



Achieving mutually inclusive internationalization of higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean. Introduction to the Dossier B

Emma Sabzalieva  @ Francesc Pedró  @

Global patterns of higher education internationalization over the past 20 years – at least until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – reveal a steep and steady increase in the volume of international activities. From dramatic growth in student mobility to the ever-expanding quantity of international branch campuses, and from the growing number of governments and institutions adopting internationalization strategies to the normalization of ‘internationalization at home’ in the curriculum, higher education internationalization now permeates all levels of higher education in all places.

However, breaking down the patterns of activities beyond the global level quickly reveals significant imbalances in where internationalization is actually happening. Flows of international students, for example, have historically been from the ‘Global South’ to the ‘Global North’, especially when it comes to full-time degree seeking students. For these students, the opportunity to obtain a degree in Europe or North America is seen as preferable to staying nearer home, whether for academic, political, social or other reasons. Countries that host large numbers of international students (the US, Australia, UK, Germany and Russia were the top five hosts in 2019) benefit enormously from this influx of potential – and governments are quick to point out the economic benefits attached to international students.

It is not only flows of international students that follow geographically imbalanced patterns. It is not an understatement to say that in all spheres of international activity, there is a hierarchy of knowledge in which ideas and institutions from the ‘Global North’ dominate, often underpinned by financing that also flows in the same North to South direction. Of course, there are many exceptions and there are many partnerships in teaching, research and community engagement that are based on more equitable understandings

of whose knowledge counts and what knowledge matters. Nevertheless, despite the existence of many projects and activities that follow a more cooperative (and, one might posit, more sustainable) approach to internationalization, this realm remains very unequal. For example, Latin America and the Caribbean, the focal region for this special issue, has the lowest percentage of internationally mobile students of all world regions: just 1.3% of the student population (UNESCO IESALC, 2022).

There is thus a great appetite and need to rethink higher education internationalization. This helps explain why, in recent work by UNESCO IESALC on the futures of higher education, new ideas and approaches to internationalization are put forward. Desirable future values and principles of higher education internationalization were affirmed through consultations with a global group of higher education experts as including 'promoting intercultural learning, inter-institutional cooperation based on mutual benefit, solidarity, mutual respect, and fair partnership' (UNESCO IESALC, 2021, p. 40).

These values and principles represent a different way of thinking about higher education internationalization as something that brings benefits to all those who are involved – and even to others who are not directly engaged in the cross-border exchange of knowledge, but who stand to reap the benefits of the generation of new ideas and ways of understanding the world. This different way of thinking happens because the links between those who are connecting are based on all partners bringing different but equally valuable experiences and know-how to the table. Further, all partners understand that they can learn from each other and see value in a range of ways of approaching problems because they share a commitment to generating knowledge that improves our collective understanding, or because it brings us as humans closer together. In other words, it is mutually inclusive internationalization.

What could mutually inclusive internationalization look like in practice? Renowned internationalization scholar (and author of one of the articles in this special issue of ESS) Jocelyne Gacel-Ávila has set out her forward-looking vision as follows:

The future of internationalization will require HEIs to commit to supporting a global higher education system based on integrity, academic quality, equitable access, reciprocity, the development of GC [global citizenship] skills, the advancement of international

research collaboration, and the solution of global problems at the center of their efforts. (Gacel-Ávila, 2021, p. 5)

In Gacel-Ávila's article in this collection, she highlights the ways that internationalization could become more inclusive in a post-pandemic scenario, moving away from physical mobility towards activities that have clearer benefits for society and are more inclusive of the broader higher education population. Similarly, in his article, Pablo Beneitone considers the role that internationalization at home could play as a democratizing factor. If academic mobility has been elitist in the past – less than 3% of the global student population was physically mobile before the pandemic (UNESCO IESALC, 2022) – then the prospects for enhancing internationalization through the curriculum and connecting together the institutional with the disciplinary and individual dimensions could be a way forward.

Mutually inclusive internationalization is also about acting with humility: recognizing that simply because something has been done one way in the past does not mean that this is the right or the only way forward. Indeed, the growing complexity of our world and the persistent challenges that face us in relation to our climate, our health, and our wellbeing underline the necessity of rethinking that which has been taken for granted in order to find different and more sustainable ways of knowing and being. This different way of thinking must also be critical because it is only through critical lenses and approaches that we are freed to question and disrupt the historic issues of coloniality and marginalization that both underpin and reinforce the unequal hierarchies of today's higher education.

In this respect, the regional focus on Latin America and the Caribbean taken up in this special issue again becomes important. The region has long been home to many traditions of critical thought, approaches that provide meaningful tools, frameworks and lenses through which to conceptualize and agitate for mutually inclusive internationalization. The articles in this thematic dossier are no exception. Gabriela Sánchez Gutiérrez and Sonia Jaquelina Romero Huesca, for example, put forward a decolonizing perspective on internationalization and generate a theoretical framework built, as they put it, mainly in Latin America and also connecting to the reality they observe in México. Ángel Carmelo Prince Torres's article considers the role of the trans community in Latin America and proposes internationalization as a way of

bringing about more equal treatment for trans people in higher education. Given the paucity of literature on the trans community in higher education in general, this article represents an important new contribution to the field, grounding its relevance to the special issue through both the regional focus and by using internationalization as a tool for inclusion.

The ethos of mutually inclusive internationalization can also be achieved through a lens of equity. This requires revised practices of internationalization to go beyond only giving voice where voices have not been heard, but to ensure those under-heard voices are given greater amplification than others. To achieve the fair partnerships that are a feature of mutually inclusive internationalization requires this type of restorative action as part of the work towards longer term structural rebalancing. There are many ways that this can be taken up in the context of higher education internationalization; three such routes through partnerships are highlighted in this special issue. First, creating intra-regional partnerships along a 'South-South' participation model; second, acknowledging and addressing systemic inequalities from the outset; and third, advancing interculturality as an integral facet of internationalization.

While intra-regional partnerships in higher education are not new, focussing these partnerships on deepening regional integration to support what author Sergio Mario Orellano Narvaez describes as international academic circulation has been less common. Through his study, Sergio Mario Orellano Narvaez turns our attention to flows of knowledge through the Bolivian participants in a Brazilian scholarship programme. Whereas this study considers 'South-South' partnerships, the article by Anouk Mertens and colleagues directly confronts the inequalities that have been inherent in many North-South higher education partnerships through a case of the University of Aruba and KU Leuven in Belgium. By acknowledging these inequalities from the outset, the partners are better positioned to address and eventually, to overcome them. The final article in this special issue by Diana Araujo Pereira and colleagues reveals the importance of centring interculturality as a foundation of international activity in higher education, again examined in a context of intra-regional cooperation through the case of UNILA, the Federal University of Latin American Integration.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue advance our understanding of the new concept of mutually inclusive internationalization, providing fra-

meworks and examples from practice of how this concept could be taken up and further developed. The regional focus of this special issue on Latin America and Caribbean is particularly important, both because it is a region where some practices of internationalization have had the lowest impact but where on the other hand the potential for undertaking internationalization that meets the goal of being mutually inclusive appears highly promising.

With the COVID-19 era still upon us at the time of writing and with wave after wave of economic, (geo) political and social crises seeming to continually engulf the world, it remains challenging to predict whether future patterns of internationalization may genuinely change in response to these issues. Hopes for positive change, however, remain strong, as the findings from a public consultation on the futures of higher education completed by 1200 participants in almost 100 countries suggest:

Even more so than today, respondents envisaged a future world with a fully global outlook. Higher education, which has long had an international outreach, is well-positioned to help tackle global challenges and take on a role in global society as we look ahead to 2050. (UNESCO IESALC, 2022, p. 37)

This provides a vision that, if realized, would bring the achievement of mutually inclusive internationalization within our collective grasp.

REFERENCES

- Gacel-Ávila, J. (2021). *The internationalization of higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean towards 2050*. UNESCO IESALC. <https://bit.ly/3P3VFsi>
- UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean. (2021). *Thinking Higher and Beyond: Perspectives on the Futures of Higher Education to 2050*. UNESCO IESALC <https://bit.ly/3bvJKWx>
- UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean. (2022). *Moving minds: Opportunities and challenges for virtual student mobility in a post-pandemic world*. UNESCO IESALC <https://bit.ly/3Sw4iyE>