

Meaningful internationalisation? Insights into rationales and practices from Denmark, Finland, and Germany

Symposium convenor

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Presenters

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Symposium rationale

Just like the meaningful university, internationalisation of higher education is contested terrain. For the past decades, internationalisation has been a buzzword in university strategies. However, in an era with Brexit and neo-national tendencies in many European countries and the USA, internationalisation through mobility and language (English Medium Instruction) has come under pressure. Contradictory political signals in regard to student mobility, language of instruction, and other 'instruments' of internationalisation call for critical research into how internationalisation is conducted and experienced by the stakeholders. Internationalisation is supposed to lead to higher quality of higher education, but it is unclear how transnational mobility or English medium instruction per se leads to increased quality. Consequently, for teachers, instrumentalist approaches to internationalisation emphasising measurements of student mobility rather than the content of the process of internationalisation can lead to a sense of meaninglessness. For students, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach towards internationalisation just emphasising transnational mobility but not addressing the opportunities internationalisation understood more broadly creates for experiencing diversity and developing a multicultural understanding and global citizenship may lead to meaninglessness. During this symposium, five different presentations explore contemporary complexities of internationalisation and discuss what and how make internationalisation meaningful.

Individual abstracts

1. Meaningful internationalisation and the tension between national and global interests

This presentation gives an overview of internationalisation in Finnish higher education from the point of view of language from the 1990s until 2020s. Internationalisation is operationalised as the use of English in the academia, but it receives its meaning in the political constellations at any given time through the dynamics of English and national languages. The presentation is a meta-analysis of the author's recent work on internationalisation in Finnish higher education from the language perspective. It first discusses how internationalisation receives "global" and "national" meanings based on the dynamics between English as the language of internationalisation, Finnish as the national language of the majority, and Swedish as the somewhat controversial national language of the minority. It then continues to discuss the different meanings of internationalisation of higher education from the post-national era of the 1990s to the neo-national times in the 2010s. The developments of post-nationalist (importance of English) and neo-nationalist (importance of Finnish) language policies in higher education are relevant to the larger understanding of the meaning of the nation state in globalization of higher education in particular and societies in general.

2. Projected meanings of internationalisation in a university's marketing materials

Institutional policies and marketing materials are replete with claims that internationalisation is meaningful because it enhances the quality of higher education (HE). In countries where English is not the first language, such as Denmark, HE policies have shaped discourses of internationalisation around the meaningfulness of transnational mobility and English as a medium of instruction (EMI). However, how internationalisation is perceived by students, staff and institutions remains unclear. This paper draws on the analysis of marketing video materials of a Danish university's website, exploring discourses of internationalisation when targeting prospective students. It draws on implicitly or explicitly portrayed educational spaces (or the lack thereof) of ten master's degree programmes. Under a critical spatial perspective, visual data will be coded and analysed using a critical discourse analysis related to discourses of quality and internationalisation. Preliminary findings have shown that international education is portrayed differently in advertising materials for Danish and international audiences. These findings raise important questions about projected 'meanings' of internationalisation when targeting Danish and international students. Moreover, the absence of internationalisation aspects in the Danish marketing videos suggests that the institution may view the meaning of internationalisation spatially different, when targeting Danish prospective students.

3. Meaningful mobility? Perspectives on internationalisation in teacher education

Internationalisation has developed as one of the key goals and policy strategies in a majority of higher education institutions' strategic plans, and mobility is one of the key mechanisms through which internationalisation occurs. Teacher training programmes fall into this trend and there is increasing awareness of the internationalisation of teacher education across the globe. An important rationale for internationalisation of teacher training is to promote intercultural competence in an attempt to increase teachers' global understanding and their ability to implement such approaches

into their classrooms. Yet, what happens when student teachers from all over the world come together in one classroom? Does this mobility enable meaningful interaction, or can it also reinforce ethnocentric views about themselves and others? In this regard, it is important to understand the impacts of mobility for prospective teachers as their experiences abroad set the stage for reflection and self-transformation in terms of personal and professional development, knowledge acquisition, and application of skills. This paper explores how students make meaning of their international experience marked by global hierarchies in education. It stems from ethnographic fieldwork at a Danish higher education institution with international student teachers from 19 countries.

4. Global citizenship as meaningful internationalisation?

In light of global sustainability challenges and growing nationalist voices in Europe and elsewhere, questions of the role of universities in society and the meaning and purpose of higher education receive increased attention in public and academic discourses. While many scholars argue that the internationalisation rhetoric is much influenced by the imperative of neoliberalism, only a limited number of studies have paid attention to the process of global citizen learning of international students. Following a critical understanding of the pedagogical concept of Global Citizenship Education (GCE), GCE intends to promote learners to become more independent, informed, and critical thinkers, who address relations of power and take more responsible and ethical actions. The focus of this contribution is on the meaning of studying abroad for developing global citizenship. The main question is whether and how studying abroad can be “more” than only language acquisition and job preparation but rather a learning environment for global citizenship. Based on six semi-structured interviews with students from Germany, who had been on different studies abroad, this presentation discusses preliminary results in terms of the potentials of study abroad for building global citizenship and thereby broadening the understanding of what meaningful internationalisation may be.

5. ‘International’ academics’ negotiations of meaningful teaching

Academics have always travelled between universities and research groups to exchange and gain new knowledge as part of their profession. However, in recent decades, travelling has been linked to the term internationalisation and is often institutionalised as part of funding, hiring processes, and promotion requirements. Universities are increasingly profiling themselves on having international staff and they are putting efforts into attracting international staff as part of their internationalisation strategies. Those policies and strategies often associate internationalisation with issues of competitiveness and quality. In this paper, we focus on how this type of internationalisation is given meaning at the level of academics. Based on qualitative interviews with ‘international’ academics in Denmark, we discuss how ‘the international’ is ascribed meaning and negotiated in the daily practice of being an academic. We unfold how international academics’ former experiences of teaching in other settings and universities are transformed and negotiated in new settings. Hence, we discuss how international academics negotiate what constitutes meaningful teaching in the context of internationalisation.