(Review Article)

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Globalization and the Student's Role in 21st Century Higher Education: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This literature review explores the impact of globalization on universities and how the role of the student has changed in 21st century higher education. It examines how global forces have changed learning environments and educational priorities for universities. The review also highlights the transformation of students from passive recipients of knowledge to active participants in their education and their communities, and global citizens. Drawing from the literature, the paper identifies key trends, such as the push for global competencies, the integration of technology enhanced learning, and the rise of student agency in academic and institutional decision making. The review shows that the student's role is central to the global redefinition of higher education.

1. Introduction

Higher education in the 21st century has been characterized by rapid transformation. With the advent of digital technology, globalization, and changing students' needs, higher education institutions have been continuously attempting to adapt to new challenges and opportunities. This literature review explores how globalization has influenced higher education, pedagogies, and expectations, and how all of this has impacted the role of the learner.

2. Globalization and Higher Education

Universities are now more interconnected through international partnerships and research collaborations than ever. This has led to a focus on developing global competencies, such as intercultural communication and multilingualism, among students (Guo et al., 2024). On the one hand, globalization has reshaped higher education by fostering increased mobility of students, faculty, and knowledge across borders (Meyer at al., 2011). On the other hand, it also presents challenges, including competition for international rankings, the commercialization of education, and concerns about the homogenization of academic values (Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2017; Khan et al., 2020; Sarpong & Adelekan, 2023).

2.1. Definition of Globalization

Globalization is described as the "the widening, deepening, and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness." (Held et al.,1999, cited in Johnstone, 2010, p.15). It is defined as the process of increasing integration of capital, technology, and information internationally with the goal of creating a growing integrated world market, with the direct consequence of giving countries no choice but to compete in the global economy (Salmi, 2000).The principle effect of globalization is transforming a society of nation states into a society of an open network where never ending information flows (Castells, n.d., as cited in Johnstone, 2010). This inevitably creates a clash between this networked borderless economy and the idea of culture since globalization is about states looking outward at the global market

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rather than inward at their people, history and cultures (Cloete ,2000). In fact; globalization can be seen in a positive light as a process of integration into the world economy, or in a more neutral light as a strategy of development through a rapid integration with the world economy. A more simplistic view is that of globalization as an expansion of economic activities beyond national boundaries (Nayyar, 2007). However, there is much more to the phenomenon beyond borderless economic activities. Globalization is about expanding economic transactions and openness and increasing economic interdependence and integration in the world economy. This process does not confine itself to trade, investment, and finance; it extends to flows of services, technology, information and even ideas moving across borders (Nayyar, 2007). It is seen as a socio- economic and technological process that has the tendency to blur or even diminish geopolitical borders and national systems. It is why essential to recognize that globalization is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that extends far beyond economy to politics, society, and culture (World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization, 2004, cited in Nayyar, 2007).

2.2. The Impact of Globalization on Higher Education

In any economy, education plays an integral role in the makeup of the social infrastructure and constitutes a crucial component of social consumption (Nayyar, 2007). In a world moving towards openness and recognizing the plurality of cultures and competing value systems, universities play an essential role in developing the knowledge, skills and values needed to enable students to become global citizens. Therefore, only through including global perspectives and education for sustainable development in universities can students attain a global citizenship education for the 21st century (Otter, 2007). Globalization increases the importance of higher education on many levels, first to individuals when it comes to earning power and social status, second to the larger society when it comes to global competition, economic prosperity, and civil society (Johnstone, 2010). The number of students in some form of higher education across the world has increased in the past century from an estimated 500,000 in the early 1900s to over 100 million in the early years of the 21st century (Daniel et al., 2006). Therefore, globalization and the global economic competition that accompanies it as well as the powerful bargaining position knowledge-based economies grant their states, the demand and need for both private and public higher education institutions have grown (Johnstone, 2010).

The two main elements of globalization that are particular to worldwide higher education are the open information space with quick and easy data transfer created by communications technologies, which make higher education and knowledge more thoroughly networked on a worldwide scale; and the domination of Anglo- American economic and cultural content in a number of areas, higher education included (Marginson, 2006). Globalization is greatly associated with a global market of universities led mainly by American Ivy Leagues, a one-way influence of American institutions on other countries and a brain drain from developing nations (Marginson, 2006).

While discussing the impact of globalization on higher education, the term internationalization is often used interchangeably with globalization (Knight, 2008). For higher education, internationalization refers to the integration of international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of higher education (Knight, 2008). This internationalization process has encouraged higher education institutions to extend and reinforce activities such as mobility of students and staff, training, and research programs beyond the domestic market. It has also encouraged institutions to incorporate international issues in their course topics at the local level in their research and publications. The role of academic institutions after all is to respond to socioeconomic demands of their communities, so it is expected that they would take into account the stakes of internationalization and globalization in teaching and research activities (Hatimi, 2018).

The spread of globalization has had a major impact on the world of higher education. Nayyar (2007) states that "market forces, driven by the threat of competition or the lure of profit have led to the emergence of higher education as business." (p.7). The rapid technological advancements changed the way education and knowledge is delivered not only in the national context but also in the cross-border international context. Globalization is transforming higher education to the extent that markets are shaping the content of higher education and influencing the institutions responsible for higher education (Nayyar, 2007). This influence goes beyond what is taught to include what is researched; choices of students are changing as well because of globalization. There is more demand for higher education that guarantees employment, and this pushes universities to introduce new courses and omit others based on what is popular. Professional higher education (engineering, management, medicine, and law) is impacted by globalization as its fields become increasingly internationalized which is coaxing a harmonization of academic programs with a more global context. Globalization also opened a number of new opportunities for distance higher education to flourish, thanks to technology progress and market forces (Nayyar, 2007). In order to keep up with the fast pace of change the world is experiencing due to globalizations, institutions of higher education are encouraged to take several steps listed by Johnstone (2010) as the following:

- Support language departments and faculty and emphasize second and third language proficiency in admission and especially in graduation requirements.
- Recognize and reward staffs' effort in reaching out to students and academics from abroad and helping in the process of admitting and integrating them in the life on campus and community.
- Provide real care and support to international students and recognize their importance beyond a metric of the institution academic sophistication.
- Offer support for students and staff to take part in international programs that are not only 'exotic junkets', but actual academic destinations with high learning expectations.
- Support substantial curriculum and department reorganization and restructuring with the goal of increasing the level of international and global scholarship.
- Recognize the real scholarly collaboration ventures and not just participate in any institutional agreement that comes from abroad. (p.23)

The higher education market is fully integrated at the global level. The training offered for students and faculty goes beyond the borders of their countries. Universities and all higher education institutions are required to situate themselves in a market that operates on a domestic and international level. This explains the significant growth of student mobility over the past decades (Hatimi, 2018). Between 2000 and 2011, the number of students taking part in international mobility programs had doubled; in 2013, the number of international students increased to 4.1 million, which is about 2% of the total number of students in the world. This number is expected to reach 7 million by 2020 (Altbach et al, 2009).

In a world of quickly growing economies and increased competition, higher education is one of the most important tools for both people and countries to thrive. According to Nayyar (2007), there is ample evidence that developing a physical infrastructure and a social infrastructure (education in particular) provides conditions to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of integration into the world economy in the process of globalization.

That is why it is extremely risky for countries that are considered latecomers to industrialization and development to penetrate the global economy without creating adequate conditions. The spread of education in society is of outmost importance since it is the key to creating capabilities among people. Higher education especially is what offers this advantage as it is the basis of development in underdeveloped countries. This was a lesson well learnt from the success stories of Asia in the second half of the 20th century. Now, in the 21st century, it has become evident that the wealth of nations and the well-being of humanity depend significantly on ideas and knowledge rather than on land, natural resources, and such (Nayyar, 2007).

3. The 21st Century Learner

The 21st century learner is characterized by unique attributes, skills, and needs shaped by the rapidly evolving technological, social, and economic landscapes of the modern world. The learners of today are digital natives, immersed in a world of instant information access and continuous connectivity (Hirschman & Wood, 2019). Therefore, it is important to understand the features of the 21st century learner and explore how advancements in technology, shifts in societal expectations, and the demands of a globalized economy have influenced their learning styles, preferences, and competencies.

3.1. The Learner's Role in Higher Education

There has been numerous research and debate about the role that students play in shaping higher education. There has been a variety of terms used to describe changing roles of the student in reference to their engagement, participation, and agency in higher education. Among these terms, the main ones are consumers, partners, co-creators, change agents, and producers. This terminology has been rapidly growing in popularity and seriousness as institutions use it more often for determining and advertising their mission (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019).

The concept of students as consumers has risen due to the introduction of fees and growing managerialism in the majority of western and western-style higher education systems (Singleton-Jackson et al., 2010). Demands for quality higher education have expanded because of the necessity for highly skilled, specialized professionals in a changing economic environment. The response of the university is to sell their degrees as a promise of social mobility and professional career opportunities because the notions surrounding the modern job market strongly associate employability to a degree from a prestigious university (Vuolo et al., 2016). Universities need to compete to attract funding from the government, industrial connections as well as from students. This is referred to as academic capitalism, which is defined as institutional and professional market or market-like efforts to secure external money (Slaughter &

Leslie, 1997). Viewing students as consumers positions them as actors in a free-market state where they adopt customer-like attitudes and behaviors and are considered as a source of revenue (Naidoo & Whitty, 2014). This concept or metaphor of students as consumers, therefore, creates a higher education where students pay fees and in return consume educational experiences to get a degree. This results in universities focusing on key performance indicators that keep track of students' existing consumption and the chance that they will consume again. While these indicators (e.g. students' degree of satisfaction) are relatively simple to note, doing so might come at the expense of a holistic understanding of the value of a university experience (Bunce et al., 2016). The concept of students as consumers has been criticized for positioning learning as a product rather than a process since it might encourage an entertainment model of learning in which educators must keep their students (consumers) happy and this can result in a detrimental effect on pedagogy and curricula (McCulloch, 2009).

The concept of students as producers came as a direct opposition to the traditional teacher centered "sage on the stage" model of higher education where students were considered nothing more than empty vessels that needed to absorb knowledge from their educators. The idea of students as producers challenges the status quo through the argument that all higher education knowledge is a co-production by those interacting in the university communities, students included (Light et al., 2009). According to McCulloch (2009), "co-production sees the student, lecturers and others who support the learning process as being engaged in a cooperative enterprise, which is focused on knowledge, its production, dissemination and application, and on the development of learners rather than merely skilled technicians." (p.181). Positioning students as producers, unlike positioning them as consumers, emphasizes the intellectual and experiential value students contribute to their own higher education, and it reinforces a collegial approach to learning (McCulloch, 2009). In the ever-changing landscape of higher education, including students' diverse experiences in production of knowledge can lead to create more inclusive and welcoming learning environments. Understanding the idea of students as producers goes beyond just supporting them to co-produce their learning, it is the core of the purpose of higher education itself.

Students as co-creators build on the concept of students as producers (McCulloch, 2009). Co-creation acknowledges students as knowledge producers and implies that their perspectives, ideas, opinions, and experiences are all valuable resources to invigorate higher education (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019). This challenges traditional ideas of students as dependent on knowledgeable instructors for engaging with what is taught and how. It asks for what is called radical collegiality, moving away from conventional hierarchical conceptions of expertise, in which students are considered as agents in the process of transformative learning. Such a shift begs the question of how academic developers may encourage academic staff to be open to democratic methods, to have higher expectations for students, and to encourage students to show more active engagement in their learning (Bovill et al., 2011). Co-creation and collaboration activities result in an ongoing dialogue between students and staff, from the initial design of the activity all the way to the output and final dissemination (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019; Bovill, 2020).

The idea of students as partners goes beyond the daily contributions students make to their higher education and to a fundamental re-envision of spaces of higher education (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Matthews, 2016). When students are viewed as partners, strategies that involve them as active participants in their own classroom learning and involved in all facets of university attempts to improve education are implemented. Students and faculty work together in a cooperative, reciprocal process that gives everyone involved the chance to contribute equally, if not always in the same ways, to the conception, decision-making, implementation, research, or analysis of curriculum or pedagogy. Since everyone participating—students, professors, professional services personnel, senior management, student unions, and so on—is actively involved in and stands to benefit from the process of learning and cooperating, this is ultimately a relational activity (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Partnership is considered radical in higher education institutions, which are hierarchical, since partnerships create spaces where power and exclusion are deconstructed and redressed (Matthews, 2016). Such a transformation is possible through the reconceptualization of the relationship between staff and students to become one of mutual empowerment among co-learners who bring higher education expertise that is although different is equally valuable (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019). Although achieving equality in the hierarchical context of higher education is rare, promoting equity is possible and more importantly, partnerships are made on basis of respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. Partnership practices include four categories: first, teaching, learning and assessment; second, scholarship of teaching and learning; third, curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy; and finally, subject-based research (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019).

Students as change agents is a role similar to a partner, with added emphasis on students' leadership and agency. While partnerships in higher education are initiated by staff and is reflected in the resulting scholarship, positioning students as change agents is at its core work that is initiated, designed and led by students (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019). University leaders are urged by many student change agents to act as responsible social actors who recognize that their actions have an impact both on and off campus. In short, these students see that either the institution or larger society

require change. Students who choose to get involved in institutional and community affairs have historically had a significant impact on their institutions and communities, according to numerous researchers (Altbach, 1999). Students have historically had a significant role in overthrowing governments, challenging conventional wisdom, and enacting change on a more local scale (Ropers-Huilman & McCoy, 2011). The importance of students' agency is reflected in examples such as those where they take responsibility to shape their own higher education experiences as valuable participants and agents (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019). Therefore, it is essential that instructors and institutions carry out the role of critics and conscious of society while establishing connections with student change agents and value their teaching, learning, and civic roles (Ropers-Huilman & McCoy, 2011).

4. Conclusion

Globalization has redefined higher education, demanding that institutions produce learners who are adaptable, globally aware, and capable of navigating complex environments. The literature reveals a growing emphasis on learner-centered approaches that empower students to take ownership of their education and engage meaningfully with local and global issues. As higher education continues to globalize, understanding the ever changing role or multiple roles of the student will be essential to ensuring that internationalization efforts are indeed transformative.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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