institution (Hénard, Diamond & Roseveare, 2012). These benefits include the promotion of innovative and strategic thinking that leads to innovation, the facilitation of staff and student collaboration, the encouragement of novel approaches to learning assessment, and increased awareness of global issues and the functioning of educational systems across diverse nations, cultures, and languages.

According to Green (2012), several factors drive internationalization: educating students for “global citizenship” and preparing them for the (global) workforce; raising the standard of research and teaching; strengthening institutional capacity; bringing in more profits; promoting local/regional economic development; resolving global issues, fostering global understanding and peace, etc. Additionally, Marmolejo (2010) outlines the following justifications for the institution’s internationalization: enhancing student qualifications; expanding the institution's international profile; internationalizing curriculum; enhancing research and knowledge acquisition, diversifying the higher education staff and institution, etc. Knight (2008) makes a distinction between national and institutional justifications for internationalization, mentioning factors such as the development of human resources, strategic alliances, earning capacity through commercial trade, nation-building, social-cultural advancement, mutual understanding, international brand and profile, quality improvement through international standards, staff and student development, knowledge acquisition, etc. Globalization and internationalization positively contribute to students’ growth and development (Kadlec & Jukić, 2023), wherein successful international cooperation is often associated with online forms of cooperation (Aškerc Zadavec, 2023). The motives vary by time, nation, or geographic distinction; they do not conflict with one another and result in various strategies and policies.

Knight and de Wit (1999; de Wit, 2002) distinguish four categories of motives for the internationalization of higher education: political, economic, socio-cultural, and academic motives, which may vary in importance across countries and regions, and their dominance may also change over time. In 2002, de Wit expanded the existing categories with subcategories (de Wit, 2002), and his classification is probably the most comprehensive, despite the fact that his methodology did not distinguish between justifications and motives at the national, institutional, or sectoral levels.

The scope of the study

According to the previously presented theoretical background with a focus on the conceptual background and motives or reasons for internationalization, in the later parts of the article, some basic results will be presented with a focus on the following objective: to investigate and understand the factors influencing internationalization at Slovene universities, with a specific focus on identifying the main drivers and assessing the significance that university management attributes to the internationalization of higher education.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection method

A semi-structured interview format with open-ended questions on predetermined topics was conducted, allowing for the change of the sequence of questions or the addition of new questions depending on the structure of each interview. Similar but not completely identical questions were used, as questions were slightly adapted to specific institutional contexts. The collected data were processed through content analysis (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). In the article, both facts obtained through interviews, as well as the opinions and views of the interviewees, are included.

The interviews took place at the beginning of 2020. Subsequently, in June and July 2020, some of the interviews were supplemented to gain insight into the specifics that occurred at higher education institutions due to the declaration of the epidemic. The interviews were conducted in person, as well as online, using Skype, due to the time constraints of the people involved and later due to restrictive measures in connection with the epidemic.

Sample

The interviewees were purposefully selected based on their involvement in internationalization activities at the universities or national institutions where they work and according to their roles at the institutions. For this article, the findings of six interviews are presented, involving representatives of the three largest Slovene universities: the University of Ljubljana, the University of Maribor, and the University of Primorska, as well as representatives of the Slovene national institution in the field of higher education. All the interviewees agreed that conversations were recorded, enabling later verbatim recording of all conducted interviews. The long-term storage of the transcripts in a secure location has been ensured.

The questions were structured to allow for the greatest possible anonymity and confidentiality of the interviewees, which is an important aspect of research ethics (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Following this methodological approach, the anonymity of the persons involved in the research is maintained. The list of interviewees included in the research, in an anonymous form and with numbers assigned to individual interviews, is in the final part of the article.

RESULTS: UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE DRIVERS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERNATIONALIZATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In this chapter, key observations are presented regarding the perceptions of the interviewees. In the initial part, the results are provided concerning the main drivers and motives for internationalization at Slovenian universities. In the second part, key findings are presented regarding

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the importance that university management attributes to the internationalization of higher education in the context of other areas of the university's activity.

The results are presented by summarizing key observations and outcomes from the interviews in the form of text excerpts. The acquired findings are not analyzed in more detail through the coding of qualitative data but are presented as specific excerpts of the text. This approach provides a deeper insight into the opinions of the interviewees and offers an understanding of concrete practices at universities.

In the context of *motives or drivers for internationalization in higher education*, at the national level, Interviewee 1 highlights that “internationalization is an important building block of our higher education system”. It ensures “a high-quality higher education system in Slovenia [...], it is about promoting intercultural competences, [...] [and] raising the quality of the international recognition of our higher education, research, and scientific field,” (Interview 1).

At the university level, the interviewees highlight the motives for internationalization in the context of increasing quality in connection with the pedagogical process (including intercultural learning), the improved reputation of the institution, and the general academic level, e.g. “Actually, the biggest motive is academic excellence” (Interview 2); the motive is “certainly strengthening the quality of teaching and broader social and cultural development” (Interview 3). “These are purely academic motives – the quality of the study process” (Interview 4).

Internationalization makes a significant contribution to employability, e.g.: “Certainly, the quality aspect is of primary importance here because we are actually training quality personnel, who are then widely employable, not only in a certain local environment” (Interview 5). Additionally, “it is a kind of signal for the employer [...], if nothing else, already polished English is in a way a ‘brand’ that [students] can write down in their CV” (Interview 2).

On the other hand, the interviewees see economic or financial advantages in internationalization only in an indirect sense, e.g. “to say that this makes financially added value directly – no. But indirectly, of course” (Interview 5), “because from a financial point of view – it would be difficult to say, yes [there is financial advantage. But] later [there is financial advantage] indirectly, because you become more successful and better” (Interview 4). Namely, “prestige is most important to individuals in the academic profession, money is not important to them [...]. If something contributes to prestige, then it is very, very desirable” (Interview 2).

In the context of the assigned *significance of internationalization in higher education* at the national level, an interviewee representing a national organization points out that “[...] different managements have different affinities for internationalization” (Interview 6).

From the point of view of university management, all interviewees emphasize that internationalization is extremely important in the strategic operation of universities. “I would say that [internationalization carries important meaning at] the highest possible [level] because our university realizes that only when a university is integrated into the international environment, it literally is a university” (Interview 3). Interviewee 2 highlights that “internationalization [is] one of the university's three key priorities, purely strategic [priority]. [...] in the last four-year period, it is, in fact, in close connection with other areas, but it is the highest priority.” Likewise, a representative of one of the universities states: “Internationalization is very important in our strategy and also in our daily activities. [...] We certainly put [internationalization] alongside research and education. [...]

Like most universities, we are also very involved internationally [...] at various levels. Of course, the management strives to include the university in various networks, various connections, and various exchanges [...] at the system level” (Interview 5).

University representatives emphasize the importance of internationalization of higher education from the point of view of various levels of higher education management, e.g.: “Unfortunately [...] everything depends on how much experience the management has had with the international environment. If the management is involved in international experience, [...] then there is no fear at the level of [international] cooperation, and [...] they know how to judge what form of cooperation makes sense. [We have international] initiatives, which I am sure will have a long-term impact on the development of universities [...]. Not even that much money was allocated, compared to the impacts [achieved]” (Interview 4).

University management primarily highlights the added value and the upgrading of existing activities with an international focus: “[Internationalization has] an added value [...] and it makes sense to take advantage of [it], so that what [university] fundamentally does, becomes, or at least remains, at a much higher level. That is why we increasingly [...] carefully choose international partners, [...] we control in some way or follow guidelines, i.e. excellence, quality. [...] we choose strategic partners from whom we can get the most and with whom we can significantly upgrade and improve our core processes” (Interview 2).

In this context, Interviewee 4 adds that it is important to plan international activities more broadly and holistically because “[...] if you have very little [international] experience, they are like some little interesting thing. If they are permanent, they become part of the process and change the operation of the university as a whole. Intensity turns the exotic into a principle. [...] It is very inappropriate if [university's international activities are not holistically] coordinated.”

DISCUSSION

The internationalization of higher education has gained increasing significance over the past three decades, transitioning from a peripheral concern to the core of the concept. As emphasized by Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2009), the global and international context has become progressively vital in the twenty-first century, further fueled by the development of artificial intelligence and advanced utilization of information and communication technology. In this context, various drivers, motives, and meanings are ascribed to internationalization in higher education and its associated concepts. A comprehensive understanding of the concept of internationalization in higher education, as well as related concepts and the motives behind it, is essential for effective planning, implementation, and achievement of its objectives.

Within the theoretical introduction, this article clarifies the conceptual issues related to the internationalization of higher education and presents the underlying motives and drivers. These should be perceived as instrumental in achieving higher objectives, such as enhancing the quality of higher education systems and various services (van der Wende, 1997). These foundations set the basis for presenting key findings from interviews involving representatives of the management of three Slovenian universities and national institutions at the higher education level in Slovenia.

The interviewees underscored the significance and driving forces behind internationalization (and globalization) in higher education, primarily in terms of improving the quality of research and pedagogical processes or the overall performance of higher education organizations. Notable

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advantages of internationalization in the educational process include the modernization of pedagogy, the development of intercultural and various soft competencies (e.g., communication skills, collaborative work, and strategic thinking), and increased awareness of global issues among students and staff.

Additionally, participants at the university level expressed the considerable importance of internationalization, closely intertwined with all other university activities. However, as emphasized by Interviewee 3, the meaning attributed to internationalization at the university level depends on the management's experience with internationalization and, consequently, how much importance the university management places on it.

It is important to note that the findings of the article cannot be generalized, given the limited number of representatives from the university management included in the interviews, conducted solely among the management of universities in one country – Slovenia. Nonetheless, the article presents some general insights into the management perceptions about the motives and importance of internationalization in higher education, serving as a foundation for further, more detailed analyses. Given the challenges and trends in modern higher education influenced by rapidly changing realities and technologies, a thorough understanding and identification of the drivers, motives, and reasons for internationalization, and the importance universities attach to it, are crucial. This understanding significantly influences the strategic planning of universities and the implementation of international activities in university practices.

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INTERVIEWS

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