

‘Everything That Quacks is Internationalization’ - Critical Reflections on the Evolution of Higher Education Internationalization

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Abstract

Since Jane Knight published her first version of her definition on internationalization of higher education in 1993, the debate on what is meant by internationalization has been ongoing and continues today. This essay provides an overview of our evolving understanding of the internationalization of higher education in theory and practice, reflects on factors influencing its development, the importance of emerging views and voices, and the implications of current debates for future directions.

Keywords

Internationalization, higher education, definitions, critiques, future directions

Over the past four decades the internationalization of higher education has been defined in various ways in different historical and geographical contexts and been the subject of important critical debate. In 1998, in response to the accidental, occasional and random nature of approaches to international education Joe Mestenhauser coined the phrase, “*everything that quacks must be international education*” (Mestenhauser, 1998, p. 70). At the time the idea of the internationalization of

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higher education was just emerging. Today it is an important core dimension of higher education and a recognized field of study. In this essay I consider whether it is still however the case that, despite all of the discussion and debate that has taken place since 1998, ‘everything that quacks is internationalization’. As an ongoing participant in the development of the idea, I reflect on factors influencing its evolution in theory and practice, on the importance of listening to emerging views and voices and on the implications of current debates for future directions.

Definitions are attempts at best to clarify the meaning of complex concepts. They provide a foundation for further discussion and action. Because it is impossible to define any complex concept in a complete and exact manner, definitions also evolve over time. The definition of internationalization in higher education by Knight (2004) as “*a process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education*” (p. 11) has been widely adopted around the world. It evolved from an earlier definition focused on the institution “*the process of integrating the international dimension into the teaching/ learning, research and service functions of an institution of higher education*” (Knight, 1993)¹. The focus in the 2004 definition on the broader purpose and delivery of post-secondary education (not just the institution) was a significant change that is often overlooked even though this definition has been used and cited extensively. At the same time over the past decades, this definition has also been debated, and alternatives have emerged. Most recently, Knight’s definition has been challenged by Marginson (2023) as being representative of the broader hegemonic position of the Global North in the internationalization of higher education. Marginson’s argument is consistent with discussions of internationalization as a Western paradigm and calls for it to be decolonized and contextualized as seen in the work of the ‘Critical Internationalization Studies Network’ (CISN, n.d.). In the words of Stein and McCartney (2021, p.2), “*Scholars and practitioners in critical internationalization studies draw attention to the risks of reproducing uneven global power relations, colonial representations, and extractive resource flows in mainstream approaches to internationalization*”. Authors, primarily from the Global South have also proposed new definitions of internationalization, better suited to their specific context (see for example, Heleta and Chasi, 2023).

Two Important Preliminary Observations

As this discussion continues to evolve, as it surely will, I feel it is important to keep in mind what Jane Knight and I wrote as far back as 1995, namely that “*there is no simple, unique or all-encompassing definition of internationalisation of the university*” and that it is not “*helpful for internationalisation to become a ‘catch-all’ phrase for everything and anything international*” (Knight & de Wit, 1995, p. 16). In 2018, 23 years later, we wrote “*that notion is probably even truer now*” and that indeed internationalization had already by then “*become a very broad and varied concept, including new rationales, approaches, and strategies in different and*

constantly changing contexts” (Knight & de Wit, 2018, p. xix). This observation, in my view, is overlooked in the many discussions and critiques about the meaning of internationalization, both current and over the last two decades. As such, it is also a relevant insight to bring to the discussion about its future.

Another important and often overlooked dimension of Knight’s 2004 definition was the significance of rationales (the ‘why’ of internationalization), program strategies (the ‘what’) and organizational strategies (the ‘how’). By relating these to her definition, she provided a broader context in which different motivations (political, economic, social/cultural and academic) by different stakeholders would give direction to the process and different programs and organizations. Understanding context and direction are in my view essential for understanding the past and the present state of the internationalization of higher education, which in turn will have an impact on its future direction.

The 1990s: Challenging the Past

Until Knight’s 1993 definition presented another way of thinking about the phenomenon, the international dimensions of the higher education sector had been dominated by a rather US based, static, ad hoc and fragmented approach, based on activities and related administrative procedures, mainly tucked away in the international offices of higher education institutions, often related to governmental bureaucracies, and termed as ‘international education’. In summary her definition was a call for a move away from an unplanned ‘activity approach’ to a more integrated ‘process approach’. That activity approach became the subject of criticism in the 1990s, also in the US itself. For instance by Groennings (1990, p. 12) as “*a many-splendored chaos with momentum*” and “*a disorderly development, lacking clear definition, boundaries and agreement*” and in 1998 Mestenhauser commented on its unintegrated and fragmented nature, as stated above. Halliday (1999) went even further, comparing it to a “*spur and sales gimmick, an appeal that issues as easily from the mouth of the financial manager as from the lips of the cosmopolitan scholar.*” (p. 99)

It was in this context that Knight proposed her 1993 working definition, emphasizing a process approach as an alternative to the static ‘international education’ approach. It added an important dimension to the discussion, conceptualizing internationalization as an ongoing process and an evolving and diverse concept, one in which the international dimension was not merely added on but in fact integrated into all functions. This context explains what was recently criticized by Marginson (2023) as a tautology within the definition, “*internationalization integrates the international*” (Knight 1993, p. 7).

The Emergence of Scholar-Practitioners

Internationalization became a policy issue in higher education in the 1990’s in response to the increasing globalization of societies and economies and the end of

the Cold War. At this time scholars paid little attention to the concept, as evidenced by the fact that prior to the 1990s studies of the phenomenon of internationalization, its meaning and impact were rare. It was practitioners who built the first connections between theory and practice in the internationalization of higher education and provided the foundations for its future conceptual development. National entities and associations representing the interests of practitioners, such as the Canadian Bureau of International education (CBIE), which published Knight's work and her 1993 definition, as well as IDP Education in Australia, the Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA) in the USA and the European Association for International Education (EAIE) in Europe, were actively engaged in supporting the search for the meaning of internationalization in this new global area. Along with other groups such as the 'Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development' (OECD) through its 'Program on Institutional Management in Higher Education' (IMHE) these Associations supported the development of the first scholar-practitioners in the field seeking to understand the process of internationalization and its potential.

These organizations provided the platform for publications de Wit (1995), Knight and de Wit (1997), and Knight and de Wit (1999), in which Jane Knight and I worked with colleagues worldwide to understand the concept, simultaneously seeking to understand national and regional contexts including the impact of their political, social, cultural and economic conditions on the internationalization of higher education. At this time almost all of the contributors to the discussion were practitioners, who worked in international offices or national agencies. Scholarly work was still marginal. The current leading journal in the field, the *Journal of Studies in International Education*, was initiated in 1997 with the support of associations of practitioners, as a scholar-practitioner journal. Scholar-practitioners have continued to play an important role in the development of the field, bridging theory and practice, routinely engaging in both scholarly activity (studying the phenomenon) and practice (managing and organizing the details) (Streitwieser & Ogden, 2016).

Discussions on the theoretical foundations of the concept of the internationalization of higher education gradually began to emerge in the 1990s. These debates have gathered pace since. In 1996, Ulrich Teichler described research on international education as occasional, coincidental, sporadic and episodic. In the following years, an evolution in conceptual thinking took place. Books published in the late 1990s and the establishment of the *Journal of Studies in International Education* were important factors in establishing and defining the field. Recognized scholars from the fields of education and philosophy such as Fazal Rizvi contributed new perspectives and ideas, arguing in 1998 with Walsh for more culturally relevant approaches that take into account the complexities of the politics of difference in a globalized world (Rizvi and Walsh, 1997). All of these discussions contributed to the fact that in 2007 Barbara Kehm and Ulrich Teichler concluded that research on internationalization had become more multidimensional and multifaceted, and intertwined with research on other aspects of higher education. (Kehm & Teichler, 2007).

Currently there are more journals than simply the *Journal of Studies in International Education* which publish articles on internationalization. It has, arguably, become one of the main themes in the most significant higher-education journals; and there are many books, including a number of book series, blogs and webinars that publish debates and critiques on the topic.

Ongoing Critique

Critique is an important part of the ongoing development of any field. Recently scholars have argued that internationalization remains undertheorized (Lee and Stensaker, 2021), have challenged the distinction between practitioner and scholar with respect to concept development (Marginson, 2023) and suggested fundamental flaws in the definition of the internationalization of higher education today. While these academic discussions may be relevant to the ongoing development of the concept, in my view they overlook three things. First, the context in which Knight developed her definition. A context in which there was an urgent need for a working definition that both practitioners and scholars could use at a time when the internationalization of higher education (as distinct from international education) was rapidly evolving as a field of study. Second, even though it was not the only definition published in the 1990s it is certainly the one most used by practitioners and scholars across the world today. Would it have been as widely used were it not fit for purpose? And what does ‘fit for purpose’ look like at the different stages of the development of a concept and its practice? Third, both theory and practice have evolved in very different social, political, national and regional contexts in which the purpose and functions of higher education are diverse, and the challenges faced are quite different within and across institutions.

In 2014, I wrote in reaction to debates around meaning and direction that “*internationalisation in higher education is at a turning point and the concept of internationalisation requires an update, refreshment and fine-tuning taking into account the new world and higher education order*” (de Wit, 2014, p. 97). Stein and McCartney (2021) observed seven years later that this observation “*remains prescient*” but also emphasized the importance of acknowledging that critical approaches to internationalization must also be subjected to “*deep questioning*” that not only takes account of “*the new world and higher education order*” and the ongoing impact of coloniality but also “*the limits of critique itself.*” (p. 3). In my view, this reflects well the conceptual evolution in internationalization.

Suffice it to say at this point that today the internationalization of higher education is recognized as multifaceted and evolving, on one hand “*a broad umbrella term that covers many dimensions, components, approaches and activities*” (de Wit and Hunter, 2016, p. 53–54) and on another riddled with “*complexities, tensions, difficulties, and paradoxes*” (Stein et al., 2016, p. 14)

Implying Norms and Standards

In the second decade of the 2000’s, the ongoing search for meaning took on a new character, the use of different adjectives to describe internationalization, each one

suggesting a desirable standard, and thereby adding a normative dimension to the concept. Hence, we have seen the emergence of terms such as ‘*comprehensive internationalization*’ (Hudzik, 2011), ‘*intelligent internationalization*’ (Rumbley, 2015), ‘*ethical internationalization*’ (Pashby & Andreotti, 2016), ‘*conscientious internationalization*’ (Ledger & Kawalilak, 2020), ‘*responsible internationalization*’ (Stallivieri, 2019) and ‘*humanistic internationalization*’ (Streitwieser, 2019). Most are expressions of intention, rather than reality, and in varying degrees aspirational. As Hunter et al. (2022) noted:

“the concept of internationalization continues to be refined and revised, and theories and definitions adjusted to match new and evolving understandings. Aided by scholars and practitioners young and old, from traditional and new disciplines, this continuing process of conceptual evolution supports a crucial reflection on the values inherent in internationalization theories and practices (p. 70)”

That internationalization is approached as a continuous and evolutionary process is as important, normal and healthy today as it was in the past. While Knight’s process definition of internationalization was a huge step forward, it brought new challenges to the forefront, as the process resulted in misconceptions (de Wit, 2011) and had unintended consequences (noted by Knight, 2009). In being flexible enough to accommodate diverse purposes the 2004 definition arguably left too much room for conflicting, opposing rationales of internationalization. Hence competitive, for-profit, economic rationales, and mobility for a small minority of students may be seen as equally valid as approaches focused on the traditional international education values of cooperation and exchange and programs designed to offer inclusive global learning opportunities to all students. In that respect, the gradual shift from the term ‘international education’ to ‘internationalization of higher education’ prompted by Knight’s 2004 definition has not clarified meaning or focus. In my view, the new array of meanings, labels and alternative terms attached to internationalization, mentioned above, illustrate its multifaceted dimensions but also the sloppiness in use of the concept, confusing rationales, outcomes and approaches (de Wit, 2023a and 2024).

In response to this broad range of concerns, an update of Knight’s definition was proposed in 2015, making it clear that the process needs to be intentional, and giving it a clear focus and direction. Following a global study on the internationalization of higher education, I developed, with colleagues, a revised definition of internationalization as “*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*” De Wit et al. (2015, p. 29) With hindsight, this 2015 definition was aspirational rather than a reflection of reality which provides some direction and a possible agenda for the future of internationalization.

A Western Paradigm

One of the critiques of Knight's definition is that it is an Anglo-western concept, imbued with the hegemony of the Western world, and as such cannot be universal. Much has already been said by me and others about the construction of internationalization as a Western paradigm ten years ago (see for example Jones and de Wit, 2014). But it is also useful to note that non-Western perspectives have been present in scholarly work on internationalization for some time. Jane Knight and I cooperated actively with authors from the global south in the 1990s and 2000s, as reflected in many of the publications cited above. In these works, the foundation for the critiques of scholars such as Stein et al. (2016, p. 14), Stein and McCartney (2021) and others, can be seen.

Further, we have recently seen the emergence of definitions from the global south that are regionally focused. Heleta and Chasi (2023), emphasize repeatedly that (unspecified) existing definitions of internationalization are 'colonial', 'Eurocentric' and 'hegemonic' and that it is important to break away from copying that concept in the global south. They define internationalization as

"a critical and comparative process of the study of the world and its complexities, past and present inequalities and injustices, and possibilities for a more equitable and just future for all. Through teaching, learning, research and engagement, internationalisation fosters epistemic plurality and integrates critical, anti-racist and anti-hegemonic learning about the world from diverse global perspectives to enhance the quality and relevance of education."

This approach reflects the emergence of culturally relevant approaches attuned to the complexities of the politics of difference called for in the 1990's by Rizvi & Walsh (1997) and others then and since. Regardless, in my view, this definition is not in conflict with the 2015 agenda of de Wit et al., rather it provides a valuable contribution to the broader discussion as well as a future internationalization agenda for South Africa which may also be adopted or adapted in other contexts.

Marginson (2023, p. 30) notes that while the definition by Knight *"does not specify Western-centric higher education ... it helps to sustain it."* He makes reference to several scholars from the global south who criticize internationalization as western hegemony which does not pay attention to or serve the global south. This critique of internationalization is correct, but that Knight's definitions have themselves helped to 'sustain' Western-centric internationalization in my view goes too far. It is the way scholars and practitioners have constructed internationalization, through interpretation, strategy and activity that has resulted in the dominance of the Western paradigm. Rather than critiquing the definition it makes more sense, in the words of Stein et al. (2016, p. 14) to *"argue for critically informed examination of all available possibilities and of the dominant global imaginary itself."*

From Definition to Direction

In this essay I have attempted to provide an overview of the evolution of the debate about the meaning of the internationalization of higher education. I have argued that the 1994 and 2004 definitions of Jane Knight have to be seen in the context of their time as a reaction to the lack of a comprehensive process approach in the US-based definitions of international education that dominated that era.

While the term ‘internationalization’ has since become a dominant feature in policies and practices of higher education around the globe, it is perceived and used for different, in many cases opposing, rationales and strategies, with a strong emphasis on neoliberalism and marketization. Whitsed & Green (2013) argue that because the term is certainly used in a wide variety of discourses and systems by diverse individual actors it is constantly constructed and re-constructed through their social practices and discourses which leads to a sense of chaos and uncertainty and a constant search for meaning. In this regard the criticism in the 1990s about the American concept of ‘international education’ as chaotic, fragmented and lacking clear boundaries mentioned earlier, applies to a large extent also to the way the term ‘internationalization’ is used in higher education today, often as ‘toto pro parte’. Or, in Mestenhauser’s words still ‘everything that quacks is internationalization’. This discussion highlights the importance and urgency of reaching agreement on and being clear about its real intentions and expected outcomes in the context of the time whilst also recognizing the importance of understanding and using its potential to direct the future.

The ongoing critiques of Marginson, Stein and others make valuable contributions to understanding and directing the future of internationalization, moving it away from being predominantly Western in its implementation. Now is the time to look forward, to stop searching for the ideal definition, but at the same time to stop using the term ‘internationalization’ in a sloppy way. This means being clearer and more specific about the directions we want to take in the context of the world today and the future we want to create (de Wit, 2023a and 2024). Hence, rather than seeking to ‘re-define’ we should strive to describe new directions for internationalization, based on clear rationales and outcomes. Some possible agendas for the future, have already been described, informed by scholarship in the global north and the global south. There are many others, such as a “*meaningful shift to reinventing international higher education for a socially just sustainable world*” (Healey, 2023, p. 176–177).

So let’s focus our efforts henceforward more on discussing future directions for internationalization, keeping in mind as Castiello-Gutiérrez, da Silva, and Stein note, “*at the heart of navigating complexity and uncertainty is the recognition that there are no easy answers, nor are there any quick fixes*” (2023, p. 11). They suggest that the successful reimagination of internationalization will depend on context-specific practical interventions that take into consideration the unique combination of power dynamics, policies, and theoretical commitments related to internationalization and its desired outcomes, which aligns with what Jane Knight and I said in 1995 and 2018, cited above.

To conclude, let me reiterate

“the end of the current form of internationalization will need to be the beginning – a beginning with new directions and key themes (...) a shift from short-term neoliberal approaches to long-term societal interests, from international education as a benefit for a small elite towards global learning for all, and from a Western paradigm to a global and equal process.” (de Wit, 2023b, p. 206–207)

This new beginning will only be possible if there are changes not only in the focus of scholarly debate, but also in the actions of the key people engaged in the practice of internationalizing higher education – from policymakers and leaders to student affairs professionals and teachers. We have made a start, but we have a long way to go, as Healey (2023) remarks, on a journey that has no set route and at this stage, no clearly defined destination.


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Note

1. When in the text reference is made to ‘Knight’s definition’ in general, it will be the 2004 definition, otherwise there will be explicit reference to the 1993 definition.

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