From Mobility to Solidarity: Reframing Internationalisation in Higher Education

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I have spent years working in international education, and I am increasingly convinced that movement alone is not the point.

Across education systems, there is growing pressure to demonstrate relevance, impact, and measurable outcomes. Schools, colleges, and universities alike are asked to prepare learners for a rapidly changing and interconnected world, to show value to external stakeholders, and to justify their practices in increasingly instrumental terms. In this context, educators are often left navigating a familiar tension: one between formation and performance, and between education as a moral practice and education as a deliverable.

One response to these pressures has been an increased emphasis on outward-facing engagement. In schools, this might take the form of partnerships or global awareness initiatives. In higher education, it is often articulated through internationalisation strategies. While the language and structures differ across sectors, the underlying question is pretty much the same: *what kind of engagement genuinely serves the educational good, and what merely signals it?*

Internationalisation in higher education offers a particularly revealing case. Universities promote global opportunities as evidence of openness and educational quality. Student mobility, international partnerships, and global rankings are now widely treated as markers of success. Yet movement across borders does not, in itself, guarantee learning, formation, or understanding. Exposing students to difference is not the same as encounter. Opportunity does not necessarily lead to responsibility.

This raises a deeper question that extends well beyond higher education: ***what kind of engagement is worthy of an educational institution that claims to educate the whole person?***

Internationalisation and the Myth of Neutrality

Much of the dominant internationalisation literature presents global engagement as a largely neutral or technical good. Activities are measured through participation rates, destinations, employability outcomes (resume padding), and institutional visibility. Within this framing, internationalisation is assumed to be inherently beneficial and mostly value-free.

However, scholars across higher education studies have challenged the assumption that universities and their policies operate neutrally. Giroux (2002) and Brown (2015), for example, argue that contemporary higher education increasingly reflects neoliberal tendencies, in which educational purposes are shaped by marketisation, competition, and performance metrics. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) similarly describe the rise of "academic capitalism," in which universities align their priorities with external economic interests in ways that tend to distort institutional aims.

Internationalisation does not sit outside these pressures. Decisions about where students go, how programmes are structured, and what outcomes are valued are shaped by underlying assumptions about success and the value and purpose of education. When global engagement is organised primarily around mobility and competitiveness, it risks reinforcing existing inequalities rather than challenging them.

The Limits of the "Third Mission"

The concept of the university's "third mission" is used to describe activities beyond teaching and research. Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000), envisioned the "Triple Helix" model, which framed the third mission in terms of universities' external relationships with industry and government, specifically related to innovation and economic development. Subsequent scholarship has expanded this understanding, recognising that the third mission can also include social, cultural, and civic engagement (Zomer and Benneworth, 2011).

While these frameworks help explain the expanding social role of universities, they tend to focus primarily on structural relationships and outputs. Less attention, however, is paid to the ethical and formative orientation that influences how engagement is both understood and enacted within institutions. Instead of adding more stakeholders to existing models, an alternative approach is to examine how institutional ethos influences the meaning and practice of global engagement.

From Mobility to Solidarity

Reframing internationalisation through the lens of solidarity offers one such alternative.

Solidarity is not sentimentality, nor is it simply a matter of charitable action. It is a moral stance where individuals and institutions understand themselves as tied to others, particularly in contexts marked by inequality and unequal power. It calls for attentiveness and restraint, and an honest reckoning with the benefits one derives from global systems.

Viewed in this way, internationalisation is not primarily about *where* students go, but about *how* they are formed to understand their place in an interconnected world. This reframing shifts the emphasis:

- from access to responsibility

- from experience to encounter

- from individual gain (commodities) to shared obligation

This perspective resonates with wider critiques of instrumental approaches to education. Schindler (1998) warns that when success is judged by "what works", by what can be measured, or by what attains legitimacy, education drifts away from truth and formation. In

the context of internationalisation, this suggests that global engagement can easily become performative unless it is grounded in a deeper understanding of educational purpose.

Institutional Ethos and Global Engagement

How internationalisation is enacted depends significantly on institutional ethos. Universities do not simply add global programmes to an otherwise neutral structure. Instead, they interpret international engagement through their deeper commitments, traditions, and moral frameworks.

Research on mission and identity in higher education suggests that when institutional purpose is merely rhetorical or symbolic, it struggles to guide decision-making in practice (Weiss and Piderit,1999). In this manner, internationalisation can easily be absorbed into prevailing market logics, which prioritise visibility and growth over formation.

Institutions with strong moral or religious traditions are often assumed to approach internationalisation in distinctive ways. In practice, however, this cannot be taken for granted. Even when institutional identity is clearly articulated, internationalisation is frequently pursued through the same metrics and success markers that dominate the wider higher education sector. Participation rates, rankings and accolades can stand in for educational purposes, often with limited or no reference to how global engagement aligns with institutional mission. In such cases, religious identity may be invoked symbolically and be only weakly integrated into those structures that shape international practice. Internationalisation, then, risks reflecting prevailing sector norms instead of promoting the formative commitments that an institution claims or hopes to uphold.

A Formative Horizon

Reframing internationalisation around solidarity neither rejects mobility nor romanticises global engagement. Instead, it insists that movement across borders must be oriented toward a deeper, formative purpose.

Internationalisation becomes educationally meaningful when it invites students to grapple with complexity, limits, and moral ambiguity. It asks them to understand that the way they live, study, travel and consume is connected to wider global structures—environmental, political, cultural and economic. It's about helping students see that their opportunity for education abroad exists *because* of unequal global mobility. Their economic security is often tied to global labour, trade and extraction systems. Their education, passport, language and institutional prestige give them advantages many others do not have. Their choices: where and how much they travel, their consumption, and their career paths, have tremendous consequences beyond themselves. If internationalisation is reduced to mobility and opportunity, it risks reproducing the very inequalities it claims to address. Grounded in solidarity, however, it becomes a practice of formation. And that formation asks institutions to recognise themselves in the education they offer.

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