

Response by Maria Clar to Eva Egron-Polak

friday lecture, 20th April 2012

In my response to Eva Egron-Pollak, I would like to begin with some arguments relating to the importance of internationalization. I will then focus on a few aspects of the International Association of Universities (IAU) third global survey¹, namely the importance, the risks, and the internal obstacles of internationalization. Finally, I will comment on the missing gender aspect in the survey.

Internationalization is a crucial topic in higher education, especially in an academic career. Plenty of reasons can be mentioned why international communication, cooperation and mobilization are important. On a personal level, internationalization strengthens the individual personality development and self-fulfilment. Moreover it contributes life experience and broadens personal horizons. Internationalization opens up additional job-related and personal options, like learning and practising different languages. It offers the opportunity for an interchange of knowledge and an intercommunication of higher education systems and raises the awareness of how socialized and culturally constructed conventions and habits work. Lots of social fields, e.g. in economy, arts, and science or knowledge do not stop at national borders. Therefore, internationalization provides the chance to break down human-made, constraining and excluding borders.

Among the few selected aspects of the survey I would like to refer to is internationalization as an institutional focus. Both the Austrian Ministry for Science and Research and the University of Vienna underscore the importance of internationalization in their official statements as well as e.g. in the development plan University of Vienna 2013-2015 of the Rectorate. One result of the IAU survey is that the most important reason for internationalization is the improvement of student preparedness for a globalized and internationalized world. In Europe, the second most frequent answer by Higher Education institutions is “enhanced international profile and reputation” and it is especially this second answer which can be found in the

¹ Egron-Polak, Eva / Ross Hudson (2010): Internationalization of Higher Education: Global Trends Regional Perspectives – the IAU 3rd Global Survey Report, Paris: IAU, 2010

development plan of the University of Vienna². Sadly, this is not a big surprise because one of the biggest risks of internationalization of higher education is the commodification of education, which leads me to the risks of internationalization and furthermore the barriers students are confronted with. I especially want to concentrate on students who are regular students in Austria and want to go abroad. In contrast to these, students without Austrian citizenship have other problems to face, for example nostrification, work permission or visa approval, which I will not discuss now.

In the IAU survey the most given answer to the question of the most important potential risk is “no reply”, followed by “commodification and commercialization of education programmes”, “brain drain” and “increase in number of foreign >>degree mills<< or low quality providers”. In my opinion “no reply” as the most frequent response is in fact an interesting reply when talking about risks. Does it mean that there are no risks that can be seen? Or is it common sense to talk about internationalization only in a positive way or because of the given importance to “repress” the risks?

Commodification of higher education is strongly connected with the other answers. This term stands for the competition to form an elite, to be in top positions in international rankings and to fight for the best financial and economic opportunities. In this model, inherent to the capitalistic system, there have to be winners and thus also losers. Therefore, higher education institutions are forced to recognize what is best for the market, which often means to neglect non-mainstream, alternative and critical elements and perspectives of education. One example of this trend is the abolition of the study programme “International Development” at the University of Vienna³. The official reason given is that there is no more money for funding the existing bachelor for the next years. However, I doubt that this is the only reason. When talking about the importance of internationalization it is inconsistent to abandon exactly that field of study with the most outspoken internationalization aspect and with the highest number of students going abroad⁴. One of the biggest risks of the international competition is that it leads to a stronger focus on profitability and not on knowledge per se. In my opinion, it

² Vgl. Entwicklungsplan Universität Wien 2015, <http://www.univie.ac.at/rektorenteam/ug2002/entwicklung.pdf> S. 8-9 [15.04.2012]

³ Vgl. <http://ie.univie.ac.at/das-institut/geschichte/chronik/> [15.04.2012] sowie <http://derstandard.at/1334795988321/Uni-Wien-W-IE-derstand-fuer-Bachelor-geht-weiter> [15.04.2012]

⁴ Vgl. Unger, Martin et al : Internationale Mobilität. Zusatzbericht der Studierenden-Sozialerhebung 2009, Studie im Auftrag des Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Forschung , BMWF, Juli 2010 (Studie des Instituts für Höhere Studien, IHS) http://ww2.sozialerhebung.at/Ergebnisse/PDF/sozialerhebung_2009_internationale_mobilitaet.pdf

is dangerous to use internationalization for measuring reputation and quality. Any development in this direction may result in the centralization of knowledge and therefore the neglect of academic plurality.

As far as internal obstacles to internationalization are concerned, “Insufficient financial resources” is the most frequently given answer for internal barriers in the IAU survey. This is congruent with the data from the Student Social Survey, especially with the additional research report of international mobility⁵. In this report a number of differentiations are made – one is to distinguish between students who already studied a semester abroad, students who are planning to have a semester abroad and students who are not at all planning to go abroad. One semester is most common in international mobilization – this is why there is a focus on it in the report. All three groups name financial resources as the biggest problems of going abroad. Furthermore, students who completed a semester abroad mention barriers in house hunting, falling back in their studies in Austria, and problems in transferring their courses. Students, who are planning a semester abroad, assert that there is a lack of information on how to get financial support or how to find accommodation and a lack of information on different studies abroad. Students who are not planning to go abroad list fear of losing time for their study in Austria, incompatibility with family, relationship or children and maintenance or leaving of their flat in Austria as the biggest barriers beyond the financial problem. In most cases there is more than one reason given – mostly four. In all groups especially female students, students over the age of 30 and students with a lower financial background in their families are faced with financial problems when going abroad for a while.

I would like to mention that there is no perspective on gender or class in the IAU survey. In fact it is really difficult to find literature about internationalization of higher education relating to gender. But I do not think this is because there is no need for research in this respect. Looking at the Student Social Survey one recognizes differences between women and men as well as differences among people with different social and financial backgrounds in their families. Female students go abroad more often – part time or for working experiences or

⁵ Vgl. Unger, Martin et al : Internationale Mobilität. Zusatzbericht der Studierenden-Sozialerhebung 2009, Studie im Auftrag des Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Forschung , BMWF, Juli 2010 (Studie des Instituts für Höhere Studien, IHS)
http://ww2.sozialerhebung.at/Ergebnisse/PDF/sozialerhebung_2009_internationale_mobilitaet.pdf
[15.04.2012]

language courses. Exceptions are researchers – in this case there are more male students who go abroad and on average they also stay longer. Research abroad is often important for an academic career and interestingly, this is the only form of international mobility with more male than female students. So, summing up this is not only an interesting research topic but actually a topic which should be focussed on much more.

Finally, I consider it important to emphasize that every single person should be given the same chances for going abroad. We should plead for internationalization in terms of academic and social exchange and in terms of getting to know other people, other languages and other ways of doing science. This should happen with a focus on alternative systems and plurality but not on the question of what is best for the market and it should happen without focus on the profitability of higher education for an economic system.