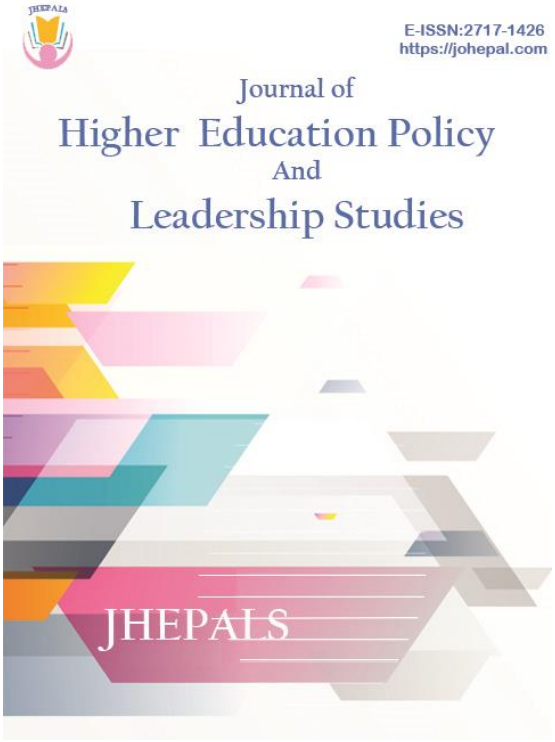
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Embracing Diversity for the Betterment of Mankind: An Interview with Prof. Robert Coelen

Robert Coelen

NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences, NETHERLANDS

Email: robert.coelen@nhlstenden.com

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Robert Coelen *



Robert Coelen is Professor of Internationalisation of Higher Education at NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands, Director of the Centre for Internationalisation of Education at the University of Groningen (in collaboration with his university), and Visiting Professor at Research Institute of Higher Education, Tongji University and at the International Teacher Centre of East China Normal University. Prior to these appointments, he was Vice-President International at Leiden University, and senior executive on internationalisation at The University of Queensland and James Cook University in Australia, especially focused on the recruitment of international students. He has worked for about 25 years as a university executive in the field of international education after a successful Australian career in Molecular Virology.

Prof. Coelen is Associate Editor of the Journal of International Students and on the review board of the Journal of Studies in International Education. He regularly reviews manuscripts for another 5 international journals. Presently he co-supervises 10 PhD students in the Centre for Internationalisation of Education at the University of Groningen. His research interests centre around various sources of diversity including national and/or ethnic diversity and the impact this has on individuals, institutions, and society at large. Robert publishes regularly and has edited books on local and global internationalisation, internationalisation and employability, and most recently on design-based education.

https://www.nhlstenden.com/en/research/internationalisation-higher-education

Keywords: Embracing Diversity; Neo-Nationalism; Brexit; Global Tension; International Collaboration

*Corresponding author's email: robert.coelen@nhlstenden.com

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Interview

It is an honor and privilege for us to host Prof. Robert Coelen as a globally renowned scholar and higher education leader whose research, books, talks, interviews, and notes are extensively cited and acknowledged throughout the world with a research/ professional focus on *Internationalization of Higher Education, Global Mobility in HE,* and *Globalization*.

There is no doubt that all scholars and researchers worldwide are experiencing new challenges within this new era of Covid-19; hence, they might have much academic and administrative commitments to handle. We- at the Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies- understand our esteemed authors and researchers' tough professional schedule; in this regard, we appreciate Prof. Coelen's commitment to accept our invitation for March Issue (2022) interview.

We are sure that Prof. Coelen's insightful, illuminating and critical responses to the following questions will be of interest to a broad audience of international researchers, students, policymakers, and leaders in Higher Education.

Question #1

How will phenomenon such as the rise of a new nationalism in Europe affect the direction of internationalization in European higher education institutions? What will be the central orientation(s) of the HEIs policies?

Answer:

There is little doubt, that in a number of European countries neo-nationalistic political parties are on the rise. Whilst neo-nationalism as an ideology and political movement is built on classical nationalism, the main feature of neo nationalistic parties is an anti-immigrant policy (Eger & Valdez, 2015). The neo-nationalistic movements have arrived at their current form by applying aspects with a reactionary character aimed at the changes that were brought about by globalisation (of which immigration in heretofore unknown numbers is an important part) (Holston & Appadurai, 1996; Beck & Sopp, 1997). There are other worrying aspects of neo-nationalism apart from their xenophobic rhetoric and these include economic protectionism, attacks on critics, denial of scientific evidence for climate change, and not the least the anti-vaccination movement and the denial of the existence of SARS-COV-2, which I, as a former molecular virologist, find outright idiotic.

As Douglass points out in his book on neo-nationalism and universities (Douglass, 2021), universities have been at the forefront of national development and global integration, but are doing this today in an environment that, due to the recent SARS-COV-2 pandemic, has allowed populists, demagogues, and autocrats to further consolidate their power. Indeed, universities are 'a vehicle for socioeconomic mobility', of importance in virtually all countries of the world, and 'of technological innovation and economic development'. Their graduates sustain essential public institutions, viz. schools, hospitals and governmental organisations (Douglass, 2021).

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Let me only deal with the anti-immigration sentiment of neo-nationalists by way of example as to how damaging this could be to the very lives of these very same neo-nationalists. Although anecdotally, I have become aware how irrational these people can be as they are wheeled into accident and emergency departments of our hospitals recently. Whilst they are in severe respiratory distress, they still claim that SARS-COV-2 does not exist and could not possibly the cause of what they are suffering at that time. To the attending medical personnel this must seem extremely strange, given that patients with these symptoms consistently test positive for the presence of this virus. The arguments that can be made for promoting global collaboration for mankind's progress are most likely also lost on them.

The global shortage of university graduates is becoming an increasingly significant problem. A report by Binvel et al. (2018) foreshadows a global talent deficit of more than 85 million people by 2030. Indeed, in countries with low unemployment and booming manufacturing production the use of robotics is rapidly increasing, not to replace people, but to overcome labor shortages. Such talent shortage not only affects unrealised economic output in the short-term, but more significantly will lead to stunted growth and ultimately a decline in living standards not just for the working population, but also those who have already retired. Indeed, much of the forecasted shortage can be attributed to simple demographics of low birth rates over the last few decades. Notwithstanding the current war that is waged on the Ukraine by Russia, by 2030 that country is predicted to have a labor shortage of 6 million people. China could be facing a shortage of 12 million or more talented workers. There are other countries (e.g., Japan, Brazil, and Indonesia) that potentially face a shortfall up to 18 million people. These shortages, along with a shift towards more knowledge intensive industries requiring about half the global workforce to upskill by 2025 (Zahidi et al., 2020).

Assuming universities choose a rational approach in countries where they have the freedom and autonomy to do so, they must continue to embrace internationalisation as a mechanism to counter forces that would have us dismantle globalisation. Innovation has its roots in diversity, more specifically in diverse teams. More than once it has been posited that effective diverse teams are at the basis of mankind's progress. The source of diversity need not necessarily be national or ethnic in origin, although Kwiek (2015) showed in an extensive analysis that international collaboration between scholars was between 2x and 9x more likely to result in publication compared to local collaboration only. Indeed, more recently he showed (Kwiek, 2021) how European science showed a shift away from national collaboration towards more international collaboration (Kwiek, 2021). However, as Uzzi and coworkers (2013) demonstrated, the most highly cited and impactful papers in an analysis comprising more than 18 million published articles, shared two features. One was that they were deeply rooted in a discipline, but secondly that an unusual intrusion (from another discipline) occurred. I believe that the most essential aspect of (cognitive) diversity in a team is one that results in a wider perspective taking approach to a challenge. Indeed, some challenges require a disciplinary diverse team to overcome all aspects. It would be almost impossible to imagine a team of medical doctors alone to develop an application of laser speckle contrast imaging in laparoscopic surgery (Heeman et al., 2019), this requires other disciplines to achieve, an aspect that is obvious from the disciplinary backgrounds of the

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authors of this paper. It is useful here to think of the concept of task-relevant diversities. Given that universities are at the forefront of mankind's development it follows that they must continue along the path they have chosen and to remain committed to international and interdisciplinary collaboration. The former most certainly requires cross-border traffic of people, ideas, and goods (globalisation). We cannot stop now and more than ever do we need to collaborate internationally, especially to head off the disaster of global warming that is bearing down on us now.

Question #2

How did/will Brexit influence higher education policies and practices in European sphere?

Answer:

Brexit, in my opinion was caused by an anti-immigration sentiment, together with arguments about sovereignty, the economy, and other points. In a way, the arguments contained neo-nationalistic characteristics. Unfortunately for higher education, it was closely followed by the SARS-COV-2 pandemic. Indeed, already before the official start date of Brexit (1 Feb 2020), the first infections with this virus were already recorded in China (December 2019). This ultimately resulted in a double calamity for UK universities. Whilst attempts were made to mitigate the immediate effects of Brexit in terms of student enrolment, at the end of the academic year 20/21 EU/EEA and Swiss students lost their 'home fee status'. Already before that time the SARS-COV-2 started to spread globally. The World Health Organisation declared it a pandemic by March 11, 2020, and less than a fortnight later the UK declared a national lockdown.

International student participation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic was reduced, more so for credit mobility than whole degree mobility. The notion of an online virtual semester abroad was not very appealing, whilst this had a lesser effect for full degree international students. Nevertheless, the Brexit also caused the loss of European students as they were not able to participate in higher education exchange through Erasmus+. Whilst the UK government continues to fund outgoing credit mobility through the Turing Scheme, this does not provide reciprocal funding for the same mobility into the UK. Whilst it is being touted as a replacement for Erasmus+, an important element is missing (inbound credit mobility support).

In terms of research, particularly the participation in Horizon Europe, with its total budget of more than 95 billion Euros, a deal is to be struck allowing UK universities to participate. Indeed, for the first call for this program UK universities were already allowed to join. Sensitive areas of research, such as quantum computing and space were initially excluded in this scheme but are now judged on a case-by-case basis. Longer term stays in the UK for researchers and students from the EU are more lenient than for other third country citizens and are covered by an EU directive. Short-terms stays are still visa free. Thus, there appears to be a relatively mild effect on international collaboration with the EU for research. As far

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as Brexit is concerned, I consider there to be only higher education losers on both sides of the North Sea and presently activities are being rescued as much as we can.

Question #3

How do you think universities can prevent new global tensions and conflicts (such as those between Russia and Ukraine)? Can universities prevent a new world war? How?

Answer:

Global tensions, potentially leading to openly expressed conflicts, whether they are arising within the national or international context, are very much borne out of either a group or a category of people wanting to impose their will on others in an attempt to ensure assimilation or they arise out of ignorance what diversity can bring in terms of benefits (Page, 2016). At the end of the day, we all live on one planet and if we do not take care of it for the benefit of all mankind, we all lose, whether we have successfully imposed our will on others or not. If we all lose it'll take nature to rebalance the use of this planet by way of evolution, the way it had before mankind did its level best to 'improve' on nature. I was educated as a biologist with a strong emphasis on ecology and how nature had finely tuned biodiversity to take the best advantage of what the local environment provided as challenges to the species that lived within such environs. As always, we can take our lessons from nature and ensure that diverse teams can operate in an ecological way. If you like, when teams have good team ecology, members of a team can utilise their skills, insights, and perspectives in relation to the environment (read ''challenge' in a context) that is in the task at hand to ensure the best possible outcome.

What can universities contribute to prevent global tensions and conflicts? I believe they have a major role to play in this scenario. We need to be active in demonstrating the benefits of national and international harmony. We need to lead by example. This is why all attempts to restore, as much as is possible, the negative effects of Brexit is worthwhile. We should be extolling the virtues of diverse teams. Herein lies a major challenge, namely, to work in an interdisciplinary way.

Whilst I have long been an advocate of internationalisation (and I still am by the way), there are sources of diversity other than national and/or ethnic, that maybe more important in various disciplines. In a recent analysis of the aims of working groups of the Businet organisation (Businet, 2022) by way of a simple word frequency analysis, two important words appeared in the top 10, namely interdisciplinary and internationalisation. This comes as no surprise, given that this organisation is concerned, amongst other activities, with the development of curricula of business programs. In the practice of business, collaboration at the international and interdisciplinary interfaces are very important. Equally, it would not be difficult to see what the most important source of diversity would be in programs under the umbrella of women's studies. It might be a bit harder to fathom what this would be for molecular biology. Fortunately, one of the PhD students at the Centre for Internationalisation of Education, is looking into this question. The answer is waiting and if

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we have it, I would hope that universities go further in allowing multi-disciplinary teams of students to work on real-world problems. Indeed, this could also be multi-national teams, provided that the task at hand addresses the available diversity in such teams. Universities should therefore lead by example and allow different sources of diversity to flourish to create superior outcomes. This can only happen if we re-think how we educate our students, going from bastions that are called disciplines, to playing fields where players descend from their bastion and join others in collecting and acting on various perspectives on a challenge.

There should be no harm in expressing different perspectives, this is part of human nature. It certainly ensures that if they are embraced, teams will produce better outcomes. For the last two decades for example, McKinsey and Company have shown a very good association between embracing diversity (in the world of work) and a better economic performance (Dolan et al., 2020). Dogged determination to stick to some insights regardless of the environment has cost many a business dearly. Just as empires rise and fall. Ultimately, I believe the fall to be due to insufficient appreciation of the cognitive diversity that would be available if all participants in an empire or business were able to express their perspectives, even if this included a perspective not to want to belong to that empire or business anymore and to be able to act on it. Universities per se cannot prevent new tensions and conflicts, but they do have a role to play. I hope I have made that clear.

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