

The University in Geopolitical Turmoil

by Prof dr Dirk van Damme

Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed colleagues, and honoured guests,

Thank you for the privilege of addressing you today on a very interesting topic: the condition of the university in a time of geopolitical turmoil. As we gather in an era marked by shifting alliances, resurgent nationalism, global conflict, economic uncertainty, and profound technological change, we must ask ourselves: What is the role of the university in this complexity? How can it respond to global forces beyond its control while preserving its foundational values?

In this address, I will explore four interconnected themes: first, the university's international mission; second, the changing policy environment for international activity; third, the structural imbalances and inequalities in global higher education; and finally, the university's future prospects as a global institution.

The International Mission of the University

Universities have long served as engines of knowledge, dialogue, and discovery that transcend national boundaries. Ideas circulate freely, and

knowledge grows through exchange. Few modern systems are as global in nature as the higher education sector. From their earliest days, universities aspired to be places of research, scholarship, study, and debate, speaking to the learning community regardless of geographical boundaries. In early modern times, traveling scholars and students were a familiar phenomenon in Europe, as well as in other parts of the globe, such as the Arab world and China.

Today, scientific research is one of the most globally connected and integrated systems of modern human society. Transnational research networks and international co-publishing are growing in scope and impact every year. Talented researchers and academics constitute a global market to which ambitious universities are tapping in order to increase their research output and status. Research is the most powerful driver of the internationalisation of universities. However, the education side is following very rapidly. Today, nearly six million students are mobile and studying abroad worldwide. Still, the numbers continue to grow every year.

The international mission is most clearly embodied in the global collaborations that define contemporary academia. Multinational research projects, international student mobility, cross-border faculty exchanges, and inter-institutional partnerships all contribute to fostering innovation and building mutual understanding. Universities have been key actors in promoting cosmopolitanism, defending academic freedom, and upholding the values of openness and inquiry. Furthermore, the university's international mission is vital to addressing global challenges. Climate change, pandemics,

cyber-security, and artificial intelligence are all issues that transcend national borders and require collective, interdisciplinary efforts. The university is one of the few institutions equipped with the intellectual infrastructure to address such complexity.

The internationalisation of universities and academic globalisation have significant institutional consequences. Despite the absence of any form of global governance, there are essential mechanisms of international convergence. International agreements, for example, regarding the recognition of degrees, mutual acceptance of accreditation arrangements, common qualification frameworks, and credit transfer systems, represent important regulatory frameworks for the global system. In certain regions, such as the European Union or the European Higher Education Area, they have become very powerful as a result of the Bologna Process. Other regions of the world, particularly in the context of international trade agreements, have implemented similar arrangements. On top of all this, global university rankings are classifying the complex reality of global higher education in an easily readable, but hierarchical and reductionist, list of status and reputation. Thereby falsely suggesting a global level playing field of academic merit. Through these processes of convergence, individual universities have become connected with one another. By this interconnectedness, they have established a truly global system.

Yet, the global higher education system is not without its limits, contradictions, and tensions. There are many signs that the glory days of unbridled internationalisation are over. In many countries, nationalist policies

seem to take priority over international aspirations. This is not entirely new. Truly global universities constitute only a very small fringe of the system. Most universities define and identify themselves as belonging to specific national systems of history, culture, language, and politics. Universities are making every effort to integrate themselves more firmly into regional knowledge and innovation ecosystems. Political shifts are also important. Conservative opinion leaders in some countries have started to attack universities as 'globalist propaganda machines'. It is likely that the internationalisation and globalisation of higher education are becoming a politically contested reality.

The Changing Policy Environment

The post-Cold War era, particularly the two decades following the 1990s, saw an unprecedented expansion in international education. Governments around the world actively promoted student mobility, welcomed international researchers, and encouraged universities to build global networks. Global rankings, transnational education programs, and strategic international partnerships flourished.

However, in recent years, the policy environment has undergone a dramatic shift. Geopolitical tensions between major powers, particularly the United States and China, have cast a shadow over academic cooperation.

Universities have found themselves caught in the crossfire of trade disputes, technological rivalry, and national security concerns. Rising nationalism, visa restrictions, funding cuts, and political suspicion of foreign influence are eroding the very foundation of international academic cooperation. The

question before us is not merely whether the university can maintain its global outlook, but whether it can do so in a world that is becoming increasingly fragmented and adversarial.

In some countries, foreign scholars are subjected to growing scrutiny; in others, international collaborations are viewed with suspicion or outright hostility. Academic institutions are increasingly being asked to vet partnerships, monitor student affiliations, and align their research with national security priorities.

In many ways, higher education is a pawn in a complex set of fundamental and rapidly changing geopolitical realities. These are well-known. The conflict between China and the Western world continues. The Russian invasion of Ukraine continues, resulting in a rift between Russian higher education and the Western world, largely reestablishing the cleavages of the Cold War era, with the important exception that, under the Trump administration, Europe no longer views the United States as a reliable ally. The Trump-inspired tariff wars, now underway, may have an impact on higher education by escalating national hostility. National and regional knowledge security concerns are eclipsing the value of international academic collaboration.

The issue of immigration is also of paramount importance in most high-income contexts. While complex and with many national variations, the politics of the wealthy world are increasingly opposed to large-scale immigration, regardless of rational economic arguments or humanitarian needs. Of course, immigration policy has direct implications for student and

faculty mobility—in most cases, making it more challenging to gain access for study or employment.

Today, the landscape is one of ambiguity and contradiction. On one hand, governments recognize the economic and strategic value of international students and global research collaboration. On the other hand, they are imposing new regulations, emphasizing "trusted partnerships," and framing higher education as a site of geopolitical contestation.

The impact on institutional autonomy is profound. Universities are being asked to navigate complex political terrain, balance their commitments to openness with national expectations, and reconcile their global aspirations with local responsibilities.

Structural Imbalances and Inequalities in Global Higher Education

The ideal of the university as a global commons—a shared space for the pursuit of truth—masks deep-seated structural inequalities that shape international academic life. Access to resources, prestige, and influence is highly uneven, reflecting broader patterns of global inequality.

It is almost painful to say, but global higher education is itself one of the most unequal systems the world has seen. Processes of colonialism, asymmetrical trade, and economic inequalities have profoundly influenced the expansion of academic institutions over past centuries. Centres of academic development have been concentrated on the economic and political hegemony of the global order. Since the mid-20th century, the global academic hierarchy has been consolidated in these hegemonic countries. Only in recent decades

have things started to change as emerging economies have begun to invest in and expand their own higher education systems to meet the demands of aspiring and increasingly prosperous middle classes. China, followed by India, but also countries such as Saudi Arabia, is taking the lead as an example to many other emerging economies. It is challenging for ambitious universities in these countries to challenge the power mechanisms behind academic excellence. Still, China appears to be making slow but decisive progress in penetrating the upper ranks of the global system. This will be almost impossible for many other countries. The measurements, definitions, and data collection behind the assessment of academic reputation are not free from cultural bias, and the academic community struggles to improve its definition of success.

The historical legacy of concentration of academic excellence is increasingly coming into conflict with the reality of higher education development and demand. To give you an idea of the scale of inequality in higher education, some figures. The number of students enrolled in higher education worldwide has more than doubled in the past two decades, from about 100 million in 2000 to 264 million in 2023. The average gross enrolment rate has more than doubled as well, from 19% in 2000 to 43% in 2023, but 79% of the eligible age population is enrolled in Europe and North America, compared to only 9% in Sub-Saharan Africa. East Asia has experienced significant growth, increasing from a 15% enrolment rate in 2000 to 62% in 2023.

Predictions over a mid-long horizon show an important shift. Participation and graduation rates in the countries of academic hegemony are reaching ceiling

levels, while demand is exploding in many other parts of the world. From around 150 million tertiary graduates worldwide in 2015, we are projected to reach 300 million by 2030, a doubling of the numbers. The bulk of the historically unprecedented expansion of higher education delivery will be in emerging economies, such as China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, and the Arab states. The share of the United States and Europe in the global pool of graduates is expected to shrink, from 14% in 2015 to 8% in 2030, for the United States. Consequently, from a geographical perspective, there will be a significant mismatch between the location of exploding demand and the location of perceived academic excellence. In itself, this mismatch is driving global student and staff mobility, as people who can afford it seek the best opportunities worldwide. Rankings serve as search tools for aspiring students, and in doing so, their biased definition of academic excellence is reinforced.

One of the most critical questions facing the global academic community is whether the sharp inequalities in the system are sustainable. In the 21st century, is it still sustainable to maintain a system built on 19th- and 20th-century premises that is clearly at odds with meeting the demand for knowledge, research, and education in other parts of the world? Is it sustainable to implicitly and explicitly support academic hegemony and power imbalances? And is it even possible to do so when knowledge travels the world at the speed of bits and bytes?

A community, for which freedom of research, the free flow of knowledge, and the power of scientific reason are essential cornerstones of the value system, would enormously benefit from a level playing field between all members, the

closing down of historical privilege, and the elimination of power imbalances. This noble idea is getting political traction because of the unique opportunities provided by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG4 on education. These goals, adopted by the international community, are very important drivers for a more sustainable global higher education system. So far, universities have been largely absent from the international debate on SDG4. Recently, things have started to move, and international university associations are making strong arguments in favour of including universities as partners and actors in achieving progress towards the SDGs.

The global rankings system, for instance, is heavily weighted toward institutions in the Global North, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom. These rankings shape perceptions of excellence and drive flows of talent and funding, often at the expense of universities in the Global South.

Addressing these imbalances requires more than technical fixes; it necessitates a fundamental reevaluation of what internationalization entails and who benefits from it. True global engagement must be rooted in reciprocity, equity, and mutual respect. We must build partnerships that empower all participants, not just the most powerful.

Internationalization without Westernization?

As a consequence of the changing political context, global higher education is, for the first time in recent history, becoming less international. As already

mentioned, there are now around 6 million mobile students per year—reflecting complex global mobility patterns that include significant South-to-North movement, as well as growing South-to-South, North-to-South, and North-to-North flows, among others. International branch campuses, now numbering over 300, and other forms of transnational education are also part of this global environment. The number of students participating in cross-border programs and institutions is now approaching, and may soon surpass, the number of internationally mobile students. Similar to the case of student mobility, the traditional dominance of the Global North in cross-border delivery is likely to be threatened as a result of recent events. The current internationalization ecosystem, including South–North student degree mobility and North–South mobility in transnational education, development cooperation, and accreditation, will be dramatically challenged; however, it is currently impossible to accurately predict specific trends.

Internationalization has so far been a Western concept. Now, its dominance is more challenged than ever, which is in itself a good and necessary development. More concerning is the fact that core values that have always been advocated for by the West and in particular the United States—such as academic freedom, academic integrity, as well as responsibility of society for higher education and of higher education for society—are no longer guaranteed. It remains to be seen if these academic values will survive the current transformation as well as the other challenges outlined here.

Future Prospects

What then lies ahead for the university in an era of geopolitical turmoil? The future is uncertain, but several possible trajectories can be discerned.

First, universities must reaffirm their commitment to internationalism, even in the face of adversity. This entails defending academic freedom, advocating for open inquiry, and resisting the instrumentalization of higher education for narrow, partisan political purposes. It also means building resilient networks that can withstand political disruption—networks based on trust, shared values, and long-term collaboration.

Second, universities must engage more deeply with questions of equity and inclusion. International partnerships should not replicate global hierarchies; instead, they should challenge them. Institutions in the Global North must move beyond tokenistic collaborations and invest in capacity-building, joint research, and equitable governance structures.

Third, technology will play a pivotal role. While virtual exchange cannot replace the richness of physical mobility, it can enhance access, reduce environmental impact, and create new forms of engagement. The pandemic has shown that digital platforms can sustain academic cooperation in times of crisis—this potential must now be fully realized.

Fourth, universities must become more politically astute. They cannot afford to be naive about the geopolitical environment in which they operate.

Leadership must develop the capacity to navigate complex regulatory

landscapes, manage risks effectively, and articulate the value of international engagement in terms that resonate with policymakers and the broader public.

Finally, we must reimagine the university itself—not merely as a site of learning and research, but as a civic actor, a diplomatic bridge, and a moral compass. The university must serve as a sanctuary for critical thought, a platform for global dialogue, and a catalyst for social transformation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the university stands at a crossroads. It can retreat into insularity, bending to the pressures of nationalism and geopolitical conflict. Or it can rise to the challenge, reaffirming its global mission and reimagining its role in a turbulent world.

The choice is ours. Let us choose wisely. Let us defend the university as a space of openness, equity, and shared humanity. Let us ensure that, even in times of geopolitical turmoil, the light of knowledge continues to shine across borders, cultures, and generations.

Thank you.

