

International Sharing Builds Knowledge but Leads to Brain Drain, Survey Finds

By PAUL MOONEY

Beijing

The vast majority of leaders of colleges and universities around the world believe that the internationalization of higher education is of utmost importance, but many also think serious risks are inherent in the process, according to a recent survey.

Ninety-six percent of institutional leaders responding to the survey, carried out in 2005 in 95 countries by the International Association of Universities, said internationalization brought benefits, but 70 percent also thought there were risks that the quality of higher education could be affected, a report describing the survey says.

"You can't live in a bubble and look at internationalization," said Jane Knight, author of the report and an adjunct professor in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. "You have to take a realistic view of the intended and unintended consequences. This survey has helped us to identify where some of the risks are."

The 172-page report, "Internationalization of Higher Education: New Directions, New Challenges: 2005 IAU Global Survey Report," was released at the association's annual international conference, which was held in Beijing this month. The association, known as the IAU, works with Unesco.

At the three-day conference, experts on higher education from around the world spoke about online education, distance learning, and the internationalization of higher education in China, South Korea, Japan, Africa, and Europe.

The conference was held in conjunction with the Seventh China International Forum on Education and China Education Expo 2006, both under the auspices of the China Education Association for International Exchange. The exposition featured 450 universities from the United States, Europe, and Asia, and attracted some 60,000 students.

Stronger Research

The association's survey found that the most important rationale for internationalization was "to increase student and faculty international knowledge and intercultural understanding" and "to strengthen research and knowledge capacity and production."

The risks included the growing commercialization of higher education, the rise in foreign "degree mills," and the threat of brain drain. "Commercialization and commodification" was ranked No. 1 on a list of eight potential risks. The largest number of institutions that listed commercialization as a risk came from the Asia-Pacific region, the report says.

The report also noted some changes from the results of the previous survey, taken in 2003. In the new report, Asia replaced North America as Europe's No. 2 choice for

international collaboration, and North America slipped to No. 3. (Other European countries are No. 1.) Furthermore, in the latest report, distance education ranks as one of the three least-active elements of internationalization, a change from 2003, when it was identified as one of the fastest-growing aspects.

Eva Egron-Polak, general-secretary of the international universities' association, pointed to the different regional perceptions about the impact of internationalization. "It's important to understand what might be highly beneficial in one region may be perceived as a high risk in another," she said.

Ms. Egron-Polak said the analysis would help IAU and higher-education institutions to determine what actions were needed in the future to address the crucial challenges in internationalization.

Ms. Knight said the findings painted a relatively positive picture of the sustained importance attributed to internationalization, but she said the situation was less encouraging at the national level, as national governments were not paying sufficient attention to international education.

She said governments were not playing the role they should in terms of national policy and money to facilitate international research, mobility, and development projects, and to ensure that appropriate quality-assurance and accreditation systems were in place.

The report can be obtained by writing to iau2@unesco.org

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