INTERNATIONALISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: LOCAL RESPONSES TO GLOBAL CHALLENGES

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Introduction

Much has been written on the internationalisation of higher education. In the past – we are talking about the 1980s – the discourse was dominated by practitioners in the field of international education, but with the increasing importance of internationalisation, also “traditional” higher education researchers have become interested in the phenomenon. The increasing importance relates obviously to rising levels and importance of internationalisation activities as such, but also to the increasing embeddedness of internationalisation in supra-national and national policy-making and in institutional strategic management (Van der Wende, 2001). Hence the interest in analysing the developments from disciplinary perspectives, such as public administration, political sciences and business and management studies. Consequently, Teichler’s (1996, p. 341) comment that “[m]ost of the research available on academic mobility and international education seems to be occasional, coincidental, sporadic, and episodic” seems not to be applicable anymore.

Before continuing, it is important to more or less delineate what we mean by internationalisation. I am inclined to follow Van der Wende (1996, p. 23) in her definition: “any systematic, sustained effort aimed at making higher education (more) responsive to the requirements and challenges related to the globalisation of societies, economy and labour markets” (but see also Knight, 2004; P. Scott, 1998). There is a clear need to be precise in this respect, for there is considerable confusion about and overlap between the concepts of internationalisation, Europeanisation and globalisation.

Below I will try to give a thematic overview of the state of the art in research on internationalisation, give examples of specific research projects or publications that fit the themes. Admitted, the choice of examples is somewhat arbitrary, but I tried to select studies that are beyond the obvious (and I confess I have a slight preference for evidence-based contributions). Another “confession” is that I am not fully abreast of developments in research focusing on the micro-level (pedagogy, teacher-student interaction, etc.). I close with what are – in my view – the gaps in the literature and what would be interesting research avenues. Before addressing the existing literature, it is worthwhile to pay attention to some characteristics of higher education research.

Characteristics of higher education research (on internationalisation)

As has been mentioned above, there is a growing interest from the disciplines, but internationalisation research has always had a clear link to actual (policy) developments and discourses, leading Kehm and Teichler (2007) to conclude that publications mostly target practitioners and policy-makers and to a lesser extent academic scholars that study higher education. In this sense, their view on internationalisation is not that different from what Tight (2003, 2004) concludes about higher education studies in general. He raises the question of whether research into higher education is an a-theoretical community of practice, and answers the question by stating that theoretical approaches are largely implicit in higher education researcher and that the field consists of partly overlapping communities of practice. The relatively low level of theory development is certainly a weakness of the field, for
it limits the potential of generalisation and the formation of a core body of knowledge. On the other hand, as Teichler (2000) sets out, a practitioner’s approach is particularly strong when it comes to applying knowledge by experts with a considerable level of field knowledge. The downside of such an approach is the lack of theoretical, methodological and conceptual underpinnings.

A second characteristic is that much of the research on internationalisation is carried out with the financial support of external agencies. Such agencies range from national internationalisation agencies (such as British Council, DAAD, Nuffic, etc.), governments (ministries responsible for higher education), but particularly supranational stakeholders and stakeholder organisations, such as the European Commission (commissioning research, but also funding research through its Framework Programmes), the International Association of Universities (IAU), the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA), the European Association for International Education (EAIE) and the European Association of Universities (EUA). For sure, there is nothing wrong with an interest of and support from such organisations. On the contrary, quite often they are able to commission and support research that otherwise would not be possible given limited resources of researchers themselves. But it is appropriate to comment that to some extent those commissioning research guide and steer research on internationalisation in certain directions. Not so much by interfering in the research activities and the research process itself, but in particular by up front deciding on the topics to be researched, by (often) detailing the research questions, and possibly methodological approaches. Additionally, commissioning agencies put pressure on researchers to carry out research projects within limited timeframes ...

These features of commissioned research may increase the policy-relevance of the research carried out, but it not necessarily follows that the most interesting research (from an academic perspective of creating new knowledge) is being carried out.

A third remark is linked, like the first comment, to the general nature of higher education research. The field of higher education is inhabited by academics from various disciplines, ranging from history, public administration, educational studies, anthropology, law, philosophy, business studies, sociology to psychology. There are – as far as I know – only a limited number of attempts to carry out multi- or interdisciplinary research. As a consequence, the literature on internationalisation in higher education research is scattered and it may be difficult for a novice to come to terms with the existing body of knowledge. There are however a few journals (e.g. *Journal of Studies in International Education; Globalisation, Societies and Education*) that are useful sources lending a helping hand to try to understand the state of the art in internationalisation research. The “scatteredness” has however two dimensions not often addressed. The first is that much of the literature is “grey”, and therefore may be difficult to retrieve. Second, probably the majority of publications is not written in English. Kehm and Teichler (2007, p. 8) estimate that more than half of the publications on internationalisation in higher education is not written in English.

In sum, we can characterise research on the internationalisation of higher education as being:
- very closely following developments in policy and practice;
- light on theory;
- much dependent on external funding;
- many disciplines are involved and the literature is somewhat scattered.

3 Themes

Kehm and Teichler (2007) distinguish the following themes: mobility of students and academic staff; mutual influences of higher education systems on each other; internationalisation of the substance of teaching, learning and research; institutional strategies of internationalisation; knowledge transfer; cooperation and competition; and national and supranational policies regarding the international dimension of higher education. I take this classification as a point of departure, but cannot do justice to all this themes and therefore highlight a number of these.

3.1 Mobility of students and academic staff

This theme is much researched, if only for the fact that many consider mobility of staff and students to be the activity that represents internationalisation best. In addition, mobility has a considerable tradition across the globe, lending itself “easily” to investigate. Also, the support from national and supranational policies (ERASMUS, SOCRATES) has helped to bring mobility in the spotlight. Research has focused on fact-finding, the evaluation of national mobility programmes (e.g. NIFU-STEP, 2006; Westerheijden & Klemperer, 2002), the evaluation of supranational mobility programmes (Teichler, 2002) and the student experience (Maiworm, Steube, & Teichler, 1992). There is also growing attention to the socio-economic position of mobile students (Souto-Otero, 2008).

An example of an interesting piece of research on (student) mobility, to give just one example, is an article that appeared in the Journal of Studies in International Education (Kelo, Teichler, & Wächter, 2006). The authors present key findings on a Eurodata study regarding student mobility and – in much detail – set out the shortcomings of current data that are supposed to reflect student mobility. A main concern is that current data inform us about the number of foreign students enrolling domestic institutions, but do not reveal much detail on actual mobility. Neither cover the data all mobile students. There is a noteworthy neglect in the statistics to report on short-term mobility, and higher education institutions not formally recognised do not turn up in the statistics (think of private higher education institutions, but also of lifelong learning experiences outside the formal institutions of higher education). The article discusses a number of good practices of data gathering (Finland, Germany and UK) and suggests steps to further improve the data. There is not much improvement, however, given current problems to get insight in European mobility patterns (Westerheijden, et al., 2010).

3.2 Mutual influences of higher education systems on each other

This strand of the literature is much influenced by recent attention to trends of globalisation and how these trends affect higher education systems and policy-making in these systems. The current developments in the context of the Bologna Declaration may serve as an example of a process where systems – and actors within these systems – influence each other. To what extent this influence is mutual or on an equal footing is open to debate, but at least the opportunities are there for influencing each
other. At the concrete level, researchers have been interested in the diffusion of the graduate school model, or e.g. the “diffusion” of two-tier study structures across various countries (Witte, 2006). But one can easily extend the scope, by including the spread of policies/ideas across nation-states in general, such as the emergence of the idea of cost-sharing (students contributing largely to the costs of their higher education experience), the spread of New Public Management ideas (Braun & Merrien, 1999) and the diffusion of quality assurance systems (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004), etc.

Witte’s (2006) comparison of policy developments in France, UK, the Netherlands and Germany – based on a theoretical framework integrating the work of Scharpf and Mayntz (Scharpf, 1997) and North (1990) – in light of the challenges of the Bologna process comes to mind as a good example of a thorough analysis of how various actors within the respective higher education systems had particular preferences, capabilities and perceptions that shaped the debate on changing the higher education systems and consequently the outcomes of the debate. Her analysis shows how important perceptions of powerful actors are and – even if these perceptions are based on limited insights and are possibly biased – how these perceptions can play a dominant role in the policy process. At the same time, she is able to demonstrate that there are certain path dependencies (Pierson, 2000) that steer policy processes in certain directions.


3.3 Institutional strategies of internationalisation/cooperation and competition

With internationalisation moving from the periphery to central stage within many higher education institutions, the issue cannot be dealt with by enthusiastic individuals at the fringes. Given the increasing strategic importance (bearing in mind the risks, budgets, investments and time spent on internationalisation activities) it follows more or less logically that central management becomes involved in these matters. Strategy here refers to setting a general direction or rationale for internationalisation, but also to concrete activities, such as marketing, profiling, developing an internationalisation portfolio, stimulating the export of education, setting up branch campuses, developing alliances, etc. Interesting research on these topics ranges from developing European policy statements (Barblan, Kehm, Reichert, & Teichler, 1998; Barblan, Reichert, Schotte-Kmoch, & Teichler, 2000) and creating partnerships (Heffernan & Poole, 2005) to studies focusing on how to balance international cooperation in a context of increasing pressures to compete.

The latter topic was a major issue of a EU-funded fifth Framework Programme project: Higher Education Institutions’ Responses to Internationalisation, Europeanisation and Globalisation (TSER-HEIGLO). Findings of this study have been reported in Huisman and Van der Wende (Huisman & Van der Wende, 2005, 2004; Van der Wende & Huisman, 2003). Based on a new institutional theory framework (W. R. Scott, 2001), the project analysed policy developments and
institutional strategies of higher education institutions in seven European countries: UK, the Netherlands, Greece, Germany, Austria, Portugal and Norway. It tried to tease out to what extent regulatory, cognitive and normative forces played a role in shaping and directing internationalisation strategies and activities. Luijten-Lub’s (2007) thesis analyses the 35 case studies of the HEIGLO project more in-depth from the institutional theory framework. Also interesting in the context of the work of on the impact of “glonacal” forces on internationalisation activities (Burnett & Huisman, forthcoming; Douglass, 2005; Marginson, 2006).

3.4 National and supranational policies

Much of the work in this area analyses internationalisation policies and their impact either on students or on higher education institutions (Huisman & Van der Wende, 2004; Kälvemark & Van der Wende, 1996). Of particular relevance are analyses that focus on the rationales of governments (e.g. OECD, 2004). A relative shortcoming of this literature is that it is mainly descriptive, but see Corbett (2005) and e.g. the work of Gornitzka.

4 Future

This paper concludes with a number of under-researched topics. As will be clear from the above, any project that is firmly rooted in any of the disciplines that focus on higher education is welcome (without saying that all research should be based on theoretical disciplinary perspectives). Also, truly comparative studies form a very small minority of the studies on internationalisation of higher education, whereas such studies would be very welcome in terms of informing us about different impacts across national and institutional settings. An overarching theme to “interesting research” would be to investigate how – in multi-player and multi-level contexts – actors and organisations respond to the challenges that these contexts offer, i.e. what are local responses to global challenges. The following topics would be on my wish list:

- policy-borrowing and travel of ideas across countries
  There are some studies in this area, but they are rather light in terms of theoretical explanation. I guess there is much to learn from the international relations and political science literature (Aspinwall & Schneider, 2000; Knill & Lehmkuhl, 1999; Sverdrup, 2000). But also the concept of policy learning and borrowing (e.g. Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996) from public administration and public policy theories lend themselves easily for application in the field of higher education (see e.g. Phillips & Ochs, 2003 for an application in education). Finally, the sociological literature contains some interesting approaches for the analysis of the “travel of ideas” (Czarniawski & Sevón, 1996; see Gornitzka, 2006 for an application in higher education).

- impact studies (cost-benefit analyses)
  The literature often conceives of internationalisation as an inherent good. But we should not close our eyes for the considerable efforts and investments necessary to organise internationalisation activities. There are a number of evaluation studies of mobility programmes and their impacts, but the literature is relatively sparse. What
are the costs and benefits of setting up a branch campus in South-East Asia? Not necessarily these analyses need to be driven by an economic perspective; “measuring” impact in terms of appreciation by those involved is as important.

- internationalisation and culture
There is a general understanding that culture matters in internationalisation activities and that efforts are needed to overcome certain cultural barriers when engaging in internationalisation. As far as I can see, there is only limited attention in the literature to cultural approaches (but see Bartell, 2003). To some extent this is ironical, because traditionally research on internationalisation and the international experience (particularly in the US) was rooted in cultural studies and anthropology … (Kehm & Teichler, 2007).

- strategic alliances: promise and peril
The formation of alliances, consortia etc. in higher education has been noted by scholars, but has often simply been taken for granted. Only few have addressed what these alliances imply for organisational structures and action. For sure, alliances allow institutions to carry out activities that were (highly probably) not feasible as a stand alone. But at the same time, being embedded in networks limits organisational action as well and it can be hypothesised that the stronger the ties in the networks, the more limited individual actions are. And what do alliances arranged at the top-level of the institution imply for individuals, schools and departments? Furthermore, issues of identity and image in higher education have been under-researched (but see Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). How does alliance formation impact on identity and image or the other way around?

- internationalisation strategies revisited
The Huisman and Van der Wende study has been mentioned above and there are some IAU and EUA reports in this area, but much remains empirically and theoretically uncovered. Basically, the starting question could be why and how institutions engage in internationalisation activities? Particularly building on the international business literature could be a fruitful approach to analyse strategic internationalisation management. The work of Farshid Shams, PhD student at Bath, is interesting, for it looks at how universities have developed branch campuses and strategically have tried to balance global imperatives and local adjustments.

5 References


