

Reference Number: 2022/002/LEPG/BSR

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Domain: Law, Economics, Politics and Governance; Society and Religion

IUC conference: Fostering Inclusive Internationalisation 2022

Category: Essay / Key note lecture

Submitted: 19 October 2022

Date of publication: 9 November 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53099/ntkd4307>

ISSN: 2787-5717

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Universities and the Future of Inclusive International Scientific Cooperation

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Abstract

In this essay, based on a key note presentation during the IUC 50th anniversary conference on fostering inclusive internationalisation, the necessity is explored of internationalisation and of inclusive internationalisation in research and education. It is argued that there is not such a thing as national science and that the global challenge we face only can be addressed through international cooperation. The present situation however is far from ideal and there are serious barriers and hurdles for inclusive internationalisation in scientific cooperation. At the same time there are promising counter strategies; related for instance to the Open Science movement, through changing funding schemes and, in particular, by concrete action of universities themselves.

Key words: International scientific cooperation, future of universities, inclusion and inclusiveness, global challenges

¹ The author sincerely thanks professor Wieger Bakker (Utrecht University) for his valuable comments and contributions. He also thanks Hanneke Olivier for her linguistic virtuosity.

Introduction

Utrecht University's motto is sharing science, shaping tomorrow: with open minds, open attitudes, and open science we join forces worldwide to create tomorrow's solutions. We are there for the betterment of the world. Welcome to paradise! At least as we see paradise at our university.

The road to that paradise is very bumpy with many hurdles to overcome. And for me as Rector Magnificus it was typical to experience over the past few years that some people, particularly politicians, question even the idea that internationalisation, especially inclusive International Scientific Cooperation, is the road we have to take towards that paradise. Inclusive here reverts in the broadest sense to fair and equal access to and opportunities for participating in the international scientific community.

Therefore, I feel obliged to dedicate a few words to the necessity of internationalisation, and of inclusive internationalisation, in research and education.

I. Why internationalisation?

There are many reasons. I will only mention the three most important ones.

1. Peace and progress

Since WW II international cooperation in general, but also in science, has been seen in the light of the contribution it can bring to 'peace and progress for mankind'. In fact, this is the wording UNESCO uses since the 1950's (<https://www.unesco.org/en/scientific-research-cooperation-why-collaborate-science-benefits-and-examples>). Peaceful use of nuclear science (CERN 1954), 'science diplomacy', linking East and West by supporting links between 'colleagues and countries' (1964), fighting global soil erosion (1961), supporting peace processes (2017) and, recently, collaboration for a sustainable future (2019) and an international framework for open science (2021); they are all examples of UNESCO's efforts to foster and enhance international scientific cooperation.

In higher education there is also a need for international cooperation. In that same vein, the European Union (EU) is an important proponent of this, emphasizing the need for inclusive higher education and the need for HE-institutions to be well connected to tackle Europe's social and democratic challenges. In the field of education, the ERASMUS-programmes were and are thoroughly infused by these ideas. And the Trans-European Mobility Scheme for University Studies (TEMPUS), even reached far beyond the EU.

The mission of the Inter University Centre Dubrovnik echoes a comparable spirit: "Building upon its location and its history the IUC Dubrovnik serves as a bridge between

regions within Europe and between the European region and the world by connecting scientific communities and connecting communities through science”, <https://iuc.hr/about>.

Important to mention is also the International Association of Universities (IAU). It promotes the collaboration among its members by articulating the fundamental values and principles that underpin the pursuit, dissemination, and application of knowledge. The IAU advocates for higher education policies and practices that respect diverse perspectives and promote social responsibility, <https://www.iau-aiu.net/Vision-Mission>.

2. There is no such thing as national science

The second reason for internationalisation being essential, is a rather simple one: there is no such thing as national science anymore; science is depending on international principles that require interaction and dialogue across borders.² The quality and development of research benefits tremendously from having international contacts and collaboration. And that is even the case for disciplines that, at first glance, have a national frame of reference, like law or languages. But even those disciplines are not solely ‘national’ anymore. One might even think that they were already international before the nationalization of science in the 19th century. Law, for instance, was already very international in the Middle Ages, helped by the fact that at that time the lingua franca for all academics was Latin.

The EU, once again, fosters that development through the creation of the European Research Area (ERA), although - as a slight point of critique - the ERA seems to be rather market driven and based on competition. That in itself is not wrong, as long as that competition doesn’t end up in favoring a happy few (disciplines) and in having lots of researchers becoming burnout.

Next to the ERA, we have the logical correlating European Education Area, helping the Member States in working together to build more resilient and inclusive education and training systems. An initiative that gained a lot of traction through the establishment of European University Alliances, <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative>

Anyhow, the development of the European Research and Education Area’s, is a clear reflection of the idea that there is no such thing as ‘national science and scholarship’ anymore. And that idea doesn’t stop at the borders of the EU, of course. A lot of European universities, their researchers and teachers have close collaborations in all corners of the world. And that brings me to the third reason for international collaboration.

² See the speech of Rianne Letschert at the opening of the Academic Year in Maastricht, September 2023, titled “Our task for the future; pushing borders”: <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/news-events/corporate-events/opening-academic-year-2022-2023>

3. Global challenges

There is hardly any university anymore that doesn't indicate in its mission statement to want to contribute to the solutions to the grand challenges, the big societal problems on national, regional and global level. International collaboration is key in that respect. It is not without reason that SDG 17 stipulates partnerships to be crucial for achieving the other Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 17 refers to all kinds of partnerships, but there is no doubt that the teaming up of universities all over the world is necessary to accelerate progress.

The current state of affairs in collaboration between universities is however far from what is necessary. Internationalisation has unfortunately been strongly dominated by competition and exclusion. International cooperation was to a large extent, up until now, motivated by success in that competition, measured by rankings and metrics like H-index and Social impact factors.³ As a result we see a lot of international collaborations between high-ranked universities of western origin. In-depth collaborations with developing countries are rare. And that is remarkable considering all the earlier mentioned noble objectives of Western universities.

Looking more closely, the present situation is far from rosy, indeed. Over the last decades the high ranked universities in (Western) Europe, North America and some Asian universities competed for excellence, for the best, most promising master and PhD students, post-docs and professors. This had and has all kind of questionable effects. These universities were for instance most successful in EU grant applications <https://www.science.org/content/article/some-countries-still-struggle-win-eu-funding-despite-programs-give-them-leg>, in attracting scientists from abroad and in developing international networks with other centers of excellence. Thus contributing to a brain drain from the lesser wealthy countries to the more wealthy countries, (<https://www.dw.com/en/my-europe-eastern-brain-drain-threatens-all-of-eu/a-46755913>), less opportunities to participate in international scientific networks and, due to austerity measures, very limited funds to travel, participate in conferences and even in open science schemes. Even the European Union's widening programmes had a relatively limited impact.

The recent crisis in Europe has made clear that inclusive scientific cooperation is urgently needed. From climate change, to supporting peace processes, to strengthening democracy and an open society and to supporting economic development and fighting poverty.

In sum, for this part, internationalisation of academic work is necessary for several reasons, but what we need above all is more inclusive internationalisation, in the sense of cooperation between universities, incorporating more diverse experiences and perspectives.

³ D.W. Leebron, The Global and the Local: Construction an Distinctive Role for Universities in Shaping the Future, in: L.E. Weber/B. van der Zwaan (eds.), The University at the Crossroads to a Sustainable Future, Geneva: Association Gillion Colloquium 2020, p. 180-181.

II. Barriers, hurdles and counter strategies

In order to achieve this more inclusive internationalisation, there are several barriers to overcome, hurdles to take. I will mention just a few.

1. Nationalism

We have to find an answer to the nationalism that has emerged in various states. Pavel Zgaga, from the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, in a very interesting contribution to a bundle of Essays in Honour of 70 Years of IAU, writes this: “The process of *globalization*, which seemed to be unstoppable at the time, has been confronted in recent years with *deglobalization*, *renationalization*. The political, economic and social processes of gradual international *distancing* which is accompanied by the promotion of ‘national pride’ today, have also had a strong impact on the field of science and higher education, directly or indirectly.”⁴ And I couldn’t agree more. We also see this in the Netherlands, some political parties and even academics, try to frame internationalisation in general as a threat to national identity, national language and the accessibility of educational programmes to Dutch students as a result of crowding-out effects. There is a lot to argue against. And that was recently done by my Maastricht colleague, Rianne Letschert, at the opening of the Academic Year.⁵

I suppose we all agree that this type of nationalism is nonsense. But we cannot leave it at that, we have to deal with it and, even better, come up with effective counter-strategies.

2. Unequal access to funding

Perhaps an even bigger hurdle to take when it comes to more inclusive internationalisation, is the unequal access to funding.

In Europe, but also beyond, the transition to Open Science (OS) has gained a lot of support <https://www.coimbra-group.eu/the-promise-of-open-science/>. But at least two key elements of OS, open access and FAIR data come at a cost. Who is going to pay for them? Universities, national or European/international authorities? Or does academia have to go for an entirely different publishing model? There is not a clear answer, yet. Probably it will turn out to be a mix of these solutions.

There is hope when it comes to the accessibility of educational programmes. The pandemic has brought many problems, but also positive insights. For example, students from the Global South can indeed successfully participate in our programmes, without us forcing them to come to Europe for a long time at high costs. In my own university I have seen this bringing more balance to our exchange and master programmes.

⁴ P. Zgaga, Between Global Inequalities and World Ethics. Personal Reflections on Internationalisation of Higher Education over the Past Seventy Years, in: H. van ‘t Land/A. Corcoran/D.C. Iancu (eds.), *The Promise of Higher Education*, Cham: Springer 2021, p. 51 (also available in open access)

⁵ <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/news-events/corporate-events/opening-academic-year-2022-2023>

3. The framing of international collaboration is also an issue

Diversity and inclusion in themselves represent positive values that take us further in solving global challenges, and that we should therefore cherish. If we agree on this, then the next step would be to stop framing certain forms of international collaboration as ‘capacity-strengthening’. As the Danish Institute for International Studies states in its May Policy Brief of this year, this frame qualifies the relationship as unequal from the outset, <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/decolonising-academic-collaboration>. A better approach would be to stress the opportunities a collaboration would offer.

4. More recent challenge: Open Science only in Open Societies and knowledge security

I already mentioned the major cultural shift in academia towards Open Science. Utrecht University is strongly committed to that. At its core Open Science is about giving back to society and giving greater consideration to society and societal problems as steering elements in academic activity. Open Science is not only about open access publishing and FAIR data, as some still tend to believe. It is also about public engagement, citizens science and open education.

Open Science implies an Open Society. Look, for instance, at the consequences of the EU Data Protection Regulation: the transfer of data to third countries is only allowed if these countries respect fundamental rights and freedoms. In that same vein, in recent years, knowledge security has become a major concern for universities and other knowledge institutions. A lot of time and effort goes into risk analyses. Some collaborations - especially with Russia and China - have come to a halt. But more in general international collaboration is under a very close watch of the public, politicians, and security organisations.

5. Role of international and European institutions funding education and research

I do have to touch upon this topic, but only briefly. Just to make one point, inspired by my experiences in the international networks in which Utrecht University participates. These European and international institutions must continue to make demands concerning inclusiveness in their grant conditions, as, for instance, in the case of the European University Alliances. Perhaps these requirements should even become stricter. Otherwise, the well-established, rich universities will stay in their comfort zone of old-fashioned excellence.

III. What do we do at Utrecht University?

There are also things that universities can do themselves in order to overcome some of the hurdles mentioned. How do we do this at Utrecht University? I will give a short description

here, not with the intention of setting a shining example for the road ahead, but more as an experience I would like to share.

In Utrecht, during recent decades, the cooperation with central and eastern Europe and with the Global South was virtually invisible. Researchers and teachers who were working on these collaborations did not feel very appreciated and remained below the radar. That became very clear to me when we organised an online meeting with the University of Surinam during the pandemic. We expected no more than 20 attendees, but we ended up with more than 130 people in the meeting. Several people told me that they were very glad that the university recognises and supports this type of collaboration once again.

Following that experience, we took some further steps. We already had a [Centre for Global Challenges](#) (UGlobe) that works on research, education, and impact, addressing major global issues. But until quite recently it was based within and stimulated by only a few faculties. The Executive Board and all the Deans decided that UGlobe from now on would work for the entire university, stimulated by all faculties. At the same time, we established a committee, working for and across the entire university, with the intention of enhancing and supporting inclusive international collaboration. The committee itself has described the main reasons for engaging with the global community and, in particular, with the Global South: <https://www.uu.nl/en/organisation/centre-for-global-challenges/about/collaboration/global-engagement>:

1. *Global engagement beyond Western Europe supports Utrecht University's strategic goals to excel in research and education as an international institution of higher education and science.*

It:

- Increases the *global* relevance of the knowledge we produce, gain and teach, and promotes the utilisation. Many challenges are *global* challenges, or have a global nature (e.g. climate, but also think about shortages of medicines, maintaining open societies, ensuring that children everywhere can develop to reach their full potential, etc.). Addressing / solving these issues requires a global approach based on cross-country collaboration and insights from different parts of the world. The countries that constitute the Global South are also home to the majority of the world's population.
- Strengthens our research networks and associated strategic position.
- Can help Utrecht University researchers to contribute to questions that can *only or can more efficiently be* answered through research with other populations, like questions about certain diseases. But also: questions related to climate resilience, biodiversity, etc.
- Can strengthen our access to a global talent pool – students and researchers - which adds to diversity in thinking, experiences, and approaches of numerous outstanding, innovative scholars. This is essential, because the best research is conducted in diverse teams.

- Can strengthen the quality of our curricula, including accessing insights and perspectives from across the globe, and decolonising curricula where necessary.
- Can improve cross cultural competencies of Utrecht University students and staff.

2. Global engagement beyond Western Europe can contribute to equal opportunities for partner institutions in lower resource environments.

At the moment the committee has three priorities:

- a. How can Utrecht University help improve access to funding opportunities, in particular for lower and middle-income (Low and Middle-Income Countries) staff/student exchange/support (e.g. scholarship opportunities for students from LMICs)?
- b. How can we create and connect communities around global engagement (with possible sub communities around regions or themes)?
- c. Publicity and dissemination: make known to the broader Utrecht University community (and beyond) that Global Engagement is a strategic priority and show what that means.

IV. Conclusion

Universities are amongst the oldest institutions in world. We have become this old due to having given independent attention to issues that exist in both the short and longer term. And we have made ourselves relevant, even indispensable to society in doing so. Inclusiveness is a big issue. It affects the quality and legitimacy of our work. It is up to us to set an example and give some guidance. We should not wait for funding, legal frameworks or the initiatives of other institutions. It is time for action.

Aruba/Utrecht, October 2022