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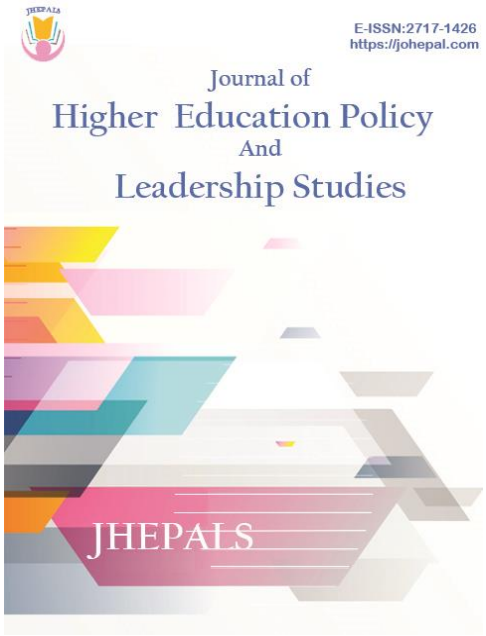

Internationalisation and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Higher Education: The Promise of Internationalism and the Danger of Positionalism

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Abstract

This article explores the emerging logics of internationalisation in higher education and the pursuit of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Drawing upon the work of Jonas Stier, it outlines the historical and philosophical aspects of internationalisation - particularly internationalism, educationalism, and instrumentalism - and shows how these can lead to what varieties of higher education internationalism. As academic institutions adapt to a changing global context where market and sustainability logics intertwine, this exploration reveals how new logics prioritise sustainability, equity, and social responsibility as goals linked to internationalisation agendas for higher education institutions (HEIs). However, this paper also raises the danger of HEIs' seeking sustainability merely as a positional good, leading to positionalism, which leads to the performance of sustainability for ranking and reputational purposes rather than for making contributions to the global commons. The paper offers insights into how new perspectives on internationalism could lead to an alignment of academic work with global sustainability objectives, fostering a collective commitment to creating positive and lasting impacts on a global scale.

Keywords: Higher Education; Internationalism; International Policy; Positionalism; Rankings; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Internationalisation Logics in Higher Education

The internationalisation of higher education has undergone significant transformations over the past few decades, driven by various socio-political, economic, and technological factors. Understanding the evolution of internationalisation logics because while there is stability with previous 'logics' there are also important changing dynamics within higher education systems. Major shifts in these logics have seen the understanding of HE internationalisation shift from an indicator of HE excellence, to 'credentialisation', to commodification, and also as a feature of global citizenship. This article traces the historical development of internationalisation logics, examining key theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence to unpack the complex processes shaping higher education on an international scale.

A Historical Evolution: Early Approaches to Modern Internationalisation

In the post-World War II era, internationalisation efforts in higher education primarily focused on academic mobility and exchange programs aimed at fostering cross-cultural understanding and cooperation (Altbach & Knight, 2007). The emphasis was on student and faculty exchanges, with limited attention paid to broader institutional strategies or global competitiveness. This period was characterised by a relatively narrow conception of internationalisation, primarily driven by diplomatic and cultural considerations rather than economic imperatives.

Transition to 'Globalisation' Paradigm

The late 20th century witnessed a paradigm shift in internationalisation logics, as many higher education institutions increasingly embraced globalisation agendas driven by neoliberal economic policies (Marginson, 2011). This was catalysed by some national and regional policymakers' desire to participate in the 'global knowledge economy' (Jessop, 2012) through world class universities. A variety of important policy actors, including international consultants, education businesses, economists, education agents, and ranking organisations were actors that played roles in these processes (Lim, 2018; Lim, 2023).

The interest in globalisation agendas was accompanied by a wave of academic interest, and important work was done and manifested in the foundation of academic journals such as *Globalisation, Societies and Education,* among others, as a space to discuss these trends. Universities were conceptualised as organisational actors (Krucken & Meier, 2006) and they began to view internationalisation as a means to enhance their competitive advantage in the global knowledge economy, focusing on attracting international students, establishing branch campuses, and forging strategic partnerships with overseas institutions. This era saw the emergence of market-oriented approaches to internationalisation, which spread from liberal market economies to others with historically less marketised HE systems. There was an increased emphasis on revenue generation, brand expansion, and rankings enhancement (Knight, 2008; Lim, 2018).

Contemporary Trends and Challenges in HE internationalisation

HE internationalisation logics have gradually become more nuanced and multifaceted, reflecting the complex interplay of geopolitical, technological, and socio-cultural forces (de Wit, 2019). While economic considerations remain important, there is growing recognition of the need to balance market-driven strategies with broader social and educational

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objectives, such as promoting global citizenship and addressing transnational challenges like climate change and inequality. Furthermore, digital technologies, especially in the wake of the COVID pandemic, have transformed the landscape of international HE by facilitating online learning, enabling virtual forms of mobility, and allowing more cross-border collaboration (Laufer et al, 2021).

The evolution of internationalisation logics in higher education reflects broader shifts in the global political economy and the changing nature of knowledge production and dissemination. One shift has been the 'market turn': internationalisation of HE moved from a form of cultural diplomacy to being seen as a tool for economic competitiveness and global engagement. However, there are important counter-examples to this, where international HE very much plays a more socio-political role.

The concept of internationalisation is therefore multifaceted, encompassing a diverse array of strategies, initiatives, and objectives adopted by higher education institutions. Moving forward, HEIs and policymakers will need to adopt more holistic approaches to internationalisation that balance economic, social, and also ethical considerations. It is this respect that internationalisation should be considered not only to serve political agendas of HE leaders or universities as organisations but also to recognise the shifting and expanding priorities of the university community constituents: students, academic workers, and local communities among others. These shifts have the potential - although uncertain - to contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable global higher education ecosystem.

The Logics of Internationalisation: A Philosophical Approach

I draw upon the ideas of cultural anthropologist Jonas Stier (2004, 2006) to deepen the discussion about international HE. Instead of thinking about the historical trends and transformations regarding the nature of international HE, he argues rather for a more philosophical perspective and puts forward three 'isms' that describe the purposes of HE internationalisation: idealism, educationalism, and instrumentalism.

Stier's first ism, idealism, suggests that internationalisation is inherently positive. It emphasises understanding global conditions and injustices, and promotes an inclusive worldview. Idealists believe in advocating for fair global resource distribution and ensuring decent living standards for everyone. They would see internationalisation as an integral element of tolerance for and respect among students - and people in general - in a global community, contributing to a more democratic and equitable world.

Each 'ism' is also subject to critique. The idealistic view has the potential to lead to arrogance and reinforcement of ethnocentric attitudes - a certain and specific kind of inclusion. It may perpetuate the belief that Western cultures have superior knowledge to impart, while devaluing the competencies of others and portraying large parts of the world as victims. Some view internationalisation as a tool for imposing Western values and asserting global dominance - as 'Westernisation' in other words and thus not at all a good in the way it is often conceptualised and practised.

Educationalism emphasises learning for personal and societal growth beyond mere practical application. It values exposure to diverse cultures as a transformative learning experience, fostering intercultural competence and respect. Education is seen as a good in itself - as an element of individual development or *bildung*. However, this focus on individual

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development can overlook systemic issues by overly focusing on individual education as a solution to global problems.

The former 'isms' begin from the standpoint in which internationalisation and education are both seen as goods in themselves and that they are social ends rather than means. Accepting these positions means that public and private resources should be directed to producing and supporting international education, regardless of the cost.

In contrast, instrumentalism views internationalisation as a means to an end, to achieve profit, economic growth, or other goals. Employers increasingly seek professionals with multilingualism and cultural competence, valuing practical skills applicable in diverse contexts. Instrumentalists see education as a way to prepare a skilled workforce for the global market, focusing on competencies with immediate applicability. This view of international HE is not positive or negative in itself. Stier (2006) himself argues that instrumentalist interpretation views international HE as a means to achieve sustainable development - which requires cooperation across national borders.

However, an instrumentalist view can also render international and intercultural education as a valuable commodity (Stier, 2010). If taken further, this approach can lead to a lack rather than a build up of global solidarity, as more advanced nations sell education and where advantageous retain talent from less affluent countries. International education can then lead to the flow of material and human resources from the Global South to the Global Nouth in the form of brain drain, commercialisation of HE credentials, and extraction of data and value from the Global South contexts for use by Global North universities.

The increased scale of internationalisation has also been accompanied by the spread and wide use of global league tables and university rankings. These are used by university managers as a way to cement advantage, by some academics as a way to screen students and collaborators and by international students as a guarantee of a return on investment. Rankings have increasingly affected the way we think of individual universities and also of national university systems (Lim and Williams Oerberg, 2017). I argue here that they can also lead to the promotion of a new '-ism' in international HE: (sustainability) positionalism.

Although rankings are criticised by academics and many universities do not have ranking positions as explicit targets in their mission statements, the effects that rankings have on the behaviour and priorities of university managers and workers is unmistakable. Numerous studies have also shown the important role they play for international students who claim to need more information about distant universities than can be provided by rankings (Hazelkorn, 2011).

Conceptually, I propose that *positionalism is the understanding of international HE as inherently hierarchical and that a high position is in itself a good*. However few universities would admit to such a philosophical stance. Nevertheless, position and rank appears important to many HE institutions. It is much more likely that a high position is seen as an end for which international education is an end. Instrumentalism as a logic of international HE encompasses a range of ends: market gains, high ranking but also sustainable development. There are certainly many ways to understand university strategies in this light. Moving forwards, can the SDGs be seen as an end in itself? Can sustainability be understood as an end or good in itself - a new 'sustainabilism' as a logic of internationalisation?

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Evolution of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Their Adoption in Higher Education

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are by now quite well known in the field of higher education. The framework consists of 17 interconnected goals, ranging from zero poverty to strong and stable institutions. There are 169 targets embedded in these goals, covering a wide range of issues, including gender equality, climate action, and quality education (United Nations, 2015). They were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 and represent a global commitment to address pressing socio-economic and environmental challenges by 2030. However, the underlying elements of these goals had already been present in university agendas - as part of the earlier Millenium Development Goals (United Nations, 2015), and also as part of university mission statements that recognised social responsibility.

The SDGs provide a framework for concerted action across diverse sectors, including education. And while awareness of the SDG challenges is longstanding, the adoption of SDGs has prompted a reevaluation of institutional missions and priorities, as universities strive to align their activities with the broader agenda of sustainable development.

The adoption of the SDGs has catalysed efforts to mainstream sustainability principles in higher education curricula, research, and campus operations (Ashida, 2022). Universities around the world have embraced the SDGs as a guiding framework for their activities, incorporating sustainability themes into disciplinary programs, establishing research centres focused on sustainable development, and implementing campus-wide initiatives to reduce carbon emissions and promote environmental stewardship (Ashida, 2022). Moreover, the SDGs have become a focal point for international collaborations and partnerships, as universities seek to leverage their expertise and resources to advance the global sustainability agenda (Leal Filho et al, 2020).

Despite the growing momentum behind the integration of SDGs in higher education, several challenges remain. These include the need for greater coordination and coherence in sustainability efforts, the incorporation of marginalised voices and perspectives in decision-making processes, and the measurement and evaluation of progress towards SDG targets (Ashida, 2022). For universities to achieve SDG targets would entail that they foster interdisciplinary collaboration, community engagement, and innovative pedagogical approaches to address complex sustainability challenges (Leal Filho et al, 2020).

My own previous work with colleagues for the Asia Europe Foundation examined higher education policies promoting sustainable development across Asia and Europe. It has been the first to generate data regarding how national level ministry representatives set policies to achieve the SDGs in their HE sectors (Lim et al., 2023). The study covered 31 national contexts (in Asia and Europe), analysing data from surveys, focus groups, and secondary sources to understand how governments are encouraging higher education institutions (HEIs) to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The study also presents concrete examples of enabling measures and identifies opportunities to strengthen the interface between policy and practice towards the SDGs. We extended our analysis in partnership with the International Association of Universities (IAU) and its Global Survey on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD) to

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investigate, for their part, the HEIs' engagement with the SDGs. This brought together 240 institutional responses from 42 countries in Asia and Europe.

Together, these studies showed that a majority (although not all) countries have developed strategies and implementation plans for the SDGs in HE and employ various policy tools to strengthen HEI contributions to sustainable development (ibid). However, there is a gap between national policies and institutional actions, particularly in monitoring and follow-up. The analysis of the responses from universities reveals that they emphasise an integrated understanding of economic, environmental, and social/cultural perspectives in sustainable development. However, there are national as well as regional (ie between Europe and Asia) differences in knowledge levels, challenges, and priorities related to sustainable development (ibid).

Marketisation and Sustainability in Higher Education

One particular challenge - and perhaps opportunity - for the expansion of sustainability is how it is aligned with the context specific marketised logics of HE sectors. It is well known that the logic of capitalism has profoundly influenced the structure and governance of higher education in many countries, particularly in the context of market-oriented reforms and neoliberal policies (Marginson, 2016). Under a wave of 'neoliberal' policy waves, universities are increasingly viewed as economic entities competing for students, research funding, and prestige in a global marketplace (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009). This marketisation of higher education has led to the commodification of knowledge, the rise of performance metrics and rankings (Lim, 2018), and the proliferation of market-driven approaches to teaching, research, and administration (Marginson, 2016). While these trends have contributed to increased efficiency and innovation, they have also arguably generated concerns about the erosion of academic values, inequality, and social stratification within higher education systems (Giroux, 2014).

The relationship between capitalism and sustainability in higher education is complex and multifaceted, reflecting broader tensions between economic imperatives and environmental concerns. While capitalism has historically driven growth and innovation in higher education, its prioritisation of profit and performance in competition often conflicts with the principles of sustainability, which prioritise long-term ecological integrity and social equity (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009). However, it should also be recognised that sustainability itself is increasingly linked to competitiveness and economic outcomes.

In contrast to the profit-driven logic of capitalism, Leal Filho et al (2021) argue that the principles of sustainability call for a more holistic and inclusive approach to university governance and development. Sustainability in higher education encompasses environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and economic viability, with an emphasis on meeting the needs of present and future generations without compromising the environment (Ashida, 2022).

Universities play a critical role in advancing sustainability through education, research, campus operations, and community engagement, serving as catalysts for innovation and social change (Lozano et al., 2021). Our research confirms that many HEIs and governments in Europe and Asia accept that these goals are within the remit of their HE sectors' missions and visions (Lim et al., 2023). However, achieving sustainability goals in higher education

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requires overcoming entrenched institutional practices, power dynamics, and economic interests that prioritise the short-term over the long-term. Our own research indicated that even where there is the desire to implement more sustainable practices, a lack of resources and trained practitioners are significant obstacles (Lim et al., 2023).

However, there remain significant intersections and synergies between sustainability, equity, and social responsibility in higher education policy. For example, efforts to promote sustainability often involve addressing social and economic inequalities and advancing social justice (Leal Filho et al, 2020). Likewise, initiatives to enhance equity and diversity in higher education can contribute to building more resilient and inclusive communities that are better equipped to address sustainability challenges (Steele & Rickards, 2021). By integrating sustainability, equity, and social responsibility into higher education policy and practice, institutions can foster a culture of responsibility and citizenship that prepares students to engage with complex global issues and contribute to positive social change (Lozano et al., 2021). What can be further explored is the relationship of sustainability with the aspect of internationalisation in HE.

Promoting Sustainability Through Internationalisation

Higher education institutions are increasingly recognising the interdependence of sustainability and internationalisation, viewing them as *complementary frameworks* for addressing global challenges and fostering positive social change. The integration of sustainability and internationalisation in higher education reflects a holistic approach to addressing complex global issues, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality (Ashida, 2022). By combining sustainability principles with internationalisation initiatives, universities can leverage their expertise, resources, and networks to promote environmental stewardship, cross-cultural understanding, and global citizenship among students, faculty, and staff (Lozano et al., 2021). This integration involves a multifaceted approach that encompasses curriculum development, research collaboration, student mobility, and community engagement, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and innovative solutions to sustainability challenges (Leal Filho et al, 2020).

At first glance, the scale of international travel linked to international HE might make it seem like internationalisation and sustainability are irreconcilable goals. But international travel is not the only form of internationalisation and the reduction of travel emissions is not the only form or pathway to sustainability.

Higher education institutions are implementing a variety of innovative strategies to promote sustainability through internationalisation. These include the development of transdisciplinary sustainability curricula that integrate global perspectives and experiential learning opportunities, such as study abroad programs focused on sustainable development and environmental conservation (Ashida, 2022). Universities are also forging international research partnerships and networks to address sustainability-related issues, conducting collaborative research projects, and sharing best practices and knowledge across borders (Leal Filho et al, 2020). Moreover, there is a growing emphasis on embedding sustainability principles into campus operations and infrastructure (Lim et al., 2023), with initiatives to reduce carbon emissions, promote renewable energy, and enhance resource efficiency (Lozano et al., 2021).

[DOI: 10.61186/johepal.5.2.22]

While the integration of sustainability and internationalisation presents significant opportunities for higher education institutions, it also poses challenges, including logistical, cultural, and institutional barriers (Ashida, 2022). These may include limited funding and resources, competing priorities, and differences in academic cultures and practices across countries and regions. However, there are also opportunities for innovation and collaboration, as universities leverage their collective expertise and networks to address sustainability challenges on a global scale (Leal Filho et al, 2020). By fostering cross-cultural dialogue, knowledge exchange, and collaborative problem-solving, higher education institutions can play a critical role in advancing sustainability and internationalisation goals and contributing to the achievement of the SDGs (Lozano et al., 2021).

Sustainability Through Internationalisation in the 'Global South'

Higher education institutions in the Global South face distinct challenges and opportunities in promoting sustainability and internationalisation. These include limited funding and resources, uneven access to technology and infrastructure, and diverse cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic contexts (Marginson & Sawir, 2011). However, there is also a wealth of indigenous knowledge, local expertise, and community networks that can be leveraged to develop innovative and contextually relevant approaches to sustainability and internationalisation (Ashida, 2022). Moreover, many institutions in the Global South are deeply committed to addressing the socio-economic inequalities and environmental vulnerabilities that disproportionately affect their communities (Steele & Rickards, 2021).

Despite resource constraints and other challenges, higher education institutions in the Global South are implementing a variety of innovative strategies to promote sustainability through internationalisation. These include the development of community-based research and service-learning programs that engage students and faculty in addressing local environmental and social challenges (Ashida, 2022). Universities are also forging partnerships with international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and industry partners to leverage external expertise and resources for sustainability projects and initiatives (Steele & Rickards, 2021). Moreover, there is a growing emphasis on incorporating indigenous knowledge and traditional practices into sustainability curricula and research agendas, recognizing the importance of local perspectives and context-specific solutions (Ashida, 2022).

While higher education institutions in the Global South face significant challenges in promoting sustainability and internationalisation, they also possess unique strengths and opportunities for innovation and collaboration. These may include cultural diversity, interdisciplinary expertise, and a deep commitment to social justice and community engagement (Marginson & Sawir, 2011). By leveraging these strengths and fostering partnerships with local communities, governments, and international stakeholders, institutions in the Global South can play a leading role in advancing the global sustainability agenda and contributing to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Steele & Rickards, 2021).

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The Danger of Sustainability and SDG Achievement as a Positional Good

The integration of sustainability initiatives and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within universities has prompted a discourse surrounding the potential risks associated with targeting sustainability solely as a means to bolster institutional reputation and improve university rankings. One perspective is that leveraging sustainability efforts can be considered as a "positional good" to enhance institutional prestige and competitiveness in the higher education market. Marginson (2007) notes the increasing emphasis placed on rankings as a measure of university status and suggests that strategic positioning on sustainability can attract top talent, foster stakeholder engagement, and ultimately elevate the institution's profile. Additionally, Selby et al. (2009) highlight the positive correlation between sustainability commitments and indicators such as student recruitment and philanthropic support, suggesting that universities stand to benefit from aligning themselves with sustainability goals.

However, detractors caution against the potential dangers of instrumentalising sustainability for reputational gains. When sustainability becomes a mere marketing tool, universities risk diluting the essence of sustainability and prioritising superficial initiatives over meaningful impact. Lyon and Maxwell (2011) further warn against the practice of "greenwashing," where institutions convey a false impression of environmental responsibility to enhance their image. This phenomenon not only undermines the credibility of sustainability efforts but also erodes public trust in higher education institutions. Moreover, Lauder et al (2015) emphasise the danger of diverting resources away from addressing systemic challenges in favour of pursuing rankings-driven sustainability initiatives, which may perpetuate a focus on quantitative metrics over qualitative impact.

The instrumentalization of sustainability in higher education also raises ethical concerns regarding the commodification of academic values and the prioritisation of market competitiveness over societal well-being. Marginson (2011) argues that universities have a broader responsibility to uphold their public service mission and contribute meaningfully to addressing global challenges beyond economic imperatives. When sustainability becomes merely a means to enhance institutional prestige, universities risk compromising their integrity and neglecting their moral obligation to advance environmental stewardship and social justice.

While strategic positioning on sustainability may offer short-term benefits for universities in terms of reputation and rankings, it also carries inherent risks and ethical dilemmas. Universities must navigate the delicate balance between strategic branding and genuine commitment to sustainability, ensuring that their actions align with their core values and contribute authentically to addressing societal needs. Universities have a unique opportunity to lead by example, demonstrating that sustainability is not merely a matter of image management but a fundamental aspect of institutional identity and purpose.

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Conclusion: Revisiting (Stier's) Internationalism in HE

I am convinced that many stakeholders view internationalisation in HE as a means to some end, including sustainable development. However, can internationalisation be reimagined as a potential good in itself and can it lead to a changed mindset? Edgar D. Mitchell, an American astronaut, seeing Earth from space causes one to "develop an instant global consciousness…" He went on to point out that "From out there on the moon, international politics look so petty." The Overview Effect refers to a profound shift in cognitive perception experienced by many astronauts upon departing Earth. Looking out at the planet from orbit or the lunar surface provides a perspective that transcends individual problems and conflicts, emphasising the fragility of Earth and the relative significance of human actions in the content of a cosmic scale. This transformative experience erases national boundaries and geographical disparities, highlighting our shared humanity and the insignificance of divisive constructs such as nationalism and tribalism. Astronomer Carl Sagan's poignant reflection on Earth as a "pale blue dot" underscores the arbitrary nature of human borders in the cosmic context.

This cosmic perspective encourages an understanding of humanity's place in the universe, the delicate nature of our planet, and our immense potential as a species. However, many contemporary leaders lack this perspective, prioritising short-term gains over long-term human progress. To address this, a new internationalism can be linked to renewed calls for concepts of global citizenship, urging leaders and citizens to unite rather than divide and to prioritise the well-being of all.

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