

Understanding Characteristics of Definitions for Internationalisation of Higher Education: Concept Analysis

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Abstract

Although there are some efforts to define and describe internationalisation of higher education by different authors and the work is particularly useful to help understand internationalisation processes, there is no common shared understanding. The aim is to illuminate the way in which internationalisation of higher education is described and understood, using concept analysis. Firstly, I identified the concept definitions, attributes, antecedents, and consequences of internationalisation of higher education and constructed framework based on the findings of this review. This involved an exploration of the characteristics and attributes that describe and define internationalisation of higher education. Theoretical thematic analysis was employed to get meaning of the data. The study revealed that the ambiguity regarding the concept persists, because internationalisation has multiple definitions which are continuously being updated. The study also recognizes internationalisation of higher education as a strategy; consequently, internationalisation as a strategy is the sum of internationalisation activities which are executed in order to run higher education while responding to higher education institution's international function.

Keywords

Higher Education, Internationalisation, International Education, Strategy

1. Introduction

Internationalisation has turned into a mainstream activity in higher education and has impacted higher education (Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022; Schoole, 2008), stimulating individual higher-education institutions and leadership into maintaining equilibrium between responding to higher education national needs and

meeting international demands. Internationalisation of higher education is defined as the variety of policies and programmes that universities and governments implement in response to globalisation (Marginson, 2022; Altbach 2012), implemented differently in different contexts (Tight, 2022). As broadly presented by Zeleza (2012), internationalisation views differ widely on the forces that drive internationalisation, the activities that constitute it, the competencies it promotes, the values it creates, the processes that sustain it, the respective roles of key constituencies within and outside the universities, and its effects on the core functions of the higher-education enterprise (Wang, Sung, & Vong, 2021).

Furthermore, Knight (2015) appended that the intention of internationalisation is not to become known, but to use the integration of international, intercultural, or global dimensions into the goals, functions, and delivery of education, as a means of improving or achieving academic objectives of the institution. There is consensus by various authors that internationalisation is indeed a complex concept to define (Xu, 2023; Tight, 2022; Wang, Sung, & Vong, 2021). According to Knight (2012), the challenging part of developing a definition for internationalisation is the need for it to be sufficiently generic to apply to many different countries, cultures, and education systems. There is, however, a range of definitions proposed by various authors (Marginson, 2022; Tight, 2022). However, the common thread is that internationalisation is interpreted and used in a broad manner and is not limited to one particular set of international activities, nor is it motivated by a single rationale (Wang, Sung, & Vong, 2021). According to Cross, Mhlanga, & Ojo (2011), there is an increasing consensus in many countries on the need for universities to internationalise; however, there is very little agreement about what internationalisation means, and which strategies are most effective for its implementation in differing contexts (Tight, 2022). Therefore, although the notion of internationalisation is popular, the current fundamental challenge for leaders, researchers, and practitioners, is how to deal with the variety of terms and definitions related to internationalisation in higher education (Xu, 2023, Wang, Sung, & Vong, 2021). Xu (2023) noted that scholars do not agree on the meaning of internationalisation because of the diversity and complexity of its rationales, activities, stakeholders, and providers, at national, sector, and institutional levels. Furthermore, Warwick (2014) added that there is a problem of lack of shared understanding of the true meaning of internationalisation. The problem relating to lack of shared understanding shows that, despite emerging as a mainstream phenomenon in higher education, internationalisation is still misunderstood or not sufficiently defined and described among and by practitioners.

2. Conceptualising Internationalisation of Higher Education

Higher education has always been an international institution (Stein, 2021; Tight 2021) and this widely accepted statement is generally made with reference to the birth of the university in medieval Europe, and the prevalence of mobility of students and scholars (de Wit, 2011). However, there are varied views on the

history and genesis of internationalisation of higher education. Over the past three decades, there has been a boom experience of internationalisation of higher education (Stein, 2021). Altbach & Teichler (2001) argued that the original universities were founded in Paris and Bologna in the 13th century, quickly expanding to other parts of Europe. However, Altbach and de Wit (2015) have lately argued that this internationalism goes back at least to Nalanda University in India in the 6th century AD, which attracted students and staff from all over the Buddhist world. Furthermore, there is also a documented history of higher education in Africa prior to colonisation, albeit in a different format, with no dates supplied. Teferra (2008) indicated that there were universities in Timbuktu, for instance, the School of Holy Scripture in Ethiopia. Hence, as people travelled from Asia, Europe, and the rest of Africa to these centres of knowledge, this implies the first form of internationalisation on the continent of Africa. By nature, then, international activities at the early stage came as a result of physical mobility of scholars and students crossing regions and borders for higher learning and scholarship. However, Teichler (2004) argued that to say higher education is internationalising or ought to internationalise is somewhat surprising; universities have long been considered one of society's most international institutions, hence, we should rather refer to this phenomenon as re-internationalisation. Scott (1998) has argued that there were no international universities at the initial stage of higher education, there being no national states. However, as indicated by de Wit, Deca, and Hunter (2015), internationalisation began with elements of international education, later becoming full-blown internationalisation; in some cases, the nouns may be used synonymously. However, the continued change in focus, scope, and strategies, has made internationalisation a complex and multifaceted phenomenon (Tight, 2022). This evolution has led to changes and/or increased debates on the understanding of internationalisation (Knight, 2012).

As pointed out by Tight (2022), the term means different things to different people, and is thus used in a variety of ways. As stated by de Wit (2002), as internationalisation gains more recognition, there is a trend of using it in the best way to suit the purpose. Authors are defining internationalisation based on individual perspectives; there are as many definitions of internationalisation as there are authors on the topic. Therefore, the differences in definitions and understanding of internationalisation are not just scholarly carping but reflect disagreement on the meaning of internationalisation (Wang, Sung, & Vong, 2021). Hence, de Wit (2011) emphasised the need for a clear definition and conceptual understanding of internationalisation, because of its relevance. However, despite some efforts to define and describe internationalisation of higher education by various authors (Marginson, 2022; Deardorff & Van Gaalen, 2012), the ambiguity regarding the concept persists (Xu, 2023) most definitions are only rooted in a skilfully worded presentation, hence, internationalisation remains a concept that is misunderstood. This misunderstanding reflects a situation in which internationalisation is interpreted and used in various ways and in different contexts (Xu, 2023; Rumbley, Altbach, & Reisberg, 2012); this presents a challenge

in terms of developing a common understanding and conceptual understanding that can provide clarity on meaning, affording some principles to guide policy and practice.

However, despite the absence of one generic definition of internationalisation process, there is hope that internationalisation exists because all universities are international in nature; internationalisation has helped the establishment of African universities which were created and developed through an internationalisation process by colonial universities (Teferra, 2008). Therefore, there is a need to locate the purpose of higher education and to discover the role of internationalisation in achieving that purpose, in order to define it (Deardorff & Van Gaalen, 2012). As noted by de Wit (2013) the missing centre is to confront the question of “why” we are internationalising higher education, rather than what we mean by internationalisation. The assumption is that the “why” question will reveal the original intent and will be described based on the original stance. Further, Tight (2022) argued that while many interpret the growing globalization and internationalization of higher education as another effect of neo-liberal agendas. It also suggests that higher education researchers themselves need to move out of their national comfort zones and think and research more globally (Tight, 2022). Altbach (2012) noted that internationalisation is a response to globalisation; hence it may be correct to suggest that internationalisation is a strategy for responding to globalisation. Whereas Marginson (2022) argued that internationalisation and globalisation create conditions and possibilities for the other, and the definition of internationalisation should be non-ideological and neutral. He suggested that internationalisation is to “create the action or growth of relations between nations, or between organisations or persons in nations” (Marginson, 2022).

3. Material and Method

This paper followed an interpretive paradigm that uses a qualitative approach, which comprises concept analysis. The concept-analysis approach is rooted in the understanding that concept and conceptual analysis is associated with a study that clarifies the meaning of a concept by describing the essential or generic meaning, the various meanings, and the appropriate usage of the concept (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The first part of this process was to identify the concept definitions, attributes, antecedents, and consequences of internationalisation of higher education and constructed framework based on the findings of this review. This eventually revealed the characteristics that indicate the presence of internationalisation of higher education. Concept analysis has been found fundamental, because, when the definition of a concept is not clear, the ability of the concept to assist fundamental tasks is greatly impaired (Rodgers, 2000). Similarly, it is difficult to differentiate between the concept of interest and other concepts which may be related. Although authors argue that concept analysis lacks empirical investigation to clarify concepts, results in certain limitations in

the methodology of concept analysis (Botes, 2022). In this study the technique is particularly valuable when a concept has more than one meaning or definition (Rodgers, 2000; Walker & Avant, 2005). Therefore, the creation of conceptual clarity of terms that have become catchphrases and lost their meaning, is of great importance for this kind of research methodology.

4. Results and Discussions

According to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (Stevenson, 2010), description and definition are two words that are often confused when it comes to their meanings and connotations. It is indeed true that the two words are different, conveying different meanings (Stevenson, 2010). Description is a detailed meaning of a concept or a phenomenon, whereas definition is a short meaning of a concept or a phenomenon. It is generally felt that description is the enlarged version of the definition. In other words, a concept that is concisely defined may be fully explained through a very elaborate description. However, other schools of thought put it that definition and description go together. Therefore, a definition is often followed by a description: a definition, in many cases, needs the help of a description for better understanding.

The search for characteristics covered a wide range of scholarly sources. The diversity of the sources reflects the scope of use of the concept of internationalisation. Besides, the breadth of usage applied to internationalisation by both scholarly and non-scholarly people underscores the importance of the concept to both researchers and those practicing it. Although internationalisation has a disputed history (Altbach & de Wit, 2015; de Wit, Deca, & Hunter, 2015), it has been discussed for over thirty years. However, there is a “chicken and egg” relationship (Thurman & Fisher, 1988) between international education and internationalisation, the term international education appearing as a surrogate, related term, as well as the antecedent. Although literature posits that higher education is international by nature (Altbach & Teichler, 2001; Scott, 1998), according to these results, higher education only becomes international when an institution chooses to internationalise.

The results confirmed the general global view that internationalisation has multiple definitions: ultimately, there is no globally accepted definition. Although Knight (2004) tried to develop a working definition which has been adopted by many, this did not only fail to bring clarity, but also did not prevent people from continuing to develop definitions. However, in order to establish characteristics and patterns of the definitions and definition development, the study grouped the definitions into categories; as in groups of definitions from different periods which addressed various aspects of internationalisation, definitions from one author upgraded or improved over time, various definitions from one author, and emerging definitions. The exploration of the discussion around internationalisation literature and interview revealed a variety of definitions of internationalisation. The list of definitions is not exhaustive; however, it portrays

a pattern of definitions.

Table 1 shows the variety of definitions of different patterns. Meanings were extracted from the multiple definitions for analysis based on patterns or characteristics displayed. Xu (2023) and Wang, Sung, and Vong (2021), describes internationalisation as an ongoing, counter-hegemonic educational process that

Table 1. Internationalisation of higher education definitions.

Author	Definition
1 Arum, & van de Water (1992)	Internationalisation refers to the multiple activities, programmes and services that fall within international studies, international educational exchange, and technical cooperation
2 Knight (1993)	The process of integrating an international dimension into the research, teaching, and services function of higher education
3 van der Wende (2001)	The process of systematic integration of an international dimension into the teaching, research, and public service function of a higher education institution
4 Knight & de Wit (1997)	The process of integrating an international perspective into the teaching/learning, research, and service functions of higher education institutions
5 Ellingboe (1998)	The process of integrating an international perspective into a college or university system.
6 Marginson (2000)	The term “internationalisation” describes the growth of relations between nations and between cultures
7 Schoorman (2000)	Internationalisation is an ongoing, counter-hegemonic educational process that occurs in an international context of knowledge and practise in which societies are viewed as subsystems of a larger, inclusive world
8 van Damme (2001)	Internationalisation refers to the activities of higher education institutions, often supported or framed by multilateral agreements or programmes, to expand their reach over national borders
9 Welch (2010)	Internationalisation is a process of integrating an international, intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of the institution
10 Altbach (2002)	Internationalisation refers to the specific policies and initiatives of countries and individual academics, institutions or systems which deal with global trends
11 Yang (2002)	Internationalisation is a process by which the teaching, research and service functions of a higher education system become internationally and cross-culturally compatible
12 Yang (2002)	For a university, internationalisation means the awareness and operation of interactions within and between cultures, through its teaching, research, and service functions, with the ultimate aim of achieving mutual understanding across cultural borders
13 Yang (2002)	For a national higher-education system, internationalisation refers to dialogue with those in other countries
14 Soderqvist (2002)	A change process from a national higher-education institution to an international higher-education institution leading to the inclusion of an international dimension in all aspects of its holistic management in order to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, and to achieve the desired competencies
15 Knight (2004)	The process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education
16 Knight (2004)	For some people, this means a series of international activities such as academic mobility for students and teachers; international linkages, partnerships, and projects; and new, international academic programmes and research initiatives
17 Knight (2004).	For others, it means the delivery of education to other countries through new types of arrangements such as branch campuses or franchises using a variety of face-to-face and distance techniques P6
18 Knight (2004).	To many, it means the inclusion of an international, intercultural, and/or global dimension in the curriculum and teaching/learning process

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| 19 | Knight (2005) | Internationalisation is considered a process in which an international dimension is integrated into the teaching, learning, and service functions of the institution, through key organisational strategies |
| 19 | Knight (2005) | At home-/campus-based internationalisation is interpreted as the creation of a culture or campus climate that promotes and supports international/intercultural understanding and focuses on campus-based activities |
| 20 | Knight (2005) | Abroad/cross-border internationalisation is seen as the delivery of education to other countries through a variety of delivery modes (face to face, distance, e-learning) and through different administrative arrangements (franchises, twinning, branch campuses, and so forth) |
| 21 | Altbach (2006) | Internationalisation has more to do with the “specific policies and programmes undertaken by governments, academic systems and institutions, and even individual departments to deal with globalisation” |
| 22 | Jiang (2008) | Internationalisation concerns the relationships between and amongst nations in which respect for sovereignty, national policies, and culture are highly accentuated |
| 23 | Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley (2009) | Internationalisation may be seen as a strategy by which societies and institutions respond to the many demands placed upon them by globalisation, and as a way for higher education to prepare individuals for engagement in a globalised world. |
| 24 | Deardorff & Van Gaalen (2012) | Internationalisation is the means of reaching the core goals of an institution, rather than an end in itself |
| 25 | Knight (2015) | “Integration of international, intercultural or global dimensions into the goals, functions and delivery of education” as a means of improving or achieving academic objectives of the institution. |
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occurs in an international context of knowledge and practice in which societies are viewed as subsystems of a larger inclusive world; while [Tight \(2021\)](#) indicated that internationalisation refers to the specific policies and initiatives of countries and individual academic institutions or systems to deal with global trends. Policies in this context related to the way in which processes are conducted. Hence, this definition brings an understanding that internationalisation is a strategy. [Knight \(2004\)](#) described internationalisation as a process: this implies that it is an ongoing activity. [Yang \(2002\)](#) defined internationalisation as a process by which the teaching, research, and service functions of a higher-education system become internationally and cross-culturally compatible. [Soderqvist \(2002\)](#) defined internationalisation of higher education as a change process from a national higher-education institution to an international higher-education institution, leading to the inclusion of an international dimension in all aspects of its holistic management, in order to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and to achieve the desired competencies. [Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley \(2009\)](#) also indicated that internationalisation is a strategy by means of which societies and institutions may respond to the many demands placed upon them by globalisation; and as a way for higher education to prepare individuals for engagement in a globalised world. This shows that [Altbach](#) points at policy and initiatives to deal with a global agenda; [Wang, Sung, and Vong \(2021\)](#) views it as a process of making university goals internationally compatible, while for [Soderqvist](#), it is a change from national to an international education system. [Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley \(2009\)](#) presented internationalisation as a strategy for preparing to engage with the global world, while [Knight \(2004\)](#) recognises it as a process of integrating an international dimension. However, to [Deardorff](#)

and Van Gaalen (2012) internationalisation is a means by which to reach core goals of an institution rather than being an end in itself. This implies that achievement of mission and goals of a higher education institution will be better indicators of success of internationalisation. Therefore, there is a need for locating the purpose of higher education and the role which internationalisation is playing in achieving that purpose, in order to define it (Deardorff & Van Gaalen, 2012). Therefore, internationalisation is both an expression and an activity of international education, or both a strategy and a process.

An analysis of the second sample was conducted based on characteristics such as updated or improved definitions. The definition by Altbach (2009) and Knight (2004, 2015) were sampled for patterns which demonstrate the definition of improvement over time.

Table 2 shows two definitions by Altbach (2002, 2006) which have the same original idea but have subsequently expanded to include stakeholders. The increase

Table 2. Improved definitions for internationalisation of higher education.

Author	Definition
1 Altbach (2002)	Internationalisation refers to the specific policies and initiatives of countries and individual academic institutions or systems which deal with global trends
2 Altbach (2006)	Internationalisation has more to do with the “specific policies and programmes undertaken by governments, academic systems and institutions, and even individual departments to deal with globalisation”
3 Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley (2009)	Internationalisation may be seen as a strategy for societies and institutions to employ in responding to the many demands placed upon them by globalisation; and as a way for higher education to prepare individuals for engagement in a globalised world
1 Knight (1993)	The process of integrating an international dimension into the research, teaching and services function of higher education
2 Knight & de Wit (1997)	The process of integrating an international perspective into the teaching/learning, research, and service functions of higher-education institutions
3 Knight (2004)	The process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education
4 Knight (2005)	Internationalisation is considered a process in which an international dimension is integrated into the teaching, learning, and services functions of the institution, through key organisational strategies
5 Knight (2015)	“Integration of international, intercultural or global dimensions into the goals, functions and delivery of education” as a means of improving or achieving academic objectives of the institution.

in number and size of practicing stakeholders is the main change to these definitions. The change depicted demonstrates the growth pattern of higher education. Hence the change in the number of stakeholders eventually required an update of the definitions. Internationalisation is therefore an ongoing process (Knight, 2015). However, this contradicts the view of Knight (2004) which argues that definitions should avoid being influenced by activities and other developments. The definitions by Knight (1993, 2004, 2005) have a pattern of change differing from Phillip Altbach’s pattern. The definitions from Knight started as tenuous, but expanded or improved as definitions were being updated in relation to activities and specific purposes of internationalisation. As an increasing number of

activities are involved in internationalisation at different times, updates on the definition or description are to be expected. This shows that internationalisation definitions are flexible; and may be updated or improved at any time: the definitions are continually changing in response to emerging trends.

The definitions of Specific Categories from **Table 3** shows that definitions for internationalisation are sometimes designated to a specific group. As internationalisation is being practised at different levels (national, sector, institution, and department) in higher education, understandings of the term may differ, hence the need for understanding at various levels. For **Tight (2022)** internationalisation is defined based on higher-education hierarchical levels. These definitions offer differing meanings because internationalisation is presented as “a process” in one, as “awareness” in another, and, finally, as “a dialogue”. This brings a different dimension in which the multiple trends in definition of internationalisation are not only between different institutions or people, but within individuals, definitions being designated by levels within an organisation. Furthermore, definitions by **Knight (2004)** were also multiple definitions an individual. However, apart from the common position by Jane Knight that internationalisation is a “process”, these definitions indicate that, for some people, it is “a series of international activities”, to others it is “a delivery of education”, and others “an inclusion of international in teaching and learning” (**Tight, 2022; Wang, Sung, & Vong 2021**) Jane Knight has therefore designated different definitions for different groups, without specifying them. However, this has vindicated the view that internationalisation has different definitions. It is evident that among the many definitions for internationalisation the definition by **Knight (2004)** has been generally adopted by many authors. The definition of internationalisation, according to **Knight (2004)**, is: “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education”. It appears that this definition is accepted by many authors in that it illuminates the possible elements and activities related to internationalisation.

Table 3. Internationalisation of higher education definitions of specific categories.

1	Yang (2002)	Internationalisation is a process by which the teaching, research, and service functions of a higher-education system become internationally and cross-culturally compatible
2	Yang (2002)	For a university, internationalisation means the awareness and operation of interactions within and between cultures through its teaching, research, and service functions, with the ultimate aim of achieving mutual understanding across cultural borders
3	Yang (2002)	For a national higher-education system, internationalisation refers to dialogue with those in other countries.
1	Knight (2004)	For some people, it means a series of international activities such as academic mobility for students and teachers; international linkages, partnerships, and projects; and new, international, academic programmes and research initiatives.
2	Knight (2004)	For others, it means the delivery of education to other countries through new types of arrangements such as branch campuses or franchises using a variety of face-to-face and distance techniques.
3	Knight (2004)	To many, it means the inclusion of an international, intercultural, and/or global dimension in the curriculum and teaching/learning process

5. Emerging Discourse

Literature discussions (Xu, 2023; Tight, 2022; Wang, Sung, & Vong, 2021; de Wit, 2013; Deardorff & Van Gaalen, 2012; Knight, 2015; Rumbley et al., 2012) regarding definitions are attempts to establish the missing link in an effort to develop a concise and clear definition of internationalisation. Knight (2012) and Tight (2022) pointed out that, owing to a lack of an accepted definition, most definitions are based on the purpose of the individual activity. De Wit stressed the need for establishing the reason for internationalisation by answering the question “why internationalising?” however, to Deardorff and Van Gaalen (2012), internationalisation is a means of reaching core goals of an institution, rather than an end in itself. This means that the current definitions are missing the reasons for internationalising, according to de Wit (2013), therefore missing the direct link to the core goal of a higher-education institution. However, Knight (2015) included the word “function” which was generalised, rather than specific. However, Hudzik and Stohl (2009) argued that a definition for internationalisation must make clear and explicit reference to the purpose of higher education, rather than being subsumed under the strategies and policies, becoming lost in the discourse, and therefore being paid insufficient attention (Hudzik & Stohl, 2009; de Wit, 2013).

6. Conclusion

Based on the characteristics of diverse attributes of internationalisation both from literature and informed by definitions offered by Knight (2004), Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley (2009), Deardorff and Van Gaalen (2012), and finally Knight (2015), the paper recognises internationalisation as a strategy. The analysis revealed that most definitions describe internationalisation activities as internationalisation, while the activities are elements of the internationalisation as a strategy. Therefore, according to the observation by de Wit (2013) that the definition of internationalisation development lacks “why”, the paper elaborates the importance of recognising the purpose for internationalisation of higher education as a key characteristic of a definition. Therefore, internationalisation as a strategy is the sum of internationalisation activities which are executed in order to run higher education. However, this does not mean the sum of all activities; every activity contributes at different times and at various levels to the achievement of internationalisation as a strategy. This shows the link between the higher-education function and internationalisation as a strategy. It also shows the link between internationalisation as a strategy and the respective internationalisation activities. Therefore, internationalisation activities appraise internationalisation as a strategy, while internationalisation as a strategy responds to a higher-education function.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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