![Cascade logo — ideas without frontiers]

IDEAS WITHOUT FRONTIERS

REVERSING THE GAZE

Internationalisation: it seems like a pretty innocuous aspiration. Don't we all want to become more connected, joining a richer, global family? It sounds like a utopia we can all buy into. Unfortunately, the processes and the drivers that have evolved to define internationalisation, have become increasingly muddied by short-term goals and blinkered motivations. Many institutions within English-speaking countries are driven by an insatiable appetite for overseas students who have become the economic life-blood of a system that is clearly unsustainable. Meanwhile, low and middle-income countries (LMIC) find themselves playing an endless game of catch-up, and can only watch as their greatest talents seep away into the brain drain. The rich and the privileged few continue to benefit and the gap between them and the silent majority continues to widen; like a casino, the house (in this context, the global north) always wins. This may seem a rather gloomy view of a field that is fundamentally underpinned by a genuine ambition to make higher education accessible to everyone across the world. But, as with many worthy intentions, there are unintended consequences, and the devil lies in the detail. We need to look beneath the bonnet and examine how the dynamics of internationalisation can be made more equitable and more effective in the long term.

We need to take into consideration the technologies that offer new opportunities for interaction, mitigating against the economic challenges and climate threats that physical mobility presents, but also to find ways to reverse-engineer mobility flows so that they benefit those with greatest need. Above all, we need to shift our perspective and reverse our gaze from the privileged few to the silent majority and understand what it is that separates us and what can ultimately draw us together.

Working towards inclusive international and intercultural learning for all, means that we become more respectful of diverse contexts, agendas and perspectives on a global scale.

Hans de Witt[1]

Pioneering thinkers like Hans de Witt have done just this and have begun to unpick the myriad issues that have characterised internationalisation over recent years, especially with the massive growth in higher education across the world and the pervasive, unconscious barriers that impede the creation of a more level playing field.

Most institutions look outwards to models and channels for internationalisation, rather than focussing on their own context. Their internationalisation strategies tend to be fragmented without a cohesive connection to the University's core missions around education, research and outreach. Too often, universities are driven by market forces, and, despite their rhetoric, pay little or no consideration to the notion of a common good whereby the economic ambitions and interests of globalisation are matched by a drive for intercultural, moral and societal aspirations. Increasingly, individual institutions develop their policies based on a response to economic drivers and rankings rather than forming part of a unified approach, benefitting an elite cohort of students rather than the broader community.

RESEARCH AT A GLOBAL LEVEL

Knowledge is power and the value of universities has historically been determined by their role as knowledge generators. The contribution that academic research makes to a country's socioeconomic development is essential, and new knowledge produced through international collaboration can bring unique insights that help advance societies and enhance countries' competitive advantage. However, at an international level, the pursuit of 'research excellence' is often skewed against investigators in low and middle income countries. Of course the dominance of English immediately creates an obstacle, but there is also an issue of unconscious bias within journals whose editorial boards are predominantly from privileged backgrounds with interests and priorities based on a particular geographical context. Researchers from LMICs often resort to the simpler route offered by predatory journals, paying for the opportunity to see something in print without the rigour of peer review[2]. Alternatively, they limit their publications to local journals which are not indexed. But as James Georgalakis observes, 'An anthropologist in Ghana, supporting communities to improve social protection systems, or a macro-economist in Bangladesh advising their government on informal work and labour regulation, is far better placed to understand these processes, both theoretically and practically, than any scholar of evidence informed policy in a university in the UK or the United States.'[3]

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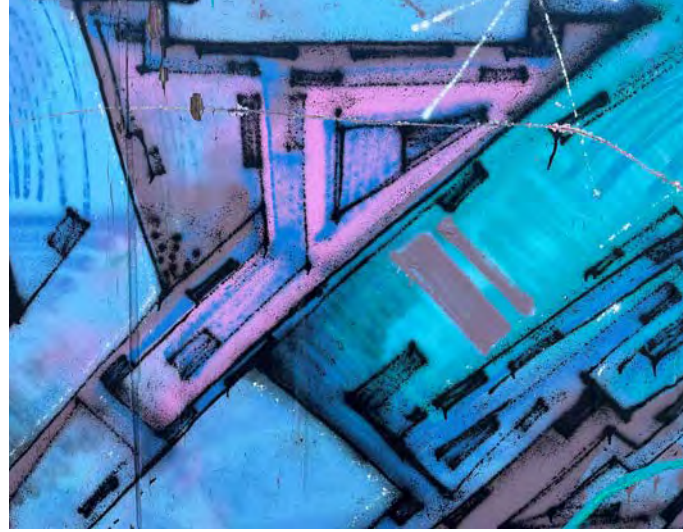
and labour regulation, is far better placed to understand these processes, both theoretically and practically, than any scholar of evidence informed policy in a university in the UK or the United States.'[4] Yet more often than not, funders and researchers neglect to recognise this and opportunities for meaningful innovation and potential impact – both commercial and, more significantly, social – are lost. The grand societal challenges, the wicked problems that plague LMIC more acutely than the global north, remain unresolved, and the UN sustainable development goals become little more than pipe dreams. National and international funders (European Union, British Council, DAAD, SIDA etc.) have attempted to address regional needs, through such programmes as Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education, but as Roberto Escarre observes, there is a still a lack in stakeholder ownership, particularly in terms of impact measurement[5]. Recent initiatives such as the African Union and EU Innovation Agenda[2] have sought to shift from a development-focussed approach to more equal, strategic partnerships, but there are still inherent challenges around resourcing and capacity-building. Paradoxically, at the same time, there is a crisis within international development precisely because of the lack of or mismanagement of social capital and knowledge resources[6] which could be largely overcome if the local and regional insights of universities were more effectively tapped by donors and philanthropists.

TEACHING & LEARNING

Unfortunately, in the meantime, as far as Universities' teaching mission is concerned, many observers have noted a shift away from capacity building and cooperation as an integral part of internationalisation towards an approach that is more geared towards building reputation and status and generating income. It plays against the pursuit of linguistic and cultural diversity. In some areas, this has inevitably led to a kick-back against the whole notion of internationalisation. Some universities see the integration of overseas students to be undermining the quality of the education they offer, while the rise in nationalistic policies and attitudes have led to a greater prevalence of "international misunderstandings"[7] and even prejudice. It is all too easy to dismiss the notion of creating global citizens and international understanding against more empirically demonstrable outcomes such as income and employability. As a result, developing and emerging regions find themselves increasingly marginalised, and omitted from the internationalisation agenda. Students and academics who are lucky enough to benefit from mobility programmes are too often neglected, facing linguistic and cultural challenges, financial hardship and lack of accommodation, and social isolation.

Of course, these barriers to a more equitable and meaningful approach to internationalisation are often self-evident and the issue is not that we are unaware of their existence but rather, that as organisations, we lack the resources or the political will to overcome them. While we are aware that the problem exists, it is also difficult to unpick the complex relationships and dynamics between north and south that have led to this situation. It is more difficult still to explore ways that we might mitigate against it. We must collaborate and cooperate more, not only with each other but with other institutions outside the higher education sector. We need to be more ambitious and focussed on making the world a better place, integrating it within our teaching programmes and our research rather than making it an isolated aspiration. We have to recognise that 'supporting teaching and research excellence' should not be limited to supporting those who are excellent; we need to help drive quality across the board, supporting in particular those who strive to improve themselves but are blocked by socioeconomic, geographical or cultural obstacles. Most of all, we must create forums and platforms that give representatives of the global south a voice and a means to carve out their own agenda in the development of a more balanced and equitable internationalisation agenda.

The CASCADE FOUNDATION has been formed because we have realised how difficult it is for individual institutions to do this, because their agenda is driven by so many complex interests that impede their drive towards change. Like great oil tankers, institutions lack the agility to pursue pioneering approaches. However, we can develop meaningful cooperation and collaboration as individuals. We can help each other to unpick the tangled fabric that undermines equitable internationalisation, we can challenge accepted orthodoxies and explore alternative models. This also requires the humility to recognise that we do not have the means at our disposal to really investigate the problem without listening to others and forging a new type of relationship with our colleagues especially from low and middle income countries. By pooling our individual expertise and listening to other voices, we can begin to channel our collective knowledge towards a fairer world and shift the discourse amongst our peers. We do not seek to undermine our institutions but hopefully, eventually, help them to find more effective channels to achieve their strategic goals.

We know we are not alone in this aspiration. Paeradigms (https://www.paeradigms.org) is an NGO and social enterprise focused on achieving transformational outcomes in education that lead to social change and economic impact. They recognise that capacity building needs to be comprehensive, working closely with stakeholders, facilitating agreement among them on overall goals and the way forward. They "openly listen to opinions and concerns, giving everyone a voice which creates a platform for meaningful contributions". At a research level, the Institute for Development Studies (https://www.ids.ac.uk) is bringing together leading thinkers from Africa, South Asia and Latin America to create single international research teams to explore how research evidence and diverse types of knowledge can promote safer, healthier and more equitable lives for all. We also share similar values and aspirations while regional networks such as the Head Foundation (https://headfoundation.org) which supports projects and programmes which directly or indirectly result in the most positive impact on the largest number of beneficiaries.

So, what is it that the Cascade Foundation proposes? Above all, we are in listening mode. We want to create spaces for dialogue and a means to shift our perspectives, and we want to experiment with new approaches.

VISIONARY VOICES

Visionary Voices As part of our initial explorations of this problem, we are curating a series of podcasts with leading thinkers in the world of higher education and other related fields, from different locations and backgrounds, who can lend their thoughts and insight to the debate and inspire their peers with their knowledge and experience.

COMMUNITY IN ACTION

We want to form a community of individuals from higher education institutions and other organisations across the world, representing diverse backgrounds and geographies, to support and shape the idea of a more equitable approach to internationalisation helping institutions become more globally connected.

CASCADE CHAMPIONS

From the Community, we want to identify individuals who are willing and able to offer their specialised support in delivering specific actions to work within their own communities, adjusting the relationship between north and south, sharing knowledge and co-creating strategies and programmes, designing projects and workshops, or offering individual coaching and mentoring support. We call this a community in action because we do not want members simply to reflect, we also want them to take action within their own communities, effectively to 'cascade' the ideas and approaches that have been developed.

CO-CREATION SESSIONS

We will be holding three online labs (Concept-building, Programme development and Funding structure). The sessions will be specially geared to designing the Dreamweavers Festival, a model for offering students from deprived backgrounds in low and middle income countries the chance to come together and derive an international experience that would ordinarily not be available to them. Fundamental to this that there should be conceptual volte-face so the programme is not offered as some altruistic token, but rather that the students themselves are seen as leaders and ambassadors whose mission is to apply their unique knowledge and skills to help save the global north from its own complacency.

DREAMWEAVERS SANDPIT

Held in September 2024, the pilot will bring together ten doctoral students from low and middle income countries to spend a week exploring a more equitable approach to internationalisation and co-creating the content for the Dreamweavers Festival to be held in September 2025.

DREAMWEAVERS FESTIVAL

Developed through the activities described above, the Festival will be a celebration of equitable internationalisation and a showcase for LMIC talent and priorities. It will be based around a two-week mobility for students from low and middle income countries who are ordinarily challenged in their ability to travel or study abroad, including first generation students with those with specialized learning needs, disabilities, care responsibilities, financial need etc. Located in Europe, the Festival will allow the students to work with local students to educate them and hone their skills in intercultural intelligence, co-creation, design-thinking and social innovation and showcase their talents and abilities to the wider world. All the time the emphasis will be on subverting prevailing notions of internationalisation and highlighting the enormous potential of balance cooperation.

IN CONCLUSION

The imbalance between institutions across the world has not been created intentionally but has come about almost inevitably because of the negative dynamics of globalisation. But if we are serious in our intentions to restore this balance, we need to be rigorous and creative, working with each other to carve new channels for cooperation. We hope that Cascade can make some inroads into making this happen.

WWW.CASCADEFOUNDATION.EU/

FOOTNOTES

[1] De Wit, H. (2020). Internationalisation in Higher Education: : A Western Paradigm or a Global, Intentional and Inclusive Concept?. International Journal of African Higher Education, 7(2). https://doi.org/10.6017/ijahe.v7i2.12891

[2]https://ijspt.scholasticahq.com/article/83948-research-from-low-income-and-middle-income-countries-will-benefit-global-health-and-the-physiotherapy-profession-but-it-requires-support

[3]https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/research-for-change-in-low-and-middle-income-countries/

[4]https://www.academia.edu/35581611/THE_HIGHER_EDUCATION_ROLE_IN_BUILDING_HUMAN_CAPITAL_IMPACT_EVALUATION_OF_HIGHER_EDUCATION_CAPACITY_BUILDING_INTERVENTIONS_IN_DEVELOPING_COUNTRIES&nav_from=d29dc8be-c30c-4059-ba50-74c05b34246b&rw_pos=0

[5]https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/ec_rtd_au-eu-innovation-agenda-final-version.pdf

[6]https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0263786320300569

[7] TEICHLER Ulrich, « Internationalisation Trends in Higher Education and the Changing Role of International Student Mobility », Journal of international Mobility, 2017/1 (N° 5), p. 177-216. DOI : 10.3917/jim.005.0179. URL : https://www.cairn.info/revue-journal-of-international-mobility-2017-1-page-177.htm