

# **Internationalizing higher education**

**– challenges and possibilities for social work education**

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## Introduction

**W**hy are institutions of higher education interested in internationalization? The question was asked at a faculty meeting in our university college. A variety of arguments and opinions were expressed. Many “when”, “what”, “how”, “who” and “why” questions were asked. Some arguments were normative and altruistic emphasizing the need of helping to develop countries in improving their educational system, others took a more ideological stand explaining internationalization within a neo-liberal and globalized frame, and some arguments emphasized the importance of a comparative approach to improve the quality of national education.

In this article I will illuminate some of the questions and I will specially focus on social work education, and discuss some of the questions concerning internalisation of social work education. In particular, I will draw attention to the following issues: Is internalisation of higher education (IHE) due to globalisation processes characterised by commodification and utilitarianism? If yes, does this represent a challenge to the traditional function and role of higher education system? What more specific are the pro and contra arguments for IHE? How and to what extent have harmonizing policies taken place within higher educations systems? Does a contradiction exist between comparative social work (which is made possible by IHE), and contextual social work emphasizing the need of local knowledge? How should professional social work relate to this possible contradiction?

## What do we mean by globalization and internationalization?

Certainly, neither globalization nor international co-operation in education and research is a new phenomenon (Hirst and Thomson 1996, Webb 2003) but the degree of internationalization is highly affected by globalization processes in contemporary societies. Globalization, however, is a buzz-word having many connotations. By using the word we may refer to a variety of phenomena like a process, an ideology, a policy, a marketing strategy and so on. The French philosopher and social scientist Pierre Bourdieu refers to globalization “as a `myth` or `discourse` used by neo-liberal ideologues to dismantle welfare states and construct a universe of individualistic consumers” (cited from Holton 2005:14). Somebody uses the phrase to express positive and desirable developments, others are more critical and they associate with more negative and unwanted phenomena. Better possibilities to work, travel and communicate across the borders are advantages of globalization. The fact that the information and communication technology makes the world more transparent and available, are for many a promising potentiality for collective action. For others, globalization impacts on the growing power of transnational corporation, and according to the editor of a handbook in globalisation “there is no doubt that over the last 25 years or so, policy has been driven by the interests of the international financial system and transnational corporations” (Michie 2003: 10). Substantial decision-making processes are taking place without democratic accountability and transparency. `Governance without government` and `the hollowing out of nation-state` are expressions characterizing the development (Jessop 2004). Globalization also implies cultural homogenization, especially the negative influence of the “American way of life.” Expressions like “McDonaldization” or “Coca-Colonization” are sometimes used to describe the influence of globalization on consumption (Ritzer 1995). Thus, we are dealing with a complex set of processes made possible by a borderless world – processes that are both desirable and controversial.

In academic literature many different definitions are offered. Most of them assert the growing interconnectedness between political, social, cultural and economic systems beyond national borders as characterizing features with the phenomenon. Therefore globalization processes are related to three different fields (Palier and Sykes (2001:3) :

- “In the economic field, globalization has been used to designate an increasing internationalization of economic exchange and production”
- “In the field of politics and political institutions, globalization is said to include several phenomena such as the weakening of nation states and their loss of social and political legitimacy”
- “In the field of cultural analysis, globalization has been associated with the free and instantaneous circulation of information: a threat to traditional cultures and social cohesion coupled with cultural homogenization or “Macdonaldisation”

However, internationalization and globalization are not equivalent concepts. Usually, we think of internationalization of education as an implication of globalization processes. Globalization is a process impacting on internationalization. One might say that globalization is changing the world of internationalization and as a consequence internationalization is changing the world of education (Knight 2003). On a general level internationalization “includes specific policies and programs undertaken by governments, academic systems and institutions, and even individual departments or institutions to cope with or exploit globalization” (Altbach 2004). More specific it implies the attempts of higher education institutions to integrate an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service function of the institution. Thus the flow of knowledge, ideas, values and people (educators and researchers) across the borders will affect nations in a wide range of ways. How and to what degree depends on the nation's history, tradition, culture and priorities.

There is little doubt that in the economic field global actors expect to benefit and vegetate from the integration process of higher education. Universities and institutions of higher education are increasingly considering knowledge and competence as commodities suitable to sell on a global market. As long as “the knowledge industry” produces “goods” wanted by the market, the commercialization process will continue. However, there are objections to such a development. Firstly, the very idea of treating higher education as a commercial product to be bought and sold is controversial. Should education be regarded as a commodity to be traded for profit in the marketplace? Or, is education encapsulated by humanistic and altruistic values inappropriate for profit-seeking activities? Secondly, what is the *raison d'être* of a university – to be instrumental means in the hands of authorities in order to respond to changing external demands, or to be critical and autonomous institutions built on academic freedom? The attitudes to these questions will depend on what kind of institutions we regard universities to be. At least two main perspectives are possible to identify:

### **Two main perspectives on universities' principal role and function in society**

The first represents an *instrumental and utilitarian* approach to the universities' place in the society: Universities and institutions of higher education must be useful for the society. Attentive and flexible universities who are responsive to the shifting needs in society, is a role model according to this instrumental perspective of higher education. Globalization, strengthening influence of the market and growing internationalisation of goods and services have created new conditions which the higher education must accept and respond to in an adequate and appropriate way. The *‘service university’* must be a tool for the authorities in their effort to achieve their political aims. Aiming at economic growth seems to be the crucial objective for most countries in Europe. Knowledge, skills and competence will be beneficial for business, create more jobs and probably have an integrative effect on society and therefore will ensure economic development. Institutions of higher education are recognized as instrumental means to achieve this goal. Authorities in the respective countries must (by laws, norms and different forms of economic incentives) ensure that the institutions of higher education will develop in the intended direction. During the last decades there seems to be a shift towards these kinds of *‘service universities’* in many European countries (Brandser 2006).

Most people will agree that this instrumental perspective on contemporary universities' and higher education institutions' role and function in society, are relevant and legitimate. The criticism relates to the predominant role this perspective has acquired in contemporary Western Societies. Critics will, however, claim that there is another perspective which is at least equally important. That is the *role of free, democratic and critical social institutions* where creativity and progressive thought is appraised as the crucial ideal encapsulating the activity. Changing political courses should not influence or threaten this fundamental ideal. This perspective is based on the legacy of Wilhelm von Humboldt - the German philosopher and founder of Humboldt University in Berlin. His ideas published in early 1800 about values and principles for modern universities have got crucial influence on former and contemporary discourses about the function and role of universities in society. He envisioned a university where academic freedom and enlightenment are core values. Innovation, creativity and quality of education and research will benefit from these values. The universities and colleges are most useful for the society when they retain their autonomy and do not let external needs, defined by politicians or business interests, direct them. The universities' basic idea as a cultural and tradition medium in the society is being emphasised. In this perspective knowledge by itself is treated as a virtue – and not exclusively as a mean to achieve something that is regarded to be useful by the authorities. Autonomy and academic freedom are central values according to this way of thinking. These are pre-conditions that must be achieved if one wishes to develop analytical thinking and critical reflection in higher education and research.

The pro and contra arguments for internationalizing institutions of higher education will obviously be influenced and shaped according to these partly conflicting understanding of role and function of universities in society. However, these contradictory perspectives are not often explicitly problematized when the arguments are discussed. The next section will sketch some of the most important pro and contra arguments for more internationalization.

### **Pro and contra arguments for more internationalization in higher education and research**

Most of the arguments in favour of more internationalization in education and research are clearly instrumental and utilitarian; internationalization is taking place because states, institutions or individuals seek to achieve something beneficial to themselves. They are acting in a rational way to maximize self-interests. This public-choice perspective on human and institutional behaviour may often be true, but not always. For some, education, competence and enlightenment (cf the Humboldtian ideals) are values by themselves, not only means to achieve something else.

Traditionally, there have been four main reasons for internationalization: Social/cultural, academic, political and economic (Knight 2004). Knight argues that these categories are insufficient to incorporate new and emerging rationales for internationalization. Therefore, she identifies other rationales and reasons. Most of them are clearly utilitarian like nation building there human capital and more competent and educated citizenry and workforce are regarded to be crucial factors, building of high quality institution and thereby improve international profile and reputation, or building strategic alliances between institutions by use of benchmarking, joint curriculum or program development, seminars and conferences, joint research initiatives and international mobility of students and academics

Other arguments are not as explicit utilitarian emphasizing the importance of social and cultural understanding. To meet fellow students in other countries, getting friends, experience new cultures and a new way of life, in short; expand one's perspective on life, society and people are independent ends and objectives for internationalizing higher education. This argument, of course, is true for both student groups. International students and national students as well, benefit from an international campus. And of course, individuals and institutions in the host-country may also benefit from international students in a more instrumental and utilitarian

way. Having fellow students and scholars asking unexpected questions and representing new perspectives in analysing academic and professional issues, will be productive in the learning process. Knight (2004) summarizes the development towards more internationalization by emphasizing the differences, complexity and importance of internationalization processes in higher education:

*“All in all, the rationales driving internationalization vary from institution to institution, from stakeholder to stakeholder, and from country to country. Differing and competing rationales contribute to both the complexity of the international dimension of education and the substantial contributions that internationalization makes to higher education and the role it plays in society”* (Knight 2004,web site)

Some of the arguments and rationales in favour of internationalization are controversial and contested. What then are the contra-arguments of internationalization? As I noted above perhaps the main contra argument is the very idea of treating higher education as a commercial product to be bought and sold. I am afraid that the profit factor in the knowledge economy has advanced too far to be prohibited by humanistic and altruistic values. The commodification of knowledge may be an irreversible process. An indication of this is that the GATS agreement favoured by World Trade Organisation (WTO), presupposes that knowledge is a commodity that ought to be bought and sold on a global marketplace. So, the battle of commercialization of knowledge and education is probably lost. Nevertheless, it is crucial to be aware of possible negative impact of internationalization processes in education.

Altbach (2004) analyses how globalization affects universities, especially in developing countries. He does not argue against globalization and internationalization, but discusses some negative impacts on higher education. Some of them relate to features with higher education systems as institutions. Others relate to features with adequacy and relevance of the knowledge and competence that is offered to students.

He asserts that one kind of impact could be that contemporary processes increase inequalities among universities. Smaller universities lack the facilities for research, due to expense they cannot afford high quality journals and necessary databases and very often they only provide bachelor degrees. This is especially the case in many developing countries. Commercialization tendencies (as stated above) imply that knowledge and education are seen as private goods which the student should pay for. Accordingly, the state is less willing to provide universities public funding. Higher education institutions have to generate funds by selling knowledge products, increasing student fees and developing partnerships with private organisations and companies. The result seems to be intensified privatization.

Another impact is that the knowledge students acquire and the academic norms and values they internalize, sometimes are poorly adjusted to local needs. Internationalization of the curriculum is one reason for this mismatch between local need and acquired competence. The fact that many of students from developing countries do not return to their home countries after finishing education could be an indication of this lack of relevance. Accordingly, it is a major challenge to ensure that study programmes are relevant to students' professional or scientific career in home country. A related problem is the “brain drain”: able scholars and scientists depart from the universities because of internal and external mobility. The salaries are better in business or abroad. This fact and the mismatch between local need and acquired competence constitute a major problem, and result in “brain drain” from fields in need of competence. This tendency is accentuated by the growing predominance of English as an academic language. The demand to publish internationally favours scholars who are familiar with English. It is not obvious that concepts and perspectives developed within an English-speaking context are most appropriate to understand issues and challenges in other countries. National relevance in competence-building and knowledge production will in some

fields – there the focus is on understanding the complex relationship between theory and practice and developing forms of “best practices” – presuppose publishing in the national language. Besides, this demand towards using English as an academic language represents a threat to culture and nation-building. This has been an issue in countries like Netherlands and Norway. For instance, a lot of Norwegian professors in April 2007 published warnings on the diminishing of Norwegian as an academic language. This fact is an indication of their fear of the extinction of national languages in academia. It seems to be more important to reach an international academic audience than a national public.

The issue of relevance in respect to internationalization of higher education is of particular importance for social work education. It is crucial that when teaching comparative social work we are aware of different national contexts in understanding and defining social problems and social work. We must ensure that national issues, values and policy-frameworks are well considered and visible as a “stage-curtain” when comparative social work is taught. Social work education have a potential to be better if we take into account and reflect upon impulses, perspectives, concepts and understandings from other cultures in dealing with social problems and social work. If we do not succeed in combining these prerequisites comparative social work and contextual social work will be conflictual and not beneficial to each other.

If the “brain drain” problem due to lack of relevance in education is an impact of globalization processes, it will be important to analyse how to counteract this tendency. It is possible to argue that the dominant instrumental and utilitarian perspective on higher education is strengthening this unfortunate development. Top-down globalization processes initiated by rich countries in the Western world will probably encourage and enforce education and competence suitable to meet the need on a global market place. The global “knowledge industry” will be aiming at accomplishing a production of knowledge requested by business and authorities working on an international marketplace. This will accentuate the brain drain problem. If, however, universities and other institutions of higher education are more willing to restore the Humboldtian ideals where critical thinking and ability to analytic reflection are based on contextual insight without the pressure of an instrumental straitjacket, the unlucky “brain drain” problem could be turned to a “brain train” situation that is more suitable and relevant to local needs and contexts. This will not make comparative social work irrelevant in education of social workers. On the contrary; knowledge about social problems and different ways of dealing with them on international level can be very useful in analysing and working with the issues within a national and local context. Thus comparative social work could be a prerequisite for good contextual social work.

### **The Bologna process as an example of internationalizing higher education: “Brain draining” or “brain training” implications?**

The question of co-operation between different countries in education and research surely is not a new topic. Such co-operation has been going on for many years though the scope of this work varies, and depends on traits of the states involved in it and their interest in such co-operation. What is new is that a better coordination of the education system enters the political agenda in a wider range via many institutional declarations from European governments. Efforts to harmonising higher education in Europe are often connected with the so-called Bologna Declaration which was signed by several European Ministers of Education and Research in June, 1999. Six issues were identified for further work:

1. Adoption of a *system* of easily readable and comparable degrees
2. Adoption of a system essentially based on *two main cycles*, undergraduate and graduate.
3. Establishment of a *system of credits* - such as in the ECTS system

4. Promotion of *mobility* by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement of teachers and students
5. Promotion of European co-operation in *quality assurance*
6. Promotion of the necessary *European dimensions* in higher education.

The governments undertook to attain these objectives – “within the framework of our institutional competencies and taking full respect of the diversity of cultures, languages, national education systems and of University autonomy”. It is also mentioned in the Declaration that the Ministers expect “Universities again to respond promptly and positively and to contribute actively to the success of our endeavour”. The process which was started by these signatory countries (29 countries) has a deadline for successful realisation in 2010 and at the same time a goal to promote the European education system in the world in general.

After 1998 the Ministers have met regularly to improve objectives and secure proper development in the co-operation process. It is worth mentioning that a conference in Berlin was significant because the Ministers gave their special interest to the so-called social dimension of the Bologna process. They claimed that higher education is a public good and public concern. They underlined that the need to promote competitive power must be balanced with the necessity to consider higher education as a tool to strengthen social belonging and reduce social differences both inside one country and between countries. In addition it has been decided to focus upon studies at doctoral level as part of the European harmonizing process in the higher education system.

Until to the conference in Bergen, Norway in May 2005, the Ministers set the goal to work particularly at promoting effective and comparable quality assurance system, coordination and advancement of a system essentially based on two main cycles with a view of easier comparability and advance of recognition system of national degrees. The communiqué after the Bergen conference expressed satisfaction with the work being done with these issues, and

reassured that the objective is to establish a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) based on the principles of quality and transparency within 2010, and they regard the achievements so far in the Bologna Process to be successful. In the communiqué there are also some interesting policy statements regarding necessary autonomy to higher education institutions, the need for sustainable public funding of institutions and the importance of building active citizenship. These statements are important because they could imply that the fear of making higher education a commercial product on a profit-seeking marketplace is overstated<sup>1</sup>.

Bologna process is a dynamic process which includes most of the countries in Europe which have bound themselves to harmonize different sides of the higher education system. It implies both the authorities' wish to support the process and ability to make corresponding changes in legislation. Both the wish and ability varies a lot from state to state in Europe. Norway appears to be one of those states which have advanced most in this harmonization process. However, it shall not be concealed that in Norway as in many other countries, there are critical attitudes towards the harmonization process.

<sup>1</sup> These arguments are build on the following excerpts from the Bergen communiqué:

“We must cherish our rich heritage and cultural diversity in contributing to a knowledge-based society. We commit ourselves to upholding the principle of public responsibility for higher education in the context of complex modern societies. As higher education is situated at the crossroads of research, education and innovation, it is also the key to Europe's competitiveness. As we move closer to 2010, we undertake to ensure that higher education institutions enjoy the necessary autonomy to implement the agreed reforms, and we recognise the need for sustainable funding of institutions.

Critics of contemporary politics of harmonisation will claim that the authorities give too much weight to the instrumental perspective for research and education. Accordingly, the role of the higher education processes as democratic and critical social institutions, can be easily neglected. It can be claimed that emphasis on flexibility and convertibility will result in standardisation which will not preserve the special and particular need for competence in some countries to a satisfactory extend. Therefore there is a danger of the education system being modelled more on the bases of global and international trends, and less on the bases of national and local needs, approaches and pre-conditions, and this mismatch between acquired competence and needed knowledge may result in a serious brain drain problem. There are, however, possibilities to counteract such a development: more consciousness of the principal role and function of universities in society – more in accordance with a Humboldtian ideal – may facilitate and relate knowledge and competence more appropriate to a national and local context.

Conclusively, I would like to emphasize that though the harmonisation process we are embarking on should not be accepted at face value but rather be pondered on and treated critically, there are many working in the sphere of higher education who regard these efforts of internalisation as positive and necessary. It is certainly an advantage that students can study in foreign countries within a degree structure which is comparable, and at the same time they can be sure that the quality assurance is provided in a reliable way. Besides (some will say unfortunately) it is a fact that the aim of the education politics and plans of activities which are the basis for the Bologna process are so established and accords so strongly with the globalisation traits in society in general that to reverse the development would be very difficult. However, in my opinion successful internalization of higher education depends on how we manage to cope with at least four challenges. These challenges are of especial importance to social work education:

- How to ensure co-operation, collaboration and harmonization of higher education on international level without diminishing relevance and local adjustment in research and education?
- How to counteract the “brain drain” problem?
- How to avoid having a harmonized education system which is mainly based upon market-mechanisms there short-term economic profit is the dominant criteria of success?
- How to ensure that future higher education institutions will remain reflexive, critical and autonomous institutions, and at the same time attend to the role of being productive and instrumental institutions in society?

The European Higher Education Area is structured around three cycles, where each level has the function of preparing the student for the labour market, for further competence building and for active citizenship. The overarching framework for qualifications, the agreed set of European standards and guidelines for quality assurance and the recognition of degrees and periods of study are also key characteristics of the structure of the EHEA.”



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