

Research on internationalisation and globalisation in higher education—Reflections on historical paths, current perspectives and future possibilities

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Abstract

Internationalisation and globalisation are intertwined and complex phenomena that have attracted the interest of higher education scholars for several decades. This article offers some reflections on how research on internationalisation and globalisation has developed over the years and the perspectives that appear to have dominated these studies. A key argument is that while the field is, in many ways, booming—both in the numbers of publications and with respect to topics explored—whether substantial theoretical advances have been made is questionable. Many publications still tend to be quite descriptive with shallow observations, mostly on reporting national trends and political agendas. As internationalisation and globalisation undoubtedly continue to make an impact on higher education in the years to come, there is a need for a stronger theoretical basis, which can underpin future studies. The current article discusses potential future advancements enabling a more integrated, theoretical grounding for understanding and interpreting internationalisation and globalisation in the years to come.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Internationalisation and globalisation of higher education has become one of the core research themes in higher education with scholarly papers, specialised journals, and conferences devoted to the topic. Hence, we are

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currently witnessing a huge expansion in empirical interests and topics, leading to a quite diverse research field (Beerens, 2004; Kuzhabekova et al, 2015; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Maringe & Foskett, 2010).

One of the factors driving this diverse research agenda is the intractable nature of internationalisation and globalisation phenomena, whereby the complexity of issues, drivers, explanations, and implications makes them difficult to classify and understand in a clear-cut way. Nevertheless, much work has been devoted to unpacking and providing definitions of key concepts and develop more conceptual understandings (Altbach & Knight, 2007; De Wit, 2002; Kehm, 2003; Knight, 2004; Knight & de Wit, 1995; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Vaira, 2004). More recently, globalisation is often described as the increasing relationships, interconnectedness and interdependence between national, local and supra-national organisational actors, while internationalisation often is interpreted as a more limited process of establishing specific relationships within this large web (Fumasoli, 2019). Moreover, internationalisation is also often seen as a response to globalisation forces (Knight, 2004). These kind of definitions points to different analytical levels but leave less clarity as to whether these definitions are mutually exclusive or how they are analytically linked (Fumasoli, 2019).

The many empirical phenomena and developments that are unfolding in the sector is yet another factor driving diversity in this field of research. Examples of the many themes and topics that various studies of internationalisation and globalisation have covered include—but are far from limited to—studies of geographically bounded processes (e.g., Gornitzka & Langfeldt, 2008; Horie, 2002; Lee & Sehoole, 2015; Marginson et al, 2011; Teichler, 1999); for-profit higher education and academic capitalism (e.g., Morey, 2004; Slaughter & Cantwell, 2012); international student and staff mobility (e.g., De Wit, 2020; Santiago et al, 2008; Wildavsky, 2010); global university rankings (e.g., Hazelkorn, 2007, 2011; Kehm & Stensaker, 2009), university alliances and network establishments (e.g., Beerens, 2003, 2004; Beerens & van der Wende, 2007; Olds, 2009; Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018); internationalisation at home (e.g., Soria & Troisi, 2014); the borders, boundaries and different forms of internationalisation (e.g., Kosmützky & Putty, 2016), and the experiences of international scholars and staff (e.g., Cantwell & Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007).

While these examples indeed showcase a booming research area, one could also question what exactly encompasses and is emphasised in internationalisation and globalisation research. For example, much comparative research such as research on distance education and research on the application of technology in teaching and learning etc., often carries labels that can be associated with internationalisation and globalisation (see reviews by Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015; Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016), while these studies also could be classified in other ways (e.g., transnational studies, studies of Europeanisation), depending on the disciplinary perspective. There is also a considerable amount of research that first and foremost report on empirical developments—often in the form of single case studies of internationalisation efforts, for example related to the management of off-shore campuses (Shams & Huisman, 2012). Research publications on internationalisation and globalisation are especially dominated by the Global North. One review indicated that although the number of research studies on international higher education has grown over time, networks among researchers of higher education continue to operate largely within national borders and are still dominated by a few Western countries (Kuzhabekova et al, 2015).

With this backdrop, the aim of the current article is to initiate joint reflections of where we are in the internationalisation and globalisation research field, and to provide some possible pointers to the future. For the most part, internationalisation and globalisation research can be likened to a crowd in which everyone speaks but fewer listen, much less understand and build towards advancing the field. Our starting point is that all the work devoted to re-defining and re-classifying internationalisation and globalisation has offered limited value, and that more theoretical contributions could offer a more progressive alternative. This is not to say that such theoretical framing is currently absent, and one of the contributions of the article is to identify the (implicit) theoretical perspectives, which seems to have guided research in this field, offering some broader, alternative or competing explanations for empirical findings. Based on their review of international higher education scholarship, Dolby and Rahman concluded that “one of the weaknesses of (a portion) of this subset of literature [international higher education] is its uncritical stance toward both its own internal practices and the structures in which it operates” (Dolby & Rahman, 2008, p. 688). The current article is—hopefully—a response to this critique.

A small note on the positioning of the current article is still warranted. While a considerable amount of literature is referred to and discussed, the article is not claiming to be a systematic review of the internationalisation and globalisation field in higher education. The approach taken is rather that of reflection and rumination, focusing on how we could (re-)ignite a debate on the future of the studies in this area.

2 | RESEARCH ON INTERNATIONALISATION AND GLOBALISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2.1 | An effort to discern pathways and phases or continuity and complexity?

Several reviews and meta-studies have already offered ways to interpret how the field of internationalisation and globalisation has developed over time. For example, in a recent review of research on internationalisation in one of the leading journals in the field, Bedenlier et al (2018) identified four major developmental waves in this research area:

- delineation of the field (1997–2001)
- institutionalisation and management of internationalisation (2002–2006)
- consequences of internationalisation: student needs and support structures (2007–2011)
- moving from the institutional to the transnational context of internationalisation (2012–2016).

While these proposed phases indeed make sense, one could still argue that such clear-cut development waves perhaps overshadow the phenomenon of layering, and how new perspectives and issues are being added to the existing ones—without previous topics having to disappear. This would suggest that there may still be considerable path-dependencies in the research field whereby some research topics continue to attract interest over time (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2014).

However, if some topics may attract continuous attention over time, other topics may also be overlooked. De Wit (2020, pp. ii–iii) has, for example, pointed out that during the latter decades much more attention has been devoted to a small, elite subset of students and faculty than on global and intercultural outcomes for all, and that while there is a strong interest in the strategic choices and strategies of institutions of higher education, less focus is given to the role of national governments in internationalisation and globalisation processes. The latter observation is somewhat surprising since in most countries, higher education systems are still under quite firm governmental regulation—even in an era of national de-regulation of the sector.

Another problem with classifying research in phases is that research classified as internationalisation and globalisation studies are not evenly spread around the world, and that some countries tend to dominate the field with respect to the number of studies undertaken and topics highlighted (Kuzhabekova et al, 2015). The latter point hints at how higher education stakeholders may produce global norms, rules and regulations on a large scale—affecting the research agenda (Ramirez, 2010). As illustrated by the attention given to global rankings (see, e.g., Deem et al, 2009; Hazelkorn, 2011), there is a danger in unconsciously and uncritically perpetuating the same unchallenged global forces. Furthermore, franchising efforts, certifications, and other market-based university procedures can also be normed globally with limited investigation.

Thus, the proposed argument is that internationalisation and globalisation processes, phenomena and topics are closely intertwined and for this reason difficult to clearly distinguish from each other (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Van Vught et al, 2002). This observation is not novel, but one that has dominated broader social science studies of globalisation for decades and where economic, cultural and political factors are seen as closely connected as part of globalisation processes (see e.g., Giddens, 1999; Robertson, 1992). Whether the field of internationalisation and globalisation studies in the area of higher education is currently reflecting this insight is yet another question.

2.2 | Theoretical silos in higher education internationalisation and globalisation studies

In this section we offer our interpretations of whether internationalisation and globalisation research in higher education reflect the insights that scholars such as Robertson and Giddens offered before this millennium. As suggested by the heading, we read much of the research conducted as embedded in particular perspectives—political, economic and cultural—resulting in theoretical silos with little cross-fertilisation across the field.

2.2.1 | Political perspectives

Political perspectives on internationalisation and globalisation seem separated into two basic camps. On the one hand, we find contributions addressing the diminishing importance of the nation-state, and the rise of other actors in shaping how the sector is developing (Iredale, 2001), with recent attention on the rise of a common global society and developing a global citizenry (Gacel-Ávila, 2005; Tarrant et al, 2014). These contributions tend to be inspired by more extensive work in sociology and political science, where the absence of authority—a typical role of the state in developing higher education—becomes a key characteristic of internationalisation and globalisation. An important point of reference is found in the new world as a “stateless polity” (Meyer, 2000, p. 236), whereby new international organisations and actors emerge as agenda setters and drivers of change. As such, this category of research is perhaps more about de-nationalisation than internationalisation and globalisation as such, where lack of control and coordination is seen as a critical challenge (see also Bauman, 1998). Still, stateless polities may still have room for unequal power and authority as new types of actors may fill in the vacuum left by national states. The role of global rankings and the commercial interests and organisations driving such initiatives is just one example (Hazelkorn, 2011).

On the other hand, contributions offering more optimistic perspectives on the role of the state are also present—even as internationalisation and globalisation unfold. For example, countries have been vying to serve as “global hubs” by linking with universities abroad (Olds, 2007). Also, in Europe the many studies on the Bologna process tend to emphasise the inter-governmental characteristic of this process and how nation-states may form alliances and build agreements that align systems and structures in the sector in a voluntary and smooth way. The underlying argument often underpinning contributions in this category is that the state is still a powerful actor in the higher education sector and that the “government continues to do its job” (Capano, 2011)—apparently quite successfully. Country case studies emphasising how governments are developing national strategies for internationalisation and globalisation can also be said to belong to this more optimistic perspective (Gornitzka & Langfeldt, 2008; Horie, 2002; Knight & de Wit, 1995; Piattoni, 2009). How higher education as a sector also can be used by governments as a way of exercising soft power is also part of this picture (Yang, 2010).

Other emerging political perspectives involve institutional adaptations in response to global norms. Typical issues addressed are related to quality assurance, interest articulation and negotiation, and the implementation of policy processes (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002). In addition to the already mentioned Bologna process, one could also note the many analyses of qualification frameworks around the globe, and studies of global policy processes, such as the recent global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications coordinated by UNESCO (2019). As new international bodies and agencies are emerging, there is a broadening of the analyses undertaken, from studying policy to a stronger focus on polity—the organisational and institutional structures surrounding the policy developed (Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018). Examples include analyses of new meta-organisations and international coordination arenas at the European level, such as quality assurance (Gornitzka & Stensaker, 2014); studies of the internationalisation of academic associations (Fumasoli & Seeber, 2018) and new networks and informal groups related to the Bologna process more in general (Elken, 2017).

Additionally, a growing body of internationalisation and globalisation research has examined issues of power and privilege among groups across the world from political frames. Activism (Boren, 2019; Koen et al, 2006);

labour rights (Dobbie & Robinson, 2008), and governance (Shattock, 2014), have emphasised the decentring or recentring of power, while challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about institutional authority as being fixed. For example, international students are repositioned from byproducts of institutional processes to actors with self-agency (Marginson, 2014). Emerging critical perspectives are not only important extensions of the internationalisation and globalisation field but have also brought into question traditional frameworks that have long been unchallenged. As such it is possible to argue that political perspectives are becoming more open for insights from economics and cultural studies.

2.2.2 | Economic perspectives

There is a long tradition for studying internationalisation and globalisation in higher education applying economic perspectives (Yang, 2003). The label *economic* covers issues related to marketisation, investments and expansion, and entrepreneurship. A number of studies perceive the rise of internationalisation and globalisation as a direct consequence of national de-regulation and the opening up of more market-like governance approaches in higher education (Altbach et al, 2010; Marginson, 2002; Marginson et al, 2011). Hence, economic perspectives on internationalisation and globalisation are multi-faceted, but still tend to focus on the rising competition between countries and between higher education institutions where knowledge and innovation is the driver for continuous economic growth and societal development. A key idea associated with this development is the rise of the *knowledge economy* and *knowledge society* where basic and applied research and technological advancement are the drivers for entrepreneurship and innovation (Berman, 2011; Santiago et al, 2008; Välimaa & Hoffman, 2008). Likewise, the rising emphasis on graduate employability has become a key outcome for internationalisation efforts (Crossman & Clarke, 2010) as well as a pedagogical priority (Tynjälä et al, 2003). Students viewed as consumers has also burgeoned increasing interest to student experiences, particularly their learning (Ryan, 2011) and engagement (Guo & Chase, 2011), as well as studies on how to increase their international participation (Doyle et al, 2010; Stroud, 2010).

A common starting point for contributions using an economic perspective is that universities have become the most important engines in contributing to the knowledge economy. The idea of *world-class universities* emphasises human capital and economic investment in STEM subjects to equip universities to survive in an increasingly competitive climate (Salmi, 2009). The competitive focus has also triggered a considerable amount of research addressing how universities can develop strategies and priorities that can enable them to excel in a more market-like environment (Middlehurst, 2002; Taylor, 2004; Vaira, 2004).

The strategic choices that universities make have also been pursued in various analyses. Studies of how universities try to globally brand, market, and build their reputation have not least become commonplace (Blanco Ramirez, 2016; Christensen et al., 2019; Rhoades et al, 2019). These studies often point to a paradoxical development in which higher education institutions on the one side display considerable effort in portraying themselves as unique and distinct, although studies also have pointed out the many similar marketing profiles developed (Drori et al, 2015; Papadimitriou & Blanco Ramirez, 2015).

Other examples of institutional strategy implementation studies include analyses of attempts to set up new campuses in other countries, or to build higher education “hubs” or “branch campuses” in cooperation with institutions and national authorities in other countries (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011)—often with for-profit or at least strong economic motives (Lane, 2011; Morey, 2004). With respect to these studies, it is worth noticing that the development of such establishments tends to take place in fast developing economies or in countries where national authorities also play an important role as facilitators (Jon et al, 2014).

Yet another strand of research that can also be classified as belonging to the rise of international *strategy studies* in higher education are those that emphasise how universities engage in transnational education and develop collaborations and consortia across national borders (Beerkens, 2004; Olds, 2009; Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018).

Since the current pandemic, there has been increasing interest in transnational education efforts in response to border shutdowns (Stacey, 2020). Within the institution, university administrators and outside firms shape academic content and even academic governance under the guise of internationalisation with underlying motivations related to efforts to increase prestige and funds (Stromquist, 2007). This perspective has extended to include the role of international educators as key entrepreneurial actors in incorporating market-like activities within universities (Deschamps & Lee, 2015).

Within an economic perspective, issues related to higher education as an export is often addressed together with the subsequent challenging of balancing competition and collaboration in quasi-market settings (Huisman & van der Wende, 2004; Wildavsky, 2010), although studies also can be found on inequalities and other challenges internationalisation and globalisation processes may cause (De Wit, 2020; Deem et al, 2009).

2.2.3 | Socio-cultural perspectives

Following the development of neo-institutional theory in the late 1990s and early 2000, there are a number of studies that have used the idea of an emerging “world society” (Meyer et al, 1997) as a starting point. The key idea coming from this theory is that globalisation is about cultural uniformity and the universalisation of everything from practices, to ideas and organisational forms. Through networks and arenas for the deliberation of ideas, norms and values, globalisation inevitably leads to similarity. An underlying assumption in this theory is that there is a cultural centre from which ideas and templates are spread to the rest of the world. Contributions arguing for how the idea of “McUniversities” will be diffused globally can be said to belong to this assumption that some dominant cultural values are difficult to resist (Ritzer, 1996).

As part of the cultural perspectives undertaken, we could also include the many studies of the mechanisms allowing for the travelling and norming of social ideas. The role of technology, for example, has been a key element in several theoretical contributions on globalisation but is perhaps most visible in the work of Castells (1998) and his argument that internationalisation and globalisation implies the rise of the network society, where technology is perceived not only a means for transporting ideas, but transformative in itself. Technology enables the collection, analysis and dissemination of information which in itself contributes to the shaping of cultural images and what is important and prioritised in society. Often, such priorities will be translated into quantitative indicators, paving the way for the development of global accountability schemes. However, technology has also been transformative regarding the mode of production with respect to teaching and learning. Globally accessible e-learning platforms have contributed to several analyses and a re-thinking of physical mobility, time and place in higher education (O'Connor, 2014), especially in light of international disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Theories emphasising the concept of translation have also become popular (Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006). This concept recognises the importance of global ideas, scripts and templates as drivers of emulation, but underlines how ideas are translated during their “travel” and that the implementation process may yield very different outcomes in different contexts (Czarniawska-Joerges & Sevón, 1996; Djelic & Quack, 2018).

Among the dominant global values is the power of global university rankings, a development which has also been studied from a cultural perspective (Hazelkorn, 2007; Kehm & Stensaker, 2009). Rankings are important for globalisation in the sense that the information gathered is standardised and thus enables comparison of institutions across national borders (Hazelkorn, 2011). As US and UK higher education institutions tend to top such rankings, several commentators have underlined how internationalisation and globalisation processes may imply the spread of particular models and interpretations of the university based on ranking metrics that favour these countries' institutions. (Currie et al, 2003; Hazelkorn, 2011; Marginson, 2002). More specifically, several contributions argue that this development will lead to global convergence where the Western university model and way of organising is being emulated throughout the world (Ramirez, 2010; Wildavsky, 2010). Recent studies have also found that global rankings most likely have an impact on university strategy, not least as those institutions

that are not ranked seem to have distinct different priorities than those included in the rankings (Lee et al, 2020; Stensaker et al, 2018).

However, the latter type of study also indicates that cultural perspectives on internationalisation and globalisation are not only about convergence and isomorphism, but also about addressing issues such as historical path-dependencies, cultural persistence and stability (Bartell, 2003; Currie et al, 2003). The role of English as the global language has been empirically examined and critiqued (Byun et al, 2010; Coleman, 2006). Additionally, studies have also shown how racism and similar expressions of cultural intolerance is an inherent ingredient in internationalisation and globalisation processes, such as in the experiences of international students and scholars throughout the world (Cantwell & Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007). From emerging critical perspectives, there are also studies that have investigated the decolonisation of the academy (Bhambra et al, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2012), recognition of indigenous knowledge (Durie, 2005; Thaman, 2003), and engaging in postcolonial pedagogy (Madge et al, 2009). Such studies have offered new scholarly pathways in bringing new and much needed scholarly voices from marginalised populations in the academy. As such, the studies in this field have started to challenge the Western hegemony, promoting a more diverse range of ideas, topics and including and analysing models from different parts of the world.

3 | POSSIBILITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Our reading indicates that many of the drivers and factors identified by scholars such as Robertson (1992) and Giddens (1999) indeed have been investigated and analysed also in higher education research, although in a narrower theoretical manner. While we do see some tendencies to expand the theoretical foundations, we would still argue that the connections and complexities between political, economic and socio-cultural perspectives have not been well explored in a systematic manner.

In the early 2000s, Marginson and Rhoades (2002) argued for a *glocal* approach to the study of internationalisation and globalisation processes in higher education—where the global, the national and the local levels and actors should be analysed in more integrated and coherent ways. The argument launched by Marginson and Rhoades (2002, p. 290) called for “exploration and analysis of types and patterns of influence and activity, to reconceptualise social relations and actions globally, nationally and locally.” Instead of simplifications and plain descriptions of empirical trends and formal policies, we should look for complexity, context and the conditions affecting internationalisation and globalisation processes. Unfortunately, only a quite limited number of internationalisation and globalisation studies could be said to relate to all of these dimensions almost twenty years later.

However, noticeable exceptions include studies on the rise of transnational governance, especially in relation to European integration—which have been quite successful in using multi-level and multi-actor concepts and acknowledge the interactions between micro, meso and macro levels in internationalisation and globalisation processes. The traditional dichotomy between public and private actors also becomes blurred as new international agencies may be founded by national authorities although being classified as private self-governed foundations (Djelic & Quack, 2018).

Vukasovic et al (2018) have also extended the dimensions to look for in internationalisation and globalisation studies by proposing that some areas also should be labelled as multi-issue areas—hinting that they may affect different areas—cross-cutting the political, the economic and the socio-cultural. International student mobility may, for example, be an issue that is related to academic, legal, ethical, and economic policy areas to mention a few, but tends to be studied through separate frames. We should also be careful to perceive internationalisation and globalisation phenomena as linear and sequential processes. Attempts to create order by identifying phases and stages may be proved irrelevant as exemplified by the sudden halt of international student mobility as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Multi-layered, multi-perspectival approaches take into account the risks of emphasising a single form of internationalisation (i.e., student mobility) during times of global crisis and the need

for greater flexibility. Hence, these studies could indeed be said to follow up on the ambitions sketched out by Marginson and Rhoades (2002) in promising ways.

While this paper has not set out to review methods, one can reasonably assume that internationalisation and globalisation studies should similarly consider broader ways to advance methodology. A recent special issue in *Higher Education Quarterly*, edited by Kosmützky and Nokkala (2020), calls for a methodology discourse in higher education. The editors note a similar trend of scattered reflections and a lack of coherent discourse that severely limits scholarly debate and advancement in methodology. Investigating and challenging *the rules of the game* and *whose rules* are fundamental efforts to the maturing of the higher education field (Kosmützky & Nokkala, 2020, p. 119).

Still, the vertical *uploading* or *downloading* of policies, ideas, scripts and practices, and advancements in the methodology for studying these phenomena need a broader theoretical framing if we are to advance the field of internationalisation and globalisation studies further. Combining political, economic and socio-cultural perspectives is one way forward to analyse complexity, provide context, and identify the conditions shaping internationalisation and globalisation processes around the world. Due to the many levels where internationalisation and globalisation processes play out, including the many actors involved and the scope of issues addressed, theoretical integration offers structures and frames that could make comparisons of seemingly different phenomena, entities and processes possible. The latter is not least important as new ideas and theories are currently receiving increased attention, including but not limited to, critical perspectives and the introduction of new paradigms stemming from the Global South and marginalised communities in the Global North. In an era when internationalisation and globalisation processes are being met with increasing scepticism, national regulations, and now facing the consequences of global pandemics, we might easily see this research area as being even more fragmented than before—although what we need are more joint debates, not least including more diverse voices. Methodological nationalism, which assumes that social processes are limited within nation-state boundaries, risk limiting internationalisation and globalisation studies by reinforcing unequal power relationships (Shahjahan & Kezar, 2013). Looking for ways to include new voices and ideas within existing theoretical perspectives may not only foster more lively debates and create a more dynamic research field—it could also lead to theoretical advancements that can better capture the dynamics witnessed in current internationalisation and globalisation processes.

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