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What Was in the News? Conversations on Internationalisation of Higher Education in *University World News* in 2020

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic brought challenges to education in ways that could not have been foreseen, yet at the same time opened opportunities for new ways of thinking and doing, also in higher education. While other activities of higher education involuntarily quickly adapted and teaching and administration went largely digital in one form or another, thousands of international students were stranded and prevented from either travelling home or travelling to their institutions. Academics who intended to travel, were also grounded. The impact of the pandemic on internationalisation of higher education was indeed significant. Socially isolated, discussions that would normally take place at face-to-face gatherings, such as conferences and staff exchanges, came to a halt yet were still able to continue on digital platforms and in the media. In these fast-changing times, it is important to keep up with the latest thinking and in this paper, we explore the sensemaking that took place through *University World News* during 2020.

Keywords: internationalisation discourse, framing analysis, media analysis, global education, Covid-19

Introduction

Over the last three decades, there has been an increase in internationalised activities in the higher education sphere, driven by the massification of higher education, the development of a knowledge economy globally and the emphasis of performativity in university rankings in spite of a rhetoric around intercultural understanding and appreciation (de Wit, 2021). While mobility remained a pie in the sky for most students due to financial constraints, the internationalisation space changed from one of cooperation to competition (Van der Wende, 2001). In their report to the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education, de Wit et al. (2015, p. 29) adapted an earlier version to demarcate internationalisation of higher education (IoHE) as follows:

[T]he 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 (emphasis in original).

They implored that IoHE “has to become more inclusive and less elitist by not focusing predominantly on mobility but more on the curriculum and learning outcomes” (ibid). This call was repeated in de Wit (2021) to include the different dimensions as mentioned in the demarcation in all aspects of higher education in a non-elitist and inclusive manner. Still, prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, IoHE

was “still predominantly focused on mobility, short-term and/or long-term economic gains, recruitment and/or training of talented students and scholars, and international reputation and visibility” (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 29).

The Covid-19 pandemic brought challenges to education in ways that could not reasonably have been foreseen, yet at the same time opened opportunities for new ways of thinking and doing. This is also applicable to the sphere of higher education, and specifically IoHE, which for a long time focused predominantly on staff and student mobility. While other activities of higher education involuntarily adapted, and teaching and administration went mostly digital, thousands of international students around the world were stranded and prevented from either travelling home or travelling to their institutions. Face-to-face research- and capacity-building projects were severely hampered, academics who were due to travel to international conferences were grounded and face-to-face collegial discussions on matters of common interest were interrupted. The fast pace at which circumstances changed since the start of 2020, when the first case of Covid-19 was reported outside China and then rapidly spread through the world (World Health Organization, 2020), inevitably led to novel ways of knowing and being. With physical borders closed and social distancing the norm, interacting online via platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet and MS Teams, relying on digital content became standard practice.

While many research publications are surely forthcoming, at the time of doing the study, research publications on the effect of the pandemic on various domains of education, and the thinking with regard to matters in the field were limited due to the slow turnaround time for research to be published. Still, a lot of sensemaking happened through media, and as qualitative researchers such as de Wet (2020) argue, digital media allows researchers to access and use media publications and discussions, as secondary textual data. Working inter alia in the field of Comparative and International Education and with an interest in IoHE, we deemed it essential to engage with views from around the world to understand what the current thinking and discussions are. In this study we thus used news articles related to IoHE published in a specific online newspaper that claims to keep stakeholders in higher education “abreast of developments in their field” (*University World News*, 2021), in order to engage with the discourse during this time.

Approach

We used the keywords “internationalisation” or “internationalization” on the website of *University World News* and limited our search to publications in 2020. The search rendered 172 articles which we downloaded.

Only articles published in the *University World News* Global Edition were included. Thus, during analysis the authors removed the articles in the sample that were published in the Africa Edition of the publication. Further exclusion criteria included articles that focused only on a single institution, included singular examples of policy changes and articles in which mention is made of internationalisation, but there is no elaboration thereof or makes little contribution to the global narrative of IoHE (as defined by de Wit et al., 2015; this paper). This process rendered a sample of 116 articles. The two authors then independently read the articles and identified themes that crystallised. Afterwards we engaged on how we classified them, adapted the themes where needed and also reflected on the

general insight gained through the exercise. The articles were then again analysed to see how often different authors included the subtheme in the discussion. This also led to identification of topics that were salient in the discussions, which we will discuss afterwards.

The complete data sheet including the themes and subthemes as well as the URLs of all articles used is available upon request from the first author.

Themes

Pandemic and post-pandemic

Numerous articles, 53 (45.7%), discussed internationalisation in view of the Covid-19 pandemic. A prominent narrative found under this theme was an acknowledgement of the drastic effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on higher education, specifically regarding student mobility, enrolment and the loss of tuition revenue. Studying abroad has become less attractive due to the pandemic with reasons including cost, mobility issues and personal safety. Authors anticipated that the reduction in international student enrolment will have a detrimental effect on the financial stability of many higher education institutions (HEIs). Authors also noted quality concerns in online learning, the absence of purpose-built online teaching material, student anxieties and a lack of staff training. Leask and Green (2020), for instance, described the unprecedented pace at which institutions had to transition to online learning as having provoked a “panic-gogy”.

Although, it was evident that the pandemic caught HEIs around the globe off guard, Covid-19 is posed not only as a challenge, but also a catalyst for opportunity. Many authors pointed to possibilities that the situation brought to the international higher education arena, which include new forms of pedagogy, tremendous initiatives from staff and students alike and as offering a chance to reboot and reshape academic mobility, making it more inclusive and more environmentally sustainable. A few authors even provided their perspective on the post-pandemic future of higher education (HE).

International amelioration and the common good

Several internationally relevant matters, beyond the scope of HE, came to the fore. Discussion under this theme centred around global issues and the common good. Subthemes included international cooperation, interdependence of nations and social and environmental sustainability. Authors specifically deliberated on matters related to human rights, diversity and democracy, and particularly academic freedom in HE across the globe received attention. Discussions reflected a growing awareness of the positive environmental impact of decreased physical mobility in HE. Concerns were raised about inequality in the international HE sphere, with specific reference to North-South inequality and the limited progress that was made with regard to the position of women and other vulnerable groups, including foreigners. A narrative that was repeated by various authors is the increasing tension HEIs are experiencing around mobility resulting from increasing nationalist tendencies, populism, racism (both pre-existing and Covid-related racism) and strong public anti-immigration discourses. Selected authors, for example, reported an unsettling rise in instances of racism, discrimination and even assault towards

students of Asian heritage which is affecting their choice to study abroad. Seventy-eight (67.2%) of the analysed articles included this theme.

Neoliberalism

It was of no surprise that the influence of neoliberalism was present in some of the discussions – the influence of internationalisation of institutions on their ranking, performativity and competitiveness often came to the fore. Clearly HEIs globally, are under great pressure to produce employable graduates with performance-based funding models. Authors noted that governments and policymakers put strong emphasis on the importance of effectively preparing graduates for the world of work. The clear focus is on competitiveness and developing the human commodity. There is a notable concern regarding attracting and retaining foreign students, especially within the pandemic era. Great emphasis is placed on the need to retain and attract Chinese students, due to the financial injection they represent. In the UK, for example, Chinese students represent 45% of all international students (Mok, 2020). In accordance with this, various authors discussed the ambitious programmes to attract mobile academics or repatriate their own citizens after they earn degrees abroad. Twenty-seven articles directly discussed policy changes and reinvention, of which the majority was focussed on policies that would promote neoliberal ideals. Others challenged institutions for exploiting foreign students who use them as cash cows to strengthen their finances. Fifty-two (44.8%) of the analysed articles included this overarching theme.

Internationalisation of higher education

Various aspects specifically pertaining to IoHE were addressed in the articles (84; 72.4%). Some of the subthemes related to the nature of IoHE and comprehensive internationalisation (9.5%), partnerships and networks (5.2%), international research and research collaboration (5.2%). It was evident that international collaboration is highly desirable as it is perceived as making universities competitive in the much criticised, but highly visible, global rankings. Various articles also mentioned internationalisation at home, which is posed as a solution to the mobility problem, but also a threat to attracting international students.

Articles furthermore focused on the aims of IoHE, including cultural competences and student attributes (6,0%), but by far the most dealt with student mobility (53.4%), often linked with concerns raised with income generated by international students as mentioned in the previous section. There was also some mention of virtual exchange (4.3%) and staff mobility (3.4%). The discussion also highlighted the importance of continuous regeneration and rethinking of IoHE with an emphasis on digital media, innovative teaching and learning tools and the use of virtual platforms as needed for international competitiveness.

Staff and students

Forty-five (38.8%) of the articles included a focus on the role-players in the IoHE space, namely staff and students. Twenty-four (20.7%) of these acknowledged the importance of student support and 14 (12.1%) on students' experience.

Whose views are portrayed

Jacobs (2014) alludes that information in the media is always partial, yet UWN (2021) assures that they use a “network of some five dozen education journalists based in more than two dozen countries, with representation in all regions”. We analysed who entered the discussion on IoHE in this outlet in 2020, by doing a rather blunt analysis simply in terms of where the authors are situated. In this sample analysis, 48% of the articles were written or co-written by authors in Europe (including the UK), followed by authors from North-America (22%), Asia (20%), Africa (4%), Australia (3%) and lastly South America (2%). We need to emphasise that these statistics are not representative of all the articles in the newspaper, but specifically pertaining to IoHE, and given that the discourse on IoHE is still largely in the Global North, this is not unsurprising. De Wit (2021, p. 27) argues that there is a risk that “internationalization continues to be perceived as strengthening the dominance of the existing powers in international higher education: regions, nations, and institutions”.

Discussion

Upon reading through the articles, certain underlying issues caught our attention. It seems that even pre-Covid-19, debates have been emerging regarding the future of IoHE. This seems to be amplified by the pandemic, especially with the limits on student mobility. Students are beginning to question the feasibility of studying abroad and the value and benefits that international education brings. There seems to be a conviction by most authors that HE has irrevocably changed. While some are convinced that the pandemic opened up opportunities and will change the HE landscape for the better, others have a more gloomy outlook. Still, a few authors are of the view that eventually we will return to the pre-pandemic status quo.

The current dominant discourse in IoHE is focused on the neoliberal obsession with funding, rankings and the global competitiveness of both universities and graduates (Bamberger, Morris & Yemini, 2019), and this was also the case in the sample of articles. There is a concerning absence of the student in the discussions as little is written beyond their economic value. Especially within the parameters of the loss of student mobility and the corresponding migration to online learning, one would expect the focus to be on supporting students in this regard. The pandemic has placed international students around the world in extraordinarily challenging situations, many stranded either at home or at foreign institutions. Despite this, any discussion about the well-being of international students is salient. This is most apparent in the articles written by non-Chinese authors about the mobility of Chinese students. Students are mostly discussed as a commodity and not as individuals who require support.

The analysis has illustrated that in many cases neoliberal ideals are being pursued at the expense of student well-being, multilateralism and global solidarity. IoHE seems to no longer be about academic and cultural exchange (if it has ever been). It is therefore perhaps time to question the ethics behind internationalisation outcomes (Pashby & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2016). For example, even though concerns are raised regarding the increasing instances of unilateralism, nationalism and racism, less than five articles discuss the need to develop global citizenship and

intercultural competencies in students. None of the articles explored the possibility of preparing the current study bodies for international students and the diversity they bring. This is especially concerning when one considers the aims of internationalisation as described by de Wit et al. (2015).

A second issue the authors noted is the void in the discussion regarding the issues of Covid-19 – we expected a significant number of articles to focus on the actual quality of the online education provided and providing staff and student support. However, very few articles mentioned it and none focused on it. The concerns, once again, reflect the neoliberal nature of our times. The articles that mention quality concerns emphasised that there has been no time to train lecturers to deliver online, to reconstruct the pedagogy or to engage with professional instructional designers. Solutions were rarely suggested.

Furthermore, there seems to exist an imbalance in the foci of the discussions. IoHE is constructed as emulating the experience of the West in a global context of Western dominance. This holds true even in discussions that includes collaboration outside the Northern hemisphere. This is most clearly illustrated in the absence of discourse surrounding decolonisation, transformation and North-to-South mobility. These concepts are an important part of the IoHE narrative and we expected these topics to feature more prominently. Similar concerns have been raised by Bamberger, Morris and Yemini (2019).

Although we excluded the Africa editions, as we reasoned that the readership would be limited, we did realise that many global issues including transformation and decolonisation were discussed in these editions. We would recommend scholars around the world to take heed of the discourses taking place on this platform and we intend to follow up this paper to focus on these issues.

Limitations must, however, be noted. Firstly, we used only one newspaper albeit one with a good reputation that is freely available and with a definite focus on higher education matters. Secondly, we acknowledge our own subjectivity in the study. We furthermore only did a synoptic analysis and will delve into the underlying discourses in a follow-up study. Still we believe that it provides for a glimpse of the discussions that are taking place in the IoHE sphere and can inform future discussions.

Conclusion

It was clear that the views shared on the platform were somewhat repetitive and clearly authors were grappling with certain issues. Although predictions of the future were forthcoming, solutions were not readily so. Clearly IoHE has strong elements of “wickedness” (Hagenmeier et al., 2020), where solutions are not ready, uncomplicated or even inferable and when implemented will certainly present their own challenges.

De Wit et al. (2015, p. 29), perhaps idealistically, described IoHE as being focused on “the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society”. This analysis has made it evident that this is not the ideals HE is striving for and that internationalisation is still deeply intertwined within the neoliberal ideals and practices.

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We want to acknowledge the admirable work done by UWN to provide a platform for discussions on matters pertaining to HE around the globe. The critique offered in this paper was not directed at the publishers, but at the mindset of scholars in the IoHE space.

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