

Misconceptions on internationalization of higher education

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Internationalization in European higher education has developed over the last twenty years from a marginal point of interest to a central factor. This process is also described as mainstreaming of internationalization. In the second place it is indisputable that globalization of our societies and economies have resulted in the fact that competition and market processes have more and more influence on the manner in which internationalization is implemented. Internationalization knows many motives and approaches. The developments described above have strengthened this diversity even more. The tendency towards the mainstreaming of internationalization assumes a more integral process-based approach of internationalisation aimed at a better quality of higher education and the improved competencies of staff and students. Reality is less promising however, despite the fact that the international dimension takes an increasingly central role in higher education. Still there is a predominantly activity-oriented or even instrumental approach towards internationalization. This leads to major misconceptions about what internationalization actually means. Jane Knight in issue 62, winter 2011, presented five myths about internationalization: foreign students as internationalization agents; the international reputation as a proxy for quality; international student agreements; international accreditation; and global branding. I will describe nine misconceptions (two of them coinciding with a myth as described by Jane Knight), whereby internationalization is regarded as synonymous with a specific programmatic or organizational strategy to promote internationalization, in other words: where the means appear to have become the goal.

1. Internationalisation is education in the English language

The influence of the English language as a medium of communication in research has been dominant for a long period of time. Also, over the past twenty years there has been a tendency in higher education to teach in English as an alternative for teaching in one's mother tongue. There are several unintended negative effects. Increasingly, education offered in the English language is regarded as the equivalent of internationalisation, which results in a decreasing focus on other foreign languages; in an insufficient focus on the quality of the English spoken by students and teachers for whom English is not their native language; and thus leading to a decline in the quality of education.

2. Internationalisation is studying or staying abroad

Study or internship abroad as part of your home studies is often regarded as the equivalent of internationalisation. In particular the European Commission's policy to stimulate this manner of mobility has contributed to this instrumental approach over the last 25 years. We can question, however, the imbalanced and over-simplified approach to mobility as being the same as internationalisation. As well, it can be said that mobility is merely an instrument for promoting internationalisation and not a goal in itself. Mobility needs to be better embedded in the internationalisation of education. It should be specifically assessed as to whether these added values are developed in the student and more innovative reflection is required on alternative ways of achieving these added values, for instance by the use of virtual mobility.

3. Internationalisation equals an international subject

A third misconception that continues to surface persistently is that internationalisation is synonymous with providing training with an international content or connotation: European Studies, International Business or Music. Within the institutions and schools that offer these programmes, the prevailing opinion seems to be that in this manner internationalisation has been properly implemented. Without meaning to overlook the valuable contribution of these kind of programmes, again, it is too simplistic and instrumental an argument to declare regional studies synonymous with internationalisation.

4. Internationalisation implies having many international students

A fourth misconception on internationalisation is the assumption that having many international students equals internationalisation. Without denying that the combination of local and international students in the lecture-room can make a significant contribution to internationalisation, also in this case, having international students is not sufficient in itself. Unfortunately, countless examples can be given of programmes that are oriented exclusively towards international students or where international students are being added as an isolated group.

5. Having a few international students in the classroom makes internationalisation into a success

The other side of the preceding misconception happens as well. In particular many international programmes have developed a very distorted proportion between the number of local and international students. Partly as a result of the increasing national and international competition for international students, the proportion between local and international students becomes more and more unequal, so one can hardly speak of an international classroom setting. Conversely, this development has a negative effect on the internationalisation of mainstream, non-English-language programmes. The local students with a certain, whether or not motivated, international interest, preferably enrol in the international programmes which means interest in the mainstream education in the local language dwindles. Also in these programmes, the presence of a small number of international students creates tensions. Should the courses be taught in English if there are only one or two international students in the lecture-room? How can the integration of international students be realized in such distorted proportions?

6. There is no need to test intercultural and international competencies specifically

A sixth misconception assumes that students acquire intercultural and international competencies naturally if they study or do their internship abroad or take part in an international class. This misconception is closely related to the previous misconceptions about mobility, education in English and the presence of international students. For, if these kind of activities and instruments are considered synonymous with internationalisation, then it is obvious to assume that intercultural and international competences will therefore also be acquired. Once again, reality is more complicated. It is not guaranteed from the very start that these activities will actually lead to that result. After all, a student can completely seclude himself from sharing experiences with other students and other sections of the population in the country he visits, and therefore exclude himself from their culture.

7. The more partnerships, the more international

A seventh misconception on internationalisation is the focus on partnerships: the more partnerships, the more successful the internationalisation. Globalisation, competition and market processes have reinforced the development towards strategic partnerships. This tendency towards strategic partnerships often gets stuck in intentions however. The majority

of partnerships remains bilateral, and in several institutions and schools the number far exceeds the number of students and teachers being exchanged.

8. Higher education is international by nature

In particular at universities and among their researchers the general opinion is that they are international by their very nature, and thus there is no need to stimulate and guide internationalisation. Thereby, references are made to the Renaissance, the time of the philosopher Erasmus (ca. 1467-1536), whom the European exchange programme is named after. This historic reference ignores the fact that universities mostly originated in the 18th and 19th century and had a clear national orientation and function. Internationalisation does not come naturally in universities and universities of applied sciences, but it should be introduced. That is why the rather widely accepted definition of internationalisation by Jane Knight speaks of an integration process.

9. Internationalisation is a goal in itself

Most of the abovementioned misconceptions see an activity or instrument as synonymous with internationalisation, whereas in fact their goal is merely to contribute to its realisation. The last, also fairly prevailing misconception regards internationalisation as a goal in itself and therefore it is in line with the misconceptions mentioned earlier. Internationalisation is a process to introduce intercultural, international and global dimensions in higher education to improve the goals, functions and delivery of higher education, and with that to improve the quality of education and research. If internationalisation is regarded as a goal in itself then it remains ad hoc and marginal.

For a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities for the internationalisation of higher education it is important to recognise that these misconceptions are still fairly common.

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This book is a compilation of nine previously elsewhere published articles by Hans de Wit, professor of internationalization at the Hogeschool van Amsterdam, the Netherlands, alone or with a co-author: four of them on trends and issue in internationalization of higher education, three on student mobility, and a new one, together with David Urias, on research and resources. It also contains his public lecture: *The Law of the Stimulative Arrears? Internationalization of the Universities of Applied Sciences, Misconceptions and Challenges*, and an overview of his publications .