

# Redefining Internationalization as Global Responsibility

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**Thilo Zimmermann**

University of Cologne, Germany

Email: [thilozimmermann@gmx.de](mailto:thilozimmermann@gmx.de)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1481-4921>

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## Abstract:

For several decades, higher education institutions (HEIs) have sought to educate a generation of decision-makers through internationalization, enabling them to meet the needs of a globalizing economy. However, since the 2007 financial crisis, the concept of globalization has been increasingly called into question. The rise of autocratic regimes over the past decade, the geopolitical shock caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the growing relevance of climate change have ushered in a new phase of globalization. The relationship between nation-states and global governance is being readjusted. The concept of internationalization at HEIs must adapt to these new challenges. This discussion paper argues that HEIs must redefine their role in this process by taking responsibility for current research and for the education of future decision-makers to prepare society for the future.

**Keywords:** internationalization, higher education institutions, globalization, Global Responsibility, sustainable development goals

## 1. Introduction

For nearly forty years, internationalization has been a 'hot topic' at higher education institutions (HEIs). Between 2010 and 2020, the decade before the pandemic, the number of international students doubled (de Wit, 2020 p. ii). While most HEIs follow some form of internationalization, the specific goals of internationalization are rarely questioned. Brandenburg and de Wit (2011) proclaimed the "end of internationalization," arguing that it had become an automatism resulting in ever-increasing mobility numbers without questioning the "why and for what purpose." In order to revitalize the debate about internationalization, the authors propose to move away from dogmatic and idealistic concepts of internationalization and globalization, "understanding internationalization and globalization in their pure meanings—not as goals in themselves but rather as means to an end, where this "end" for HEIs is to improve the quality of education and research in a globalized knowledge society" (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011 p. 17). What are the driving forces of internationalization? Why did internationalization become popular during the last 40 years, and will it be necessary to reimagine internationalization to face upcoming challenges? This paper will provide theoretical perspectives on the internationalization of HEIs in the coming decades. The paper argues that "Global Responsibility" is an innovative concept for universities that adequately encompasses all aspects of globalization and internationalization, providing a clear objective for internationalization initiatives.

To reimagine internationalization as Global Responsibility, we must first clear up some pitfalls in the wording and definitions of internationalization. Unclear and blurred definitions often lead to false conclusions. What does "internationalization of higher education institutions" actually mean? First, we



will examine the term "internationalization," and then the term "higher education institutions." In doing this, we will look at the original concept of the "university" as the classic HEI. This will enable us to redefine the self-perception of HEIs in a globalized world.

## 2. Internationalization vs. Globalization vs. Global Responsibility

Some confusion arises from the two terms "internationalization" and "globalization." Unfortunately, the latter is often associated with economic globalization, which has been taking place since the 1980s and has followed a neoliberal political agenda of global economic integration. Consequently, globalization is associated with something negative, as its negative social and environmental consequences have been prominent in the public debate in recent years. The neoliberal form of globalization is increasingly seen as a dead end, increasing inequality around the world and causing the rise of nationalism and populism. "Internationalization" is therefore considered a less biased term, particularly in discussions about the internationalization of higher education institutions (HEIs) (see also Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011).

The main difference between internationalization, globalization, and Global Responsibility is the perspective from which the need for cooperation is legitimized. Internationalization is based on the concept of "nation," while globalization describes the process of national institutions and structures becoming global. Global Responsibility, on the other hand, starts directly from a global perspective. Now, we will take a closer look at each of the three concepts.

### 2.1 Internationalization

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines *internationalization* as "[t]he action or process of making something international in character, composition, or scope" (OED Third Edition, 2015). The OED states several definitions for international, the ones most adequate for our context would probably be "(l)ocated or held in one place but involving people of two or more nations; characterized by the presence of many nationalities or cultures; cosmopolitan, multicultural", "[...] advocating cooperation and understanding between nations; looking beyond national attachments or allegiances; cosmopolitan in outlook", and "designating a person from another country; foreign, overseas. Frequently in international student". (OED Third Edition, 2015). The term "internationalization" implies that we are dealing with an administrative procedure. The HEI, a nationally organized structure, seeks to open itself up to exchange with other nationally organized structures in order to move beyond national attachments, for example. A study of the history of the International Office at the University of Cologne supports this viewpoint. Although Konrad Adenauer, the mayor of Cologne, supported the establishment of the university in 1919 to promote peace and international understanding in the newly founded German Republic after the war, documents from the International Office, founded in 1928, show that national thinking still played an important role in "internationalization." (Mueller, 2018). The whole concept of internationalization is therefore historically deeply rooted into national assumptions and understands universities as institutions embedded within national education systems, which pursue international cooperation largely as a means to advance national or institutional interests.

Today, internationalization typically refers to the process by which universities *expand* their international activities, including student mobility, research cooperation, and institutional partnerships across borders. International partnerships are often framed as instruments to enhance the quality of



education, increase global competitiveness, attract international talent, and prepare students for participation in a globalized economy. In this sense, internationalization can be understood primarily as an *administrative process* in which nationally embedded institutions seek to expand their global reach while still operating within a framework defined by national priorities. While these efforts have contributed significantly to strengthening global academic exchange, the concept of internationalization itself remains deeply rooted in a nation-state perspective.

This nation-state-centered logic also shapes the conceptual limits of internationalization. Although the concept promotes cooperation across borders and often carries a cosmopolitan rhetoric, it rarely addresses the deeper normative question of why international cooperation should take place and what broader purposes it should serve. Internationalization strategies frequently emphasize mechanisms—mobility programs, joint degrees, or research networks—without necessarily defining the global challenges that such cooperation is meant to address. As a result, internationalization risks becoming an end in itself, rather than a means to tackle shared global problems.

## 2.2 Globalization

There is a plethora of definitions for globalization (for an overview, see e.g. Al-Rodhan & Stoudmann, 2006). This discussion paper will not delve into the phenomenon of globalization in detail. Instead, it will focus on the definition in the OED and illustrate the differences between "globalization" and "internationalization." The OED defines *globalization* as “[t]he action, process, or fact of making global; esp. (in later use) the process by which businesses or other organizations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale, widely considered to be at the expense of national identity” (OED Third Edition, 2009). It, therefore, also describes a process, this time of becoming *global*, meaning “[...] relating to, or involving the whole world” (OED Third Edition, 2009). Interestingly, globalization often refers to the global activities of companies, especially so-called "multinational" ones, but is not used to describe the global activities of HEIs, as HEIs normally do not build campuses abroad (despite a few exceptions, especially in the private sector). Nevertheless, it is fair to say that HEIs have tried to respond to the dynamics and needs arising from globalization through internationalization. Since a globalizing economy and society require global research networks and students educated in an international context, HEIs have begun to establish international networks and exchanges.

The relationship between globalization and internationalization of HEIs has been analyzed by Altbach and Knight (2007). They defined globalization “as the economic, political, and societal forces pushing 21st century higher education toward greater international involvement”, resulting also into “the emergence of the ‘knowledge society’” (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p. 290). They argue that internationalization strategies of HEIs are “created to cope with globalization and to reap its benefits” (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p. 291). According to the authors, internationalization strategies are created to fulfill the needs of a free trade economy. This economy requires highly mobile, English-speaking students with an international education and extensive knowledge of technology and culture. In this process, international higher education itself is becoming a global private good as private universities seek internationalization strategies. Examples include creating global branches in other countries and recruiting tuition-paying students worldwide. Nevertheless, they conclude that “(w)e are at a crossroads—today’s emerging programs and practices must ensure that international higher education benefits the public and not simply be a profit center” (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p. 304).



Altbach has emphasized that globalization can have two effects: innovation in communication and data management can, on the one hand, “level the playing field in the new age of knowledge interdependence”, whilst, on the other hand, globalization can also increase inequality, as it often does not serve the interests of developing countries, as economists such as Joseph Stiglitz (2002) and Dani Rodrick (1997, 1999) have stated (see Altbach, 2004, pp. 3–7). In recent years, globalization has come under considerable pressure as nationalist movements have gained political power in many countries. Brexit, the U.S.-Chinese trade dispute, and most recently, the economic consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine have sparked debate about adjusting globalization and reorganizing production chains in a more national or regional manner. It has become increasingly difficult to advocate for a globalized world, with even the multilateral framework having been put into question. This trend can also be seen in statistics on internationalization. According to a DAAD report, indicators of international exchange, such as the number and the duration of study periods abroad, have stagnated or decreased since 2010 (DAAD, 2024 p. 8-11).

### 2.3 Global Responsibility

Against this background, the concept of Global Responsibility offers an alternative perspective on international academic cooperation. Instead of beginning from the standpoint of nationally organized institutions seeking international partnerships, Global Responsibility starts with the recognition that many of the most pressing challenges of our time are global in nature and ultimately caused or shaped by human action. Climate change, conflict-induced displacement or economic inequality are examples of issues that transcend national borders and require coordinated global responses. From the perspective of Global Responsibility, these challenges should constitute the starting point for thinking about academic cooperation. The first step is therefore the identification and definition of a global problem. Only afterwards should decisions be made regarding which disciplines, methodologies, research approaches, and institutional partners are most suitable to address the issue. Rather than merely providing students educated to meet the needs of industry, HEIs should actively shape globalization by sharing the most powerful good they produce, namely knowledge. They should provide society with the right definitions to determine where globalization should lead.

It is important to emphasize that the distinction drawn here between internationalization and Global Responsibility is primarily conceptual and theoretical. The debate concerns the connotations and underlying assumptions embedded in these two terms rather than the concrete practices of HEIs. In reality, many universities around the world already engage in activities that strongly reflect the principles of Global Responsibility, even if these initiatives are formally embedded within institutional “internationalization strategies.” Research collaborations addressing global challenges, interdisciplinary sustainability initiatives, and partnerships with institutions in regions affected by conflict or environmental change are just a few examples of how universities are already acting in ways consistent with the idea of Global Responsibility. The conceptual shift proposed here therefore does not seek to replace existing practices but rather to provide a more appropriate framework for understanding and guiding global academic cooperation.

### 2.4. Internationalization vs. Europeanization

Another distinction can be made between internationalization and "Europeanization." When two member states of the European Union establish some form of cooperation, it can be considered an act



of internationalization, as it involves two nations. However, "Europeanization" is internationalization under special, facilitating circumstances. The European Union and its member states have developed a significant set of policies and tools to promote cooperation between HEIs in different member states. "Europeanization" is therefore characterized by policies that encourage or even require universities to cooperate. The policies applied by the European Union and its member states have a clear political objective: to advance and complete the process of political integration in Europe. Furthermore, as de Wit and Hunter noted, since the 1990s "there was a gradual shift from political to economic rationales for internationalization", which lead in Europe to the launch of the Bologna Process (1999) and the Lisbon Strategy in order "to make Europe the most competitive knowledge-based society in the world" (Altbach, 2004, p. 3; de Wit & Hunter, 2015b, p. 43). The policies of the EU therefore have two aims: to complete the European peace project and to advance the logic of (neoliberal) globalization. Countless policy programs exist to establish the so-called European Higher Education Area, including the Erasmus program, the Bologna Process, Horizon 2020, and most recently, the European University program, which aims to create "European" campuses. With so much political support, it is difficult to conceive of internationalization as a process mainly driven by HEIs. For instance, cooperation with HEIs from other member states is encouraged, while cooperation and exchange with HEIs from the same nation-state remains limited, except for regional research clusters. Furthermore, EU programs and strategies, such as Erasmus and the Bologna Process, focus on increasing student exchanges within the EU rather than with the rest of the world (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p. 293). Europeanization is therefore embedded in a much clearer political agenda than "internationalization." There is a trade-off between receiving more political support and having less academic initiative. A stronger sense of Global Responsibility would give HEIs more independence within governmental policies.

### 3. University, Nation-State and Universalism – a Contested Relationship

Should universities follow such a normative approach, and why should they prioritize a global perspective over national interests? To address these questions, it is useful to briefly reflect on the historical development of higher education institutions and the intellectual traditions that have shaped their self-understanding. Since their emergence in medieval Europe, universities have been embedded within a broader conception of knowledge that connected the spiritual and the worldly realms. In this context, teaching and scholarship were understood as part of a universal pursuit of knowledge that transcended local and political boundaries. Revisiting this historical perspective can help illuminate the universal dimension that has long been associated with universities and thereby provide an important conceptual link between the idea of the "global" and the notion of "responsibility." By examining these historical roots, it becomes possible to better understand how universities have traditionally positioned themselves between particular political interests and broader universal claims—an understanding that can inform contemporary debates about the role of universities in overcoming national thinking and addressing global challenges.

Since its beginning, the university has been in a contested relationship not only with religious institutions, but also with the nation-state and "international" aspirations. As De Wit and Hunter stated, the internationalization of higher education today can only be understood in the context of the internationalization of universities since the Middle Ages. Scholars were already mobile at that time, and the pursuit of universal knowledge or truth has always had an international dimension. Until the early Middle Ages, convent schools maintained knowledge in Europe. Alexander of Roes (c. 1250–



1300), a canon law jurist and dean of St. Maria im Kapitol in Cologne, defined "studium" as the third power of the Middle Ages, alongside "sacerdotium," the spiritual power of the Catholic Curia, and the secular power "regnum" or "imperium" (de Wit & Hunter, 2015b, p. 41-42; Stolberg-Wernigerode, 1953, p.194-5). "Studium" had to mediate between the transcendental "sacerdotium" and the worldly "regnum" (Ruegg, 1992, p. 18). Therefore, it had to mediate between worldly and religious power. Worldly rulers supported the establishment of universities to diminish the influence of convent schools in education. For example, Frederick I, Holy Roman Emperor, supported the foundation of the University of Bologna in 1155. Religious leaders granted universities autonomous rights to make them independent of worldly influences (e.g., Pope Gregory IX granted the University of Paris autonomous rights in 1251). The word "university" comes from the Latin "universitas magistrorum et scholarium," meaning "community of teachers and students" (Ruegg, 1992, p. 8). Therefore, it is a community that separates itself from worldly and spiritual influences to gain independent knowledge. Interestingly, the concept of "nation" has precursors at medieval universities. These universities attracted students from around Europe who organized themselves into "student nations" (from the Latin *natio*, meaning "being born") (Altbach, 1998, p. 348). As Kerr has pointed out, universities have demonstrated astonishing persistence despite political upheavals. Of the 85 institutions that existed in 1520, 70 were universities. The remaining institutions included the Roman Catholic Church and the British Parliament. (Kerr, 2001, p. 115). This illustrates the long-term impact of universities, which extends beyond worldly and national concepts.

The idea that universities are the main preservers and protectors of universal knowledge and truth arose only during Enlightenment. As Ruegg stated, universities became 'the intellectual institution which cultivates and transmits the entire corpus of methodically studied intellectual disciplines', forming "an academic elite, the ethos of which rests on common European values and which transcends all national boundaries" (Ruegg, 1992, p. xix-xx). As a consequence, "hot spots" of religious teaching that still followed the ideals of the universities of the Middle Ages were closed during the French Revolution, such as the Sorbonne in Paris (1793) and also the University of Cologne (1798) under French occupation (the UoC was re-opened under British and Belgian occupation in 1919). In Paris, the Ecole Normale Superieure was founded in order to educate a new generation of teachers that would spread the ideas of Enlightenment throughout the country.

The integration of teaching and research only began with the establishment of the University of Berlin, which was closely tied to Wilhelm von Humboldt's educational reforms. (Anderson, 2004, p. 3). Defining the link between research and education is important for understanding the role of a university, as well as the role of internationalization. The internationalization of research aims to discover universal truths and knowledge. The internationalization of education aims to provide students with the skills they need in a globalized world. However, the European or universal character of universities disappeared during the 18th and 19th centuries when rising nation-states founded and financed universities to achieve national goals, such as increased competitiveness during industrialization and promoting national languages over Latin (de Wit & Hunter, 2015b, p. 42). Since then, universities have been embedded in national administrative structures. Although laws often protect the "autonomy" of universities, dependence on government funding can lead to conflicts of interest. During the 20th century, US universities combined the English collegiate university model with the German research university concept, adding the American idea of serving society (Altbach, 1998, p. 348). Since the 1960s, universities have also fulfilled an important social responsibility within



national societies. Many universities, which were previously elite institutions, opened their doors to a large number of students, educating a significant portion of society. This was the first important step in transforming an industrialized society into a knowledge-based one.

Finally, as globalization accelerated in the 1980s, universities opened their national structures and established strong international networks to keep pace. The term "internationalization of HEIs" emerged.

#### 4. (Re-) Defining “Internationalization of HEIs”

Jane Knight, as well as de Wit and Hunter, provided an important definition to clarify the meaning of "internationalization of HEIs. Knight defined the term as follows:

*“Internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education”* (Knight, 2003, p. 2).

This definition is derived from the current practice of internationalization at HEIs. Knight argues that “[g]iven the changes in the rationales, providers, and the delivery methods of cross-border higher education, it is important to revisit the question of definition and ensure that the meaning reflects current changes and challenges”, which is especially important as “definitions can shape policy”. Knight argues further that, in order to be applicable to different countries, a definition should not “specify the rationales, benefits, outcomes, actors, activities, or stakeholders of internationalization” (Knight, 2003, p. 2). Knight's definition is therefore a "working definition" in the best sense of the term. It is derived from current practices at HEIs to summarize what internationalization means, and it can be used to further discuss and shape national policies of internationalization for HEIs. It does not aim to be a "universal" definition, which would include a subjective and normative viewpoint on the purpose of internationalization. Knight's (2003) definition still assumes that HEIs are primarily regional or national, and that their main purpose has not yet been on the international level because internationalization still needs to be "integrated" into current structures. The term “process” was “deliberately used to convey that internationalization is an ongoing and continuing effort” (Knight, 2003, p. 2), the definition therefore describes the efforts of HEIs in the ongoing megatrend of “globalization” as described above: the process of nations *becoming* global. The "triad" of international, intercultural, and global dimensions covers the various aspects of internationalization. The first two dimensions focus on relations between two nations or cultures; the last dimension opens the scope to "a worldwide perspective" of internationalization. However, this definition mainly emphasizes the international perspective because the reason for the scope is not further elaborated. According to Knight, the expression of "integrating" dimensions into the "purpose, functions, or delivery" of education was used to emphasize that internationalization must be embedded into policies and programs that have thus far rather followed a national scope (Knight, 2003, p. 3).

De Wit and Hunter further developed Knight's definition, building on a study they conducted for the European Parliament that summarized the internationalization of higher education in 17 countries. Knight's definition was augmented as “the *intentional* process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of postsecondary education”, “in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (de Wit & Hunter, 2015a, p. 3). De Wit and Hunter add therefore



the scope that was still vague in Knight's definition. It presupposes and defines that the *quality of education and research* are the main purpose of an HEI and it follows that in a globalized world, an international, intercultural or global dimension needs to be integrated to follow this purpose. However, the question of what constitutes an "internationalization" process remains. The expression "to make a meaningful contribution to society" remains somewhat vague, as it implies a political agenda for society. The meaning of "meaningful" is subject to further interpretation. One way the university contributes to society is through its role as "preserver and protector of universal knowledge and truth" and its social responsibility to provide free access to education. But why must every act of internationalization be a meaningful contribution to society? Some argue that the concept of Global Responsibility could help fill some gaps in the current definitions.

## 5. The Concept of Global Responsibility

The concept of Global Responsibility has been developed at the Division International Affairs of the University of Cologne since 2020 as a reaction to the development of globalization after the COVID-19 pandemic (Preuschhoff & Zimmermann, 2021). The crisis of liberal globalization, together with the rapid expansion of digital tools during the pandemic, has created both the need and the opportunity to rethink international cooperation toward more equitable, partnerships, that are on a level playing field aimed at addressing global challenges. In this context, the concept of Global Responsibility offers a promising framework. By placing global challenges at the center of international cooperation, it advances a perspective that prioritizes shared problem-solving over institutional or national interests, thereby giving concrete expression to the notion of responsibility in a globalized world.

### 5.1 Global Responsibility as a normative approach

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *responsibility* as the "[t]he state or fact of being the cause or originator of something", "[c]apability of fulfilling an obligation or duty" and "[t]he state or fact of being in charge of or of having a duty towards a person or thing" (OED Third Edition 2010). Global Responsibility means raising awareness of the fact that we humans are the cause and origin of what happens on our planet. Students and researchers must be enabled and capable of taking on this responsibility in order to take charge of future changes.

Global Responsibility is an attitude that considers the university in all its aspects and with all its stakeholders. Global Responsibility influences the actions and decisions an institution takes. Actions must be evaluated based on whether they contribute to Global Responsibility. It is a comprehensive, holistic approach that integrates all faculties, disciplines, and research and teaching, as well as students, researchers, and staff (Preuschhoff & Zimmermann, 2021). Understanding global cooperation through the lens of Global Responsibility therefore represents a shift from an administrative to a normative framework. Whereas internationalization often focuses on building international partnerships to strengthen institutional competitiveness or national educational goals, Global Responsibility frames international cooperation as a response to global challenges. In this approach, the choice of research topics, methodologies, and collaboration partners becomes subordinate to the objective of addressing global problems. This conceptual reframing may influence decision-making processes within universities by encouraging institutions to evaluate international partnerships not only in terms of strategic or competitive advantages, but also in terms of their potential contribution to addressing global societal challenges.



Global Responsibility has a moral and normative dimension. De Wit and Hunter called for a "more ethical and qualitative approach" to internationalization, arguing that the European Parliament's study on internationalization in higher education should push the debate in a more normative direction by extending the current definition of internationalization to include "to make a meaningful contribution to society" (de Wit & Hunter, 2015b). The Global Responsibility approach builds on this idea, as responsibility inherently seeks to be meaningful and has a clearly defined purpose.

## 5.2 The transformation from internationalization to Global Responsibility

The debate about a need to redefine internationalization has been pushed forward by de Wit (2016, 2020, p. iii-iv; see de Wit et al., 2015). He stated eight reasons why internationalization needs to be redefined, among them "the increasing commodification of higher education", "the increasing role of emerging economies", "the small group of stakeholders involved in the internationalization debate", "too little attention to norms, values and the ethics" and "too much emphasis on relations between nations than between cultures and the global and local" (de Wit, 2016, p. 16). Furthermore, de Wit argued that it is most important to first ask the question "why" internationalization should take place, before answering the what, how and the outcome (de Wit, 2016, p. 17).

The concept of Global Responsibility can overcome the problems identified by de Wit. Global Responsibility seeks to establish the circumstances necessary to fulfill institutions' responsibilities to the globe. It emphasizes norms, values, and ethics, and therefore places a strong emphasis on the commodification of higher education. Furthermore, the global perspective allows for the integration of the interests of HEIs from emerging economies in a more coherent way. Moreover, Global Responsibility is a comprehensive approach affecting all aspects and stakeholders of the HEI. Additionally, as we will see below, it allows for the integration of local and global approaches in a coherent manner.

Global Responsibility of universities subsumes aspects and dimensions of internationalization and globalization in a more coherent way. It is, however, in its effect not much different from what Hudzik called "comprehensive internationalization" and defined it as a "commitment" that "shapes institutional ethos and values and touches the entire higher education enterprise", "[I]t is an institutional imperative, not just a desirable possibility" (Hudzik, 2011, p. 6).

Global Responsibility shares many of the same definitions but takes a slightly different perspective and approach, combining the various aspects into a more coherent whole. As we have seen, responsibility means "the state or fact of being in charge of or of having a duty towards a person or thing" (OED Third Edition 2010). It is a commitment, an ethos, a value, and an imperative that shapes institutional leadership, governance, faculty, and students. Responsibility does not need to be "comprehensive"; rather, it exists or it does not. Furthermore, unlike "internationalization," responsibility is not an administrative process, but an attitude. Therefore, responsibility does not need to become "comprehensive." Nevertheless, responsibility requires an understanding of and awareness of one's responsibilities, as well as a conscience and knowledge of values, legal regulations, and social standards, in order to fulfill them. Therefore, it may be necessary to implement a comprehensive process to establish responsibility.

Furthermore, the concept of responsibility raises the question, "Responsibility for what?" Global Responsibility means the university's duty to care for the entire globe and humanity, rather than specific



groups, nations, or businesses. This approach acknowledges that knowledge is a global public good that should benefit humanity as a whole. Research and teaching must follow this attitude.

### 5.3 The global/local approach

Another debate about internationalization is that student mobility remains an advantage for an elite group of students who can afford to study abroad. A "comprehensive" internationalization strategy would therefore also require an "internationalization at home" component. Rumbley and Altbach noted, however, that combining global and local approaches "challenge practitioners, researchers, and policymakers", they call for an "intelligent internationalization," which demands that those participating in the elaboration of internationalization activities and agendas have access to the information, ideas, and professional skill-building opportunities that will enhance their ability to navigate the crucial nexus of internationalization at global and local levels" (see Rumbley & Altbach, 2016, p. 12). The Global Responsibility approach shares this view and incorporates it into its concept. As previously mentioned, Global Responsibility describes an attitude that encompasses the entire institution. This attitude includes international relations, as well as all measures that must be taken locally to take responsibility globally. Therefore, all activities organized by an HEI at the local level must be evaluated against the "Global Responsibility" benchmark. This concept is better able to intertwine global and local approaches.

Watkins and Smith (2018) have shown that such a global local approach can increase the employability of students, "by immersing them in an environment, which requires a pragmatic ethics of openness, an ability to connect global actions and local consequences" and which develops "their ability to apply their academic knowledge in a practical and culturally diverse setting, and their sense of being 'prepared' for the demands of the professional world".

### 5.4 Limitations of a Global Responsibility approach

At the same time, such an approach is not without potential limitations. Critics might argue that placing global challenges at the center of academic cooperation risks constraining academic freedom. Scientific progress often emerges from individual curiosity, spontaneous collaboration, and exploratory research that may not be immediately linked to defined societal problems. From this perspective, a strong focus on global challenges could be seen as directing research agendas too narrowly. However, even fundamental research driven by curiosity ultimately contributes to expanding humanity's collective knowledge and understanding of the world. In this broader sense, it can also be interpreted as an expression of Global Responsibility. Indeed, the framework of Global Responsibility may provide a more suitable conceptual foundation for academic freedom than internationalization, since the latter can implicitly reinforce national competition and national interests that may ultimately restrict open and globally oriented scientific collaboration.

## 6. University Strategies, Global Responsibility and the UN SDGs Policy Agenda

Global Responsibility can play a crucial role in shaping a university's self-perception. Global Responsibility can help define university strategies by offering a coherent, overarching framework for



three relevant strategies: 1) Internationalization Strategy, 2) Transfer Strategy, and 3) Sustainability/SDG Strategy.

As we have seen, internationalization plays a pivotal role in the continued success and relevance of universities in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world. Through internationalization strategies, universities establish guidelines for internationalization and emphasize important areas that are crucial for their overall strategy. These strategies typically involve a multifaceted approach that includes global collaboration, cultural exchange, and establishing a diverse academic community. By fostering a global perspective on campus, universities prepare students to thrive in a multicultural, interconnected workforce and help researchers build global networks.

Instead, transfer strategies are indispensable for universities that aim to maximize the impact of their scholarly endeavors and foster innovation. These strategies facilitate the exchange of knowledge, expertise, and collaborative efforts between academic institutions, research centers, and industry partners. Facilitating the transfer of research findings, methodologies, and resources enables universities to expand the scope and depth of their investigations. Collaborative research agreements, joint initiatives, and partnerships allow institutions to combine their intellectual resources and address complex challenges that often necessitate interdisciplinary approaches. Transfer strategies also promote the global dissemination of knowledge, ensuring that breakthroughs and advancements have a widespread impact. However, many transfer strategies focus on local or national networks and lack a global perspective. The concept of Global Responsibility, which prioritizes global challenges, offers opportunities to rethink these strategies.

In recent years, many universities have developed sustainability strategies as they have become more aware of their crucial role in fostering environmental awareness, responsible resource management, and sustainable practices. By integrating sustainability into their operations, curricula, and campus infrastructure, universities reduce their ecological footprint and instill a sense of environmental stewardship in their students and researchers. These strategies often include initiatives such as increasing energy efficiency, reducing waste, and promoting sustainable transportation methods. These initiatives contribute to the global effort to combat climate change. However, thus far, sustainability strategies have focused primarily on the local level. What is still missing is a link to internationalization and international transfer. To create an international research community that can address global challenges, strong networks and exchanges with HEIs outside the Western world are needed.

A coherent definition of Global Responsibility that brings together internationalization, transfer, and sustainability strategies could also help position the university's strategies within the broader context of the world community's strategic goals, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Bellinzona & Zimmermann, 2024). The SDGs are an attempt to coordinate global collaboration and concerted efforts to address pressing economic, social, and environmental challenges by 2030. The 17 SDG goals highlight the interconnectedness of global issues and emphasize the necessity of collaborative action to eradicate poverty, promote quality education, ensure gender equality, foster environmental sustainability, and address other critical issues. These goals provide a roadmap for nations to measure their progress and serve as a rallying point for mobilizing resources, inspiring innovation, and fostering international cooperation. Embracing the SDGs is crucial to navigating the complex challenges of the 21st century and building a shared vision for a better, more sustainable world for current and future generations. However, the SDGs are merely a policy agenda; there is no global government able to enforce the necessary policies and tools to achieve the goals. Achieving the SDGs depends on the



commitment of national governments, their ministries, political institutions, companies, associations, and citizens. The SDGs merely offer a global policy strategy to define the goals necessary for realizing a sustainable future (Bellinzona & Zimmermann, 2024). Institutions, such as governments, companies, and universities, must adjust their strategies according to this global approach in order to implement the SDG strategy. Universities play a crucial role in achieving the SDGs because they can provide the academic knowledge necessary to apply the global SDG goals to local contexts. They can also educate and advise current and future decision-makers on the policies necessary to achieve the SDGs. (Tahl et al., 2017; Watkins & Smith, 2018, p. 220-1). Global Responsibility offers a coherent framework to link internationalization, transfer, and sustainability strategies and to place them within the broader context of global strategies for achieving the UN SDGs. Rather than merely following the economic logic of globalization, as "internationalization at HEIs" has done for the past 40 years, Global Responsibility proposes a global policy strategy shared by the world community to achieve a sustainable global future.

## 7. Operationalizing Global Responsibility in University Decision-Making

To move beyond a purely normative discussion, the concept of Global Responsibility can be understood as a guiding framework for institutional decision-making in the context of global academic cooperation. Rather than prescribing specific actions or replacing existing strategic considerations, Global Responsibility introduces an additional evaluative dimension that encourages universities to reflect on how their international activities contribute to addressing global societal challenges.

Since Global Responsibility describes an attitude, it also calls for action. Therefore, Global Responsibility can be seen as a theoretical concept that supports the establishment of "Global Engagement" offices at many universities in recent years. Global engagement describes a university's intention to become involved globally, but does not explain why this engagement is necessary. Global Responsibility focuses on this theoretical basis. Global Engagement is the consequence of Global Responsibility, bringing the responsible attitude into action.

In practical terms, this framework implies a shift in the starting point of decision-making processes. Instead of beginning with the institutional objective of expanding international partnerships, universities adopting a Global Responsibility perspective would first identify global challenges to which they seek to contribute. These challenges may include issues such as climate change, global health threats, conflict-induced displacement, food insecurity, or growing global inequalities. Once such a challenge has been identified, universities can assess which academic disciplines, research methods, and institutional competencies are best suited to contribute to addressing the issue.

A second step involves evaluating potential forms of cooperation. Here, Global Responsibility encourages universities to consider partnerships not only in terms of academic prestige or strategic visibility, but also in terms of their potential contribution to addressing the defined global challenge. This approach also has important implications for the structure of international collaborations, particularly those involving partners from the Global South. In many existing research collaborations addressing global challenges, projects are financed predominantly by institutions or funding agencies located in wealthier countries. As a consequence, these actors often have greater influence in defining research agendas and priorities. By contrast, a Global Responsibility approach places the definition of the problem at the beginning of the cooperation process and therefore encourages a more inclusive and deliberative agenda-setting phase. If the starting point is a jointly defined global challenge, partners



from different regions—including those most directly affected by the issue—can contribute more actively to shaping the research questions, methodological approaches, and expected outcomes. In this sense, the framework supports forms of cooperation that are more strongly based on reciprocity and partnership at eye level.

Such a process may also lead to tensions or conflicting interests between partners. Institutions operating under different structural conditions or funding environments may prioritize different aspects of a problem. Compared to the logic of traditional internationalization strategies—where cooperation is often structured around predefined institutional objectives—this approach may therefore appear more complex and potentially more time-consuming. However, the inclusion of diverse perspectives in the initial problem-definition stage can also increase the relevance and effectiveness of research outcomes, particularly when addressing global challenges that manifest differently across regions.

Finally, the framework can inform the prioritization of institutional resources in situations where competing obligations or constraints arise. Universities frequently face trade-offs between different objectives, such as enhancing institutional reputation, attracting international students, securing research funding, or contributing to societal impact. Global Responsibility does not eliminate these competing considerations. However, it encourages institutions to explicitly consider whether their international engagements contribute to the generation of global public goods. In situations where several options appear equally attractive from a purely institutional perspective, this criterion may help guide choices toward collaborations that also address pressing global challenges.

In this sense, Global Responsibility should not be understood as a rigid policy instrument but as a normative orientation that informs strategic reflection within universities. By placing global challenges at the center of academic cooperation, the concept provides a framework through which institutions can align their international activities more closely with the broader societal responsibilities of science and higher education.

## 8. Conclusion

To some extent, HEIs have always been "international" institutions. In recent decades, the internationalization of HEIs has become increasingly important, following the economic dynamics of globalization. However, the financial crisis, the euro crisis, and rising populism have increasingly called the current model of globalization into question. Furthermore, HEIs must find solutions to complex global issues, such as climate change. HEIs must adapt to these new circumstances by questioning their current concepts and motivations of internationalization. One might ask whether universities should be shaped by the economic conditions of globalization or whether they should play a stronger, more self-confident role in shaping globalization by developing new ideas. "Global Responsibility" is a concept that could clarify some of the pitfalls of internationalization. It represents an attitude more than a process. It inherently defines why internationalization should take place. Universities internationalize because they have developed a global perspective and identity and acknowledge their responsibility to the whole. The activities of the HEI, whether in research or education, can then be organized according to this paradigm. This could include internationalization abroad or at home, creating research alliances, capacity-building projects, or e-learning programs in various faculties and disciplines. Furthermore, scholars must define global problems that require a global response. Therefore, "Global Responsibility" is also a flexible concept. "Global Responsibility"



has another advantage: it holds the HEI accountable to a global society rather than to national or regional (European) interests. Through research and education, it shapes the field for a future society.

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## About the Author:

Thilo Zimmermann had been a member of the Global Responsibility Unit of the University of Cologne since 2019, leading the team lead for global networks for sustainability. He studied economics at the University of Cologne and holds a PhD in International Political Economy from the Scuola Superiore Sant’Anna in Pisa, Italy. He went to Harvard University and Ecole Normale Superieure in Paris for research stays. Before, he worked at the German Embassy in Rome, Italy.

