

Essere e fare internazionalizzazione diversamente: uno studio di caso nel settore dell'Educazione in un'università italiana

Being and doing internationalisation differently: the case of Education in an Italian university

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on an alternative analysis of the ways in which internationalisation can be conceptualised against a background of competitive neoliberal agendas and the current volatile geopolitical context. Given the lack of plural, democratic and reflexive transnational relations in higher education, it aims to contribute to critical reflections that have highlighted the need to promote alternative and more equitable approaches to the definitions and practices of internationalisation. The paper focuses on an analysis of internationalisation in the field of education in the context of an Italian university which has recently increased its focus on the international dimensions of educational research, teaching and knowledge production. The study consists of a case study which draws out alternative and more inclusive underlying principles for internationalisation through interviews with the parties involved and an analysis of governance structures based on documentary analysis. Through a literature review of international higher education and a mapping of university activities, the research examines how these initiatives might contribute to more inclusive approaches to internationalisation. Drawing on the research's empirical and theoretical work, the paper ultimately calls for a rethinking of internationalisation that is not based on a neoliberal or economic rationale but is more open in its epistemologies and inclusive of alternative forms of knowledge.

Questo articolo si concentra su un'analisi alternativa dei modi in cui l'internazionalizzazione può essere concettualizzata, sullo sfondo di agende neoliberali competitive e dell'attuale contesto geopolitico caratterizzato da instabilità. Considerando la mancanza di relazioni transnazionali pluralistiche, democratiche e riflessive nell'istruzione superiore, l'obiettivo è contribuire alle riflessioni critiche che hanno evidenziato la necessità di promuovere approcci alternativi e più equi alle definizioni e alle pratiche dell'internazionalizzazione. L'articolo analizza l'internazionalizzazione nel settore dell'educazione nel contesto di un'università italiana che ha recentemente riservato crescente attenzione alle dimensioni internazionali della ricerca educativa, dell'insegnamento e della produzione di conoscenza. Lo studio esamina i principi fondamentali, gli attori coinvolti, le strutture di governance e gli obiettivi delle relazioni e delle collaborazioni che potrebbero favorire approcci alternativi e più inclusivi all'internazionalizzazione. Attraverso una revisione della letteratura sull'istruzione superiore in prospettiva internazionale e attraverso una mappatura delle attività universitarie realizzate, la ricerca analizza come queste iniziative possano contribuire a un'internazionalizzazione più inclusiva. A partire dall'analisi empirica e teorica, l'articolo invita a ripensare l'internazionalizzazione, non come processo fondato su logiche neoliberiste o economiche, ma aperta a epistemologie più inclusive e a forme alternative di conoscenza.

Keywords: internationalisation, higher education, knowledge democracy, alternative epistemologies

Parole chiave: internazionalizzazione, istruzione superiore, democrazia della conoscenza, epistemologie alternative

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The article is the result of joint research and analysis carried out collaboratively by the two authors. For practical purposes, the Introduction, paragraphs 1, 2, 3 and 7 are attributed to Catherine Montgomery. Paragraphs 4, 5, 6 and 8 are attributed to Rita Locatelli.

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Introduction

Higher education across the world is facing deep-seated challenges. Many of these relate to the geopolitical turbulence of our current times which have sparked increasing conflicts, war and forced migration, all of which have a profound impact on education (Courtois *et alii*, 2025). Stein (2021) characterises this era of global uncertainty as the volatility, unpredictability, complexity and ambiguity of contemporary societies. There are far-reaching impacts for higher education of the fragility of social, political and cultural environments, and this includes influential changes to internationalisation in higher education. These current fragile global relations are intensifying the precarity of international research collaborations, for instance between China and the US and across Europe (Marginson, Xu, 2022).

This paper focuses on an analysis of the ways in which internationalisation can be reconceptualised against a competitive neoliberal agenda and the current volatile geopolitical context. Given the lack of plural, democratic and reflexive transnational relations in higher education (Stein, 2021), we aim to highlight the need to promote alternative and more equitable approaches to the definitions and practices of internationalisation. Mid-Nineteenth century constructions of “The Idea of a University” (John Henry Newman) presented higher education as a “platform for human advancement through teaching and research” (Sarpong, Adelekan, 2024, p. 1114) but contemporary universities are now buffeted by neoliberalism, the knowledge economy and bullied by other economic logics (*ibid*). These include a strong measurement focus, with rankings, reputational surveys and international student recruitment often driving institutional motivations to internationalise. Larner and Le Heron (2025) note that “the spaces and subjectivities of the neoliberalizing university are multiple and contradictory” (2025, p. 844) and these happen in a complex political and social context.

In this article we argue that the role of internationalisation for human advancement has been weakened and its role in promoting global science has been underestimated (Marginson, Xu, 2022). This derailing of these important drivers for internationalisation poses the question of the role of international higher education and whether higher education can or should operate for the common good (Locatelli, Marginson, 2023). Whilst higher education is in some ways an economic institution in that it uses resources and has been constructed as a “knowledge factory”, Luke (2023) notes that there are current opportunities (some mediated through new technologies) “to imagine a new knowledge commons, encompassing an open and equitable higher education” (2023, p. 162).

But the work of constructing higher education and/or internationalisation as a public or common good is complex. Marginson (2024) presents a ten-country comparison offering distinctive constructions of higher education and public good. That study indicated that there were both “distinct national-cultural approaches” (2024, p. 10) and common elements. In all of the ten countries there was an emphasis on the embeddedness of the public good within the state but also an acknowledgment that higher education contributes to “the common good of societies and communities” (2024, p. 11). There was a consensus in the study that higher education generates “contributions to equitable social opportunity and to collective knowledge through research” (*ibid*).

In this paper we aim to highlight the potential contribution of internationalisation to higher education’s role in public good. We present a “grassroots” perspective on internationalisation in the context of a European university in Italy. Our argument focuses on identifying alignment between local international activities and the common good of local, national and global societies (or glonacal) and communities and the possibility of equitable opportunities, particularly through research.

1. New ways of conceptualising internationalisation are needed

Firstly, we turn to consider (re)constructions of internationalisation in higher education. There is notable recent unease with a range of previously dominant definitions of internationalisation. Mobility of staff and students has dominated constructions of internationalisation and inequalities that lead to immobilities including forced migrations due to political persecution and war are less frequently considered to be the domain of internationalisation (Courtois *et alii*, 2025). Marginson (2023) maintains that constructions

of internationalisation have been dominated by a single definition – that of Jane Knight (1993; 2003; 2004). Marginson notes that “internationalisation has been used normatively in determined efforts to shape higher education in particular ways” (2023, p. 2). He argues that the simplification of internationalisation as potentially virtuous and globalisation as neoliberal and evil obfuscates complex issues relating to the link between internationalisation and neocolonialism and economic neoliberalism. He also notes the importance of understanding the interactions between concepts such as internationalisation and the “larger and changing environment” (Marginson, 2023, p. 2). Stein also notes that internationalisation subsumes complex issues and there is a need for existing paradigms of internationalised higher education to be reconsidered (Stein, 2021, p. 482). Internationalisation needs to be seen in the light of critical reflections which can highlight the need to promote alternative and more equitable approaches to the definitions and practices (Stein, 2021).

In this paper we argue for a surfacing of more nuanced definitions of internationalisation. It is important to acknowledge the imperfections of the idea of internationalisation and the ways in which it intersects with other agendas including decolonising in higher education (Montgomery, Trahar, 2023). Here we present a case study which aims to explore the nuances of the local and national environments in which internationalisation develops. The purpose of this is to offer an alternative perspective on internationalisation and raise the profile and value of the local and national activities which can be considered different ways of doing internationalisation.

2. A European case study: internationalisation (of Education) at an Italian University

2.1 *Localised internationalisation embedded in the state*

This research focuses on an Italian non-state university embedded in the European and Italian context and explores how the various activities carried out within the Faculty and the Department of Education, as well as one international education research centre, can reveal overlooked or invisible dimensions of internationalisation. Here we align with Marginson’s (2024) observation of the link between public good and the state and the embedded nature of internationalisation in its national context. In the Italian context, the field of Education is seen as particularly challenging to internationalise due to a historically limited national culture of international engagement (Hunter, 2015). However, precisely because of this, we argue that it is possible to uncover forms of internationalisation that remain hidden from neoliberal frameworks and indicators – forms that may not be easy to measure or count but are nonetheless meaningful. These practices can offer alternative, often more relational and solidaristic ways of understanding what internationalisation can look like in the field of Education in Italy.

The Italian University in question is firmly rooted in its European context but its outlook has always been broader than merely national or regional and constructs itself as an institution serving the global community. This vision is grounded in a historical emphasis on Catholic or Christian values in an internationalised context (Hunter, James, 2018) and the core values of the institution include an emphasis on international collaboration and are outlined as:

To educate young people to value work, to sacrifice in the service of ideals, to act with integrity in their relationships, to be honest with all, *to foster mutual understanding among peoples, to uphold the ideal of international cooperation*, and to cultivate compassion for the poorest and most vulnerable [...]¹ (University document, 2007).

The institution is one of the largest non-state universities in Europe and comprises twelve faculties, serves over 40,000 students, and employs more than 1,300 faculty staff. Although internationalisation, in its broadest sense, has historically been part of the University’s mission, in recent years the University has made significant investments in certain forms of internationalisation, with more than 2000 students ben-

1 Authors’ translations from Italian, emphasis added.

efiting from mobility programmes (+18% in eight years), particularly from the Faculties of Economics, Linguistics and Political and Social Sciences, and there has also been a steady increase in the number of international students (+59% in six years). The institution has also established double degree programmes with more than forty universities. In 2012, a dedicated research centre focusing on internationalisation was also established to support institutional decision-making and develop a comprehensive internationalisation strategy (Mazzoleni, 2016). The University is also a member of the Strategic Alliance of Catholic Research Universities (SACRU), whose mission is to promote global cooperation among partners in thirty-one locations around the world, with the aim of fostering excellence in research and teaching through global collaboration.

3. Methodological approaches

The aim of this study was to explore the underpinning principles, actors involved, governance structures and ultimate goals of the connections and collaborations that may be conducive to alternative and more inclusive approaches to internationalisation. In addition to a literature review exploring internationalisation of higher education, the case study adopts a mixed-methods approach and is based on the following data:

- a critical analysis of the institutional policy and strategic documents produced in the University, looking at the definition, principles and objectives of internationalisation;
- a mapping of the internationalisation activities of the Faculty and of the Department of Education, and one research centre between 2014 and 2024 (ten-year span), presenting a narrative of their links, resources and knowledge building within the University and outside with their European and international partners;
- a series of six interviews with key figures in the Italian university, focusing on staff at different levels, including the Head of the International Office, the Dean of the Faculty of Education, the former Director of the Department of Education and the Director of the research centre, all of whom were responsible for internationalisation activities or international cooperation.

The case study was conducted by the two authors during the spring and summer of 2024. Some of the findings were presented at a European conference in 2024, and then further developed for the purposes of this paper.

4. Nature and aims of internationalisation at the Italian University

The aim of this section is to illustrate how internationalisation has been defined over the years in the University's main institutional policy and strategic documents, as well as in institutional discourse, highlighting the objectives and principles that underpin it.

4.1 *Internationalisation and the common good of communities and societies*

Firstly, it is important to note that the University is part of the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU), which focuses on the promotion of Catholic values by Higher Education Institutions through global collaboration in research, teaching and community engagement. However, the values that higher education institutions in the Federation are called to uphold are founded on principles that extend beyond the confines of Catholicism and extend towards solidarity and community (James, 2018). These principles encompass the promotion of human rights and dignity, integrity, social justice, peace, equality and the rule of law – values aligned to a common good that are held in common across different cultural and philosophical traditions (IFCU, 2024).

A more detailed consideration of the institutional documentation of the Italian University reveals a

growing recognition of internationalisation as a strategic mission and a valuable asset for the community and solidarity of the institution in the future. Two strategic plans of the University (University documents, 2019, 2023) highlight the importance of enhancing internationalisation efforts, with the objective of not only improving the University global ranking but also cultivating a more expansive international perspective. This strategic direction involves more than just increasing the number of international students. It also aims to consolidate an international faculty and promote a culture of internationalisation throughout the institution. In this context, there is a growing commitment to increasing the number of international programmes, the international character of which is reflected not only in the language of instruction, but also in the academic content and the professional profiles they are designed to develop (Documents 1 and 2). These priorities are reflected in the interviews with the Directors of Internationalisation at the institution. Indeed, the approach to internationalisation has undergone significant modification in the context of the pandemic and needs to take into account a different set of challenges combining the mere physical mobility of students with other strategies aimed at creating a more international environment within the institution and the classrooms, while at the same time implementing internationalisation programmes at home.

It could therefore be argued that internationalisation at the Italian University is conceived in a broader sense than its traditional understanding, moving beyond mere mobility and global positioning to embrace principles of equity, solidarity, and shared responsibility. This commitment is reflected in the fostering of inclusive international engagement, with the objective of contributing meaningfully to global development through international cooperation.

5. Internationalisation in Education at the Italian University: A decade of change?

5.1 *Local academic and European communities and the common good*

As previously stated, the primary focus of this study is on Education, a field that has been identified as exhibiting a comparatively limited degree of internationalisation, particularly in contrast to other disciplines. Background data collected in this study demonstrates a modest yet consistent endeavour towards international engagement within the Faculty of Education. We argue here that this is evidence of a local form of internationalisation which more closely serves its nearest communities. There has been an increase in outbound student mobility from 54 to 84 over a decade, though this remains comparatively limited in comparison to more internationalised Faculties. Inbound mobility remains low, with approximately ten students per year, primarily from Spain, underlining the necessity for diversification of partnerships. Staff mobility, particularly outbound through Erasmus+, is minimal, and inbound staff mobility remains difficult to quantify.

The presence of only one course taught in English and the absence of Erasmus agreements with Anglophone countries may reflect structural or geopolitical barriers, such as Brexit. Despite this, the link to Europe is strong and it is worth noting that in the most recent years, professors affiliated to the Faculty have promoted or participated in eight different European projects, obtaining over a million euros in funding, often in collaboration with Eastern European institutions. Here the local community links to the European community through internationalisation in the University. Hunter (2015) notes that an increasingly competitive international environment is pressing Italian universities to develop approaches to internationalisation beyond national borders in order to adapt in a context of neoliberalism.

However, despite significant efforts being put in place, between 2020 and 2024, there has been a decline in the largescale measurements of internationalisation at the Italian University as represented by global rankings, with the QS subject ranking in Education dropping from the 251-300 range to 351-400. The limited degree of internationalisation in the field of education may be attributed in part to the characteristics of Education and Teacher Education programmes, which are predominantly designed for Italian students and contexts, and often lack a more global dimension to international and comparative education. Beyond the programmes themselves, other factors contribute to this limitation, including the historical legacy of Italian pedagogy (Polenghi, 2024) and the limited use of foreign languages among staff and stu-

dents. In this scenario, the following sections will emphasise certain dimensions that are already extant and that may be indicative of an alternative interpretation of internationalisation.

5.2 *Internationalisation and equitable social opportunity through research*

Another important dimension of internationalisation in education is represented by the work of the Research Centre which was established in 2012 to support the University in strengthening its internationalisation strategy. Over the last ten years, the Centre has established a global community of practitioners and academics, representing an exception in the Italian and European context, in line with the major Anglo-American centres that study the international dimensions of higher education institutions and policies (Hunter *et alii*, 2023). The Centre has developed a strong international identity particularly through its doctoral programme. *Alumni* data indicate a solid base of graduates from North America and Europe, with 15 *alumni* from countries such as the USA, the Netherlands and Russia. More recently, however, the profile of incoming PhD students has become increasingly diverse. Today, the doctoral community includes students from across Europe and North America, as well as a growing number from Latin America and Asia. This shift may be indicative of broader changes in global dynamics, potentially indicating a progressive shift away from the historical dominance of traditional Anglophone countries. It also underscores the growing commitment of Latin American and Asian regions to the internationalisation of higher education.

The growing links between the Research Centre and the Department and Faculty of Education possibly signal the gradual and meaningful integration of international perspectives into the academic culture and institutional priorities of the core structures of the university dedicated to the development of research and teaching in higher education.

6. Unseen aspects of internationalisation in Education: the analysis of the interviews

As previously mentioned, the case study rests on a series of interviews conducted by the authors to complement information that may have been otherwise difficult to ascertain from official statistics. The interviews focused on key dimensions of internationalisation, such as activities and approaches developed in a “hard to internationalise” field like Education, geopolitical challenges, and a focus on philosophies and ethics of internationalisation. These interviews offer a nuanced picture of internationalisation within the Department and Faculty of Education, revealing both challenges and less visible forms of engagement that often escape conventional metrics. Indeed, while mainstream indicators, such as mobility figures, English-taught courses, and formal international agreements remain limited, particularly due to structural, linguistic, and economic constraints, interviews highlight a more complex and layered internationalisation landscape. The barriers and opportunities for internationalisation, as revealed in the interviews are explored in the following sections.

6.1 *The multiple and contradictory spaces and subjectivities of the neoliberalising university*

Language emerged as a major barrier, with both students and staff struggling with English proficiency, which remains a key marker in dominant models of internationalisation. A similar tension is present in curriculum design: the strong national focus of education programmes limits opportunities for mobility and the integration of international pedagogical perspectives. As the Dean of the Faculty of Education remarked:

Italian pedagogy suffers from its philosophical origins and struggles to critically take on the most internationally established research tools and perspective.

At the same time, interviewees problematised this dominance, advocating for greater linguistic and cultural plurality, particularly in light of efforts to diversify partnerships beyond traditional Anglophone countries. As noted by the Director of the Research Centre:

We need to challenge the assumption that internationalisation only happens through mobility or in English; there are many ways to be international, and many of them are rooted in values, networks, and local relevance.

Geopolitical and socio-economic factors also emerged as significant barriers. Ongoing conflicts and political instability have complicated research collaborations in specific regions, while teaching activities appear less affected, having been more significantly shaped by the recent pandemic. Moreover, the lack of institutional support for students with caregiving responsibilities, particularly women who are pregnant or have children, alongside financial limitations and bureaucratic obstacles, continue to restrict access to outbound mobility and international experiences.

Despite these limitations, the interviews clearly demonstrate an increase in international activity over the past decade, largely driven by a committed minority of academics within the Department of Education. These include participation in international conferences, cross-border research collaborations, and long-standing ties with academic communities in Eastern Europe, the UK, the USA, and Latin America. Indeed, when considering the Department of Education and the research conducted by its affiliated professors and researchers, it becomes evident that internationalisation is present, albeit primarily through individual initiatives or small research groups. As the former Director of the Department of Education noted:

Within our group (History of Education), there is an interest in diversifying our collaboration to encompass countries that are not typically included in internationalisation initiatives. This will assist them in enhancing their scientific activities. In particular, we consider the case of lower-middle income countries in Eastern Europe and in the Balkans.

Notably, there is a growing strategic interest in expanding cooperation with less-represented regions, particularly in Africa and Eastern Europe, to counterbalance prevailing trends in global academic relations and foster a more equitable and pluralistic vision of internationalisation. These activities point to a well-established international network at the research level. However, this engagement does not always translate into the development of academic programmes.

A recurring theme is the presence of “hidden” or informal networks, including mentorship between international students and faculty, and small-scale collaborations that emerge from individual initiative. These personalised and community-driven efforts, such as work with refugees or partnerships with institutions in Iraq and African countries, are rarely recognised as part of the institution’s formal international strategy, yet they reflect meaningful and ethically grounded engagement with global education challenges. The presence or establishment of other networks and initiatives within the University, such as the UN-ESCO Chair in “Education for Human Development and Solidarity among Peoples” and of the Observatory on Education and International Cooperation, the above mentioned SACRU network, a Centre for International Solidarity, further illustrates the evolving ties with the global academic community, albeit through a patchwork of activities rather than a coherent institutional policy. These initiatives also fit into the broader context of the *Africa Plan* that the new Rector aims to promote – a strategic initiative designed to strengthen cooperation with African countries by supporting education and training as key tools for the social and cultural advancement of the continent.

Interviewees frequently highlighted the crucial role of the Research Centre focusing on international education in consolidating international activities, both as a formal network and as a hub for a broader, more values-based vision of internationalisation.

7. Drawing out an initial framework

From the analysis of interviews, we drew out some key ideas and principles that could guide an alternative sighting of internationalisation. We developed some initial ideas for principles which could be further considered and developed through additional research. Our initial principles are:

- firstly, the *scientific principle* or research and science could be a key element to guide internationalisation activity. This is based on the Humboldtian concept of a free university engaged in scientific inquiry (McCowan, 2016). In order to carry out robust research, it is necessary to engage with plural international perspectives, and this is an integral aspect of the scientific principle. From this perspective, internationalisation is defined not only by mobility and partnerships, but also by the broadening of academic intellectual horizons and the establishment of a more globally connected academic environment.
- secondly, the majority of interviewees identified *cooperation and solidarity as fundamental values* that shape internationalisation in the field of Education. Rather than considering internationalisation in the context of principles of competition, there is a strong focus on collaboration, mutual exchange and on the crucial role of higher education institutions in addressing global challenges in a spirit of solidarity.
- finally, the *epistemology of internationalisation* in education is reconsidered as a means of interpreting and critically interrogating the diversity of education realities. Engagement with diverse linguistic, cultural and academic traditions engenders a paradigm shift in the epistemology of internationalisation, going beyond conventional metrics to facilitate scientific and epistemological debate on educational issues.

These ideas and approaches could provide a basis for a broader, more inclusive vision of internationalisation that goes beyond conventional metrics and emphasises the importance of values, collaboration and the critical examination of educational paradigms in a globalised world.

8. Conclusion: reshaping internationalisation as a common good?

Whilst universities can generate a range of epistemic, educational, social and cultural outcomes, the nuanced range of outcomes from higher education, such as student self-formation and relational outcomes for societies are not well understood (Marginson, 2024). This paper has aimed to surface some of the less obvious outcomes of internationalisation in an Italian University. The case study explored the possibilities of alternative perspectives through an analysis of documents and interviews with key participants involved in internationalisation. The aim was to highlight internationalisation activity that may foster alternative and more inclusive approaches to internationalisation. From the data collected, an initial set of three principles were suggested as a way of contributing to critical reflections that may promote more equitable approaches to the definitions and practices of internationalisation. This is particularly relevant given the lack of plural, democratic and reflexive transnational relations in contemporary higher education (Montgomery, Trahar, 2023).

Although the field of Education is generally difficult to internationalise, as shown by the data presented in this paper, a close-up analysis has made it possible to highlight activities and networks that are not officially counted, but which can nevertheless represent alternative visions and approaches to internationalisation. The principles that drive these initiatives are mainly those of cooperation and solidarity, which on the one hand underline the importance of the University's identity, without diminishing the importance of the scientific basis of these internationalisation activities. This makes it possible to rethink the epistemology of internationalisation towards more cooperative rather than competitive principles, emphasising not only international rankings or graduate employability, but also collective outcomes and collaborative practices.

In this regard, the notion of higher education as a common good may be considered a potentially useful framework for rethinking internationalisation from a more critical perspective, as evidenced in the works

of various scholars (Biesta, 2009; Brewis, 2023; Marginson, 2024). The concept of common goods may offer an alternative and critical framework, in contrast to prevailing approaches that emphasise market logic, competition, and commodification in higher education internationalisation (Locatelli, Marginson, 2023). As argued by Deneulin and Townsend (2017), common goods are deeply embedded in the cultural and social dimensions of communities and are recognised for their contribution to the general interest. This approach emphasises the value of collaborative practices and relational outcomes, acknowledging the contribution of higher education to both individual advancement, social cohesion and global citizenship. Indeed, common goods are relational goods and require forms of collectivity and shared governance for their production and enjoyment. As such, since they are based on a strong sense of community relations, they cannot be reduced to economic resources or factors of production precisely because of their social and relational value (Locatelli, 2019).

Framing internationalisation through this lens shifts attention toward non-pecuniary outcomes and collective benefits that extend beyond the individual (Marginson, 2024). These include intercultural understanding, collaborative knowledge production, and the strengthening of transnational academic communities. Rethinking internationalisation within a framework that sees higher education as a common good thus allows for a broader and more inclusive understanding of its purposes and practices. It brings to the forefront diverse approaches that may be rooted in context-specific needs, values, and traditions. This reframing supports internationalisation as a process not of exclusion or competition, but of mutual learning, shared responsibility, and global solidarity.

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