

What is Global Engagement?

On the theme of CBIE's
annual conference 2015

Dr. Sheila Embleton, FRSC

York University, Toronto
embleton@yorku.ca

What is global engagement?

It's a phrase we hear everywhere these days, and both individual words, "global" and "engagement," are increasingly used in their own right as buzzwords, in university taglines, commercial slogans, planning documents, etc.

As a linguist, my initial impulse is always to begin by trying to define the component words making up the phrase.

Dictionaries define "global" as "of or relating to the whole world, worldwide; complete or comprehensive;" interestingly a business-oriented dictionary, businessdictionary.com, defines "global" as "pertaining to the whole world, rather than a single country or region," introducing a very specifically geographical sense. "Global" has much wider scope than "international," which it is now tending to replace, generating a far more all-encompassing aspect.

"Engagement" is more difficult, with the most common meanings until recently being "a formal agreement to get married," "an arrangement to do something or go somewhere at a fixed time," or "a job as a performer." There are more specialized meanings in medicine, finance, mechanics ("condition of being in gear") and military terminology ("hostile encounter or battle"), and occasionally a more recent usage, "the feeling of being involved in a particular activity" is acknowledged. What these definitions all have in common is both a sense of commitment and of there being two parties which interact. So perhaps a good definition for our purpose is simply "a committed or meaningful interaction."

Now going back to combine "global" into the phrase, we would have a definition for "global engagement" something like **"a committed, meaningful interaction with the world as a whole."** Ambitious indeed!

International offices at many universities and colleges in Canada and the US, including some of the most prestigious, have recently been named/renamed using the phrase "global engagement" (among many examples — UC

Global engagement: committed, meaningful interaction with the world as a whole.

Berkeley, Brown, U California at Irvine, Chicago, Duke, Northwestern, Rochester, Victoria) — and several have noticed that the name Global Engagement Office produces an appropriate acronym (GEO). If "global engagement" isn't one of the key drivers of your institution's strategic plan, chances are that just means that your institution hasn't renewed its strategic plan in the last couple of years.

Despite renaming or rebranding, these offices still cover the same familiar list of functions, plus or minus a few: management of study abroad opportunities, management of partner exchange programs, facilitation of international research collaborations, dealing with visa and work permit issues for incoming and outgoing students and faculty, orientations for inbound students, pre-departure briefings for outbound students, gathering and maintaining data on international activity, and hosting international delegations. The lists less often contain proactive activity, such as: promoting existing international activities, seeking potential international partnerships, leading efforts to internationalize the curriculum, considering what it means to teach in an international classroom, and developing strategy around increasing internationally oriented activity. Language and culture are almost never mentioned, as presumably this global world operates in English and with a version of Anglo-American culture. If there is a strategy around "global engagement" or "international affairs," it must come from somewhere else in the institution, as the global engagement offices, despite their close experience and exposure, don't seem to be charged with it.

Why be engaged globally?

There are two most commonly cited reasons to be more globally engaged.

One reason is very instrumental — for our graduates to be considered educated "global citizens" and/or "job-ready" in today's world, some level of international competence is required. Whether our graduates work at home or abroad, they will need to work effectively with others from very different and diverse backgrounds. This may be made more explicit in some fields (e.g. business) than in others, but the need is there no matter what and where the job.

The other reason is more abstract, but perhaps more compelling — with modern technology and transportation, the world is indeed a smaller place. News travels faster, people move faster and further, innovations spread more quickly, ideas spread more quickly, disease spreads more quickly, etc. It has become trite to point out that today's big problems, requiring new and innovative solutions, are

To be prepared to live well and responsibly in this current and future world, education must also include engagement, not just fleeting exposure, to multiple perspectives on these inescapable global problems.

mostly global problems, transcending national, cultural, and generational boundaries, and from which no nation can isolate itself: climate change, melting of the polar ice cap, extreme weather, global flows of migrants and refugees, airborne and waterborne pollution of the natural environment and disease propagation, terrorism and cyberterrorism, etc. To be prepared to live well and responsibly in this current and future world, education must also include engagement, not just fleeting exposure, to multiple perspectives on these inescapable global problems.

Are we in Canada engaged globally?

As a nation we would like to think so — because of our multicultural population and policies and our self-image as a nation. But as *The Economist* (September 12, 2015) points out, the data show the opposite since 1995, when our spending on “global engagement” (defined as defence and development aid) started a steep decline. We now rank poorly compared with the other G7 nations, “even with other middle-ranking countries with open economies.”

As international educators, we perhaps have a better idea of some of our shortcomings, and realize that there is much work still to be done. As one measure, according to a December 2014 Universities Canada report, only 3.1% of university students have an international experience as part of their undergraduate degree, unchanged for eight years, despite almost every university including “international” in its strategic plan. Further, student preferences for international experiences remain narrowly confined to English-speaking countries, France and Germany, which can hardly be called “global engagement.” We also are well aware that despite the report of the Chakma advisory panel on Canada’s international education strategy (2012), sufficient funding has not been provided to compete with other countries (such as Australia) for marketing/branding

of Canadian education (to bring international students to Canada) nor for Canadian students to spend sufficient time abroad to engage with an authentic experience (exceptions are the federal funding for the Mitacs Globalink program, now taking Canadian students abroad as well as bringing international students to Canada, and the recently launched Canadian Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Scholarships). But, realistically speaking, how practical is it to expect that any significantly higher percentage of university and college students can have an international experience as part of their undergraduate education?

This is how we get there

What would success in global engagement look like, and how might we get there?

At 3.1%, we may be doing better than the US (1.4% mobility), but not as well as the EU where Erasmus+ has set itself an ambitious target of 20% mobility by 2020. But if substantially increased mobility is our only definition of success in global engagement, we are doomed to failure. Suppose we had ten times the money, and that led to approximately 30% mobility — which would actually be a marvelous achievement — what are we going to do for the other 70%? Should they not also have an education that leads them to be globally engaged?

If substantially increased mobility is our only definition of success in global engagement, we are doomed to failure.

Thus the key to success has to be some form of “internationalization at home.” Additionally, even those students who do travel abroad often regard that experience as an “add-on,” keeping it mentally separate, not integrating it into their overall educational experience. This too argues in favour of “comprehensive internationalization” as the preferred institutional strategy, with significant reorientation of institutional mission toward global engagement, including in particular in curriculum and “soft skills.”

Without this, mobility and our current tools alone will not be enough to produce graduates who are better citizens, knowledgeable and globally engaged, with skills and attitudes to take them and their country farther.

References

- Beelen, J. & Leask, B. (2011). "Internationalisation at home on the move". *Internationalisation of Higher Education Handbook*. Berlin: Raabe Academic Publishers.
- Canadian Bureau for International Education (2013). *A World of Learning. Canada's performance and potential in international education*. Retrieved on August 10, 2014 from http://net.cbie.ca/download/CBIE_A%20World%20of%20Learning_English_web%20high%20res.pdf
- de Wit, Hans & Fiona Hunter (2014). "Internationalization of Higher Education at the Crossroads". *International Higher Education* number 78: special issue 2014, page 2.
- Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada (2012). *International education: A key driver of Canada's future prosperity* (Final Report). Advisory Panel on Canada's International Education Strategy. Retrieved on August 25, 2012 from <http://www.international.gc.ca/education/report-rapport/strategystrategie/index.aspx?view=d>
- European Parliament. (2015, July). *Internationalisation of Higher Education*. [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU\(2015\)540370_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU(2015)540370_EN.pdf)
- Hudzik, J.K. (2011). *Comprehensive internationalization: From concept to action*. Washington, DC: NAFSA: Association of International Educators. www.nafsa.org/uploadedFiles/NAFSA_Home/Resource_Library_Assets/Publications_Library/2011_Comprehen_Internationalization.pdf
- Leask, Betty (2014). "Internationalizing the Curriculum and all Students' Learning". *International Higher Education* number 78: special issue 2014, pages 5-6.
- Reisberg, Liz (2015). "Internationalization for Everyone?" *Insider Higher Ed*, October 12, 2015. <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/world-view/internationalization-everyone?width=775&height=500&iframe=true>
- UNIVCAN (December, 2014). *Canada's Universities in the World: AUCC Internationalization Survey*. <http://www.univcan.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2014/12/internationalization-survey-2014.pdf>

CBIE wishes to thank Dr. Sheila Embleton for preparing this paper in order to initiate and enrich reflection on the theme of our 2015 Conference, *Global Engagement: Crossing Borders, Connecting Generations*.

Published with her permission.

© CBIE and Sheila Embleton

Sheila Embleton, FRSC, is Distinguished Research Professor of Linguistics, York University. She served as Vice-President Academic & Provost at York (2000-2009), Associate Dean of Arts (1994-2000), Chair of the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (2004-2008) and the National Vice-Presidents Academic Council (2006-2007). Her background is in mathematics (BSc, MSc, Toronto) and linguistics (PhD, Toronto). She is deeply interested in many policy and practical issues in contemporary post-secondary education, in Canada and internationally (especially EU and India), and is a tireless advocate for internationalization of education and access to higher education, based on merit rather than social, financial, or geographical factors. She has worked in many aspects of academic relations between Canada and India, and frequently lectures, writes for the media, and leads panels on the rapidly evolving higher education scene in India. She is President or Past-President of many scholarly organizations in her fields, and currently President of Canadian Friends of Finland Education Foundation, Board Chair of the Fields Institute for Research in Mathematical Sciences, member of the board and also Committee of Examiners at TOEFL. She is a former board member of CBIE, MITACS and Mprime Networks.

CBIE BRIEFING NOTE

Canadian Bureau for International Education

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors.
Également disponible en français

Canadian Bureau for International Education
220 Laurier Avenue West, Suite 1550
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5Z9

613-237-4820
www.cbie-bcei.ca
research-recherche@cbie.ca

