

Internationalization and Global Tension: Lessons From History

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Abstract

Increasing political and military tension in several parts of the world will inevitably affect international higher education. Nationalist, religious, and ideological conflicts challenge the original ideas of international cooperation and exchange in higher education as promoters of peace and mutual understanding and of global engagement. Since the end of the Cold War, we have not seen this type of tension and turmoil on such a scale. What lessons can we learn from the past in how to act and react in this new environment? In the 20th century, politics and international ideological struggles dominated the world. Academic cooperation and exchange have been critical in maintaining connections between nations and have paved the way for further contacts. Even though we should be realistic that international cooperation and exchange are not a guarantee of peace and mutual understanding, they certainly keep communication open and dialogue active. Will the increasingly widespread conflicts in the world today, based on religious fundamentalism, resurgent nationalism, and other challenges, harm the impressive strides that have been made in international higher education cooperation?

Keywords

Cold War, international higher education, peace and mutual understanding, fundamentalism, nationalism, global conflict

The current global climate, with increased political and military tension growing in several parts of the world, will inevitably affect international higher education.

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Increased nationalist, religious, and ideological conflicts challenge the original ideas of international cooperation and exchange in higher education as promoters of peace and mutual understanding and of global engagement. Since the end of the Cold War, we have not been used to this type of tension and turmoil on a global scale. What lessons can we learn from the past in how to act and react in this new environment?

Universities have always been international institutions, attracting students and staff from many countries and partnering with other institutions. This internationalism goes back at least to Nalanda University in India in the 6th century AD, which attracted students and staff from all over the Buddhist world. Half a millennium later, the first European universities, at Bologna and Paris, were also international, enrolling students from all over the continent, and teaching in a common language—Latin. One could speak of a medieval European education space, a predecessor of the European Higher Education Area initiated at the end of the 20th century, in a period of relative global peace and increased focus on regionalization. The European Commission understandably chose the name of Erasmus, one of the best-known wandering scholars from the early days, for its most important academic mobility program.

Universities in the 18th and 19th centuries for the most part became less international as they adopted national languages, sometimes even prohibited study abroad and focused on national priorities. One can speak of a de-Europeanization and nationalization of higher education in that period. At the same time, European-style higher education expanded to other parts of the world, in part impelled by colonialism, using European national models and European languages. Our concern in this article relates mainly to the policies and practices of countries in Europe and North America—the dominant powers during the period discussed here.

The War to End All Wars

The 20th century brought a new burst of internationalism. It is worth looking at the internationalization of the past century, because it helped to shape contemporary realities. In the 20th century, in the wake of the trauma of the First World War, there was a strong belief that the academic community could help build international solidarity and contribute to peace building. A centenary after the start of the Great War in 2014, it is particularly relevant to note the role and ultimate failure of academe in these idealistic efforts.

Europe emerged from World War I deeply traumatized. Intellectuals and academics on all sides wanted to build solidarity among the European nations as a contribution to peace. Most were horrified that the academic communities on all sides had been so easily drawn into fervent nationalism at the beginning of the conflict, easily giving up the veneer of Enlightenment ideals.

The creation of organizations—such as the Institute of International Education (IIE) in the United States in 1919, the German Academic Exchange Service (*Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst* [DAAD]) in Germany in 1925, and the British Council in the United Kingdom in 1934—are examples of political initiatives to stimulate peace and mutual understanding under the umbrella of the League of Nations.

These efforts ultimately failed to stem the rise of fascism and Nazism in Europe or Japanese militarism in the Far East. Again, the goals of peace and cooperation were trumped by negative political forces.

A Truly Global Conflagration and Its Aftermath

Those who lived through the First World War could not imagine a similar conflagration—but just 21 years later, World War II broke out. When the war came to an end in 1945, a wave of idealism again arose, this time accompanied by the establishment of the United Nations signaling a commitment to both global security and development. Simultaneously, we saw the beginning of the dissolution of colonial empires and the emergence of the developing nations. Again, higher education cooperation was identified as a means of fostering the development of mutual understanding, and modest exchange programs were established or strengthened, the Fulbright Program being the most dramatic example. In Europe, mobility of students and staff from the former colonial empires to Western Europe were the main focus of international higher education activities, but they were rather fragmented and limited. At the national level, at least for Europe and North America, international cooperation and exchange were included as minor activities in bilateral agreements between nations and in development cooperation programs, driven by political rationales. Academic institutions were, in general, passive partners in these programs.

The Cold War and the Politicization of Internationalization

Higher education, as well as cultural and intellectual life generally, became pawns as well as important fronts in the ideological struggles of the period. The era of “good feeling” lasted just a few years, as the struggle between the Soviet Bloc and the West started to develop as early as 1946—lasting until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. Ideology, as well as power politics, were very much part of the Cold War, with the struggle between communism and capitalism, as well as the political contest between the great powers, at the center. The Soviet Union, as early as the 1930s, saw intellectuals, students, and universities as part of their efforts to gain advantage in a global struggle and set up programs aimed at attracting support. The Western countries, led by the United States, significantly expanded and strengthened their internationalization efforts in higher education.

During this period, the Soviet Union focused on attracting students from friendly newly independent developing nations and countries that were part of the Soviet orbit, and educated thousands of such students—many of whom returned to their home countries to assume leadership positions and a few of whom became involved in revolutionary movements. In 1960, the Patrice Lumumba Peoples Friendship University was established in Moscow with the specific goal of educating students from developing countries along with Russians. The Soviet Union also sponsored programs that sent many Russian professors to developing country universities to build academic

partnerships. Russian textbooks were translated into many non-Western languages. These initiatives usually targeted countries in or close to the Soviet sphere of influence and often had a significant academic and sometimes political impact. Without question, Soviet programs were motivated by the political struggles of the Cold War.

For the Soviet Union, academic cooperation with the Western world was not a priority, and indeed extensive collaboration was forbidden. Although contacts at the national level for scientific and cultural agreements did exist, as well as at the institutional level and through the academies of sciences, these were under strict control by the regime. More importance was attached to cooperation with other socialist countries, whether in Central and Eastern Europe or elsewhere. Besides receiving large numbers of students on state scholarships and inviting academic staff, the Central and Eastern European governments carried out many programs of development assistance in countries across the developing world.

Although distinct because of differences in ideology, some similarities can be noted between international education in Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe during the Cold War: South–North mobility of students and staff, development cooperation with non-industrialized states, and a strong national engagement with weak and mainly reactive institutional involvement.

Between the two World Wars and immediately after the Second World War, idealism was prevalent and peace and mutual understanding were driving rationales, manifested for instance by the establishment of UNESCO and the Fulbright Act. But soon, under the influence of the Cold War, ideology more than idealism set the agenda in international education, especially between the United States and the Soviet Union. Europe was not much affected since the Third World War was the battlefield of international educational cooperation—and struggle: continuing dominance of Western models and systems of higher education, the influence of the English language, the impact of foreign training, the dominance of Western scientific products, ideas, and structures. In other words, neo-colonial and Western higher education hegemony were the results of much of international higher education relations during this period. The Soviet Union, for its part, was similarly engaged in expanding its influence. In Europe, the Iron Curtain that divided Eastern and Central Europe from the West prevented all but the most rudimentary higher education cooperation. Only in the 1970s, when Western Europe had sufficiently recovered from the impact of World War II and initiated its integration process, did a new type of academic cooperation and exchange emerge that was more focused on strengthening European cooperation and exchange within the countries of the emerging European Union (EU). A modest warming in East–West relations opened doors for academic cooperation to some extent.

Western academic foreign policy, as in the case of the Soviet Union, was also directly linked to Cold War priorities. The former colonial powers—the United Kingdom, France, and to some extent the Netherlands—sought to maintain their influence in their former colonies through an array of scholarship programs, university collaborations, and other schemes—these initiatives also competed directly with the Soviet Union. Even during colonial times, France sponsored many students from its colonies to study in France. These efforts continued and were expanded, with the goal

of helping the emerging universities in Francophone Africa and other French colonies as well as maintaining French influence and the role of the French language. Even now, international student flows to France are predominantly coming from its former colonies, even though the French have also diversified their international student population. The Netherlands, on a much smaller scale, was involved in academic development in Indonesia—the former Dutch East Indies. However, it soon expanded its activities to the broader developing world, and created separate institutes to train students from developing countries in more tailor-made programs—such as the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. The British had the largest array of programs. Again, the main focus was on maintaining British influence in its former colonies. The Commonwealth Secretariat, funded largely by the United Kingdom government, supported many scholarship programs. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office also sponsored programs, as did the British Council, as well as other government agencies responsible for foreign assistance. Programs included scholarships to study in Britain, university partnerships, support for English language textbooks, testing services, and other quality assurance mechanisms.

The United States, as the counterweight to the Soviet Union in the Cold War, developed active and far-reaching higher education “soft power” initiatives. The Fulbright Program, established in 1946, was perhaps the most visible and successful scholarship program in the world—bringing many thousands of students as well as professors from around the world to the United States, as well as sending Americans overseas. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 was a direct reaction to the launch the year before of Sputnik I by the Soviet Union. Title VI of the Higher Education Act of 1960 stimulated the development of area studies and foreign language centers as well as programs for international studies and international affairs. Indeed, one of the most significant implications of Cold War internationalization for American universities was the development of “area studies” programs that provided opportunities for studying world regions and countries, including languages never before taught in U.S. universities, such as Tamil, Bengali, Bahasa Indonesia, and others. Many academic partnership programs, funded through the U.S. Agency for International Development and other organizations, linked American universities with those in many developing countries. These initiatives have to be seen in the context of attempts by the United States to become the leader of the noncommunist world in its Cold War with the Soviet Union.

After the Cold War: Increased International Cooperation and Exchange

In the 1980s, the first signs of increased academic cooperation between Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe as well as with the United States became manifest. Still, academic cooperation was mainly a political issue, and little institutional and personal autonomy was possible. Only after the fall of the Iron Curtain at the end of the 1980s did international cooperation in higher education increase at high speed, probably more than in any other area. Both the European Commission and national

governments developed programs to enhance the quality of the sector and stimulate cooperation and exchange. The Transnational European Mobility Program for University Studies (TEMPUS) scheme of the European Community, established in 1990 for Hungary and Poland, extended to the other Central and Eastern European countries over the years. An important example of a national initiative is Central European Exchange Program for University Studies (CEEPUS), a program of the Austrian government. These initiatives not only formed the basis for the inclusion of these countries in the regular European programs like the Framework Programs for Research and Development and European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS) but also can be seen as a testing ground for the integration of these countries in the EU. Without question, the impressive array of EU-sponsored exchange, research, and collaboration programs, both for the “core” EU community and a wider European audience, were related to the broader political and economic goals of the EU.

At the same time, international cooperation and exchange between Europe and the United States and other regions in the world, especially the emerging economies in Asia and Latin America, developed over the past quarter century. One can speak of a globalized internationalization of higher education, in which traditional forms of cooperation and exchange increasingly are conflicting with more commercial forms of internationalization—such as the recruitment of students, competition for talent and scholars, the emergence of franchises and branch campuses, and the influence of international university rankings.

The Combination of Politics and International Higher Education

Higher education internationalization is not only a 21st century phenomenon—it has a rich and important history that is relevant to contemporary realities. Will we see again a de-Europeanization and nationalization of higher education in Europe emerging, in the light of increased criticism of European integration, development of nationalist populist movements, and tensions between Russia and Western Europe and the United States?

In the 20th century, politics and global ideological struggles dominated the international agenda worldwide. Academic cooperation and exchange have been in many cases, including during the Cold War, the main way relations between nations continued to take place and even were stimulated so as to pave the way for further contacts. We have to learn from these lessons. International higher education currently is substantially different from earlier historical periods, as well as from the Cold War. Its scope is different, as well, with increasing political and academic power influences from other regions of the world, especially Asia. But, even though we should be realistic that international cooperation and exchange are not guarantees for peace and mutual understanding, they continue to be essential mechanisms for keeping communication open and dialogue active. Will the increasingly widespread global conflicts, based on religious fundamentalism, resurgent nationalism, and other challenges, harm the impressive strides that have been made in international higher education cooperation?

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