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**Is the idea wrong or is the flaw in reality? On the definition of ‘internationalisation’ of higher education**

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**Abstract.**

The concept of ‘internationalisation’ in higher education has absorbed remarkable attention in the last three decades. Papers by Jane Knight and colleagues in 1994-2004 established broad support for a practice-oriented definition. The most cited version, intended to constitute a common approach across the world, stated: ‘Internationalisation at the national, sector and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education’. Here internationalisation was seen as controlled by agents in higher education, in contrast with ‘globalisation’ which was seen as primarily economic, external to higher education and potentially dangerous to educational values. In this ideological reading internationalisation, operating within the nation-state framework, was seen as a filter and defence in relation to global forces. The formula ‘globalisation is changing the world of internationalisation’ while ‘internationalisation is changing the world of education’ became widely accepted.

However, since the mid 2000s and especially since Brandenburg and de Wit (2011) suggested ‘the end of internationalisation?’ it has been evident that all is not happy in the internationalisation camp. There has been a raft of redefinitions, supplementary clauses, and unsuccessful calls for a new paradigm. On one hand, the definition is too inclusive: national governments are wedded to global knowledge economy agendas, and commercial cross-border education, rankings and competition have undermined the ideal of a benign internationalisation. These pathologies cannot all be blamed on an external economic globalisation. They also proceed from inside the sector. On the other hand, the definition is too exclusive: there is more to global relations in higher education and knowledge than economic competition; and there has been growing pushback from non-Western countries for whom Western-driven internationalisation is synonymous not with enhanced agency and control but the suppression of agency, in continuity with the colonial era. Arguably, matters can only move forward if we step outside the definition, its ambiguous universal ideal and its constrained geography and geo-politics.

In the light of developments in cross-border higher education the paper will review the discussion of ‘internationalisation’, isolate three flaws in the definitional approach, and suggest an alternative terminology for both scholarship and practice.

‘Internationalisation’ has become a key term in higher education, a motivating ideal, an expanding set of multiple practices with – at times - the flavour of a social movement. It is local awareness and practice, it is often a national strategy, it can be a generous reaching out across borders, a cosmopolitan sentiment in the shared global space, sharing resources and learning from the other. It is also signified by university rankings that push the usual suspects up to the top of the Christmas tree, aggressive cross-border recruitment, selling places to foreign nationals, the complacent claim that ‘our’ higher education is the best in the world and that’s what makes it marketable, especially when its ‘superior’ quality is joined to an ‘internationalised outlook’. It’s all been part of ‘internationalisation’.

That ambiguity is one reason why the discussion has been uncertain and fraught since the revised and best known Jane Knight definition appeared in 2003 and 2004, ten years after the first version of her definition. The 2003 and 2004 version is as follows:

Internationalisation at the national, sector and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education.

In a world that is globally connected, in which nation-states lead social organisation, we need a word for the growth of educational relations that cross national borders, relations that are ‘inter-national’. In its literal meaning, ‘internationalisation’ means the creation and augmentation of such cross-border relations. But that is not all it has meant. The ‘internationalisation of higher education’ has been the focus of a determined attempt to construct a common field of understanding and activity, and to promote cross-border education abroad and at home on an educationally sound basis. Knight started with concern about what she saw as the looseness and meaninglessness of ‘internationalisation’. She wanted to establish ‘a conceptual model’ that provided ‘clarity on meaning and principles to guide policy and practice’. ‘Definitions can shape policy’ she stated in 2003.

Knight noted the challenges entailed in taking a universal approach. Education had many contexts, countries, and systems. Stakeholders had diverse perspectives and agendas. She was ‘not developing a universal definition’, she said. But she wanted to ensure the meaning was appropriate for ‘a broad range of contexts and countries in the world’. She argued that ‘it is important to have a common understanding of the term so that when we discuss and analyse the phenomenon we understand one another and also refer to the same phenomenon when advocating for increased attention and support’. It was a soft universalism. The definition’s normative reach across the field was maximised by couching it in abstract and inclusive terms. There was something doctrinal about it. In his study of cross-border education strategies in the US and UK Jonathon Friedman described the Knight definition as part of an ‘advocacy tradition’ of international education in North America.

The strategy has been highly successful, if influence is measured by frequency and spread of use. As of yesterday, the 1994 definition had 1003 Google Scholar cites and 2003 and 2004 definition had 1570 and 3641 respectively. The *Journal of Studies in International Education* is the leading journal in the scholarly field called ‘international education’. A 2018 content analysis of the *Journal* by Bedenlier and colleagues found that Knight’s 1994 article has been foundational to this field, and Knight is author or co-author of the journal’s most highly cited works. The Knight definition has also been cited by the OECD, UNESCO, many governments, especially in the West, the International Association of Universities, the American Council on Education, Universities UK and others. It is often quoted in the websites of individual universities. A survey by the International Association of Universities in 2018 found that more than 90 per cent of institutions outside North America mention ‘internationalisation’ in their mission or strategic plan, and you can be sure that many of that 90 per cent referenced the 1994 or 2004 definition of internationalisation.

That’s a truly exceptional level of impact in both scholarship and practice. The words ‘integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery’ have become part of our lives, so that we do not notice the complex problems at their root. The definition has a taken for granted character, a life of its own that is now partly separated from its creator and its origins in 1990s liberal internationalism. I am sure that some participants in this webinar will be surprised to hear me critique it sharply today.

However, ideas must stand or fall on their merits, not their status as an orthodoxy. As I see it, this definition of internationalisation cannot adequately inform either scholarship or practice in cross-border education. Nor can it unify and normalise practice as intended.

There are three flaws. First, the teleological agenda of shaping practice has crowded out the scholarly mission to understand and explain. The Knight definition propagates a misleading geography. The definition rests on an ideological dualism, ‘globalisation’ v. ‘internationalisation’, in which globalisation is the big bad wolf and internationalisation is the good shepherd that protects higher education. This conceals from clear sight the global aspect of cross-border higher education which is a large part of the activity, and tends to lock practitioners into nation-state policy and regulation. Second, the universal terms of the definition enhance its power to include and to move people, but conceal ambiguities, and ultimately this has weakened its purchase on practice. Third, the definition tends to reinforce unequal power in higher education. It is non-relational and leaves Euro-American centrism untouched. The sharpest criticism has been from non-Western countries for whom Western-led internationalisation negates rather than enhances their potentials as agents.

I’ll now evidence these three points.

First, the geography. At the time when the definition emerged in the 1990s there were rapid global transformations. The Internet was spreading very rapidly and had kick-started a global science system based on networked collaboration and English-language publishing. This had begun to overshadow national science as the repository of authoritative knowledge. Cross-border student mobility was also booming, especially in commercial provider countries like UK and Australia. With the looming prospect of a wholesale deregulation of trade in education under the World Trade Organisation’s GATS agenda, there were deep concerns about the impact of economic globalisation and knowledge economy policy on the educational and cultural purposes of higher education.

There were two kinds of cross-border relationship in higher education. First, *global* relations that crossed borders directly – flows of knowledge, scholar to scholar links, partner agreements university to university, and so on – that did not pass through national government. Since the wandering scholars out of medieval European universities and Buddhist monasteries in South Asia there had always been global links but now in the Internet era there were many more. Second, *inter-national* relations conducted through the nation state framework, such as students crossing borders who were managed by national visa policy, or degree recognition protocols negotiated between national agencies.

Within higher education there were various takes on globalisation. Some Western university leaders saw opportunities to expand the reach, status and income of their institutions. Non-Western university leaders found themselves dealing with a huge flood of new English language material. Some scholars, influenced by Arjun Appadurai, Manuel Castells, Ulrich Beck and others, focus on the potentials of cross-border networking, global civil society, cosmopolitan learning and new hybridities. Others saw a good/evil binary between internationalisation and economic globalisation. Some rejected the whole idea of globalisation, of global convergence and integration beyond the nation-state. A third group of scholars saw all the elements in play: national, international and global, economic, cultural, positive and negative. Higher education was both a cause and an effect of globalisation and internationalisation and they could carry a huge range of contents. As Rizvi and Lingard argued later in 2009, ‘there is nothing inevitable or necessary about locating globalisation’ within the global knowledge economy imaginary. ‘The facts of global interconnectivity and interdependence’ can be understood in ‘radically different ways’.

In 1999 Knight explained her own take on internationalisation and globalisation. ‘In a literal sense, international education could be interpreted to mean “a kind or process of education which involves, relates to or is carried on between two or more nations”’ she stated. While the literal meaning of ‘global’ was ‘“worldwide” or “relating to the earth or world as a whole”, calling up ‘connectedness, interdependence’. This includes global flows of ‘technology, economy, knowledge, people, ideas’. ‘The central feature that distinguishes global from international … is the concept of nation’. So far so good. That distinction between international and global was non-ideological and broadly agreed.

However, Knight developed the noun form, the ‘isation’ words, in a different way to the adjectives. Used literally, as noted, ‘internationalisation’ meant the creation or growth of relations between nations, while ‘globalisation’ meant the extension or intensification of worldwide relations scale. However, stated Knight, the neutral approach to international resulted in ‘a rather restricted approach to the concept’. ‘The distinction between internationalisation and globalisation of higher education is controversial’, she stated, not because of the literal meanings but because of ‘the implied purpose and impact of internationalisation versus globalisation’. Knight’s definition rested on her own version of the good/evil binary of internationalisation and globalisation. Globalisation was seen as primarily economic globalisation, a threat external to higher education. It was linked it to the suppression of national differences, cultural homogenisation, a ‘neo-colonist approach’ and ‘commercialisation’. In contrast, internationalisation was controlled by educators within a national framework and potentially virtuous, a ‘pro-active’ response to globalisation.

The discussion does not centre on the globalisation of education. Rather, globalisation is presented as a process impacting internationalisation … In fact, substantial efforts have been made during this past decade to maintain the focus on the internationalisation of education and to avoid using the term globalisation of education

In 2005 Knight emphasised that the two terms were ‘purposely used differently’ in education. Globalisation was dangerous, challenging, risky. In short, national policies of internationalisation were seen as a Weberian ideal type, while the inconvenient truths, all the downsides, such as neo-colonial practices, were shifted onto economic globalisation. Even though neo-colonialism was in continuity with the policies of Western nation-states.

Knight summed up this positioning strategy in the much-quoted: ‘globalisation is changing the world of internationalisation’, while ‘internationalisation is changing the world of education’. Those who cite the definition buy into both the ideological geography and this idea of a single linear causal flow. Institutions and people in higher education exercised international agency, filtered by the nation-state, but not global agency. With internationalisation seen as the master process, the definition fixed the neutral term ‘global’ as a subset of an internationalisation agenda. The global sphere began the narrative as an all-powerful outside menace towering over higher education, and ended it as tick-the-box inside the internationalisation strategy, tamed, subordinated, listed after ‘intercultural’.

The logic was flawed and it hid from clear view such major developments as global communications and global bibliometrics and science, but it was seductive. It seemed to empower higher education agents. It drastically simplified a complex world while identifying moves they could make in response to the threat of globalisation. You can take back control of the agenda, it implied. Together with your national government, a useful ally, you could protect higher education and advance your own agenda by articulating, moderating and diverting global forces. The nation-centred focus on internationalisation also fitted with common-sense perceptions of how policy, politics and practice work. But it constrained agents to a small set of nation-bound options in which, unfortunately, higher education was seen by government as a source of national economic competitiveness in the imagined global knowledge economy. This cross-border geography made higher education more vulnerable to policies of competition and commercialisation, not less, which was the exact opposite of what Knight and many proponents of the definition wanted to achieve.

But the second problem was that such practices were included in Knight’s universal definition. If internationalisation meant ‘integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension’ into higher education, it had to include university rankings, selling international student places and treating the students as cash cows, brain drain from emerging nations, foreign aid that failed to foster local capacity and agency: the bad neo-colonial practices as well as the healthy cross-border sharing. And it was all too easy to have it both ways. Sharon Stein talks of universities that register critiques of Western homogenisation of knowledge, and declare their respect for other cultures, while unabashedly selling places to students from emerging countries with claims about the intrinsic superiority of Western culture, as in the imperial era. Anything goes. It’s all ‘integrating an international dimension’.

Since the early 2000s Knight has repeatedly expressed her concern that ‘competition, commercialisation, self-interest, and status building’ seem to be winning, as she put it in 2013. But she has held back from revising the definition so as to exclude those practices. She has stuck to the definition and the myth of the possibility of a unified practice, while continuing to argue that the bad parts are globalisation, not internationalisation.

Some other proponents of the definition have been more willing to reconsider. In 2011 Uwe Brandenberg and Hans de Wit published ‘The end of internationalisation’. They critiqued the founding ideology. ‘Internationalisation has become the white knight of higher education, the moral ground that needs to be defended, and the epitome of justice and equity’, while ‘globalisation is loaded with negative connotations’. ‘This constructed antagonism between internationalisation and globalisation’ ignores the fact that economic globalisation is ‘increasingly executed under the flag of internationalisation’. ‘Holding firmly onto traditional concepts and acting on them while the world around moves forward’ is not viable. ‘We have to move away from dogmatic and idealist concepts’ and develop new ‘values and rationales’ for ‘meaningful’ outcomes. ‘The future of higher education is a global one’. ‘Possibly we must even leave the old concepts of internationalisation and globalisation and move on to a fresh unbiased paradigm’. Since then de Wit has continued to unsettle the definition, without demolishing it. In 2016 Leask and De Wit wanted everyone to ‘think locally, nationally and globally’. A multi-scalar geography, breaking with the methodological nationalism of the definition. The year before, in a report for the European Parliament in 2015 de Wit and colleagues expanded on the definition. Internationalisation now was:

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 (de Wit et al. 2015, p. 29).

This injected quality and social responsibility as counterweights to ranking and commercial student mobility. But it clung to the universal approach, and added more ambiguity with terms like ‘quality’ and ‘meaningful contribution’. The global dimension was still sidestepped. And the difficult issue of Western-centrism was yet to be addressed.

Third then, Western-centrism. Many advocates of the 1990s/early 2000s definition take for granted the superiority of Euro-American values and their universal applicability. The Knight definition does not specify Western-centric higher education. Her discussion on the definition notes that Western-centrism is a problem. But commercialisation seems to be a larger issue, and there’s nothing in the definition itself that challenges Western centrism.

Today’s internationalisation takes place a hundred and twenty years after Euro-American powers controlled or dominated over 90 per cent of the earth’s surface. This shapes cross-border relations. For Rui Yang Eurocentrism is ‘the most fundamental issue’ in international higher education. The Anglophone countries, France, Netherlands and Russia, maintain patterns of brain drain and epistemic exclusion inherited from colonialism and the neo-imperial domination by the US after World War II. This is sustained by inherited institutional concentrations, claims to superiority, global English, and the attractions of Whiteness to cross-border students, as Riyad Shahjahan and Kirsten Edwards point out. Relations between the West and the rest ‘continue to be predicated on the Western belief that it is morally superior and that it is its right to act on such a basis’, as Yang states. For example, thirty years after Knight’s first definition of internationalisation the cultural contents of the Western curriculum have been little impacted by non-Western knowledge. But the cultural content of the curriculum outside the West has been transformed.

Programmes about global citizenship and competences mostly (not always) focus on equipping Westerners to operate freely on a global basis. Capacity building in emerging countries often perpetuates dependence on the West. All of this calls for a wrenching self-appraisal in the colonising countries. Nothing in the definition triggers self-appraisal. What Knight calls ‘neo-colonisation’ has always been part of internationalisation and that will continue until the relational structure changes. But the definition of internationalisation cannot get at that problem. It is non relational. It is *solely focused on the qualities of the self*. Changing one’s own education is the objective, not beneficial outcomes for all parties.

The definition not only allows agents to be self-referencing without an obligation to be other-referencing, it shuts out the effects of self-internationalisation on the other. The effects on non-Western societies drop from Western sight. Further, when this form of internationalisation is pursued by Western institutions and systems, because the method is self-centering, inescapably, that means it fosters Western centrism. The framing of cross-border relations is narcissistic and negates the very idea of *inter-national* relations The other side of the Western claim to universalism is Western individualism and self-regard.

So the definition has been harshly criticised in non-Western countries. From the global East, Yang states that in ‘non-Western societies … a so-called “international” perspective has been imposed from the outset’.

What is lacking is an appropriate combination of the ‘international’ and the local. Within the contemporary context of Western dominance, internationalisation of higher education in non-Western societies necessarily touches on longstanding knotty issues and tensions between Westernisation and indigenisation. This is particularly true in China, a country with a continuous history of fostering unique cultural heritages for thousands of years (Yang 2014, p. 153).

From the global South, Ogachi (2009) states that the pre-existing global hierarchy, global competition for student talent and exploitative commercial providers ‘deconstruct the notion of an altruistic internationalisation of higher education process’ (p. 333).

Although internationalisation of higher education is touted as a solution to the problems facing higher education provision in Africa, the reality is different. What internationalisation may well do is to deepen the relation of dependency of local higher education institutions on higher education institutions in industrialised countries’ (Ogachi 2009, p. 333).

Dantew Teferra (2019a) takes issue with the idea of internationalisation as ‘intentional’ in the rebadged definition by De Wit and colleagues. ‘Internationalisation as regards the global South, particularly Africa, is far from being an intentional process’ determined by local agents, states Teferra. Universities in the global South engage in ‘massive consumption’ of ideas, knowledge and textbooks from the global North ‘while staunchly, but helplessly, adhering to international academic and scholastic norms and values’. Former colonies maintain the academic language of the coloniser. Global rankings ‘have pushed the internationalisation pendulum from intention to coercion’, pressuring institutions ‘to do things not necessarily within the realm of burning institutional needs’. Teferra (2019b) sees the ‘benevolent intentionality in internationalisation’ as ‘a continuation of the neo-colonial project. He calls for ‘a more neutral, robust, “intention free” and inclusive definition’.

These are fundamental criticisms. As I see it, the 1994 and 2004 definitions of internationalisation are not longer revisable. Under their universal umbrella they tolerate neo-liberal and Western-centric practices. But they have become a fixed doctrine and will continue to be cited regardless of what their first advocates say or do. Knight and colleagues are no longer steering either concept or practice. The old evolution of internationalisation has run into sand. If something new is to be said, the old definition has to go.

What might be the components of a better approach? Less ideological and doctrinal. Grounded in a reputable geography. More explanatory and hence effective in informing scholarship, policy and practice. Fostering mutual and just relationships. In particular:

1. ***Explanation and practice***: Terminology should be conceptually robust, empirically explanatory and applicable, and useful to both scholars and practitioners.
2. ***Social science and ideology***: Terminology should be non-ideological and neutral in the scientific sense, and to the extent possible, consistent with sound recognisable usage in other social science disciplines (e.g. the use of scale in geography).
3. ***Relationality and power***: Terminology should facilitate understanding of, and the observation and analysis of, relationality in cross-border higher education, including power, inequality and hierarchy.

Terminology should not seek to shape practice by constituting one universal field of cross-border higher education regardless of diversity. It should provide concepts that explain cross-border higher education with maximum inclusion, enabling the free identification of similarities and differences and thereby informing practice. For example, terminology should help with questions of educational justice, not by building normative concepts into the terminology and pre-setting what can and cannot be observed, but by providing us with tools that illuminate issues of justice for all to see and to decide.

The purpose of Table 1 is non-ideological language, using neutral approaches to the geography of global and international. Both global and international relations are multiple. The adjectives indicate different kinds of relation. These permit analysing, normalising or politicising without violating the nouns. There are many other possible applications.

Table 2 suggests ways of observing and judging relationality in cross-border education, using quantitative and qualitative methods. New ideas in this domain are worldwide and collective. Tables 1 and 2 are a modest start. We can look forward to further discussion.