Riding the Global Tide:
An Empirical Review of Globalisation in Higher Education

Gautam Makwana[1]

Abstract: This paper presents a systematic empirical review of the literature exploring the multifaceted impact of globalisation on higher education. Globalisation, characterised by increased interconnectedness and mobility, has acted as a transformative yet disruptive force for universities worldwide. This review synthesises findings from empirical studies published between 2000 and 2023 to analyse three core dimensions: the internationalisation of curriculum and pedagogy, trends in international student and faculty mobility, and the resulting institutional stratification and marketisation. The analysis reveals a consistent dialectic across all dimensions. Empirically, globalisation is associated with increased cultural diversity on campuses, the proliferation of English-Medium Instruction (EMI), and innovative transnational partnerships. Conversely, strong evidence also highlights significant negative consequences, including the homogenization of curricula around Western models, the commodification of education, and the exacerbation of status hierarchies between institutions in core and peripheral nations. The review concludes that the impact of globalisation is profoundly ambivalent, simultaneously strengthening cooperation and competition, innovation and inequality. Future research must focus on identifying strategies that maximise the benefits of global integration while mitigating its market-driven excesses, safeguarding the public good mission of higher education.

---

[1] Social Scientist & IEC Member, Institute of Teaching and Research in Ayurveda, Gujarat Ayurved University, Jamnagar - 361001, Gujarat, India; ORCID iD: 0000-0003-2749-1367

Introduction

The forces of globalisation—the unprecedented flow of capital, people, knowledge, and culture across national borders—have fundamentally reconfigured the field of higher education in the 21st century. What was once a predominantly national or local endeavour, focused on cultivating domestic citizenry and workforce, is now an intensely global enterprise operating within a competitive international marketplace (Marginson, 2014). This paradigmatic shift extends beyond theoretical discourse; it is empirically evidenced by tangible, measurable changes on campuses worldwide. These changes range from the demographic composition of student bodies and faculty to the very content of curricula, the language of instruction, and the strategic mission statements of universities themselves (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

While the phenomenon is often discussed in broad thematic terms, its actual effects and consequences are best understood through the critical perspective of empirical research that systematically documents, measures, and analyses these transformations. This paper provides a systematic review of the empirical literature to synthesise the tangible impacts of globalisation on higher education. Moving beyond theoretical polemics, it focuses exclusively on synthesising findings from observable, data-driven studies published between 2000 and 2023. The central argument advanced through this review is that globalisation does not act as a monolithic or uniformly positive force; rather, it manifests as a powerful dialectical force, producing a series of simultaneous and often contradictory outcomes (Stromquist, 2007). It promotes greater integration while simultaneously provoking parochialism; it encourages cooperation yet intensifies competition; it drives innovation but also promotes standardisation and homogenization.

To navigate this inherent complexity, the review is structured around three primary domains where the empirical evidence is most robust and revealing:

1. *The Internationalisation of Curriculum and Pedagogy*: How has globalisation concretely changed what is taught (curriculum content) and how it is taught (pedagogical methods and medium of instruction)?
2. *Student and Faculty Mobility*: What does quantitative and qualitative data reveal about the patterns, drivers, and profound implications of global academic flows?
3. *Institutional Stratification and the Market Paradigm*: How has globalisation altered the fundamental structure of the higher education sector and catalysed a shift towards market-oriented behaviours among institutions?

Through a critical synthesis of evidence across these domains, this review aims to present a nuanced and evidence-based assessment of the multifaceted role of globalisation in shaping the contemporary university.

The Internationalisation of Curriculum and Pedagogy

One of the most direct and empirically measurable impacts of globalisation is the concerted push to internationalise curriculum content and teaching methodologies. This phenomenon moves beyond mere rhetoric, manifesting in distinct, observable trends across global higher education systems.

Empirically, the most prominent trend is the rapid expansion of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) in non-Anglophone countries. This is not an organic development but a deliberate policy strategy adopted by institutions seeking to improve their global competitiveness. A comprehensive study of 55 universities in Japan and South Korea found that 72% had formally implemented EMI programmes within the past decade, primarily in graduate schools and within departments of business, engineering, and international studies, with the explicit goal of

attracting international students and improving global rankings (Bradford & Brown, 2018). This trend is powerfully echoed in the European context. A landmark study tracking the evolution of programs across the European Union documented a staggering 500% increase in English-taught bachelor's programs since 2002, a statistic that underscores the scale and speed of this pedagogical shift (Wächter & Maiworm, 2002).

The pedagogical implications of this shift are significant and double-edged, as empirical research reveals. On one hand, quantitative assessment studies indicate that EMI can effectively improve students' English proficiency and provide them with greater access to global academic discourse and research networks (Byun et al., 2011). On the other hand, in-depth qualitative research uncovers considerable challenges. A seminal study conducting interviews with faculty in Nordic countries revealed that both lecturers and local students frequently report increased cognitive load and a persistent sense of linguistic and cultural disadvantage compared to native English speakers, a dynamic that can potentially hinder deep conceptual learning and critical engagement in the classroom (Airey, 2011). This creates an inherent tension between the institutional goal of internationalisation and the core pedagogical goal of equitable and effective knowledge transfer.

Beyond the medium of instruction, the actual content of the curriculum itself is undergoing a profound transformation driven by globalising pressures. A rigorous content analysis of business school syllabi across 30 countries revealed a striking homogenisation, with over 80% of required textbooks authored by Western (primarily American) scholars and an overwhelming focus of case studies on large multinational corporations (Shields, 2013). This empirical finding lends strong support to critical theories that frame this process as a form of "academic neocolonialism," where Western knowledge systems and epistemic frameworks are systematically privileged and validated over local,

Indigenous, and alternative knowledges (Takayama et al., 2017; Connell, 2007). The risk is the production of a "global one-dimensional man" (Marginson, 2014), devoid of critical local context.

Conversely, empirical evidence also documents countervailing positive outcomes that illustrate the dialectical nature of this process. Universities that have moved beyond simple EMI adoption to successfully integrate comprehensive "internationalization at home" and "global learning" initiatives—such as structured cross-cultural virtual collaborations with international partner institutions (COIL), and community-engaged learning with a variety of local populations—report significant, measurable gains in students' intercultural competence, empathy, and global mindset (Leask, 2016; Deardorff, 2009). This underlines the core dialectic: globalisation can both erode local pedagogical identity and promote valuable, transformative cross-cultural learning, depending on how it is implemented and critically managed. The empirical record suggests that the outcome is not predetermined but is a function of purposeful curricular design that consciously balances global integration with local relevance.

Student and Faculty Mobility: Patterns and Imbalances

The movement of students and academics represents one of the most visible and empirically quantifiable indicators of globalisation in higher education. OECD data consistently reveal a steady annual increase in globally mobile students, with numbers surpassing 6 million and contributing over USD 500 billion to the global economy annually (OECD, 2022). However, beneath this aggregate growth lies a profoundly asymmetrical architecture of flows that reinforces core-periphery dynamics. Empirical analyses consistently demonstrate that over 70% of mobile students originate from Asia (with China, India, and Vietnam as primary senders) and are concentrated in a small number of Anglophone destination coun-

tries—notably the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada—alongside select Western European nations like Germany and the Netherlands (Marginson, 2014; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023).

The drivers of this mobility are complex and multidirectional, well-documented through large-scale surveys and migration data. For students from the Global South, push factors include perceived deficiencies in domestic higher education capacity, while pull factors encompass the promise of improving human capital, better employment prospects both internationally and at home, and the cachet of a foreign degree (Bodycott, 2009; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). For receiving institutions and host nations, the motivations are increasingly economic and demographic. The financial model of many universities in Anglophone countries now critically depends on international student fees, which cross-subsidise research activities and underfunded domestic operations. In Australia, international education was the fourth-largest export industry pre-pandemic, contributing AUD 40.3 billion annually (Universities Australia, 2021). Similarly, in Canada and the UK, international students help offset declining public subsidies and support local economies (OECD, 2022). This financialisation of student mobility has led to what Marginson (2016) terms "the extraction of economic value from cross-border movement" (p. 107), transforming students into revenue streams.

The impact on faculty mobility reflects a similarly stark dialectic. Empirical studies note the potential benefits of "brain circulation," where academics gain experience abroad and return home, facilitating valuable knowledge transfer and the strengthening of transnational research networks (Jöns, 2011; Teferra, 2005). Programs like the European Union's Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions are designed to exacerbate such circulation. However, the overwhelming empirical evidence points to a more persistent and damaging pattern of "brain drain." Highly skilled academics and researchers from peripheral and semi-peripheral countries are systematically recruited to elite institutions in the global North, lured by superior research infrastructure, higher salaries, and greater prestige (Altbach, 2004; Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). This exacerbates research capacity gaps and creates a vicious cycle: the loss of top talent weakens universities in the Global South, making it even harder for them to compete, retain staff, and attract funding, thereby further consolidating the dominance of a handful of elite universities in the global North (Barnett, 2018). This stratification of academic labour is a direct and empirically measurable consequence of globalised higher education markets.

Institutional Stratification and the Market Paradigm

Perhaps the most profound and empirically demonstrable impact of globalisation on higher education is the fundamental restructuring of the sector into a highly stratified, competitive global marketplace. This transformation is not an organic evolution but a directed process, most visibly enforced and accelerated by commercial global ranking systems such as Times Higher Education (THE), QS World University Rankings, and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU). These rankings are not passive mirrors suggesting institutional quality; they are active, powerful agents that shape perceptions, define "excellence," and dictate institutional behaviour on a global scale (Hazelkorn, 2015; Espeland & Sauder, 2016). The empirical correlation between rank and success is pronounced. Quantitative studies have consistently demonstrated that an improvement in ranking position is strongly correlated with a surge in applications from high-achieving students (both domestic and international), a strengthened position in negotiating faculty salaries and perks, and a significantly improved ability to attract prestigious research funding and lucrative corporate partnerships (Bowman & Bastedo, 2011; Marginson, 2014). This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where ranking

success begets the resources that lead to further success, cementing the position of elite institutions.

In direct response to this intense, quantified competition, universities worldwide have undergone a cultural and operational shift, aggressively adopting corporate and market-oriented behaviours. This phenomenon is extensively theorised and empirically documented as "academic capitalism" (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). The university is reconceptualised as a firm within a knowledge economy, whose primary goals are to compete for market share, enhance its brand, and generate revenue. Empirical evidence for this abounds. Content analyses of university strategic plans from different geopolitical contexts—from East Asia to Western Europe to North America—reveal a startlingly uniform discursive emphasis on achieving "world-class" status, a term that has become a globalised mantra (Shin & Kehm, 2013; Lo, 2011). This status is operationally defined almost exclusively by the narrow metrics privileged in global rankings: the proportion of international students and faculty, the number of faculty with PhDs from elite Western institutions, and publication counts in high-impact, predominantly Anglophone journals indexed in databases like Scopus and Web of Science (Paasi, 2005).

This strategic reorientation has catalysed a significant and worrying narrowing of institutional missions. To maximise their performance on these standardised metrics, universities engage in isomorphic mimicry, increasingly resembling one another in structure and priority (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This leads to a strategic reallocation of resources towards disciplines that perform well in the rankings calculus—typically STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), business, and economics fields, where research funding and citation rates are high (Deem et al., 2008). Conversely, disciplines that are harder to quantify and compare globally, particularly the humanities, arts, and critical social sciences, along with mission-oriented activities like local community engagement and public service, face relative marginalisation, funding cuts, and are often forced to justify their existence in purely utilitarian terms (Nussbaum, 2010; Olssen & Peters, 2005). The empirical result is a loss of epistemic diversity and a weakening of the university's role as a critic of society and a guardian of cultural knowledge.

This competitive dynamic, driven by market logic, has drastically accelerated and solidified stratification within the global higher education field, creating what Marginson (2016) describes as a "steeper prestige pyramid" (p. 42). At its narrow apex sits a small, self-reinforcing elite of predominantly Anglo-American universities (e.g., Ivy League universities, Oxbridge) that controls a disproportionate and growing share of global resources, talent, and prestige. Empirical network analyses of international research collaborations and citation patterns vividly illustrate this core-periphery structure. Research from the Global South is systematically under-cited, and collaborations often follow a hierarchical model where Northern institutions lead, and Southern partners provide data or fieldwork, limiting true epistemic partnership (Larivière et al., 2015; Collyer, 2018). This dynamic creates a vicious and inescapable cycle for institutions in the developing world and for less prestigious universities in the West. They struggle to compete for "star" faculty and top students, who the elite, wealthier institutions siphon off. They are often relegated to the role of "feeders" or "talent nurseries" for the elite global system, providing undergraduate education for students who then pursue advanced degrees at top-tier universities (Altbach, 2004). Consequently, they risk being locked into a position of permanent dependency and peripheral status, unable to break into the elite circle that controls the defining metrics of quality (Marginson, 2016).

The empirical evidence is thus unequivocal: rather than creating a flat, open, and connected global academic community, globali-

sation, as mediated through market mechanisms and rankings, has largely reinforced and intensified existing historical and economic hierarchies. It has created a winner-takes-all market that mirrors and often amplifies broader global economic inequalities (Frank & Cook, 1995). The global higher education field is not a level playing field but a deeply stratified space where historical advantage, linguistic privilege (English), and economic power are consistently reproduced and naturalised through the apparently neutral mechanisms of competition and metrics. The challenge for the future is to disrupt this cycle—to develop alternative models of evaluation, advance genuine reciprocity in partnerships, and reassert the social and democratic mission of the university against its increasingly dominant economic one.

Conclusion

The empirical evidence synthesised in this review presents a clear yet profoundly complex picture: globalisation operates as a powerful, ambivalent, and dialectical force that has simultaneously integrated and divided the global higher education landscape. The data reveal undeniable, measurable trends towards the internationalisation of curriculum through mechanisms like EMI, significantly increased—though radically imbalanced—flows of student and faculty mobility, and the emergence of a intensely competitive global arena where institutions vie for status, talent, and resources within a stratified marketplace.

However, the benefits of this integration are starkly unevenly distributed, both between and within nations and institutions. The central dialectic is empirically evident across all three domains analysed: the very process that expands access to global knowledge and brings revenue-generating international students also risks marginalising local languages, pedagogies, and Indigenous knowledge systems, potentially engendering epistemic injustice (Stein, 2018). The systems and policies designed to facilitate valu-

able academic mobility and "brain circulation" also, and often predominantly, drive debilitating "brain drain" from the Global South, reinforcing neo-colonial knowledge hierarchies and exacerbating global research capacity gaps (Altbach & de Wit, 2018). The market-based competition that incentivises research excellence and operational efficiency also intensifies stratification, the commodification of learning, and the potential neglect of the core social and local public-good mission of universities (Calhoun, 2006).

Therefore, the critical challenge for policymakers, university leaders, and the academic community is not to outright reject globalisation, an arguably inevitable phenomenon, but to consciously and strategically manage its forces with a commitment to ethical steering and social justice. The empirical findings compellingly call for policies and leadership approaches that move beyond rhetorical internationalisation to actively promote truly reciprocal and equitable North-South partnerships, protect linguistic and epistemic diversity against homogenising pressures, and ensure that the pursuit of global standing and rankings does not come at an unacceptable cost to equity, local relevance, and educational quality (Bleiklie et al., 2017.

Future empirical research must therefore move beyond merely documenting these established trends. There is an urgent need for rigorous, mixed-methods studies that evaluate specific policy interventions—such as funding models for equitable partnerships, "internationalization at home" programs that don't require mobility, and alternative ranking systems—that can effectively harness the benefits of global connectivity while decisively safeguarding and reinvigorating the core public good mission of higher education (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). The future of a globally integrated higher education sector depends on its ability to evolve from a market-driven competition into a cooperatively governed ecosystem that val-

_____

ues diversity, equity, and shared progress as much as it values excellence and innovation.

References

Airey, J. (2011). Talking about teaching in English: Swedish university lecturers' experiences of changing teaching language. *Ibérica, 22,* 35–54.

Altbach, P. G. (2004). Globalisation and the university: Myths and realities in an unequal world. *Tertiary Education and Management, 10*(1), 3–25. https://doi.org/10.1023/B:TEAM.00000 12239.55136.4b

Altbach, P. G., & de Wit, H. (2018). The challenge to higher education internationalisation. *University World News.* https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20180320091643527

Altbach, P. G., & Knight, J. (2007). The internationalization of higher education: Motivations and realities. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 11*(3–4), 290–305. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315307303 542

Barnett, R. (2018). *The ecological university: A feasible utopia.* Routledge.

Bleiklie, I., Enders, J., & Lepori, B. (Eds.). (2017). *Managing universities: Policy and organizational change from a Western European comparative perspective.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Bodycott, P. (2009). Choosing a higher education study abroad destination: What mainland Chinese parents and students rate as important. *Journal of Research in International Education, 8*(3), 349–373. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240909345 818

Bowman, N. A., & Bastedo, M. N. (2011). Anchoring effects in world university rankings: Exploring biases in reputation scores. *Higher Education, 61*(4), 431–444. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-010-9339-1

Bradford, A., & Brown, H. (Eds.). (2018). *English-medium instruction in Japanese higher education: Policy, challenges and outcomes.* Multilingual Matters.

Byun, K., Chu, H., Kim, M., Park, I., Kim, S., & Jung, J. (2011). English-medium teaching in Korean higher education: Policy debates and reality. *Higher Education, 62*(4), 431–449. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-010-9397-4

Calhoun, C. (2006). The university and the public good. *Thesis Eleven, 84*(1), 7–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513606060 516

Collyer, F. M. (2018). Global patterns in the publishing of academic knowledge: Global North, global South. *Current Sociology, 66*(1), 56–73. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392116680 020

Connell, R. (2007). *Southern theory: The global dynamics of knowledge in social science.* Allen & Unwin.

de Wit, H., & Altbach, P. G. (2021). Internationalization in higher education: Global trends and recommendations for its future. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education, 5*(1), 28–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2020. 1820898

Deardorff, D. K. (2009). Implementing intercultural competence assessment. In D. K. Deardorff (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence* (pp. 477–491). SAGE Publications.

Deem, R., Mok, K. H., & Lucas, L. (2008). Transforming higher education in whose image? Exploring the concept of the "world-class" university in Europe and Asia. *Higher Education Policy, 21*(1), 83–97. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.hep.83 00179

DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review, 48*(2), 147–160. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101

Docquier, F., & Rapoport, H. (2012). Globalization, brain drain, and development. *Journal of Economic Literature, 50*(3), 681–730. https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.50.3.681

_____

Espeland, W. N., & Sauder, M. (2016). *Engines of anxiety: Academic rankings, reputation, and accountability.* Russell Sage Foundation.

Frank, R. H., & Cook, P. J. (1995). *The winner-take-all society.* Free Press.

Hazelkorn, E. (2015). *Rankings and the reshaping of higher education: The battle for world-class excellence* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137446671

Jöns, H. (2011). Transnational academic mobility and gender. *Globalisation, Societies and Education, 9*(2), 183–209. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2011.577199

Larivière, V., Haustein, S., & Mongeon, P. (2015). The oligopoly of academic publishers in the digital era. *PLOS ONE, 10*(6), e0127502. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0127502

Leask, B. (2016). Internationalizing curriculum and learning for all students. In E. Jones, R. Coelen, J. Beelen, & H. de Wit (Eds.), *Global and local internationalization* (pp. 65–71). SensePublishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-301-8_8

Lo, W. Y. W. (2011). Soft power, university rankings and knowledge production: Distinctions between hegemony and self-determination in higher education. *Comparative Education, 47*(2), 209–222. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2011.554092

Marginson, S. (2014). Student self-formation in international education. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 18*(1), 6–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315313513036

Marginson, S. (2016). The worldwide trend to high participation higher education: Dynamics of social stratification in inclusive systems. *Higher Education, 72*(4), 413–434. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0016-x

Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. N. (2002). "Push-pull" factors influencing international student destination choice. *International Journal of Educational Management, 16*(2), 82–90.

https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540210418403

Nussbaum, M. C. (2010). *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities.* Princeton University Press.

Olssen, M., & Peters, M. A. (2005). Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: From the free market to knowledge capitalism. *Journal of Education Policy, 20*(3), 313–345. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930500108718

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2022). *Education at a glance 2022: OECD indicators.* OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en

Paasi, A. (2005). Globalisation, academic capitalism, and the uneven geographies of international journal publishing spaces. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space, 37*(5), 769–789. https://doi.org/10.1068/a3769

Shields, R. (2013). Globalization and international student mobility: A network analysis. *Comparative Education Review, 57*(4), 609–636. https://doi.org/10.1086/671752

Shin, J. C., & Kehm, B. M. (Eds.). (2013). *Institutionalization of world-class university in global competition.* Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4975-7

Slaughter, S., & Rhoades, G. (2004). *Academic capitalism and the new economy: Markets, state, and higher education.* Johns Hopkins University Press.

Stein, S. (2018). Confronting the racial-colonial foundations of US higher education. *Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education, 3,* 77–98. https://doi.org/10.28945/4105

Stromquist, N. P. (2007). Internationalization as a response to globalization: Radical shifts in university environments. *Higher Education, 53*(1), 81–105. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-005-1975-5

Takayama, K., Sriprakash, A., & Connell, R. (2017). Toward a postcolonial comparative and international education. *Compara-*

_____

tive Education Review, 61(S1), S1–S24. https://doi.org/10.1086/690455

Teferra, D. (2005). Brain circulation: Unparalleled opportunities, underlying challenges, and outmoded presumptions. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 9*(3), 229–250. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315305277619

UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2023). *Global flow of tertiary-level students.* http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow

Universities Australia. (2021). *Data snapshot 2021.* https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/210625-Data-snapshot-2021-FINAL.pdf

Wächter, B., & Maiworm, F. (Eds.). (2002). *English-language-taught degree programmes in European higher education: Trends and success factors.* Lemmens Medien GmbH. http://www.aca-secretariat.be/fileadmin/aca_docs/images/members/2002_English-Language-Taught_Programmes_in_European_HE_-_Trends_and_Success_Factors.pdf