

Internationalisation futures in light of anti-globalisation sentiments¹

— *Marijk van der Wende*

In a time when walls are being built up and borders are being closed down, higher education faces new challenges in its effort to support an open, democratic and equitable society. Recent geopolitical events and intensified populist tendencies are promoting a turn away from internationalism and the ideal of an ‘open society’. Support for open borders, multilateral trade and cooperation is weakening, globalisation is being criticised and nationalism is looming. We have seen evidence of all of this in the closing of universities and the obstruction of academic mobility after the failed coup in Turkey in 2016 and in the Central European University being barred this year from issuing degrees in Hungary. These and other recent events have created waves of uncertainty in higher education regarding international cooperation and the free movement of students, academics, scientific knowledge and ideas. A shockwave has hit the international higher education community, as expressed in the following reflection at the 2016 EAIE Conference:

What seems to have died is the European international education community’s faith in the inevitability of the cosmopolitan project, in which national boundaries and ethnic loyalties would dissolve over time to allow greater openness, diversity and a sense of global citizenship (Ziguras, 2016, para. 7).

Indeed, walls are being built up, borders are being closed down and global citizenship has been denounced by Prime Minister Theresa May: “If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you’re a citizen of nowhere”. May is now leading the United Kingdom (UK) out of the European Union (EU). With Brexit, the UK has presented the EU with the prospect of disintegration, and the government of the United States is similarly turning its back on the world. International institutions and organisations are under pressure and multilateral agreements are being cancelled. At the same time,

¹ This essay is based on the inaugural lecture ‘Opening up: higher education systems in global perspective’, delivered by the author on 12 December 2016 at Utrecht University (the Netherlands).

China is launching global initiatives – such as the New Silk Road, or the One Belt One Road (OBOR) project, which could potentially span and integrate major parts of the world across the Eurasian continent, but likely under new and different conditions – that will also affect higher education.

These changes require a critical review of our assumptions regarding the impact of globalisation and the international development of higher education. Should we revise our expectations? And what lessons can be learned for the internationalisation of higher education?

THE CURRENT REALITY: SCENARIOS IN RETROSPECT

In 2006, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published a paper that presented scenarios on the future of higher education. Higher education leaders widely supported the scenario that was based on open networking, further harmonisation of higher education systems and growing cooperation and mobility facilitated by information and communications technology. The scenario driven by trade liberalisation and a competitive international marketplace for higher education was met with more caution. There was, however, one scenario that was completely overlooked:

Driven by a backlash against globalization and by growing skepticism to internationalization. The changing public opinion is because of terror attacks and wars, problems with immigration, outsourcing, and the perception of threatened national identity. Growing geo-strategic tensions lead to the launch of more military research programs on which governments impose serious security classifications (OECD, 2006, p. 5).

A decade later this is exactly the reality that is unfolding.

Growing scepticism of internationalisation can be heard in public and political debates on trade, open borders, migration and refugees indeed also targeting higher education. Xenophobia and discrimination against foreign students has long been reported in countries such as Australia, South Africa and Russia. More recently, in the UK (in relation to Brexit) and in the Netherlands, parties at the extremes of the political spectrum are posing critical questions in parliament on the costs and benefits of international students and worrying about reduced opportunities and access to education for domestic students ('domestic students first'). Similar political pressure has been observed in Denmark and Germany. Scepticism of internationalisation can also be heard inside academia. Some critical voices rail against internationalisation as an elite cosmopolitan project; against the use of English as a second or foreign language for teaching and learning; against global rankings and the resulting global reputation race with its annual tables of losers and winners; and against the recruitment of international students for institutional income and other forms of 'academic capitalism'. As far back as the early 2000s, students took to the streets to protest against European higher education policies, particularly the Bologna Process. Academics themselves may now list internationalisation, among such trends as massification and underfunding, as causes of higher education's current problems. Calls for students to be primarily trained for domestic

labour markets are being heard, and the local and national mission and relevance of public higher education is being (re-)emphasised, contrasting with the struggle for global reputation and impact. These voices, however, may or may not be representative of the dominant perspective or of the formal discourse, which raises the question: Is academia's internal debate developing conservative traits that may result in tendencies towards academic nationalism, protectionism or indeed isolationism?

PARADOXICAL OUTCOMES OF GLOBALISATION

What happened and what has been overlooked? Our "faith in the inevitability of the cosmopolitan project" was supported by definitions of globalisation that were inherently progressive, *ie* the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness, with growing interdependence and convergence between countries and regions (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999). Some even claimed at some point that the world was 'flat', suggesting a level playing field with equal opportunity for all competitors (Friedman, 2005). But the world has never been flat, and serious warnings signalling the risks of inequality and globalisation's tendency to generate losers as well as winners have been evident since the early 1990s.²

Scholars such as Thomas Piketty (2014) and Branco Milanovic (2016) recently advanced our understanding of these paradoxical outcomes of globalisation. They noted that, while economic and social inequality has *decreased* at the global level – mostly due to the growth of Asian economies, notably China – inequality has *increased* within certain countries and regions. These patterns are, to quite an extent, reflected in higher education.

China's rise on the global higher education and research scene has had a rebalancing effect. This is demonstrated by China's global expenditure on research and development (using the indicator for gross domestic expenditures, or GERD), second only to the USA, and its global share of researchers, second to Europe. The consequent competition leads to a concentration of resources in fewer hubs, thus creating bigger inequalities in other regions and contributing to the further stratification of the higher education landscape in, for instance, Europe (van der Wende, 2015). Global inequality also decreases as student numbers skyrocket around the world, with China and India alone home to more than half of the world's student population. However, public financial support for higher education is under pressure in many countries. The American model, relying heavily on private contributions, is increasingly followed while also being strongly criticised in the USA for issues of inequity and decreasing value for money. The importance attributed to higher education in explaining income differences is waning; family background and social connections may matter more, especially in societies that are nearing the upper limit of educational participation (Marginson, 2016; Milanovic, 2016).

² See, for instance, Rodrik's 'Has globalization gone too far?' in *California Management Review* (1997); *The rise of the network society* by Castells (2000); Stiglitz's *Globalization and its discontents* (2002); and *False dawn: the delusions of global capitalism* by Gray (2002).

Thus, while global inequalities in higher education tend to decrease, higher education's potential to compensate for increasing inequalities within rich countries, *ie* its meritocratic role, is being called into question. The pressure on the sector is two-fold: enhanced competition at the global level and a growing critique of local commitment and delivery. The pursuit of global positioning via rankings is particularly criticised for jeopardising universities' national mission and relevancy in the societies that give them life and purpose (Douglass, 2016), and for making universities become "foot-loose" from society "as an academic jet set of international types who live in their own world" (Bovens, 2016). Such critiques fit well into the critical discourse on 'academic capitalism' that has existed since the 1990s, and in the debates about world-class universities *versus* national flagships (Douglass, 2016) and world-class universities *versus* world-class systems (van der Wende, 2014; Marginson, 2016).

It has been clear for at least a decade that globalisation creates global economic imbalances with detrimental effects on social cohesion. Thus, a rebalancing of globalisation was needed, with consequences for higher education institutions (HEIs), their mission and their internationalisation strategies. I argued in 2007 that this required broadening their missions for internationalisation to not only respond to the profitable side of globalisation, but also to address related problems such as migration and social exclusion. In my view, HEIs should aim to be more open and inclusive, to balance economic and social responsiveness, and to define their 'social contract' in a globalised context (van der Wende, 2007). In the local context, this means enhancing access for migrant and minority students, supporting the integration of student groups with different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds, and embracing diversity as the key to success in a globalised world. Institutions should be called upon to become true international and intercultural learning communities where young people can effectively develop the competences needed for our societies and become true global citizens (van der Wende, 2011). The current anti-globalisation sentiments urge us to take even more responsibility for addressing the growing inequality between the winners and losers of globalisation. This is not accomplished by treating internationalisation and diversity as two separate themes, as has been done in higher education in recent decades. Internationalisation needs to be inclusive, *ie* embracing diversity in all its dimensions, as a mosaic of cultures.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN A GLOBALISED WORLD

Martha Nussbaum argued that, for education, economic growth isn't the only rationale; rather, higher education institutions must contribute to "a public response to the problems of pluralism, fear, and suspicion our societies face" (2012, p. 125). These are the very problems that our societies face now, more so than we could have imagined in our optimism during the heyday of internationalisation following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the signing of the European Treaty in Maastricht in 1992 and throughout the expansion of the EU – and even more than we feared in the years immediately following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Have we failed to develop a European identity and citizenship – goals of the Erasmus programme – in our students? Should we expect to hear more from the more than 3 million (former) Erasmus students in defence of European unity? Are Erasmus alumni

all part of the silent majority, or have they all become part of the now-criticised cosmopolitan elite? Did we fail to educate them as critical thinkers, oriented towards social responsibility, democratic citizenship and civic engagement in support of an open society? The hope is that more young people will participate in the upcoming elections in a number of European countries than did in the UK over the Brexit referendum. Hopeful are small grassroots and bottom-up student initiatives such as Are We Europe, which aims to learn from Europe's mistakes; Dare to be Grey, which aims to depolarise the social and political debate; and Operation Libero, which recently ensured a positive vote in Switzerland to ease the naturalisation of third-generation immigrants.

The celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome on 25 March 2017 was characterised by fierce debates on the scenarios for Europe's future, some more promising for higher education and internationalisation than others. Thinking about the way forward and the future leads to a number of big questions: Where is the EU going? What will be the role of the USA and China?

THE SILK ROAD TO THE FUTURE

China is willing to take the lead in economic globalisation, especially now that the new administration in the USA seems to be turning away from it. China is determined to restore its central place in the world by building its New Silk Road that will integrate the European and Asian continents and carry more than just consumer goods. The emerging uncertainties regarding the flows of students and scholars to the USA and the UK may make China more successful in its aim to attract talent (back). As in previous historical periods, people, ideas and knowledge will travel along this New Silk Road with mutual influence. But how and under which conditions? Will it follow the way China tries to influence the working of the Internet, as a 'pure and safe' environment (eg by banning the *New York Times*)?

A number of cooperation agreements on higher education and research have been signed recently by China and partners in Europe (Times Higher Education, 2016). It is time to view China as more than a follower in global higher education, as its impact on the global higher education landscape is growing (van der Wende & Zhu, 2016). However, the rather skewed development of its higher education system focuses strongly on the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields strategically relevant for geopolitical positioning, while its progress in humanities and social sciences is much less convincing. Central oversight infringes on academic freedom, eg the discussion of 'Western values' in classrooms has been curbed and, recently, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China placed 29 top Chinese universities under tighter control. Will China's values also impact the way knowledge is developed and disseminated globally, and do we actually understand these values at all? How can we prepare our students for safe travel on this New Silk Road towards the future?

A new challenge for internationalisation is emerging: to enrich our vision and understanding of the world, to widen our focus from being predominantly – or even exclusively – Western, and to open it towards a new history of the world (Frankopan, 2015).

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