



Internationalization Strategies for the Global Knowledge Society

Peter Szyszlo

The purpose of this article is to improve understanding of internationalization as a strategic response to the catalysts of globalization and the knowledge society. The paper will attempt to critically identify and interpret how the aforementioned elements are being recontextualized and translated into responsive internationalization policies and systemic institutional change. The article takes a critical analysis approach on current internationalization efforts and provides a conceptual framework for developing a performance indicator set through a combination of *institutional change theory* (North 1990) and the *Delta cycle for internationalization* (Rumbley 2010). Recommendations on future research areas are made at the conclusion of the article.

Introduction

This paper takes its cue from Scott (1998, 122) who asserts that while universities often perceive themselves as *objects* of globalization they are also its *agents*. Against this backdrop, universities have acquired a crucial role as organizations that not only produce and disseminate knowledge, but assimilate and adapt global knowledge to national needs. Universities are major interlocutors and contributors to the knowledge society discourse; however, specific challenges remain in terms of understanding strategic responses and their relations to systemic institutional change. From this perspective, a 'new geography of action' (Breton 2014, 19) is taking shape whereby higher education systems are *driving* and are being *driven* by the forces of globalization.

Globalization is an ongoing, complex and dynamic process occurring at different levels in higher education, altering the spatial correlations and traditional conceptions of higher education. Although there is no set definition, globalization is generally congruent with the view of the 'compression of time and space', the 'overcoming of distance' and the 'end of geography', which has made borders increasingly porous, enabling the flow of people, goods, capital and information to travel freely (Appadurai 1990). Globalization is bringing about a redefinition to the mission of higher education and research, described as nothing less than "an academic revolution" (Altbach et al. 2010, 1). Consequently, the dynamics of internationalization and its translation into knowledge

production, knowledge alliances and organizational change are taking place in a more complex and fluid environment. Universities across the globe are in a period of redefining their respective roles and contributions to the knowledge society. In this regard, they have become strategic actors which increasingly play a decisive role in determining where they are “located in a world structural map of higher education” (Teichler 2004, 21). Yet, internationalization strategies and performance measurement indicators are often insufficient or lacking in the current environment of accelerated globalization. Moreover, the precise instruments informing internationalization policies necessitate critical inquiry into the dynamics of rationales, university governance structures, steering mechanisms and institutional designs.

Globalization and internationalization are very different but related processes. The meanings of the two terms are frequently used interchangeably to identify the process of cooperation and cross-border activities between states (Enders 2002, 7). Despite frequent conceptual blurring, there are important distinctions in their relation to higher education, as they represent dynamically linked concepts. From this perspective, globalization can be thought of as the *catalyst* while internationalization is the *response*.

Internationalization appears to be one of the major change processes influencing the development of higher education in most countries (Egron-Polak 2012; Sutton & Obst 2011). Higher education internationalization is not a *new* concept per se. The practice behind the movement of scholars, students and ideas gained prominence in Europe over a century prior to the Renaissance (see de Wit 2002, 3-10). However, it is only in the later half of the twentieth century that the concept began to define the scale and scope of its impact on higher education and its activities became imbedded in a worldwide system. Internationalization is arguably one of the most significant phenomena facing higher education (Rumbley 2015, 16); nonetheless, it often suffers from conceptual unclarity and few attempts are made to explore the rationales, strategies and outcomes of international education efforts.

Furthermore, persistent tensions exist between the forces of globalization and national diversity. After all, universities are a product of the nation state, and while some are more globalized than others, universities remain embedded within the framework of national/jurisdictional higher education systems. Globalization is identified as a catalyst of change; however, it does not necessarily translate into a linear process with uniform outcomes. As such, it has become increasingly necessary to reassess the modes of inquiry to elucidate normative, mimetic and institutional patterns shaping globalization discourses, as well as the factors informing strategic partnerships.

The global knowledge society

Higher education is a field in which ‘globalization’, ‘competitiveness’ and the ‘knowledge society’ have resonated strongly (Jessop & Sum 2013, 24-25). Not only does the knowledge society represent an emergent discourse involving radical reforms to higher education systems, but at its most fundamental level, the knowledge society encompasses major shifts in the patterns of production, distribution and application of knowledge, which in turn, influence education, research and innovation policies (UNESCO 2005).

First coined by Drucker in 1969, his praxis asserts that knowledge has become the foundation of the modern economy, manifested in the explosive growth of the knowledge sector (Drucker 1969, 264). Dubbed the ‘third industrial revolution’, a corollary process took place whereby industrial productivity no longer constitutes the driving force behind economic output, and the creation and timely application of new knowledge is defining the pace of innovation and national prosperity. Within the global knowledge society paradigm, higher education acquired a pivotal role whereby universities became central organizations. Castells (1994, 15-16) synthesizes the relationship between higher education and the knowledge society, declaring that science and technology systems of the new economy are equivalent to ‘factories’ of the industrial age: “if knowledge is the *electricity* of the new informational-international economy, then institutions of higher learning are the *power sources*.” However, unlike most resources, knowledge does not deplete with use — on the contrary it grows through *application* and *networking* (Olssen & Peters 2005, 332).

Universities play a complex set of roles within the framework of regional and national education systems and are major contributors to human capital development, research, and innovation. Although universities have long been more open to international exposure and influences than most organizations; ideas, knowledge alliances and research partnerships have become increasingly mobile and are able to transcend national borders in an unprecedented manner. From this perspective, universities are strongest when they form a ‘cluster’ — a geographic concentration of competing *and* cooperating institutions (Jessop & Sum 2013, 29).

Consistent with this view is that geo-spatial configurations have become just as important as the means of knowledge production themselves, as universities, networks and clusters are loci for knowledge creation and innovation. Within this framework, higher education has acquired a fundamental role in the global knowledge society. This concept is inherently linked to the idea that a nation’s competitiveness is

heavily influenced by its ability to innovate. Innovation, therefore, is the outcome of how knowledge is mobilized and applied. The essential elements for the knowledge society are innovation and collective intelligence, as well as the ability to harness the outcomes of intellectual work. In similar vein, an increasing amount of specialized forms of knowledge is being produced through *international* collaboration. This requires investment in human capital and bridging geographically distant actors through new technologies and ‘connected brains’.

Wagner (2008, 36) defines a network as a “way of describing any set of interconnected relationships among actors or things. Networks are constructed from components that stand alone but can be made interdependent”. They are often channels for engaging in highly specialized forms of knowledge, embedded in a dense global web of researchers and institutions that supersede nation-state boundaries. Channelling institutional knowledge capacity is also a means of gaining access *to* and reaping the benefits *from* an expanding range of knowledge producing networks across the globe (Mrinska 2013, 329). Similarly, networks are redefining the spatial context in which academics, researchers, universities and higher education stakeholders coexist.

The university therefore becomes a ‘cognitive engine’ and a milieu for innovation (Capello et al. 2013, 3). The simultaneous practice of cooperation *and* competition (*coopetition*) among institutions has also manifested itself within this frame as university leaders and governments alike have become preoccupied with optimizing strategies and competitive advantage (Breton 2014, 20). Global networks have rewired the playing field by linking academic actors and agencies in knowledge production efforts, expanding academic horizon, developing research capacities and bringing new players inline with the knowledge society.

Internationalization as a process of change

Although there is no single definition for internationalization, it is often interpreted as a means of responding to the phenomenon of globalization, an educational innovation and a process of change. Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley (2010, 7) provide a useful working definition of internationalization as “the variety of policies and programs that universities and governments implement to respond to globalization.” Another commonly cited definition in the comparative and international higher education literature is provided by Knight (2004, 9), who defines internationalization as

a “process that integrates the international, intercultural and global dimensions into the key functions of a university, as well as into its mode of operation”.

These classifications describe how universities become more international in their outlook. They also entail a wide range of modalities which enable them to achieve strategic objectives. The process of internationalization is often accompanied by a change of structures, norms, practices and identities, resulting over time in a redefinition of higher education policies (Komljenović & Milavič 2013, 42). Sutton and Obst (2011, 17) draw a continuum along these lines to advance the idea that internationalization is “as much a process of *outward* engagement as *internal* restructuring”.

Internationalization efforts are also aimed at bringing about greater convergence to international standards, and act as a response to an increasingly globalized environment. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2009, 110), university responses to globalization are increasingly shaping institutional policies and setting the agenda for the future of higher education. Internationalization efforts have shifted from *transactional and episodic* activities to *transformational* features of the higher education landscape. In this regard, the last two decades have witnessed an unprecedented expansion in both scope and scale of international activity in higher education worldwide. Subsequently, the widening of drivers of higher education has made internationalization more of an institutional imperative (International Association of Universities 2012, 2).

Internationalization efforts have been increasingly advanced as means for universities to gain competitive advantage, enhance quality and visibility or facilitate a response to globalization. Guided by the premise that universities act as gateways to the global knowledge society, van der Wende (2001, 250) asserts that “internationalization policy at the higher education level aims to promote an internal transformation that strives for global competition and cooperation, which increasingly affect the higher education sector requiring strategic partnerships and research linkages. From this perspective, internationalization strategies have taken on a greater institutional imperative, as Altbach and Teichler (2001, 11) forewarn — a university without a proper international strategy runs the risk of becoming irrelevant.

From this perspective, (re)positioning strategies and strategic alliances which strive to bring universities competitive advantage can be interpreted through various internationalization rationales. These rationales

are defined by de Wit (2002, 84) as “motivations for integrating an international dimension into higher education. They define the ‘why’ of internationalization. Different rationales imply different means and ends to internationalization”. The rationales driving higher education internationalization policy can be segmented into four overarching groups: *political, economic, cultural and social*, and *academic* (Ibid, 83-99). The interplay between them suggests significant overlap and conceptual blurring, depending on the goals of a given academic unit or university.

The phenomenon of internationalization cannot be examined in isolation from the wider political and economic transformations occurring at the global, regional and national levels. Equally important are university-level priorities, resource endowments and goals. Correspondingly, competing academic frameworks and organizational cultures, path dependencies and institutional legacies are variables which come into play.

Conceptual mapping

Expanding research around internationalization and its central underpinnings has become increasingly salient to scholars and policymakers alike; however, it remains an underdeveloped field of research that is still at the ‘pre-paradigmatic’ stage (de Wit & Callan 1995). This challenge is compounded by limited theoretical conceptualization and empirical study about the impacts of globalization on higher education and strategic policy in response to the knowledge society. Research in this domain is not readily accessible, nor is the thematic area altogether clear. Kehm and Teichler (2007, 260) contend that “[T]he general state of research is characterized by an increase of theoretically and methodologically ambitious studies without a dominant disciplinary, conceptual, or methodological home”. Studies tend to draw upon world systems theory, international relations studies, and organizational theory (Teichler 2004, 10).

Internationalization is increasingly understood to be linked to areas affecting institutional change via knowledge mobilization, strategic planning, management structures, organizational strategies and steering mechanisms (Altbach et al. 2010; Rumbley 2015; Teichler 1999; Teichler 2004; van der Wende 1997). In turn, changes in the emergent global higher education environment influence universities to adopt new organizational practices and measurement practices. Universities are highly complex, multi-level organizations with dynamic alliances and networking capacities. Consistent with this view, they can be considered ‘complex adaptive systems’, defined by Morrison (2006, 3) as:

...dynamic and emergent, sometimes unpredictable, non-linear organizations operating in unpredictable and changing external environments... [They] adapt to macro and micro-societal change, and, through self-organization, respond to, and shape the environments of which they are a part.

A conceptual framework becomes essential to develop a critical understanding of internationalization as a *process* of change and to gauge institutional responses to globalization. Furthermore, qualitative instruments and analytical tools are required to improve knowledge on internationalization efforts, measure impact as well as determine gaps between ‘strategic aspiration’ versus ‘strategic reality’ (Maringe and Foskett 2010, 45).

Against this context, a new approach which combines neo-institutionalist theory with conceptual mapping is proposed, which could provide a useful framework to advance understanding of higher education internationalization. In the organizational landscape of the university viewed through North’s (1990) theory of institutional change, internationalization represents a new challenge of *external* adaptation and *internal* integration with which the organization must cope. The university viewed under North’s lens affirms that organizations will engage in acquiring skills and knowledge that enhance its survival possibilities. As such, North’s theory of institutional change examines cooperation under the more challenging circumstances of non-repeated interactions, incomplete information and large numbers of players. The model advances the idea that institutions provide a mechanism for incremental change, because they facilitate opportunities for new forms of negotiation and compromise.

Furthermore, North (1990, 7-8) theorizes on the institutional change matrix which is driven in part by ‘network externalities’ and ‘lock-in’, defined as “the symbiotic relationship between institutions and the organizations that have evolved as a consequence of the incentive structure provided by those institutions.” These forces take the shape of incremental change, formal and informal rules of engagement, and the perception that organizations could improve by altering the existing institutional framework at a given margin. North’s theory is particularly useful for developing a critical understanding of internationalization as a *process* of change and elucidating *how* institutional arrangements continue to function alongside normative, mimetic and legislative transformations.

The Delta cycle for internationalization (Rumbley 2010) captures a broad spectrum of complex and dynamic issues in a clear, concise format by establishing a visual representation of internationalization as a dynamic,

Figure 1: Delta Cycle for Internationalization



Source: Rumbley (2010)

cyclical process. At the core of this model is the fundamental concept of internationalization representing a function of institutional change against a fluid global environment. Consequently, the Delta cycle (Figure 1) facilitates a means of comparison and critique as to the underlying question of *why* universities are motivated to internationalize, the range manoeuvre undertaken to act on these interests, as well as gauge institutional action logs, outcomes and impacts (Rumbley 2010, 219-220).

North's theory complements the Delta cycle by introducing an element of 'friction' to illuminate how internationalization plays out in practice and as a function of institutional priorities, management cultures and resistance points. When applied to the internationalization experiences of individual universities, key indicators emerge. This enhanced conceptual framework facilitates a window to gauge the interplay among the aforementioned institutional features. This element is significant, since it places the university at the centre of the inquiry and provides a qualitative analysis of the findings. It also facilitates the basis for a reflexive account of how universities respond to the opportunities and imperatives of internationalization by examining measurable sets of indicators.

Concluding remarks

University approaches are becoming increasingly sophisticated in terms of how global engagement strategies are established and how diverse institutional responses can be consolidated in order to enhance (re)positioning strategies, build effective knowledge alliances and translate global knowledge into innovation. Universities are major interlocutors in the global knowledge society, and adopting strategic policies that allow for enhanced responses has become a greater institutional imperative. As strategic actors, universities are playing a proactive role in determining their positionality within a global higher education arena. By facilitating an enhanced conceptual framework to better determine internationalization outcomes, universities can assess and monitor their performance more effectively.

Internationalization has emerged a primary response to globalization and an educational innovation; however, further inquiry is needed to address current efforts in bringing policies closer in-line with the opportunities and imperatives of the global knowledge society. Against this context, universities might well ask what partnership portfolios and knowledge policies would be best suited for a 21st century characterized by increased flows of information, human capital, and ideas.

By improving knowledge on the impacts of globalization and policy outcomes, university administrators, researchers and practitioners alike could provide much needed intellectual monitoring of internationalization efforts. The dynamics of strategic priorities along with evolving policy responses are the fluid features that define internationalization. By gathering actor-centered perspectives and reflexive accounts of institutional responses to globalization, a nuanced analysis of university experiences can be achieved. As differing academic cultures, higher education systems and internationalization pathways are elements that allow for a range of critical and comparative analysis, further research is needed to test the proposed mapping framework to ensure its relevance and validity.

This paper suggests that effective internationalization strategies require a reflexive account of university responses to the global knowledge society. Furthermore, extending neo-institutional theory to the field of comparative higher education could prove beneficial to advance the conceptual underpinnings of internationalization discourses as they play out in practice and as a function of institutional rationales, strategies and outcomes. The inherent challenge at hand is to strike a balance to foster internationalization policies which respond to the changing needs of innovation agendas, organizational priorities and shifts in higher education.

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