



Advanced Structural Internationalization of Universities is Unethical

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Abstract

In this 'Speaking Out' paper, we challenge contemporary orthodoxies in the field of 'advanced structural' internationalization of universities by focusing on significant, but neglected issues and challenges which arise from the current substantive developments in this field. By referring to 'advanced structural' internationalization, we want to distinguish between what might be broadly defined as internationalization at home and internationalization abroad, which we consider 'structural'. 'Advanced structural' precisely because it involves transporting and re-engineering relations with governments, partners, students and other stakeholders and tends to be high risk, high commitment, and high cost. We 'look' at 'advanced structural' internationalization through the theoretical lenses of university autonomy. Since there is limited research at the intersection of international business and university autonomy, along with our experience, we draw on publicly available data relating to issues and challenges which arise from the pursuit of 'advanced structural' internationalization in higher education to construct an analytical narrative and ethical discourse appropriate to the radically changing structural, theoretical, and ideological realities we now face in this field. 'Advanced structural' internationalization poses serious ethical questions, which suggest that it does not have strong ethical foundations. In this conclusion, we are influenced by the degree of difference between university autonomy settings at home and the operation in the host country. The greater the disparity the more it is likely that the standards

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and practices which would be applied in the home environment fail to apply in the host. Hence, our thesis: ‘advanced structural’ internationalization of universities is unethical.

Keywords

Advanced structural internationalization, de-internationalization, ethics, higher education, international business, university autonomy, university internationalization

Setting the scene

Full academic autonomy may be limited in ways that are not always overt and may involve background, subtle, political, and social pressures that may nevertheless exert a powerful influence (Reilly et al., 2016b). These forces are compounded in the ‘advanced structural’ international settings when commercial, competitive, political, cultural factors combine to inhibit and restrict academic autonomy. In this ‘*Speaking Out*’ paper, we challenge contemporary orthodoxies in the field of ‘advanced structural’ internationalization of universities by focusing on significant, but neglected issues and challenges which arise from the current substantive developments in this field.

By referring to ‘advanced structural’ internationalization, we want to distinguish between what might be broadly defined as internationalization at home and internationalization abroad, which we consider ‘structural’. ‘Advanced structural’ precisely because it involves transporting and re-engineering relations with governments, partners, students and other stakeholders. Although the rhetoric associated with this ‘advanced structural’ internationalization seeks to demonstrate that it is integrated in the core mission, in practice, it is structurally separated in numerous ways from the home operation. The nature of the ‘advanced structural’ entry into a foreign setting tends to be high risk, high commitment and high cost. It is legitimated by the argument that the parent institution’s brand is a guarantee that the transplanted institution is part of a global higher education elite, providing world-class education. In practice, the inspiration is a form of ‘academic capitalism’ in which financial results become the dominant motivator (Siltaoja et al., 2019). This prompts the parent institution to apply different quality standards and modes of operation, which mean that the ‘brand’ is no longer a guarantee.

Our interest in the intersection of internationalization and university autonomy has arisen out of involvement in policy and research on university autonomy and internationalization, and teaching, research, and knowledge dissemination in ‘advanced structural’ settings. In addition to international business theory, the implications for governance, management and the nature of ‘university autonomy’ are relevant to this phenomenon. Since there is limited research at the intersection of international business and university governance and autonomy (Turcan and Gulieva, 2016b), along with our experience, we draw on publicly available data relating to issues and challenges which arise from the pursuit of ‘advanced structural’ internationalization in higher education (see e.g. Jopson and Burke, 2005; Saul, 2015; Sharma, 2019; Vasquez, 2019) to ‘construct an analytical narrative and ethical discourse appropriate to the radically changing structural, theoretical, and ideological realities we now face in this field’ (<https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/journal/organization>).

‘Advanced structural’ internationalization poses serious *ethical* questions, which suggest that it does not have strong ethical foundations. In this conclusion, we are influenced by the degree of difference between university governance and autonomy settings at home and the operation in the host country. The greater the disparity the more it is likely that the standards and practices which would be applied in the home environment fail to apply in the host. Hence, our thesis: ‘*advanced structural*’ internationalization of universities is unethical.

In the next sections, we introduce the phenomenon of ‘advanced structural’ internationalization, highlighting and discussing key related issues and challenges. Next, we ‘look’ at ‘advanced structural’ internationalization of universities through the theoretical lenses of university autonomy and follow with a discussion of the ‘key insights’ into university behavior. We finish this ‘Speaking Out’ paper with some integrative and concluding remarks.

Advanced structural internationalization

‘Advanced structural’ international higher education is manifest in a wide variety of ventures, which are often combined under the heading ‘*transnational education*’ (TNE), sometimes referred to as ‘cross-border higher education’. It can take diverse forms, such as (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014: 134):

- Articulation arrangements;
- International branch campus;
- Joint venture with overseas partner (bearing a home university recognized body’s name);
- Independent overseas higher education institution (bearing a home university recognized body’s name);
- Distance, flexible, and/or distributed (e)learning;
- Double or dual degree or award;
- ‘Flying faculty’ or ‘outreach’ franchised program;
- Joint degree or award; Progression arrangement;
- Split-site doctorate, PhD, cotutelle program;
- ‘Top-up’ program;
- Twinning arrangement, validation or ‘quality assurance’ arrangement.

This list, which is not exhaustive, is an indication of the different guises that ‘advanced structural’ internationalization can take. The published data highlights international branch campuses (IBCs) as one of the most important modes of ‘advanced structural’ internationalization. For example, according to C-BERT (2020), the largest internationalizers of IBCs are United States (77), United Kingdom (38), France (28). Whereas the largest importers of IBS are China (32), United Arab Emirates (32), Singapore (12). IBCs are often established as a private educational company in the host country, in which the home university may share an equity stake with one or more local joint venture partners (Healey, 2015).

The context for ‘advanced structural’ higher education is overwhelmingly one in which universities from developed countries enter developing or emerging countries via one or more of the TNE modes identified above. During the last 15 to 20 years, the growth of higher education in emerging countries has attracted North American and European universities to set up ‘advanced structural’ ventures in ‘lucrative’ markets, especially in Asia and the Middle East (Siltaoja et al., 2019). However, because of the political, economic, strategic and soft power implications, ‘advanced structural’ entry into the foreign higher education scene is also promoted by governments.¹ Governments have wider, political, strategic objectives, but these are rarely explored in the voluminous literature on higher education internationalization, except for occasional references to the neo-colonial aspects of the internationalization agenda (see e.g. Siltaoja et al., 2019).

The profit motive has impelled large number of ‘private’ higher education providers into the international market place. These ‘private’ providers often raise in even starker terms the issues of quality, ethical standards, good governance and precisely because they are competitive, they can have an influence on behavior more widely in the sector. Governance and management in

the context of ‘advanced structural’ internationalization tend to be given ‘lip-service’, that is, the public relations manifestos assert that the norms at home apply to the structural relationships, but in practice the standards that apply at home can be neglected in the overseas setting, where the primary motive is generally financial. As noted by Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2013: 24): *‘After one or two business schools, then there was a sudden mushroom effect. There were two things happening. From the international perspective, they saw how easy it is to make money here. . . no regulation. . . no quality standards’*.

The extent to which university governing bodies exert influence or scrutiny over their international operations is for the most part restricted to data review of numbers and revenue and this too will be limited to headline figures and the bottom line. There is little published evidence to suggest that university governing bodies subject their ‘advanced structural’ international activity to rigorous review unless the financial figures ring alarm bells and by then it is often too late, prompting universities to de-internationalize or withdraw from international markets (Altbach, 2011; OBHE, 2007a; Sharma, 2012; Turcan and Gulieva, 2016a).

Internationalization has not only become part of the mantra of universities and governments, but also a niche professional area for academics with increasing numbers of articles and books, and even whole institutes and journals devoted to the topic.² International bodies, such as UNESCO, the European Commission, the Bologna process, Governments, and Rectors Associations, all undertake studies and make proclamations and recommendations about the subject and so it may seem bold to suggest that there are aspects of this field, which may not have been subject to critical review.

University autonomy and advanced structural internationalization

The promotion of university autonomy to implement the process of modernization in higher education has become embedded in policy rhetoric, even though government intervention in recent years has tended to override and restrict university autonomy (Bowen and Schwartz, 2016; Reilly et al., 2016a). Authoritarianism, supernaturalism, corporatism, illiberalism, and political correctness are among the key impediments, idea-vetting systems, or enemies to university autonomy (Bowen and Schwartz, 2016). Nevertheless, the framework for measuring the degree of autonomy developed by the European Universities Association based on four key dimensions of autonomy remains an important measure of a modernized university (EUA, 2007). If ‘autonomy’ is indeed one of the hallmarks of the ‘modernized’ university, how do the ‘advanced structural’ ventures score?³

The first measure or dimension is *organizational* autonomy – a university’s ability to decide freely on its internal organization, such as the executive leadership, decision-making bodies, legal entities and internal academic structures (EUA, 2007). The criteria for assessing organizational autonomy include ‘external members of the governing body’, ‘capacity to decide on academic structures’, and ‘capacity to create legal entities’. Governance arrangements for ‘advanced structural’ ventures such as international branch campuses are often obscure and relate to management rather than governance and because, it can be argued that, they are a ‘branch’, separate governance arrangements are not deemed necessary. In practice, the head of the international branch will be nominated rather than undergoing a transparent and open selection process. As Shattock (2010) indicates, this means that there is an absence of effective governance oversight. The branch campus does not decide its own academic structure; this is dictated either by the home institution or by local requirements.

The second autonomy indicator is *financial* autonomy – a university’s ability to decide freely on its internal financial affairs, enabling an institution to set and realize its strategic aims (EUA, 2007). Few of the ‘advanced structural’ IBC ventures would satisfy this dimension. Their financial

autonomy is strictly limited. Indeed, since one of the primary objectives of a branch campus is to generate funds for the home institution, its ability to generate a surplus for its own use will be highly circumscribed. The measure of success for the parent university is the extent and amount of the surplus produced which it incorporates for its own operation. If the branch operates at a deficit for any period, closure or withdrawal is the response (Altbach, 2011; OBHE, 2007a; Sharma, 2012; Turcan and Gulieva, 2016a).

The third autonomy indicator is *staffing* autonomy – a university's ability to decide freely on issues related to human resources management, including recruitments, salaries, dismissals, and promotions (EUA, 2007). Here, too, the 'advanced structural' venture will have little freedom. Academic staff may be seconded from the home on a fixed, often short-term, basis or even as 'flying faculty', owing their primary loyalty to their home employer and looking to that employer for promotion and career development. Often the most senior administrative staff remain in the home institution and make occasional brief visits. Local staff have limited areas of responsibility, and because they are appointed on local conditions and salaries, they are not given parity of esteem.

The fourth dimension of autonomy is *academic* autonomy – a university's ability to decide on academic issues, such as student admissions, academic content, quality assurance, the introduction of degree programs, and the language of instruction (EUA, 2007). In this sphere, local academic autonomy is severely restricted, as examples below illustrate (Reilly et al., 2016: 240): *'I can't send you my contribution due to the formal organizational reasons'; 'My [university] senior management informed me that they did not wish me to go ahead with the chapter I had proposed'; 'The material was planned to be quite critical, but it can't be approved by my [university] administration'; 'I am being held up by the need for others to check what I send out and what I make public and/or keep private'; 'There would have been nothing of any significance left'; 'The rules in my [university] dramatically changed since I agreed to contribute, and now . . . it must be approved by the administration'; 'I was strongly advised not to proceed'; '[The administration] may not be happy about everything I write becoming available in the public domain'*. In practice, the range of subjects or degrees offered and their content is limited in part because the curriculum is in principle designed to replicate the curriculum offered in the home university. Moreover, 'advanced structural' IBC ventures offer in general a highly restricted range of subjects in fields which are not expensive to maintain and in which there is estimated to be a strong local market. With limited exceptions, branch campuses tend not to be multi-faculty, do not offer a wide range of degrees, and are restricted in the provision of multi or inter-disciplinary programs.

Key insights

These four pillars of autonomy help to define a university, its vision, its mission. There is also what might be termed the philosophical objective of a university which in Europe is encapsulated by the Humboldt ideal which is almost impossible to realize if the primary objectives are commercial and reputational. Within international business theory, the enduring question is whether the organization and values a university espouses at home can be transferred *as-is* or *adapted* to the foreign country in the pursuit of 'advanced structural' internationalization. Wearing university autonomy theory lenses on top of international business ones, we conjecture that neither is viable nor ethical.

'Transferring' the forms of organization *as-is* to an emerging or developing market is impossible because institutional university autonomy settings in that market are not simply different. They conflict and are often incompatible. Questions revolve around the four autonomy pillars and how to ensure organizational, financial, staffing, and academic freedom in an environment that is fundamentally different from the home environment. Concepts related to core values such as diversity,

transparency, integrity, collaboration, critical analysis, and excellence may have different meanings in the host country. The host country legislation may control organization structures and require elements of the curriculum, contracts, and decision-making. The leadership style may not support the parent institution's values causing gaps in ethical practice and implementation of the core processes in all four autonomy pillars. Cultural differences, such as high power distance, create hierarchical structures that make collaboration between faculty and administrative personnel or collaboration between faculty and leadership team challenging. These challenges lead to lack of support for faculty and a threat to academic freedom and integrity, as the following cases exemplify: *'The United Arab Emirates, where New York University opened a new campus last year, has barred a N.Y.U. professor from traveling to the monarchy after his criticism of the exploitation of migrant construction workers there'* (Saul, 2015). Often the home universities claim that branch campuses and joint institutions share the same values with the home institution. That is, often, academic freedom is highlighted, but in practice, the institutions do not 'walk the talk'. If the 'DNA' of a university cannot be 'internationalized', transferring the forms of organization *as-is* is impossible.

Equally problematic is the concept of '*adaptation*' of financial, staffing and academic organization to satisfy the new market and its national and cultural requirements, which may conflict with the 'imported' model. Adaptation invariably entails compromise on academic autonomy, freedom, mission, and vision, which would not be acceptable 'at home'. It establishes new parameters and ambiguities in the relationship between the parent and daughter organization and a consequent lack of clarity on the source of control, responsibility, and direction. This lack of clarity and compromise can result in unethical outcomes, such as discrimination, nepotism, corruption, inequality among the students, different academic standards, compromised assessment, and lower quality of teaching. The example below from Babson College' (USA) 'advanced structural' entry into Saudi Arabia illustrate these concerns:

'While [Mohsen] was on maternity leave, de Holan, the vice dean of academic affairs, changed an assignment grade that she had given to a student before going on leave – raising it from 72 percent to 87 percent. Mohsen objected, but email records show that de Holan dismissed her protests as a "senseless monologue" and told her that she was ignorant of the rules' (Vasquez, 2019).

If the international branch is in partnership with a local institution, ambiguity about control and responsibility can be even more damaging and undermine staff and student commitment and motivation. What is the global advantage if the new international unit fails to maintain the 'brand' standards or 'DNA' of the parent organization? Universities then have a choice not to enter into a 'advanced structural' venture, as Warwick University (UK) did in 2005, when it declined a generous financial offer from the Singapore Government to establish a campus there (OBHE, 2007b). A feasibility study undertaken by Warwick University raised concerns over the state of human rights and academic freedom in Singapore as well as financial risks and legal responsibilities. These risks and concerns outweighed a relatively positive financial forecast for the 'advanced structural' venture and prompted the academic community to be against establishing a branch campus.

Universities may have another option to consider in their pursuit of 'advanced structural' internationalization. A university may design a completely new organization, which may be in cooperation with a local foreign partner – a new organization that and which has no resemblance or association with the university home-based organization. To our knowledge, such an entity (empirical reality) has not been observed or documented yet. If it did, it would, by definition, be 'independent', and the sole rationale would be financial benefit to the 'owners'. It would in effect be a private enterprise difficult to distinguish from other 'private' providers. While it might be viable, the question remains in relation to the mission and standards of the part 'owner' – is it ethical?

Concluding thoughts

The above theoretical and empirical insights led us to the view that *'advanced structural' internationalization of universities is unethical*. In international business, ethical considerations have become increasingly prominent. It is not evident that this applies equally to university 'advanced structural' internationalization and yet the ethical dimension in education should be a core pre-occupation. Central to our concern about the ethics of establishing 'advanced structures' internationally is the quality of governance, remote management control, and lack of autonomy. The active support of governments in the home countries indicates the substantial political, soft power value of TNE coupled with revenue generation, which strengthen the sense of a strong element of neo-colonialism. Higher education has become a 'foreign direct investment' trade. However, it does not conform to normal trade expectations because there is no quid-pro-quo. To that extent, it could be said to represent an exploitation of the market on an unfair basis, because it is one sided and one way.

Our contention is that 'advanced structural' internationalization needs to be reappraised on the basis of an effective, transparent, governance structure, and responsibility, on whether it satisfies the four autonomy criteria and on the core values of a university, which may be expressed as the Humboldt ideal or its equivalent. Institutions maintain that their international 'advanced structures' is an integral feature of their internationalization mission, but since few universities have fully embedded and integrated internationalization in their curriculum, in their students and their staff, it is difficult not to have a sense of significant hypocrisy. The value system under which the 'advanced structure' operates and the implications of what it is achieving are obscured simply because there is no, inter alia, effective, engaged governing body in a position to scrutinize and raise awkward questions. Although there are genuine collaborative partnerships, they tend not to be partnerships of equals. Parity of treatment and esteem is lacking. No doubt, exceptions can be cited, but the general picture reflects the features, which we have identified.

There is more over a longer term issue. Examples can be cited of institutions, which have failed financially and withdrawn from agreements (Altbach, 2011; OBHE, 2007a; Sharma, 2012; Turcan and Gulieva, 2016a). The commitment of institutions to their 'advanced structures' is not of the same permanent nature as their commitment to their home institution. If market situations alter, then they might have little compunction in withdrawing. This is well understood locally. Consequently, the sort of embedding on a permanent basis in all aspects of the local community, which is increasingly an objective for universities in the international markets, does not happen. Indeed the nature of the relationship with the local community is prone to be superficial and undermined because ultimately the institution is there for other purposes. Moreover, prestigious universities with a high reputation do not tend to go to the poorest countries or the poorest regions, thus reinforcing the growth in inequality.

We see our conjecture as a warning for those universities that wish to pursue 'advanced structures' internationally. As current 'noise' from the field suggests, neither our conjecture nor the above insights will however refrain universities to continue 'jumping and riding the bandwagon' of internationalization of 'advanced structures' that are operationally and ethically challenging. It seems probable that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic will accelerate 'advanced structural' internationalization as universities seek to replace lost revenue from international student mobility and this may lead to a further erosion of ethical considerations.

We recognize that there will be howls of protest and that these views will be dismissed as unfounded, but unless international 'advanced structures' are fully integrated and committed to establish a genuinely autonomous institution, networked with, but independent of the home institution, their *raison d'être*, their sustainability and their ethical foundation remain in serious doubt.

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Notes

1. A notable example is Denmark that supports a partnership between Danish universities and the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the University of Chinese Academy of Sciences via Sino-Danish Centre (SDC, <https://sdc.university>), and donated approximately EUR 13M for SDC's new building (<https://bit.ly/36gvbPy>). Another example is Germany, through DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), which not only has an immense international outreach through its scholarship and exchange programs, but also sponsors German Universities abroad. Commenting on its objectives, DAAD notes that 'Partnerships between higher education institutions in Germany and their counterparts in developing countries complement development cooperation policies at the governmental level. Especially when political relations are strained, such projects can create alternative opportunities for German development cooperation beyond bilaterally negotiated agreements' (DAAD aad.de/der-daad).
2. The Boston College, Centre for International Higher Education and its associated journal 'International Education'; The Journal of Studies in International Education published on behalf of the European Association for International Education and the Association for Studies in International Education to name a few.
3. The EUA provides regularly updated 'Autonomy' scorecards for 29 European Higher Education systems. While this provides a helpful indicator and headings under which International Branch Campuses might be assessed, it is largely descriptive and does not probe in sufficient depth to reveal how in practice autonomy works. Nor does it take account of the extent to which, even in apparently highly autonomous systems, governments curtail the practice of universities' autonomy.

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John E. Reilly is a Higher Education consultant. He has extensive European and international experience working in and contributing to internationalization projects in Europe, Africa and the ASEAN countries. Other related interests in which he has worked and published include student mobility and credit recognition, curriculum development, university autonomy, and governance and management.