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## Is internationalisation creating inequality in higher education?

Giorgio Marinoni and Hans de Wit 11 January 2019

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Inequality is a word that has recently dominated public discourse, mainly with regard to its economic meaning of income and wealth inequality, but also in terms of social and educational inequality. Many researchers and organisations around the world have addressed the subject of inequality, and its reduction within and among countries is one of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 10).

Education and higher education in particular have long been considered a means to reduce social and economic inequality. Higher education enables individuals to gain knowledge, skills and competences that allow them to access better paid jobs and positions that are higher up the social ladder.

What do the results of the 5th Global Survey on Internationalization of Higher Education, an online survey conducted by the International Association of Universities (IAU) in 2018, which received replies from 907 higher education institutions from 126 countries around the world, tell us about this topic?

### Internationalisation and inequality

Inequality is difficult to measure; data is scarce, difficult to interpret and the subject is sensitive. Sometimes interpretations of data trends are based more on political convictions than on objective analysis.

This is particularly true when analysing the effects of globalisation on inequality, with some researchers pointing out that globalisation has helped reduce inequality in the world (especially between countries), while others claim it has helped increase inequalities in the world (especially within countries); still others argue that the impact of globalisation on inequalities is negligible.

Internationalisation of higher education can be seen as both a reaction to and an active participation by higher education institutions in the changes brought about by globalisation.

Statistics show that internationalisation of higher education in its narrow form of student mobility is highly unequal, for two reasons:

- Only about 2% of the world student population can benefit from a period of study abroad.
- The global flux of mobile students is highly unbalanced, with clearly identifiable sending and receiving countries and therefore a transfer of skilled human capital from some countries to others.



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There have been different responses to this problem – in particular internationalisation of the curriculum or internationalisation at home – and awareness of the necessity for internationalisation of higher education to be more inclusive is rising among the higher education community.

A **recent updated definition** of internationalisation of higher education published by the European Parliament clearly points out this mission for internationalisation to be inclusive, fair and equal.

It says internationalisation of higher education is “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”.

However, beside the well-studied role of student mobility, not much data is available on the relationship between the whole process of internationalisation in its different aspects and inequality. Could there also be increasing inequality between the internationalisation policies of higher education institutions around the world?

### **An increasing divide in importance of internationalisation**

In the 5th IAU Global Survey, higher education institutions were asked to identify how important internationalisation was to their academic leadership.

Two-thirds of respondents indicated that internationalisation was of high importance to their academic leadership. A quarter replied that internationalisation was of a medium level of importance, and a very low percentage, only 5%, indicated that internationalisation is of low or no importance.

Higher education institutions were also asked to identify how the level of importance of internationalisation has changed for their academic leadership over the past three years. More than 84% replied that the level has increased, with 34% saying that it has “substantially increased” and 50% claiming that it has “increased”.

Comparing this result with the data of the previous IAU Global Survey (conducted in 2013), the result might be puzzling at first glance. In fact, around the same number of higher education institutions considered internationalisation important as in the 4th Global Survey. However, 84% of higher education institutions in the 5th Global Survey claim that the level of importance has increased since 2013.

Further analysis suggested that this increase in the level of importance over the past three years has happened mainly at higher education institutions for which the level of importance was already high. These constitute the majority of respondents (68%). However, it has not happened at institutions where the level of importance of internationalisation was low.

This result is very interesting, as it suggests the importance of internationalisation is increasing at higher education institutions that already consider it important. This trend could have a negative consequence in terms of equality as it could create a gap between higher education institutions and their separation into two different groups: those that consider internationalisation a priority, and will be even more active with regard to internationalisation, and those for which internationalisation is not a priority.

Even for those, like the authors of this article, who believe that internationalisation of higher education is not generating inequality 'per se' and who see it as a means to improve the quality of higher education for all students and staff, this trend is worrisome.

If we assume that internationalisation of higher education improves the quality of education and research and if this process is undertaken only by higher education institutions that are already engaged in it and not by those that are not and are therefore more in need of it, the result can only be growing inequality between higher education institutions.

### **The importance of internationalisation by region**

We also looked at geographical factors. In other words: do we see inequality in the importance placed on internationalisation by higher education institutions in different regions of the world?

The results show that the level of importance is not the same in all regions of the world.

Internationalisation is highly important for higher education institutions in Africa and especially the Middle East, where 83% report 'high' importance, but it is less important than the global average for higher education institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean and especially in North America, where only 53% of higher education institutions report that it is given 'high' importance.

Higher education institutions in Asia and the Pacific and Europe follow the global trend of tending to give internationalisation ever greater importance.

North America is the only region where a non-negligible percentage of higher education institutions report a decrease in the importance given to internationalisation in the past three years – 10% of institutions, with 8% reporting a substantial decrease – while other regions follow more or less the upward global trend.

However, these regional results must be interpreted with some caution because their statistical relevance is not the same for all regions. The response rates for the Middle East and North America in particular are lower than for other regions.

The number of higher education institutions that reported medium and especially low levels of importance given to internationalisation is too small for a reliable analysis of the change of importance in the different regions. However, the results suggest that the global trend of higher education institutions that already consider internationalisation very important giving it even more importance seems to be present in all regions of the world.

The reasons for such a divide between higher education institutions that consider internationalisation extremely important and those that do not is worth reflecting on and deserves to be studied in more depth, especially if one considers internationalisation to be an essential part of all higher education institutions' mission and a sign of quality.

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