

# FORUM

*Discussing international education*

**AN INTERVIEW WITH LEYMAH GBOWEE**  
**THE END OF INTERNATIONALISATION**  
**NANTES CONFERENCE REPORT**  
**UNDERSTANDING HAITI**

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# THE END OF INTERNATIONALISATION

*In this provocative essay, Uwe Brandenburg and Hans de Wit reflect on the evolution of internationalisation and question what the future holds. Is it time to redefine our methods and views? Reactions from the members are welcome.*



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OF INTERNATIONALISATION; WE ARE NO LONGER THE SPEARHEAD OF  
INNOVATION BUT DEFENDERS OF TRADITIONS**

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Over the last two decades, the concept of the internationalisation of higher education has moved from the fringe of institutional interest to the very core. In the late 1970s up to the mid 1980s, activities that can be described as internationalisation were usually neither named that way nor carried high prestige and were rather isolated and unrelated. The exception was joint international research, which, however, has never seriously become part of the internationalisation fashion. In the late 1980s, changes occurred: internationalisation was invented and carried out, ever increasing its importance. New components were added to its multidimensional body over the past two decades, moving from simple exchange of students to the big business of recruitment, and from activities impacting an incredibly small elite group to a mass phenomenon. In our view, it is time for a critical reflection on the changing concept of internationalisation.

**FROM SUBSTANCE TO FORM**

Gradually, the why and what have been taken over by the how, and instruments of internationalisation have become the main objective: more exchange, more degree mobility, and more recruitment. Even the alternative movement of 'internationalisation at home' of the late 1990s has shifted rapidly into this instrumental mood.

This development coincided with the dawn of a second, rivalling term: globalisation. In fact, it seems that both terms act like two connected universes, making it impossible to draw a distinctive line between them. Today, internationalisation has become the white knight of higher education, the moral ground that needs to be defended, the epitome of justice and equity. The higher education community still strongly believes that internationalisation by definition leads to peace and mutual understanding, which was the driving force behind programmes like Fulbright in the 1950s. While gaining its moral weight, its content seems to have deteriorated; the form lost its substance. Internationalisation has become a synonym of 'doing good,' and people are less into questioning its effectiveness and what it is supposed to be: an instrument to improve the quality of education or research.

**THE DEVALUATION OF  
INTERNATIONALISATION**

On the other side, globalisation is loaded with negative connotations and is considered more predominant than internationalisation. This formula sees internationalisation as 'good' and globalisation as 'evil.' Internationalisation is claimed to be the last stand for humanistic ideas against the world of pure economic benefits, allegedly represented by the term globalisation. Alas, this constructed antagonism between

internationalisation and globalisation ignores the fact that activities, which are more related to the concept of globalisation (higher education as a tradable commodity), are increasingly executed under the flag of internationalisation. This is clearly illustrated by the increasing commercialisation at the conferences of the Association of International Educators (NAFSA), the Asia Pacific Association for International Education (APAIE) and the European Association for International Education (EAIE).

**INTERNATIONALISATION:  
FROM INNOVATION TO TRADITION**

What this attitude in effect did was to exacerbate the devaluation of internationalisation and the inflation of defensive measures. Nowadays, we tend to be advocates rather than pioneers of internationalisation; we are no longer the spearhead of innovation but defenders of traditions. This creates the danger of self-depreciation and defensive self-perception. In effect, it means that we are holding firm to traditional concepts and acting on them while the world around us moves forward. We – and the authors explicitly add themselves to the group of 'we' – lament about the loss of real mobility and the commercialisation of higher education in general, and its international component in particular. But at the same time we lose sight of innovative developments such as the emergence of the digital citizen for whom mobility can be at least as virtual as it is real.



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**THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IS A GLOBAL ONE AND IT IS OUR JOB  
TO HELP PREPARE THE HIGHER EDUCATION WORLD FOR THIS**

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**A NEW DAWN?****THE POST-INTERNATIONALISATION AGE**

How can we resume the active role and gain ownership of our own fate? The main points are the following:

- We have to move away from dogmatic and idealist concepts of internationalisation and globalisation.
- We have to understand internationalisation and globalisation in their pure meanings; not as goals in themselves but rather as means to an end.
- We have to throw off the veil of ignorance and ask ourselves, “Why do we do certain things, and how do they help in achieving the goals of quality of education and research in a globalised knowledge society?”
- We also have to regard mobility and other activities as what they really are: activities or instruments, and therefore, by definition, not goals in themselves.
- We should carefully reconsider our pre-occupation with instruments and means and rather invest a lot more time into questions of rationales and outcomes.

Though we need more philosophy, we also need a stronger sense of reality. We cannot continue to take for granted the fact that certain types of mobility and other international activities (such as exchanges and study abroad) are good in themselves, and that other types (such as recruitment and transnational education) are bad. We have to dig deeper, place them within a new set of values and rationales and make sure that we really achieve that which is meaningful.

The future of higher education is a global one and it is our job to help prepare the higher education world for this. Therefore, what we need are people who understand and define their role within a global community, transcending the national borders and embracing the concepts of sustainability, equity of rights and access, advancement of education and research, and much more. But essentially, we need to re-affirm the core role of universities: to help understand this world and to improve our dealing within it. What we need is a common commitment at the institutional and

personal level of how we and our students will be prepared to live and work in a global community. Possibly we even have to leave the old concepts of internationalisation and globalisation and move to a fresh unbiased paradigm. In any case, the most important thing is to rethink and redefine the way we look at the internationalisation of higher education at present. **E**

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This essay was published in the 2010 fall issue of ‘International Higher Education,’ the newsletter of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College.