

The Swiss Global Competence Lab (SGCL) – a local response to internationalization of higher education

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Introduction

Internationalization, a “key change agent in tertiary education” (de Wit et al. 2015) is often narrowly defined and unevenly distributed across the country’s HEIs: Internationalization efforts have repeatedly been related to and measured by the amount of English-taught degree programs across HEIs (cf. Sandström & Neghina 2017), and R1 institutions notably outrank younger applied universities in terms of foreign talent participating in research, teaching, and learning. As a result, these smaller, regional universities have engaged in various initiatives to gain visibility internationally and to attract both international teachers and students. This presentation highlights a series of activities and measures implemented by a consortium of four universities of applied sciences to promote the Internationalization of the Curriculum (IoC). It emphasizes local institutional limitations and requirements, and discusses the steps that lead to the establishment of a joint policy and an action plan that would constitute a basis for the development of a sustainable and long-term institutional response to the challenges posed by the changing landscape of internationalization.

Addressing emerging needs for change: Embracing the challenge

Developing global competences and addressing global challenges in higher education is even more essential today than ever before. How do we address these topics in our degree programmes? How do we ensure that learning takes on multilingual, transcultural, and transnational perspectives? How are higher education institutions supported in their internationalization efforts so that they might create opportunities for their students to become global citizens.

In response to these questions and echoing the call by various internationalization scholars to apply a critical lens to internationalization by treating it as a means to an end rather than a goal in itself (Brandenburg & De Wit 2011; Hudzik 2014; Leask 2015; Ergin, de Wit & Leask 2019), the Bern University of Applied Sciences (BFH), the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland (HES-SO), the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI) and the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW) formed an alliance to launch a series of projects to initiate Internationalization of Curricula (IoC) through a genuine engagement with the needs of students and staff (e.g., Jones 2013).

With the first Movetia-funded project, *High-Impact Measures for the Comprehensive Internationalization of Curricula*, the SGCL aimed to explore the needs and potential of global citizenship and intercultural competence training aligned with employability needs across the consortium’s institutions and resulted in a joint policy and action plan across the four UAS.

Developing an inter-university response: The Swiss Global Competence Lab

Furthermore, while the project revealed the willingness to deeply engage with IoC across the four UAS, various stakeholders emphasized the lack of expertise and their wish for an organizational body that would offer expert guidance in all fields related to IoC.

A direct response to this thinking was the establishment of a joint lab, the Swiss Global Competence Lab, an experimental idea and project hub where innovation in internationalization could be developed informally and flexibly and where solutions could be tried out, evaluated and adapted in a research-based approach. The lab, which became operational in 2021, facilitates innovation and development in three primary areas: First, it aims to identify areas for further development that are meaningful to the key actors involved in implementing change. This includes the study of the perceptions of actors engaged in internationalization through needs and potential analyses. Second, it aims at the maintenance of quality of higher education by developing diagnostic procedures to identify successful approaches to and realizations of IoC. Third, it aims to provide individual support for lecturers who want to try out innovative solutions.

Conclusion and call to action

A comparison with Switzerland's international neighbors reveals a commonality among them, as we are all grappling with the challenges and opportunities associated with internationalization in HEIs. Most HEIs are actively engaged in discussions and endeavors aimed at incorporating internationalization into their institutional framework. While exemplary practices are occasionally observed in isolated instances, typically confined to specific academic programs or individual departments, the realization of a fully internationalized HEI remains a rare occurrence. The avenues and solutions are local and highly sensitive to both context and (educational) culture. They are situated in the broader trajectories of HEIs and reflect unique responses within the boundaries of the (educational) culture in which they operate. This presents an opportunity through the SGCL to initiate a gradual and incremental approach to internationalization across all HEIs.

Within HEIs, it is customary to encounter both proactive advocates and sceptics when embarking on long-term transitional processes. What holds paramount significance is the engagement and involvement of the entire academic community, including faculty and administrative staff, encompassing both research and teaching domains, as well as all institutional services. A comprehensive and inclusive dialogue, characterized by openness and constructive critique, concerning the definitions, expectations, and requisites associated with internationalization, is pivotal. Such discussions can lead to a transformative shift in mindset and foster a more favorable disposition towards the overarching internationalization process.

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