

National Policies for Higher Education Internationalization: A global comparative perspective

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Abstract:

The internationalization of higher education is widely considered as a strategic priority for governments around the world because of the economic, political, social, and academic benefits associated with it. Starting from the premise that the nation-state plays a central role in the process of internationalizing higher education, the paper argues that it is important to take stock of the current state of affairs and ask: what are nation-states doing to internationalize higher education? The paper presents original data on the spread of national internationalization policies around the world. It finds that strategic thinking about internationalization is a relatively new phenomenon with limited coverage. In terms of the number of countries that adopt national policies, the analysis finds a world dominated by scattered efforts when it comes to higher education internationalization. Why is the absence of a national strategy problematic? In countries where universities are largely dependent on public money, having no coherent direction for internationalization at the national level can limit the scope and undermine the effectiveness of internationalization strategies at the institutional level.

Keywords: Internationalization, Higher Education, Public Policy, National Strategies, Comparative, Content Analysis

1. What do we know about higher education internationalization so far?

Higher education has always been international in scope (Guruz, 2008; Matthews & Sidhu, 2005). Nevertheless, against the backdrop of globalization and neoliberalism, nation-states – and, by extension, universities – have faced pressure to internationalize their practices at an increasing pace (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Brooks & Waters, 2011). As such, higher education internationalization is talked about as a strategic priority for governments and is considered to be at the forefront of policy agendas around the world (Brooks & Waters, 2011). Despite this, there is little large scale comparative research on the actual policies deployed by nation-states to internationalize their higher education systems. With some notable exceptions (see de Wit, Hunter, Howard, & Egron-Polak, 2015; Helms, Rumbley, Brajkovic, & Mihut, 2015), country level studies on internationalization policy typically focus on in-depth case studies or small-n comparative research.

Nevertheless, internationalization does not occur in a vacuum. It only occurs at the intersection of cooperation and competition between nation-states, institutions, and individuals. Therefore, studies that have a narrow geographical scope – while providing valuable insights into the multidimensional fabric of the process – are limited in their ability to map the global reach and impact of internationalization. For instance, while it is commonly argued that internationalization and globalization phenomena have changed the face of higher education across the globe (Altbach, 2016), it is less clear what this transformation entails on a country by country basis (Altbach et al., 2009).

This is not to say that internationalization has been a neglected phenomenon in higher education research. In fact, quite the opposite is true. In the last couple of decades, the topic has received so much attention from researchers that it would be “impossible to provide an overview claiming to be somewhere near complete” (Kehm, 2003, p. 112). The fact that there is no universally accepted definition of internationalization (Altbach et al., 2009), is an important clue that it has taken different forms in different contexts. It is precisely because of this multi-faceted nature that “there is no simple, unique or all encompassing definition”, but it is also “not helpful for internationalization to become a ‘catch-all’ phrase for everything and anything international” (Knight & de Wit, 1995, p. 16). This perpetual quest for generalization has led to a situation where internationalization is applied both when an university introduces an English-taught course and when the whole higher education system is overhauled in order to integrate an international dimension into its functioning and purpose.

The ubiquitous use of the concept (Teichler, 2009) has resulted in what could be called a “Hegelian night in which all cows are black and eventually the milkman is taken for a cow” (Sartori, 1970, p. 64). Namely, the process of conceptual traveling (applying the concept of internationalization to new contexts and cases worldwide) has led to concept stretching which has reduced analytical purchase of ‘internationalization’ (Craciun, 2015). The lack of conceptual clarity has important implications not only for research, but also for public and institutional policy formulation and funding (Matei, Iwinska, & Craciun, 2015).

On the one extreme, one may ask whether internationalization is only a fad that has been boosted by semantic inflation aimed at giving birth to an ‘internationalization industry’ (Healey, 2008) or ‘business’ (Jones & de Wit, 2014). On the other extreme, the lack of clarity may lead to deficient policies that are not equipped to deliver the intended outcomes. For instance, in spite of the rhetoric support for internationalization from institutional and national leaders, many of the articulated objectives of internationalization have not been operationalized for implementation (Knight, 1994 cited in Childress, 2009).

While these cases may seem to overstate the actual situation, they point towards the need for a broader and more systematic approach to make sense of the complexity and variety of national higher

education policies. The present chapter takes this observation as its point of departure, and suggests a way forward by conducting a global census of national internationalization strategies and revealing the insights that such an extensive data collection exercise brings to light. As such, it argues that internationalization can better be understood if one looks at what governments actually do to forward internationalization. It attempts to answer questions like: Is strategic thinking about internationalization a widespread phenomenon? Is it an old or a new phenomenon? Which are the countries that pursue internationalization in a strategic fashion? What common characteristics do they have?

In order to answer these questions, the chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes a working definition of internationalization and delineates the importance of the nation-state in forwarding the process. Section 3 discusses the data gathering protocol and the measures designed to ensure the reliability of the collected data, and as a result of the findings that derive from it. Section 4 presents the insights that a global census of nation internationalization strategies reveals and their implications for internationalization research and practice. Finally, Section 5 summarizes the main arguments of the chapter and points towards some limitations and avenues for further research in this direction.

2. What is internationalization and what role does the nation-state play?

As we cannot dig for any construction without landscaping, it is important to establish how internationalization is understood in the wider literature and provide a working definition for the current study. The prevalent definition of internationalization (Childress, 2009; de Wit, 2010; Qiang, 2003) sees it as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, and global dimension into the purpose, functions (teaching, research and service) and the delivery of higher education” (Knight, 2004). In other words, internationalization is taken to mean a shift from previously inward looking national higher education systems to outward looking ones. Moreover, internationalization is a multi-level phenomenon that spans across scales, including institutional, national, regional, international and transnational efforts (Altbach et al., 2009). Adopting such a broad definition has the advantage of catering for an eclectic mix of developments that have impacted on higher education systems and institutions. Nevertheless, this comes at the cost of watering down the concept and seeing any process that spills over or into the national borders as internationalization.

In this chapter, internationalization will be taken to mean the active engagement with the design of policies, plans, programs, strategies and approaches at various levels of decision making so as to promote the idea of internationality in higher education¹. In other words, internationalization is seen as a process forwarded by active policy making, not by drift. While this definition does not provide a more exact account of what internationalization entails, it allows for the identification and investigation of specific and explicit policy endeavors to promote the process. In this context, understanding the role of the role of different actors in the internationalization of higher education becomes crucial.

Traditionally, the University has been a medium for promoting national cultures through standardized teaching and research methodologies, which was dependent on the nation state for funding (Scott, 2000; van der Wende, 2001). It is generally argued that globalization has challenged the very nature of higher education, pushing it to reform “both the content and scope of its activities” (Guruz, 2008).

¹ The chapter makes a clear distinction between two key concepts: ‘internationality’ and ‘internationalization’. In order to differentiate these terms, the conceptualizations proposed by Brandenburg and Federkeil (2007) are employed. On the one hand, internationality refers to a *state*, and can be used to characterize an institution or a country’s higher education system “current status or the status discernable at the date of data acquisition” (Brandenburg & Federkeil, 2007, p. 7). On the other hand, internationalization refers to a *process* in which a university or a national system shifts – in a steered manner – “from an actual state of internationality at time X towards a modified actual status of extended internationality at time X+N” (Brandenburg & Federkeil, 2007, p. 7).

Starting from the proposition that there is an inherent contradiction between “internationalization” which ‘reflects a world order dominated by nation states’, and globalization which involves both “process of global competitiveness”, Scott contends that the very existence of the University has been challenged (2000, p. 4).

On the national level, internationalization is just “one of the ways a country responds to the impact of globalization, yet at the same time respects the individuality of the nation” (Knight, 1997 quoted in Kreber, 2009, p. 2). However, these national response strategies impose two competing ‘laws of motion’ upon higher education: the internationalization of learning and the nationalization of its purposes (Kerr, 1990). In other words, there is a tension between ‘the internationality of substance versus the nationality of form’ (Teichler, 2002).

3. Data gathering protocols

The proposed analysis was carried out at the national policy level. This stance was taken for a number of reasons. To begin with, as a plethora of studies have shown, nation states still play a central role when it comes to steering higher education (Beerens, 2004; Enders, 2004; Vlck, 2006; Witte, 2006). As such, higher education policy “still tends not only to reflect but to underscore the specific traditions and circumstances of individual countries” (Enders, 2004, p. 361). Empirical research has shown that even countries with similar socio-economic and political conditions have distinct higher education internationalization policies (Callan, 2000; Graf, 2009; Luijten-Lub, van der Wende, & Huisman, 2005; Matei & Iwinska, 2015).

Next, these plans express a political commitment to internationalization, and not just political rhetoric. In other words, they can be considered part and parcel of the policy output of any government that promotes a supportive culture towards internationalization. There are countries in which national policies are implicit rather than explicit, the USA being but one example of such a case. However, these cases are not dealt with in this chapter as internationalization by stealth is not the focus of the current investigation. Also, such plans push governments to operationalize their understanding of internationalization. Having a well-defined and coherent strategy has been shown to be an important ingredient for moving forward with internationalization efforts (British Council, 2011; Henard, Diamond, & Roseveare, 2012).

Lastly, the advantage of employing this strategy is that the unit of analysis remains constant on a cross-national basis. In turn, this allows for a consistent mapping and comparison of the cases. Moreover, it helps to establish the parameters of the study and represents a guide for data sourcing (Yin, 2009). In order to collect systematic information about national higher education systems and policies put in place to forward the internationalization process, the World Higher Education Database built by the International Association of Universities was used as a data sourcing guide. Due to the fact that the website where the database is located was hard to use for such a comprehensive data collection exercise, a web scraping application in Python was built to gather the relevant information. This meant acquiring an offline library of documents with systematic, reliable, and valid information on national bodies responsible for international cooperation in higher education for 189 countries².

Two steps were taken in order to ensure the reliability of the collected data. First, at the moment of data collection, the existence (or non-existence) of a higher education international strategy was verified against scholarly literature and reports on the state of internationalization in the particular national context. Second, using groups of graduate students from various countries studying higher education policy, the results from a convenience sample of 11 observations (Hungary, USA, Philippines,

² The final list of countries surveyed was 195, as the World Higher Education Database and the United Nations country lists were merged.

Albania, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Greece, Croatia, Brazil, and South Korea) were verified once again. For the test, intercoder reliability was adapted from manual content analysis to 'intercollector' reliability – the extent to which two or more independent data collectors agree on the coding of the content of interest (i.e. existence/non-existence of a higher education internationalization strategy). The measure of percent agreement was used a diagnostic tool for reliability and yielded a result of 100%. All in all, the reliability tests conducted attested to the reliability of the data collection process.

4. What does a global map of national higher education internationalization strategies reveal?

"Classifying is an activity inextricably linked to the human desire for creating order out of chaos" (van Vught et al., 2005, p. 9). Classifications – of which mapping is a sub-type – are spatial and/or temporal dissections of the world which "provide a systematic, nominal distribution among a number of classes or characteristics without any (intended) order of preference" (Ziegele, 2013, p. 79). By assessing the similarities and differences between units and clustering them based on empirical information, they provide a description of the diversity within a system. As such, classifications are not aimed at assessing or establishing causality, but at promoting transparency. In other words, mapping is a purely descriptive endeavor that establishes indicators of diversity without assembling "a specific normatively fixed combination of features that stands for a type" (Ziegele, 2013, p. 80). Mapping allows for the flexible combination of indicators and leads to the possibility of dynamic clustering³.

This extensive data collection exercised carried out for this research brought to light some interesting insights and patterns into higher education internationalization. Figure 1 presents a global map of national internationalization strategies around the world: the countries in green represent those who do have a national strategy for internationalization, the countries in dark orange represent those who have a section on internationalization in their general higher education strategy, and the countries in light orange represent those who do not have a higher education internationalization strategy.

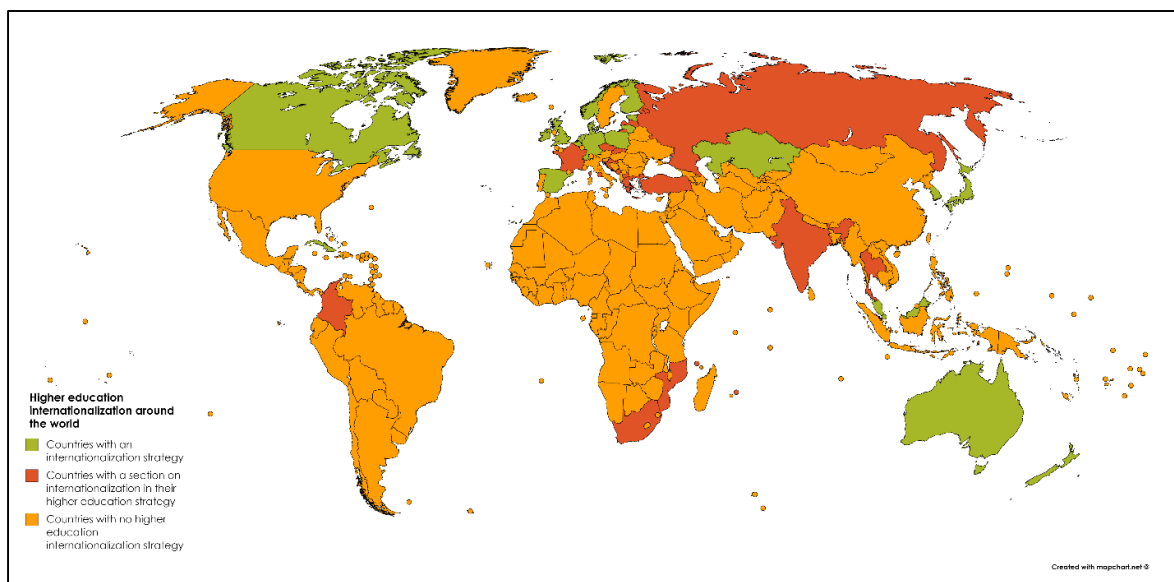


Figure 1: A global map of national internationalization strategies (Source: compiled by author)

Looking at the map, it becomes immediately apparent that thinking about higher education internationalization strategically is not a very widespread phenomenon: 80% of countries worldwide do not have any national higher education internationalization strategy. In fact, only 11% of countries

³ Per se, classifications and maps are static because they portray a structure at a defined point in time (i.e. when data was collected). However, what is meant here is that users can dynamically combine indicators to produce different classification.

– to be precise, 22 out of 195 countries – have an official strategy in this direction. Moreover, looking at the publication years of these documents shows that thinking strategically about higher education internationalization is a new phenomenon (see Figure 2). Most of these strategies have been published in the last 5 years and, as a result, it is difficult to assess their results and impact.

These findings are surprising considering that national policies and the national context are considered to play the most important part in internationalizing higher education (Enders, 2004; Graf, 2009; Luijten-Lub et al., 2005). It is all the more surprising, if we consider that, since years, not only higher education institutions (Egron-Polak & Hudson, 2014; European University Association, 2013), but also supranational organizations (European Commission, 2013; Henard et al., 2012) have encouraged and supported the participation of the nation-state in the process.

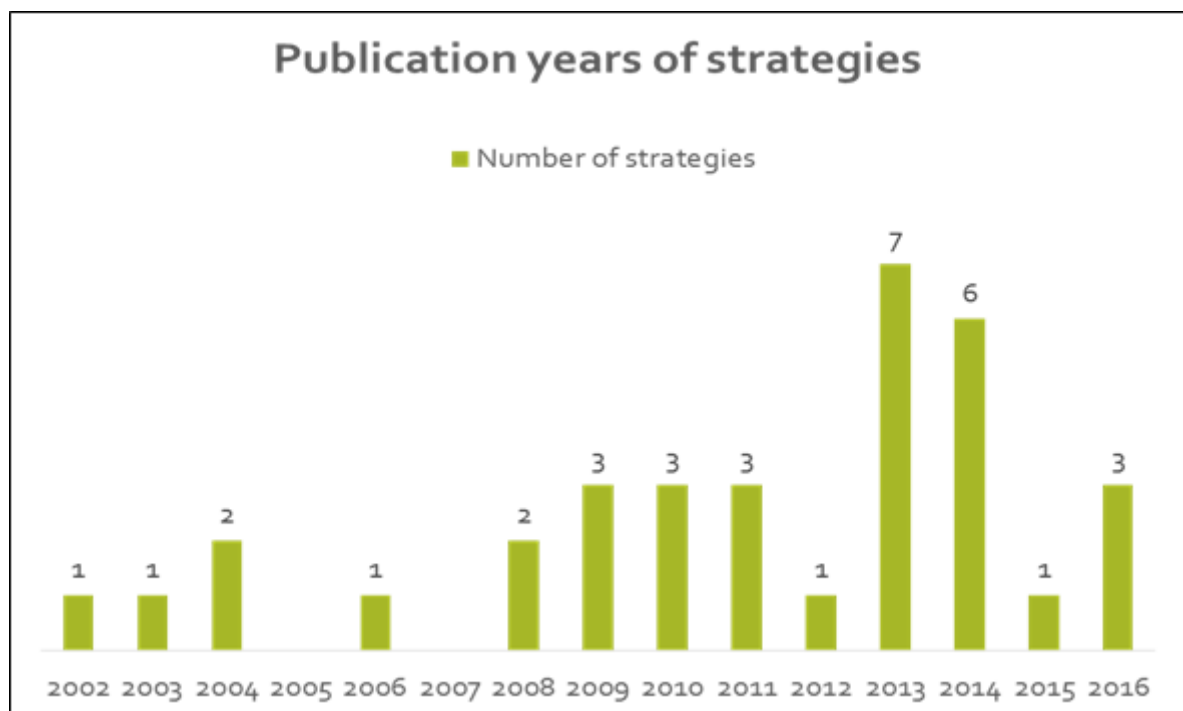


Figure 2: Publication years of national internationalization strategies (Source: compiled by author)

In alphabetical order, the countries that have a higher education internationalization strategy are: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Kazakhstan, South Korea, Lithuania, Malaysia, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK. Looking at the characteristics of these countries, various findings in relation to internationalization become apparent.

First, thinking about higher education internationalization strategically is mainly a European phenomenon. If we look at the distribution of the countries according to world regions (based on United Nations Country Grouping) we find the following distribution of countries which have a national higher education internationalization strategy: 13 in Europe, 5 in Asia, 2 in Oceania, 1 in North America, 1 in the Caribbean, and zero in Africa, Central America, the Middle East, and respectively South America. Nevertheless, internationalization is not so much related to the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (which have 49 member countries) as it seems to be to the European Union (11 out of the 13 countries are EU member states).

Second, thinking about higher education internationalization strategically is mainly a developed country phenomenon. If we look at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) membership – which is an intergovernmental organization with 35 member countries founded

in 1960 in order to stimulate economic progress and trade – we find that 77% of the countries which have a higher education internationalization strategy are OECD members (n=17).

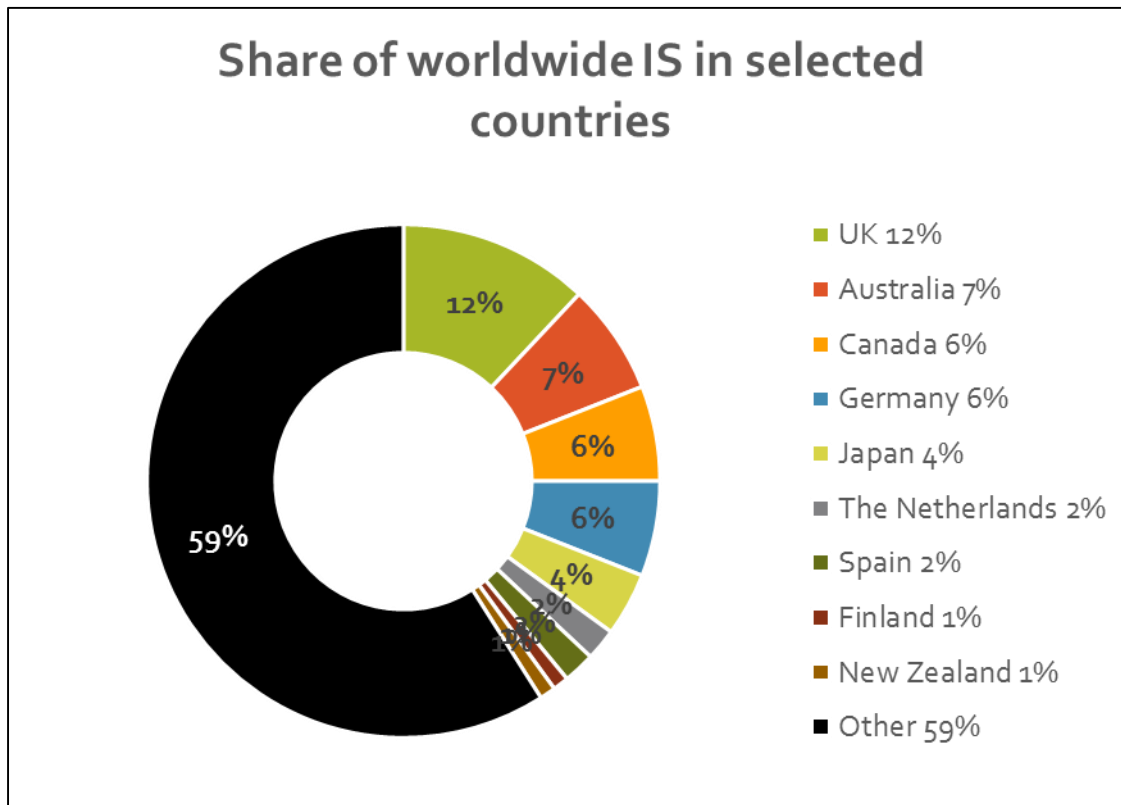


Figure 3: Share of worldwide international students in selected countries (Source: compiled by author from Project Atlas, 2016)

Third, the countries that have a higher education internationalization strategy receive the lion's share of internationally mobile students. Out of the over 4.1 million higher education students who studied abroad in 2013 (Project Atlas, 2016), the 35 OECD countries attracted 73% of them (OECD, 2016). By comparison, nine of the countries with a national higher education internationalization strategy hosted 41% of all students who studied abroad in 2013 (see Figure 3).

It is already common knowledge that “the reality of international education is geographically uneven and far from global in scope and reach” (Brooks & Waters, 2011, p. 45). Internationally mobile students are not evenly distributed across countries, but they are highly concentrated in economically advanced states, especially Anglo-Saxon societies (Guruz, 2008). Research has shown that more than 50 % of students who study abroad are clustered in just four English-speaking countries: United States of America, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada (Hughes, 2008). These countries have benefited from English being “the Latin of the 21st century” (Altbach, 2005, p. 66) and the reputation and capacity of their higher education systems (Hughes, 2008). If data was openly available for all the countries, it is safe to say that the 22 countries with national internationalization policies probably receive more than half of internationally mobile students worldwide. This is also because two-thirds of these countries have English - the academic Lingua Franca – as (one of) the official languages of instruction.

Certainly, the USA is the ‘odd man out’ in this respect as it does not have a national policy for internationalization. This can be explained by the fact that, unlike in most other countries, the responsibility for steering higher education in the USA does not fall on the national government, but on the state government. While there have been calls for a federal level policy, the main arguments

against this have been the size, institutional diversity, and decentralization of the US higher education system (Helms, 2015). The question then becomes, what is the state level engagement with higher education internationalization?

Traditionally, “states have been ambivalent, if not outright hostile, toward the international engagements of their colleges and universities” (Lane, Ownes, & Ziegler, 2014, p. 24). Recent research on the current state of affairs has concluded that support for internationalization at state level is quite limited as there are: very few states with an international higher education policy agenda (mostly *Study in* initiatives that are in fact run and financed mostly by higher education institutions through membership fees), little state funding (in 2016 only 5% of universities had received state funding for internationalization), and a lack of a formal administrative structures to manage internationalization (Helms, 2015; Helms, Brajkovic, & Struthers, 2017; Lane et al., 2014). In fact, it continues to be the case that “most international efforts continue to come from faculty members, students, and staff members” (Lane et al., 2014, p. 3), and that “internationalization-related support is still very much centered on individual opportunities and activities” (Helms, 2015, p. 27).

A possible explanation for this state of affairs could be that other countries adopted comprehensive internationalization strategies as a catching up mechanism to compete with USA (this claim is supported by the fact that the adoption of national policies in other parts of the world is very recent). Further research on the matter would be needed to test this hypothesis. However, it can be reasonably concluded that while US higher education is at an advanced level of internationality, there little system level support for internationalization.

5. Conclusions and further research

The internationalization of HE remains a messy field, as only timid attempts were made to systematize the process (Kehm, 2003). The chapter showed how large-scale comparative research of national higher education internationalization strategies can bring to light new aspects about the process that would otherwise be obscured in small-n in-depth case studies. All in all, the chapter advocated for mapping higher education internationalization policies around the world so as to make the diversity of the system transparent. In itself, the mapping exercise is purely descriptive. However, it allowed one to observe variations in the data and pose tentative questions about the causality of patterns. More empirical work is needed to catalogue these strategies.

Some of the main conclusions drawn from this global map of national internationalization policies were discussed. First, thinking about higher education internationalization in a strategic manner at the national level is a relatively new phenomenon that is not as widespread as the literature might suggest. Second, strategic thinking about internationalization is mainly concentrated in developed countries more generally, and European countries more specifically. Third, 41% of all the international students worldwide are received by just nine of the countries who have an internationalization strategy in place. Finally, two thirds of the countries with a national strategy for internationalization also have English as (one of) the language(s) of instruction.

While these findings bring a new perspective on higher education internationalization around the world, further research is needed in order to dig deeper into the different rationales, approaches, and substantive measures that the countries employ in order to forward the process. A content analysis exercise on these strategies could easily reveal the similarities and differences between them, and open avenues for cooperation or completion between countries. Such a comparative perspective could also help to characterize and contextualize the European Higher Education Area within a global reference framework. The main contribution of such an endeavor would be to increase the transparency of higher education policies for students, universities, policy makers, and businesses, and to ease consortia formation between universities and mutual agreements between states.

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