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## Commodity versus Common Good: Internationalization in Latin-American Higher Education

### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the meaning of internationalization using some Latin American experiences of higher education, to identify two views of this activity and pose the need for reflection upon internationalization as a means that should correspond to pedagogical ends in the context of globalization.

Keywords: internationalization, higher education, Latin America, globalization

### Introduction

During the last decades, the international interaction that involves educational matters between countries has been growing in such a way that the old meaning related to student's exchange has now diversified the array of activities and views. The aim of this paper is to explore the meaning of internationalization using some Latin American experiences of higher education, to identify two views of this activity and pose the need for reflection upon internationalization as a means that should correspond to pedagogical ends in the context of globalization.

To pursue this aim, we divide the paper in three sections: in the first we explore the meaning of internationalization; in the second, we comment about two views of internationalization using some Latin-American experiences; and at the end, we make some reflections about these academic activities.

### To internationalize universities

The universities of some capital cities have always been international. During the renaissance, with a passport issued by the Pope, students used to travel from different European places to Bologna, or to Paris, or to Oxford, or Salamanca, to look for a lecturer and learn from him. In *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Rabelais makes a hilarious account of the mobility of international university students of that time. Those universities were international; and currently, those universities located in cosmopolitan cities of the world (London, Paris, New York, Boston) are recognized as being international. They reflect the conditions of their environment.

Currently, there are more than 4000 institutions of higher education in America Latina with more than 12 million students (Fernández Lamarra, 2005) all scattered in very different surroundings, but why do they want them to be international, as recommended by higher education policies?

In the last decade of XX century there was a new scenario for universities in the form of a global society with a greater mobility in the labor market of an economy more interested in knowledge (Moreno León, 2001). In the same way that economic

systems went to a new geopolitical order, where countries regrouped themselves, higher education systems went to establish similar relations with different degrees of success. There was a need to inter-connect economies and there was also a need to inter-connect higher education systems. The European Community, for instance, has been working towards an integration of a higher education system through what is known as the Bologna Declaration that leads to the European Space of Higher Education (Mora, 2005; Olmos & Torres, 2016).

Latin American economies are not integrated in one block, like the European Community. Nevertheless, in the context of the restructuring of international capitalism, called “globalization”, in the American continent there have been some sub-regional groupings, like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Centro American Common Market (MCCA), or the Common Market of the South Cone (Mercosur).

Economic grouping involve internationalization of higher education as an answer to cope with new demands, like the Plan for Regional Integration of Central American Higher education (Plan de Integración Regional de la Educación Superior Centro Americana) (González García & Muñoz Varela, 2010), or the Iberoamerican Space of Knowledge (Espacio Iberoamericano del Conocimiento) which main objective is “to develop a space of collaboration and interaction in research and higher education as propellers for generation of scientific and technological knowledge” (Toscano, 2009, p. 85).

For internationalization there is an array of practices that go from a restricted meaning like traditional notion of exchange of students and faculty, to a more elaborated and comprehensive meaning, that in terms of Jane Knight (2008), “incorporates an international, intercultural or global dimension to the objectives, functions and organization of all activities of university, not only in curricular activity, but in research, university services and teaching”.

Internationalization in universities has taken different paths and meanings. Usually, it is motivated in terms of collaboration, although some scholars have identified some competitive approaches, especially when internationalization is driven by market forces.

According to Hans De Wit (2005) from exchange of students, faculties and agreements it is observed that “international dimension of higher education is becoming more oriented towards competence between universities, between higher education sectors and between different regions”; especially after the inclusion of education services into the regulations of the World Trade Organization, a new set of terms navigate the internationalization discourse, such as transnational education, borderless education, education abroad, overseas education, international trade of educational services, and so on. Mobility is no longer an exclusive activity of students and faculty; nowadays it is also an activity of programs and universities as well.

### **Commodity versus public good**

In this context, it is possible to identify two confronting views of internationalization. On the one hand, there is a competitive internationalization that is a dependent variable of economic globalization (Wit, 2005). It is conceived as one of the reactions of universities to the challenges and opportunities of globalization.

Competitiveness is the locus for these institutions to gain international visibility and benefit from abroad. Internationalization becomes part of a marketing program for the attraction of fees and grants. In this perspective, according to Zarur (2008), education becomes a commodity.

On the other hand, there is a solidarity internationalization, which according to Zarur (2008) includes a set of cooperative activities between universities from different countries for mutual benefit; to broaden the possibilities for increasing knowledge and the development of other cultures; possibilities of agreements to devise joint exchange and mobility programs for increasing the feeling of membership to the region and enrich the education of students, faculty and researchers in the aim of Latin-American and Caribbean integration.

In this perspective, solidarity internationalization becomes a horizontal activity that may influence the institutional and public policies in the updating of faculty, in the supply of programs for undergraduate, graduate, continuing education; in social and linking or extension activities to society, and especially in the overall universities contribution to development. In this perspective education becomes a public good instead of a commodity.

Among Latin American scholars the assumption of education as a public good has gained a high level of consensus. Evidence of this was manifested in both, the Regional Conference of Higher Education of Cartagena in 2008 and in the World Conference of Higher Education of Paris, in 2009, where “the definition of ‘public good’ was strongly supported by Latin-American participants confronting this view with participants from developed countries” (Fernández Lamarra, 2012).

In relation to the notion of higher education as a public good and knowledge as a social good, in the same year of the Cartagena Conference, Tunnerman expressed that “there is still a battle going on facing the claims of certain organisms, among them the World Trade Organization, for reducing these notions to mere categories of commodities under the rules of the market” (2008, p. 39).

### *Competitive internationalization*

During the last decade the university “rankings” have played a major role in the international merchandising of universities. On them, every year, quite the same universities are in the first places and the rest of the institutions want to be located in a place near to them in order to resemble the models. This is a source of reputation and a symbol of prestige to attract more clients. Forget about promoting a university model that eventually could lead to isomorphism.

More recently, there have been the university fairs in Latin American major cities. The largest is the International Education EXPO Road Show, which “offers international education institutions, of any discipline and from any country, the opportunity to present their courses to thousands of pre-selected and pre-screened students in Mexico's most productive markets during Mexico's leading International Student Recruitment Fairs”.

There are reasons to attend the Mexican EXPO Road Show, the website refers that the 21st International Education Mexico EXPO Roadshow held in the spring of 2012 received over 22,600 students for the total EXPO. Mexico is the 11th largest economy in the world, and consistently ranks among the top ten countries sending

students to the USA and Canada. There are more than 24,000 students choosing to study abroad, selecting destinations such as Spain, UK, and USA.

This fair not only goes to the three largest cities in Mexico, it goes also to most of the major cities in Latin America twice a year. Organizers arrange all logistics, accommodation, transportation and translation needs.

One more example of this competence driven internationalization will be different supply modes of educational services ruled by the World Trade Organization. There is the case of the Laureate Group, who is buying private universities in different countries to act as 'for profit' universities. Or the case of virtual institutions like Phoenix University, or Northern University, which sell courses and graduate degrees, that at the end have to be validated by a local university in order to have a certification for work.

In the competitive internationalization there is an exacerbated motivation for academic mobility, the fees paid by foreign students to universities of United States, Canada and Europe represent a very interesting financial flow, given that every year many countries have a good budget to invest in human capital; but not only that, foundations are also prepared to deposit a good amount of grants to support "world class universities".

### *Solidarity internationalization*

Of course, not all internationalization in Latin America is competitive in orientation, there is also solidarity internationalization. This, as we have said some lines above, is referred to activities agreed by networks of colleagues from different countries, for the sake of sharing academic experiences and resources, usually through student and faculty mobility or developing common research projects, lectures, conferences, and so on.

This is the case, for instance, the activities carried out between colleagues from the neighboring states of the Autonomous University of Sonora, in México, and the University of Arizona; or the Autonomous University of Tamaulipas, in México, and the University of Texas. Even without a formal agreement between institutions, colleagues have spontaneous and productive academic interactions.

The narratives by Vega (2012) and by Parrino and Efron (2012) exhibit an account about how, during more than a decade, the annual conferences of University Management in South America have been an instrument to develop different international initiatives. Besides mobility of students and faculty, other activities have evolved, like the publication of collective books and journals, collaborative dissertation committees and the organization of lectures by visiting scholars.

According to Vega (2012), these conferences started "by virtue of the personal relationship" between professors of the Group of Research in University Management from the Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil, and the National University of Mar del Plata, in Argentina. Through the years, the annual conferences have been organized by universities in different countries like the National University of Tres de Febrero (Argentina), the Regional University of Blumenau (Brazil), and the Universidad Tecnológica Intercontinental (Paraguay) and recently the Universidad Veracruzana (México). Every year the attendance to the conference becomes more international with delegates from universities throughout Latin American countries, who are prepared to contribute in any academic initiative.

In the context of economic agreements celebrated between governments, there are some organizations that have been set up to help internationalization, for instance the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration (CONAHEC) which was founded on the light of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with some financial support from the Mexican Undersecretary of Higher Education, the US Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) and the Canadian Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). With the time, more organizations have supported CONAHEC initiatives such as the Ford Foundation, and the LUMINA Foundation.

Experience has shown that initiatives of based upon personal relationship of participants, with a spirit of solidarity, tend to be more successful over time than those initiatives based only in marketing grounds.

### **Final thoughts**

Universities, to cope with new political, economic, technological and environmental demands of globalization, are called to participate in activities that allow students and faculty to interact with their peers from other countries, not only with the aim of becoming more competitive, but also to recognize cultural diversity and develop a compromise with global problems. Therefore internationalization has been assumed by universities as a policy for institutional development.

Nevertheless, in this paper we have identified two views of internationalization categorized as competitive and solidarity. We have related to some experiences from Latin America to illustrate the two categories, but the purpose for doing this is to bring about a reflection about why do we need internationalization? And what kind of internationalization do we want?

Since internationalization is not an end, but a means to enrich education, we have to connect our questions to the aims of education, which in time are connected to the construction of a particular society. To look at education as a commodity means to place principles, values and history of society in a second place since principles that should govern from this perspective are the principles of the market, which in the new context is the global market, with a future of alienation of the next generations.

On the other hand, there is a different view of internationalization that looks at education as a process of solidarity cooperation for mutual benefits, assuming with respect the different cultures, and with the aim of constructing a society according to the values and principles of equity and inclusion. Thus, internationalization is not an end in itself, but a means related to particular pedagogical ends to cope with new global demands.

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