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A Potpourri of Researchable Issues on the Internationalization of Higher Education Institutions

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Focus, Context, and Purpose

This brief paper focuses on the internationalization of higher education *institutions,*[1] particularly on identifying a set of issues for which research findings would be useful for institutional planning, policy and accountability purposes. The context is a comprehensive or strategic approach to institutional internationalization, which has been defined as,

> "Commitment and action to infuse and integrate international, global and comparative content and perspective throughout the teaching, research and service missions of higher education, achieving benefits in core learning and research outcomes, and becoming an institutional imperative not just a desirable possibility."

It is clear from even a cursory look across higher education institutions that the breadth and depth of their engagements internationally vary greatly. It also seems clear that international engagement by institutions is spreading, not just involving more institutions, but also wider arenas of engagement within institutions beyond traditional matters such as mobility and internationalizing curricula. The spread as it occurs involves other key mission areas, a wider array of institutional people, units, and motivations, occupying greater institutional attention and resources, and perhaps affecting the organization, values and ethos of institutions as well.

As a prelude to eventual discussion and decisions about research priorities, the purpose of this paper is to identify a landscape of issues that may arise from more comprehensive and strategic approaches to internationalization.

Research Lenses

There are different lenses for peering into the cauldron of research topics suggested by a comprehensive approach to internationalization. Each lens tends to highlight certain issues based on a viewer's institutional position, interests and biases. Yet, although the lenses differentially prioritize research interests, comprehensive internationalization encourages a wide

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[1] The focus on institutions is driven in part by the decentralized nature of U.S. higher education and the relatively bounded role the U.S. government has in shaping it. Although there are much stronger roles for national governments in other countries and world regions for shaping higher education through funding and policy, it remains the case that practice and delivery at the institutional level finally determine outcomes, including from the internationalization of teaching/learning, research/scholarship, and engagement/service.

and *systemic* research agenda which over time would build a broad-based body of knowledge across the lenses regarding institutional behaviors and outcomes from internationalization.

Below are a few of the lenses from a potentially wider set and some of the issues that could be highlighted when thinking about more comprehensive institutional internationalization.

- **Administrator/Leadership Lens.** Presidents, provosts, deans and chairs are interested in impacts on: institutional reputation, niche position, stature, branding and identity; funding; governance; structures, roles and functioning of both academic and service units; institutional strategic management; inter-institutional collaboration and competition, academic quality and outcomes in the eyes of institutional constituents; and documenting both sides of the internationalization cost/benefit equation.

- **Faculty Lens.** The focus is on scholarship (e.g., opportunities for research, funding and publication), careers (e.g., tenure and promotion and career opportunities), and intellectual legitimacy and quality. What value added (and costs) does internationalization bring to faculty teaching, research and service roles? Does internationalization facilitate and possibly reshape the research and teaching perspectives of faculty? How does international engagement shape access to post docs?

- **Consumer Lens** (e.g., students, parents, employers and communities). This lens encompasses a panorama of issues: (a) logistical ones such as added requirements and possible delays to graduation; (b) documentable value added in learning, community problem solving, and work force development; and (c) down-the-road impacts such as in careers and economic development. Institutional clientele of varying types want to know what the payoffs are for them from institutional international engagement.

- **Governance and Funders Lens.** How does governance (both boards of trustees and academic governance) and funders (e.g., legislatures for public institutions and donors for both public and private) view the costs and benefits of internationalization? What are their expectations for and assessments of payoffs from internationalization?

The foregoing lenses are examples of how different groups may prioritize questions and issues. Another way to differentiate interests is related to key higher education missions.

- **Teaching and Learning Lens**. Those focused on pedagogy and curricular content will want to examine the meaning, models and impacts of internationalization in shaping teaching and learning. What does it mean operationally to internationalize curriculum and learning, what are the options in pedagogy and content for doing so and with what outcomes? For example: (1) Adding content, concepts, themes and perspectives to the curriculum without changing its structure or its pedagogy. (2) Infusing the curriculum with content that reflects diverse perspectives and a framework for understanding differences and similarities. (3) Transforming: transitioning from exploring cultural diversity to critical thinking e.g., learning through different perspectives, new methodologies, and different epistemological questions? Relatedly, who has access to an internationalized curriculum, and with what documental benefits?

- **Research and Scholarship Lens**. What are the impacts of internationalization on: institutional research capacity, priorities, quality and reputation; access to funding; connections to global pathways of innovation and talent; and knowledge transfer? How are informal or ad hoc faculty collaborations facilitated and options shaped? Are there shifts in the balance between top-down and bottom-up research agenda setting?

- **The Service Lens:** How does an institution's international engagement impact the various communities it serves? There are a range of issues: assessing methods of cross-border technology transfer, community engagement and empowerment, economic and social development, methods and impacts of achieving learning across borders and cultures, and the saliency of models of co-production aimed at least in part at solving problems where people live and work.

Input, Output and Outcome Criteria

Running through each of the lenses in explicit and implicit ways is the need for hard data on *outcomes* (impact), not just on *inputs* (personnel and financial resources allocated to international programming) and *outputs* (activities, programs, amount of work) relating to internationalization. Although there is need for data on all three, particularly as input and output data signal institutional capacity and investment, and are more easily monitored, it is outcomes that define the benefits of internationalization. Examples of outcomes across the missions include:

Learning Outcome Examples
- Identifiable knowledge competencies or learning objectives met.
- Standardized levels of language competency achieved.
- Positive impacts on attitudes, beliefs, skills,
- Impact on careers and workforce development.
- Increased capacity to learn from and with others from different cultures
- Meeting requirements of internationally defined credentials.

Discovery (research, scholarship, engagement) Outcome Examples
- Reputational: e.g., Refereed publications in international journals and citations; invited speakers at international conferences; institutional position in global rankings; international awards, prizes, and recognition.
- Research discoveries of intellectual consequence and/or problem solving.
- Strategic cross-border collaborations that contribute to institutional mission objectives and strengthen institutional capacities.
- Commercial applications income.
- Impact on peoples and communities: economic, health, education, nutrition, etc.
- Safety/security and access.

In a climate of resource stress institutional internationalization needs to demonstrate its value-added in outcome terms. We have many assumptions without hard data about the outcome value of internationalization, relying instead on anecdotal evidence and "beliefs" in what must be true.

An example comes from suppositions in the OECD 2012 report on higher education internationalization (Henard et al) where higher education internationalization is purported to:

- Increase national and international visibility
- Leverage institutional strengths through strategic partnerships
- Enlarge the academic community within which to benchmark their activities
- Mobilise internal intellectual resources
- Add important, contemporary learning outcomes to the student experience.
- Develop stronger research groups.

Although one can see these as desirable outcomes, the absence of data to verify such outcomes and the absence of study about the models that produce the best results is a serious shortcoming.

Cross-Cutting Issues

My perspective is shaped by a faculty career in the liberal arts and sciences (political science/public policy) and several years as a senior administrator at a land grant and AAU public institution. This background prompts thought about several cross-cutting institutional issues:

1. How does internationalization expressed in institutional mission statements come to be operationalized in actions? How does practice vary across institutions, particularly in terms of "comprehensiveness" (spread, depth and breadth)?

2. What is the role of leadership from faculty to top administrators in defining and operationalizing internationalization? What are the outcomes from top-down, bottom-up, matrix, or mixed models of leadership?

3. What are the drivers/motivators for internationalization across institutions (particularly types of institutions)? Are they institutionally idiosyncratic; are there common elements? What motivates leadership, faculty and consumers?

4. What are the options and practice for documenting outcomes of internationalizing higher education institutional missions: teaching, research, service?

5. What criteria are used by institutions (de facto and de jure—inputs, outputs, and outcomes) to define "success" from internationalization; for example: number of participants; standards of quality; customer satisfaction; faculty assessments; financial viability; academic/intellectual outcomes? How do such institutional criteria square with government policy objectives and as well as the desires of various constituent groups?

6. How do actions and programs to "internationalize" change institutions more generally? For example: (a) "the institution's intellectual frame of reference, values, and definitions of missions, clientele and clientele needs; (b) curriculum, learning and pedagogy; (c) personnel decisions and priorities from top leadership to faculty and staff, and from strategic to operational resource allocations ; (d) bureaucratic procedures and rules (e.g., travel regulations and risk assessment); and (e) campus climate and culture (e.g., from understandings of diversity to cuisine in residence halls).

7. How do varying approaches to institutional internationalization shape connections with local communities, mediate local and global issues, and define connectivity between the institution's local and global dimensions? What are the measurable changes detected?

8. What is the impact on the institution of international cross-border engagements (e.g., partnerships and networks for teaching, research, and service; faculty and student mobility? To what extent are curricula, research agendas, institutional culture affected by cross-border bi- or multi-lateral partnerships and memberships in networks)?

9. What is the impact from off-shore operations on the home campus (financial and administrative and on curricula, research agenda and capacity)? What are impacts on the country and community where the program/campus is hosted?

The State of Research on Comprehensive Institutional Internationalization

There is little if any research on comprehensive internationalization of higher education institutions in the terms discussed above. There is research that focuses on pieces of higher education internationalization such as on mobility and internationalizing the substance of curriculum and on teaching and learning. There is growing discourse on matters of cross-border higher education collaboration, knowledge transfer and collaborative knowledge development. There are varying forms of comparative higher education systems research (usually descriptions of country systems), but comparative analysis per se is typically rudimentary. Descriptions of how higher education systems are similar or vary across countries and regions, although useful for their own purposes and can be seen as "international" in a sense of cross-border comparisons, are really quite different than the kinds of research issues outlined in the foregoing.

The methodologies employed to study higher education internationalization have their own typical limitations. There are a series of shortcomings described by others: limited sample size and reliance on case studies and, thus, questionable representativeness challenging generalizability; weak theoretical underpinnings; lack of rigorous statistical standards; reliance on self-reported data and assessments; and questionable objectivity in designing the research and reporting findings. On matters related to cost/benefit analysis of institutional internationalization, the analytical models largely avoid the measurement of outcomes and focus on inputs and outputs. These are suboptimizing designs for answering questions about impact.

Moving Forward. More research on issues identified in the "lens" and "cross cutting" sections of this paper would be useful for building a body of knowledge on the internationalization of higher education institutions. Research findings could inform institutional decision making and policy and provide a basis for assessing value. Research questions will need to be prioritized for manageability, but eventually the pieces will need to fit into the larger context of comprehensive or strategic internationalization and its holistic impact on institutions. Exploring the relationship between institutional stature and internationalization is one example of delving into this "larger context," e.g., relationships and direction of causality, if any, between internationalization and institutional rankings, or how reputational criteria relate to international standing, or whether international standing matters, and for whom.