

What do we talk about when we talk about internationalisation: Academics' attitudes towards higher education internationalisation in an Eastern European university

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Abstract

The role of academics is crucial to ensure successful and sustainable internationalisation of higher education. Internationalisation is a term that is widely used in higher education institutions but is rarely questioned or analysed in depth in a specific context. Few studies investigate how academics understand internationalisation, and how this in turn affects their motivation regarding internationalisation activities. This paper investigates how academic staff members conceptualise internationalisation. Stier's (2006) ideologies of internationalisation are employed as a heuristic device to explore academic's conceptualisations of internationalisation in a Lithuanian university. Results of a qualitative study of multiple focus groups with 27 academics showed that the majority conceptualise internationalisation as a means to achieve a specific goal which points to an instrumentalist view. Internationalisation was often conflated with good quality of education and vice versa but the impact internationalisation has on students and the society at large was described vaguely and incidentally.

Il ruolo degli accademici è fondamentale per garantire un'internazionalizzazione efficace e sostenibile dell'istruzione universitaria. "Internazionalizzazione" è un termine ampiamente utilizzato, ma raramente messo in discussione o analizzato approfonditamente in contesti specifici. Pochi studi analizzano il modo in cui gli accademici interpretano il concetto di internazionalizzazione e come questo influisca sulla loro motivazione nel perseguire attività di internazionalizzazione stesse. Questo articolo usa il concetto di "ideologie dell'internazionalizzazione" (Stier, 2006) come strumento euristico per esplorare le concettualizzazioni dell'internazionalizzazione da parte degli accademici in un'università lituana, attraverso uno studio qualitativo composto di molteplici focus group con 27 accademici. I risultati mostrano che la maggior parte di loro concepisce l'internazionalizzazione come un mezzo per raggiungere un obiettivo specifico, rivelando una visione strumentale. I soggetti della ricerca associano spesso l'internazionalizzazione all'alta qualità dell'istruzione (e viceversa), ma descrivono l'impatto che l'internazionalizzazione ha sugli studenti e sulla società in generale solo in modo vago e incidentale.

Keywords: internationalisation; conceptualisation; higher education; academic staff; Central and Eastern Europe

Parole chiave: internazionalizzazione; concettualizzazione; istruzione universitaria; personale accademico; Europa Centrale e Orientale

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1. Introduction

When I was only considering internationalisation as the focus of my PhD studies and reading without much purpose or thematic guidelines, I stumbled across an article with a witty title. “We have met the enemy and he is us” – claimed the author of said article, Michael Stohl (2007). I had been working at a university department for a few years at the time and one of my main activities was facilitation and administration of outgoing student mobility. Since all students in the department were studying Asian or Middle Eastern languages and cultures, a study period abroad was nearly a given. Yet, the number of mobile students in my department was the exception rather than the rule when compared to the rest of the university. As I was wondering why that was the case, Stohl’s account of his career in international mobility in various higher education institutions in the United States, finally opened my eyes. After spending several decades in the field, he concluded that the academic staff is crucial in deciding if, how and to what extent internationalisation shall be implemented. It should be noted that Stohl’s main focus was on mobility and internationalisation abroad, not the full spectrum of internationalisation as it is understood today, however, I believe that the argument still stands. What made my department exceptional compared to the rest of the university was exactly the academic staff, who were putting tremendous effort into ensuring that as many students as possible could spend a study abroad period in their region of studies. Their involvement went from initiating bilateral cooperation agreements to, in extreme cases, personally calling Lithuanian embassies to speed up the documentation necessary for the student’s visit.

This contrast was the inspiration for the initial research question – if academics can both foster and hinder internationalisation, what determines their behaviour? While multiple studies (Agnew, 2013; Leask, 2009; Leask & Bridge, 2013) showed that the involvement of the academic staff is crucial for successful internationalisation, the precise rationales remained unclear. There were attempts (Agnew, 2013; Clifford, 2009) to draw lines across discipline borders, following Becher and Trowler (2001). That, however, proved to be insufficient as other aspects such as geographical and socioeconomic context as well as organizational culture also influenced one’s willingness to become involved in internationalisation activities (Agnew, 2013).

Internationalisation is still often seen as something that happens abroad, however, for the past several decades the focus has been steadily shifting towards internationalisation at home (Wächter, 2003) and internationalisation of curriculum (Leask, 2009) which emphasises activities carried out in the home university. Further research, however, showed that there was hardly one “shared understanding of the concept of internationalisation” (de Wit, 2011). While ongoing debates are natural in academic discussions, the practical implications of this lack of conceptual clarity should not be understated. It stands to reason that an understanding of the concept (or lack thereof) can impact the rationales for its implementation. As more internationalisation activities are focusing on internationalisation at home rather than mobility, the importance of whether the academic staff will foster or hinder it, grows exponentially. This article adds to the research on academics’ involvement in internationalisation and presents a case of a university in Eastern Europe, consequently, adding to the representation of a region which has historically been under-represented in internationalisation research (Bedenlier, Kondakci, & Zawacki-Richter, 2018; Kuzhabekova, Hendel, & Chapman, 2015).

This article tackles the issue of how academics conceptualise internationalisation and what internationalisation rationales are behind these conceptualisations. The research is situated in the context of a university located in Eastern Europe during the process of creating an internationalisation strategy. Transcripts of three academic staff focus groups were thematically analysed in order to determine the main components of internationalisation and the rationales for its implementation. The following section briefly overviews the existing research on higher education faculty engagement, especially, in Central and Eastern Europe. Further, a discussion on

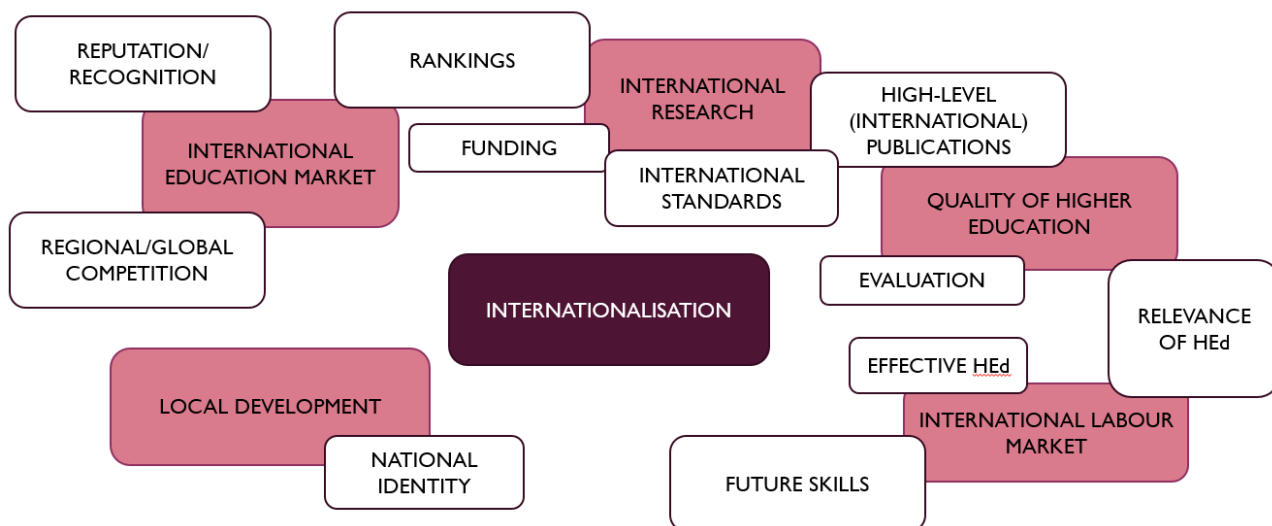
internationalisation ideologies and the analytical framework employed is followed by the methodology of the study. Discussion of the results and concluding remarks are provided in the final sections of the article.

2. Internationalisation and the academic staff: Who is talking?

Internationalisation, like many concepts used frequently by both researchers and practitioners, suffers from a certain identity crisis. The most commonly used scholarly definition was coined in 2004 by Jane Knight and updated in 2015. It defines internationalisation as “the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (De Wit & Hunter, 2015, p. 3). There have, however, been doubts whether internationalisation will or has already become a catch all phrase for anything and everything that sounds international (Knight, 2014). Others suggested that there is a need for a reconceptualization of the definition (Whitsed & Green, 2014) or a different definition altogether (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011).

A meta-analysis of the definition of internationalisation used in the scholarly work of Central and Eastern European authors, showed more diversity but not much originality. Aside from using the term ‘Europeanization’ to refer to the convergence of higher education systems and policies towards a common European model, scholars either chose the Western-made definition or did not use one altogether (Orechova, 2021). An ongoing study into the discursive construction of internationalisation in the universities of Central and Eastern Europe reveals quite a complex picture (preliminary findings of the study are presented in Orechova, 2021). The semantic field constructed on the basis of 3 universities in the region and their internationalisation discourse from 2011 to 2020 (Figure 1) shows that the concept of internationalisation in the region includes aspects of both education and research, yet the marketization of higher education is prevalent as internationalisation invokes the notions of both international labour market and international education market. In the context of this article, the conceptual map provided below should serve as an expanded working definition of internationalisation as it is discursively understood in Central and Eastern Europe.

Figure 1. *Semantic field of ‘internationalisation’.*



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While debates on the nature and content of internationalisation are happening among the researchers, they do not always happen inside universities. When they do, though, they tend to be limited to the highest offices and the rest of the university community just discuss how internationalisation can be implemented or, rather, achieved. Green and Whitsed (2016) conclude that when the institutional top-down approach is followed, internationalisation “becomes a compliance exercise with academics, at best, employing a ‘tick-the-box’ approach” (Green & Whitsed, 2016, p. 295). Such sentiments are echoed both in internationalisation research and Lithuanian higher education research. Patricie Mertova (2014) analysed academics’ perceptions of internationalisation in England, Australia and the Czech Republic. One of her informants, a senior academic in an Australian university, expressed concern over the lack of conceptual clarity in internationalisation: “everybody is talking about it but nobody can actually define it, and nobody can say how you can actually do it and why would you want to do it in the first place” (Mertova, 2014, p. 143). A telling Lithuanian case is described by Leisyte et al. (2015) in discussing the introduction of ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) into Lithuanian higher education. Several informants claimed that the country would benefit from switching from the National credit system to ECTS, however, none of them mentioned any of the vast differences in the underlying principles of the two credit systems.

Since a more comprehensive approach to internationalisation (as opposed to student and staff mobility) is a new development in Lithuanian higher education, there is little research on its implementation. Research in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, however, shows that there is a separation between internationalisation policies and their implementation. It is implemented to a lesser extent and the implementation process is influenced by the views of stakeholders on *why* they need internationalisation (Hauptman Komotar, 2019). The most important, maybe even crucial of those stakeholders, as previously discussed, are the academic staff. Given the lack of conceptual clarity and the disparity in the implementation of internationalisation, the research question underlying the study presented in this article is twofold:

- 1) what, according to the academics working in a large Lithuanian university, is internationalisation?
- 2) why do they believe the University needs internationalisation?

3. Theoretical framework: Ideologies behind internationalisation

The aforementioned connection between reasoning and implementation largely informed the choice of the theoretical framework employed in the analysis. Jonas Stier (2006) proposed three ideologies that guide internationalisation in higher education: idealism, instrumentalism and educationalism. It is important to mention here that analytically these ideologies are ideal type constructs in that they are to be seen as means of discussion and are not mutually exclusive; a university (or a singular academic) does not strictly adhere to one of them but rather oscillate between them. Idealism draws from a normative assumption that internationalisation is good per se, highlighting social injustices and life-conditions across the world and inducing tolerance and respect in students. Instrumentalism sees internationalisation as an instrument, a way to achieve profit or economic stability, sustainable development or other goals put forward by political regimes, corporations or interest groups (these are also sometimes called ‘the requirements of the labour market’ in higher education jargon). One of such ideological purposes is implicitly stated in the Bologna Declaration which assumes that internationalisation may contribute to greater convergence across Europe and, consequently, to greater social cohesion and economic growth. Somewhat differently from those mentioned before, educationalism employs the notion of education that is not limited to institutionalised education that can be easily practically applied (in the way instrumentalism does); it recognises the personal and societal value of learning itself wherein internationalisation

allows for a unique multilevel experience that contributes to the development of intercultural competence, the focal point of which is critical thinking.

Stier's framework serves particularly well in a context where implementation of internationalisation is in its earlier stages and the discussions of various internationalisation related issues are taking place, as the ideologies are broad enough to include various points that occur in a discussion among different people but also are clearly distinguishable to not be conflated into one. Moreover, these ideologies are used in other research on academics' perceptions of internationalisation (e. g., Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016; Lourenço, Andrade, & Byram, 2020). This allows for tentative comparisons which, while not the purpose of this article, can still be beneficial in painting a broader picture on what we talk about when we talk about internationalisation.

4. Methodology

This research is guided by the social constructionist idea that language creates and supports social processes and structures: what we perceive as 'real' depends on what is construed to be 'real' (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Following the interpretive paradigm of social research, I do not intend to present an objective reality, but rather to provide an account on how specific meanings of a global phenomenon are constructed in a particular higher education context.

Research data consists of video recordings of 3 focus groups organised by the university's Vice-Rector's office in preparation for an internationalisation strategy. All participants of the research are university teachers, some of which hold an executive position (deans, vice-deans of faculties, department heads, study programme committee chairs). In total, there were 27 academics representing Social Sciences (10), Humanities (6), Technical Sciences (5), Natural Sciences (5), Medical and Health Sciences (1)¹. In total, 15 of them were male and 12, female. The focus groups were conducted and moderated by a sociology graduate working in the administration of one of the faculties at the university in 2018. All the participants were expected to have had international experience personally or have participated in internationalisation activities. The three focus groups are analysed together because aside from their managerial positions, all informants are teaching academics who represent different disciplines and are of different seniority in their academic careers. Since informants were expected to have international experience, they are slightly younger than the university average (mostly due to the fact that opportunities to learn English were extremely limited prior to 1990s). The participants are not described in greater detail in order to preserve their anonymity.

The focus groups were originally organised in order to obtain data that would be used as a basis for a university-wide internationalisation strategy, however, the data was not analysed in depth at the time. I have been kindly allowed by the organisers of the focus groups to obtain the video recordings and use them for research purposes. Video recordings (approx. 5 hours in total) were transcribed verbatim and coded into categories using the constant comparison method and MAXQDA (version 20.2.1) software. The excerpts of the transcript provided in this article have been translated from Lithuanian into English by the author.

Analytic induction was used as a method of coding and identifying themes in the data. It is somewhat common that focus group data analysis is conducted using the questions asked by the moderator. In this case, the moderator's questions were very broad and required participants to elaborate in detail on specificities of a general term, thus, the primary categories were only partially influenced by the moderator's questions. The following questions were asked: what do you associate with internationalisation, what is internationalisation, how do we know that a university is international, what are the attributes of an international(-ised) study programme, what should be done in the university in order to achieve greater internationalisation. In the analysis, these questions

led to specific categories that were coded *in vivo* (using the language used by the informants) when possible. For example, means of survival was used to describe what internationalisation is to one of the participants or natural development, to describe the way internationalisation should be implemented. These categories were then linked to Stier's ideologies based on their accordance to the descriptions provided by the author (cfr. Stier, 2006). As expected, multiple ideologies have emerged in the discussions and they will be presented in detail in the following section of the article.

4. Results and discussion

While all ideologies were called upon during the discussions, the most prominent was the instrumentalist view. This could be partially explained by the fact that the participants were informed that the focus group data is to be used in preparing a strategic document for the university. It is also important to mention that the majority of focus group participants were currently in or had previously occupied an administrative role. Regardless, the prominence of instrumentalism is overwhelming and, possibly, a result of the dominating discourse and a context-specific conceptualisation of internationalisation rather than the isolated experiences of these particular participants.

4.1 Instrumentalism

More often than not when asked 'what is internationalisation?' participants would answer 'it is a means'. They explicitly disagreed with internationalisation as a goal, conceptualising it as a means to achieve other goals, most commonly, financial stability or profit and quality or prestige. Taking into account the dwindling number of students, internationalisation was seen as a way to ensure the survival of specific study programmes or entire departments via the enrolment of well-paying international students.

4.2 Internationalisation as a means of survival

The word 'survival' has been used in all of the focus groups and the financial rationales were called upon by those who have already had experience in organising international study programmes. The notion of survival was used both in terms of maintaining a strong position nationally with the improved standing of the university as well as the financial autonomy that international students provide. National regulations demand that state funding is used solely for certain means in very specific ways, often following the long and cumbersome process of public procurement. In contrast, study fees paid by international students come with no strings attached:

Truly, for us this is [a matter of] survival. Because, well, there are few Lithuanian students, we can't attract them all, and now we compete for this handful and suffer for it. <...> If we don't become an international university, we will become a regional education centre of some kind, which has no prestige, no status, no financial autonomy, just a merchant of studies. (Male, Technical Sciences)

Those that have already had experience in internationalisation, however, were more sceptical of whether the enrolment of international students can actually be considered internationalisation:

In social sciences they [students] just scatter across all the universities. So, we just try to focus on a market that would give us more self-funded students, and the probability is higher that they will come from abroad. Of course, with foreigners, it's just... If we're talking whether this is actually internationalisation

or if we are only selling a product, it would be more honest to say that we are only selling a product.
(Female, Humanities)

In terms of implementation, academics were adamant that competitive salaries were a necessary condition not only to employ internationally known researchers and teachers but also to keep motivated local academics in the university. Many of those that have attempted to be involved in organising internationalisation activities (e.g., international or joint study programmes, international student and staff visits), claimed that ‘it’s just not worth the effort’²². Since the university does not have a systematic approach towards internationalisation, all activities (except, sometimes, student and staff exchange) emerge due to personal initiatives. Because these are rarely financially or otherwise supported by the university, the results are not worth the tremendous personal effort.

A notable exception is a programme which was already popular in Lithuania that started an international track in 2012. As the informant reported, it took them several years for the student number to increase to a suitable level and they had to wait longer than they expected for the efforts to ‘pay off’. Strategic investment was also mentioned by several informants. They suggested that there needs to be a university-wide commitment to certain policies, for instance, internationalisation, and it should be properly funded. There was little specific funding for internationalisation activities at the university level at the time of speaking and what was, was project-based rather than a strategic long-term plan.

4.3. Quality <-> Internationalisation

Instrumentalism was also expressed by conceptualising internationalisation as a means to attain better education quality. This was two-fold:

- a) internationalisation can help achieve better quality (the conflation of internationalisation and quality will be discussed in the following sections);
- b) expanding internationally allows to attract more academically motivated students, who ensure better quality because they are more motivated and demand the same level of quality from the university. Their demands have more leverage because they are self-funded as opposed to local students, the majority of who are state-funded. One of the participants shared her experience with conducting an international study programme (the programme has been running for six years and is popular among both local and international students):

They [international students] raise quality for us in the sense that they pay money: they have demands, they come to the teachers, you cannot disregard them, they demand results and that’s why what we are observing over these six years, our quality with Lithuanian students is also growing because the teachers start to realise that the students, well, the clients, how do you call it, they demand and then we strive, I personally notice a lot of interest from teachers to improve upon their qualifications, learn some [new] teaching methods. (Female, Natural Sciences)

Due to demographic reasons and emigration, student enrolment has been decreasing in the past decade in Lithuanian universities. International students are considered to be more financially beneficial because they pay higher tuition fees and, reportedly, are less likely to drop out. However, internationalisation is not only perceived as a way to attract international students but also as a selling proposition to the local students who often too choose to study abroad. Having an international environment increases the prestige of the university among

local students and internationalisation is also viewed as something that should be done in order to retain sufficient local enrolment:

It is needed exactly as a means, because if you look from an entirely different side, what we have with master level, quite massively our students [university graduates], do not apply to study here, but run anywhere, they have the technology, they have the opportunities and they choose, these are different times now <...> they are just looking for where it is more interesting, better. That is, if we try to create some kind of environment, then it has to be some kind of relevant [international] environment, because it is becoming to be more prestigious to just dash somewhere. (Male, Technical Sciences)

We can see here that international environment is used not only as a means of achieving quality but also as its marker. This attitude shows the circular nature of the perceived relationship between quality and internationalisation wherein quality leads to internationalisation and internationalisation leads to quality.

4.4. (Inter)national university

Another prominent topic regarding the connection between internationalisation and quality was the global competition in higher education and the understanding that international universities and/or studies are those that are competitive in the global higher education area. While on one hand, competitiveness was coded as a positive aspect of truly international universities, the global competition was also criticised due to the brain drain it causes. Moreover, the general consensus of the inevitability of internationalisation was sometimes questioned due to the historical nature of this particular university as a national university. There were suggestions that internationalisation was somewhat similar to the Russification or Sovietization that occurred during the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in the 20th century³ and there needs to be a balanced approach to internationalisation in order to protect the national identity:

I think that the university has to, because, I'd like to stress it again, it is a university in a nation state, it has to learn to live in such globalised world, we need to look for a model and maintain both sides. I will repeat, the Soviet experience, when we also had to exist in such an adversary environment, by the way, is worth looking into <...> we had to defend it [the university] and now, I mean, we don't need defence, but we need to exist while retaining [our] identity. (Male, Social Sciences)

Lithuanian higher education national policy has been (and to an extent still is) ethnocentrically oriented even after the implementation of Bologna process (Bulajeva & Hogan-Brun, 2014). However, the ethnocentric view was very much contested in the focus groups. Given that the Lithuanian research policy has been gradually becoming more globally oriented, we could say that the higher education policy is now moving towards greater, at least European, if not global, integration.

Other participants vehemently disagreed with the purported conflict between national and international. Some followed instrumentalism and referred to the demands of the global market:

[on discussing the fact that many Lithuanian high school graduates apply to study in foreign universities and that negatively impacts the university] <...> we do not offer them competences for the future, let's be honest here. And future competences are interdisciplinarity, internationalisation, English language, networks, networking so to speak. They don't see prospects in what we're offering, <...> if they can get

and education in Management or Economics or anything else in English, it will be so much easier for them to be a specialist, to be on the top, than it would be if they studied in Lithuanian <...> for some reason, we're focusing on the average: moderately smart, moderately conscious, national student who believes his rights to learn in Lithuanian to be higher and says that he's going to be a Lithuanian citizen. No, he will be a citizen of the world and if we think that he will be a Lithuanian citizen, we plainly condemn him to be solely a citizen of Lithuania. (Male, Social Sciences)

The focus on labour market requirements when discussing language policy and national identity, shows that instrumentalism has deeply permeated the thinking of academics. Some claimed that the distinction between global and national is due to a narrow understanding of what both national and international is. It leads to the two being conceptualised as alternatives and not something that can be integrated:

The issue for us is more about the breadth of the content that we teach, when we think if this is relevant to Lithuania, and in that narrow clog-dance⁴ imagery of what Lithuania is. For some reason it is removed from Europe, as if what is relevant to Europe is an alternative, because they ask "but what is good for Lithuania?". So, is Lithuania not Europe? I see this in Humanities. And this I see as the biggest challenge, truly, to break this discourse that this is some kind of alternative, either-or kind of thing. Lithuanian content, international content. As if science could only be national or international. (Male, Humanities)

None of these views were universal. Yet, the discussions mostly revolved around the implementation of internationalisation, its criteria (language of instruction, international academic staff, international students) and barriers to its successful implementation (lack of administrative/methodological support, insufficient funding, poor infrastructure) which proves the dominance of instrumentalism.

4.5. Educationalism

While dominant, the instrumentalist view also served as a point of reference for those that were leaning towards educationalism. They critiqued the performative nature of the process and implied that there should be more to internationalisation than attracting international students. In a telling case, this view was supported by the conviction that working with international students is enriching to the teacher personally:

As soon as I hear that we need to attract foreign students in order to improve our financial situation, I have this internal opposition towards it because for me this internationalisation and, say, work with international students is first and foremost a very egoistic work, I want new experiences and that is what I gain with them. That is probably the main motivation to have a diverse classroom <...> the first advantage is what you gain yourself. (Male, Technical Sciences)

The positive experience in an international classroom has been noted by others as well, however, it was more focused towards the students in terms of their increased motivation or better opportunities to improve intercultural and other competences:

I think that they [international students] are essentially a very positive catalyst... One of the main motives, for example, to go study abroad is to simply see all kinds of people, [experience] that diversity, so we can create this diversity here, bring the foreign countries here. (Male, Technical Sciences)

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Local students were mentioned rarely and usually in the context of admissions rather than internationalisation. The discussion on international students, however, was more complex as not all international students were considered equally important.

4.6. 'Good' international students

The implicit discourse of 'international is good' also emerged when academics spoke about diverse classrooms. They maintained that international students can improve the attitude of the entire group which benefits local students as well:

I agree that if the group is diverse, if good students come here, who are capable of studying, gifted, motivated, then the entire group kind of grows in terms of intercultural competence. And the discussions are more interesting, there's more action then. (Female, Humanities)

However, not all international students were considered 'good'. In most cases implicitly but in several, explicitly stated negative attitude towards non-EU students was evident across all groups. The informants who had had internationalisation experience in their departments went to great lengths to convince the others that they accepted mostly European nationals and those that did not, were apologetic about the fact stating that they were only starting out and were expecting to attract 'better' students in the future:

Well, in most cases the dream is to have international students, not to belittle these countries, but not from Bangladesh or Nigeria but from the European Union. (Male, Technical Sciences)

There are several aspects to this notion. On one hand, there is the colonial aspect wherein education is considered to be the best in the Global West and that is supported by various higher education institution rankings and ratings. On the other, teachers feel more comfortable working with EU students due to their perceived cultural similarity (or at least, absence of vast cultural differences) to Lithuanians. Lithuanian society is still rather homogeneous and general attitudes towards immigrants (especially, of other races) are still somewhat unfavourable. A recent representative survey⁵ showed that among all immigrant groups the least favourably viewed were those from Asian and African countries (4.34 on a scale of 10) when compared to other EU (6.94), other Western (non EU) countries (6.45) and former USSR countries (5.38).

There was, however, opposition to this distinction claiming it narrow and restrictive. American Ivy League universities were used as examples of successful and inclusive internationalisation:

I may be unpopular now, but I couldn't care less whom I am teaching. For example, let's look at Harvard or Stanford. Do they stress there that they necessarily need one Chinese, one some other [nationality] student? No. I care that my students are strong [well prepared], whether they're Lithuanian, Syrian or Chinese, I don't care in the slightest. <...> So, when somebody said that the focus is on being open, then yes, this right here is internationalisation. That whoever can come here. Focusing on internationalisation in a narrow sense that we need this particular kind of students, ERASMUS or something else, well, this is narrow. (Male, Technical Science)

Educationalist notions could be inferred from the critiques levied against institutionalism as a prevalent ideology, yet it did not really emerge as an ideology in its own right. It was notably more prominent in the group that consisted of people who had the least experience in administration. This alludes that one of possible reasons for lack of educationalism in other groups was the executive lens through which the informants viewed internationalisation at the university. Granted, the current higher education atmosphere filled to the brim with evaluations and rankings is definitely not conducive to educationalist notions of personal and societal value of learning itself. When education is perceived as an economic transaction, it should not be surprising that reasons for its change should also be more related to economics than education itself.

4.7. Idealism

The idealist approach was rare among the academics, however, it sometimes emerged as an underlying tendency that was not made explicit. While two participants claimed that internationalisation may be harmful to the university as it encourages brain drain in students, the majority of academics had a positive view towards internationalisation. Other instances of idealism emerged via conceptualising internationalisation as an intellectual position that entails a broad outlook towards the world and a focus on global rather than local issues. A variation on idealism, to an extent, is also one of the topics that emerged: *science is inherently international*. There was a general agreement that science (research) is international by nature, more so among those representing Nature Sciences and Technological Sciences but not exclusively. Some representatives of Social Sciences and Humanities claimed that certain branches of science are more international than others (for example, physics, biology or medicine). They also maintained that the higher education area already is international due to the networking among researchers. This networking was also conceptualised as one of the paths for internationalisation wherein internationalisation was to be allowed to develop naturally, incrementally, without outside influence or any specific activities:

I think, maybe I am kind of a supporter of evolution, it appears that all these winds of doing something *en masse*, they create a lot of waves and, in the end, not that much of a result. This strategy is also probably one of those floods, tsunamis, isn't it? But for real, my conviction is that if we, as a university, in terms of research and our students that come to us, wherever they're from, will do what we do as best as we can, then we won't need to foster internationalisation in any specific way. (Male, Technical Sciences)

This quote also alludes to one of the more common themes: *internationalisation as studies of high quality* and high-quality studies as international that was also expressed in discussing instrumentalist conceptions of internationalisation. The participants perceived a symbiotic relationship between internationalisation and study quality wherein internationalisation was a marker of good quality (*ergo*, international studies are better). Studies of good quality are competitive globally, therefore, if the quality of studies was good enough, they could be considered international. This symbiosis points towards the instrumentalist approach, yet, to a degree, it maintains the notion that internationalisation is inherently good:

I would lean towards devaluing internationalisation as a strategic goal, maybe we should talk about normal studies in general, good ones, of quality, international, where we see aspects such as study quality, freeness, academic freedom, then this internationalisation shouldn't be somehow exceptional as an outcome. (Male, Social Sciences)

While this conflation was rather popular, there were also voices against the equation of quality and internationalisation. It often went together with insistence that certain study branches or study programmes are already good without being explicitly international, circling back to the international nature of science and research:

There can be high quality studies with local resources, because science is truly an international thing and it is the same everywhere, and you just exchange competences, exchange knowledge with the entire world and that is what creates this internationalisation; you can really ensure sufficient level of quality here and some fields, they are very good. (Female, Natural Sciences)

A possible reason for the prominence of quality discourse in discussing internationalisation was given by one of the participants who expressed her concern with the uncritical acceptance of such discourse on quality:

That we just put the quality mark on internationalisation without critically questioning what it is, I think this is really not suitable <...> We can't expect internationalisation to save us <...> We are at a very critical point now, when it is being said *a priori* that our studies are of poor quality, and we have created this on our own. There is this wave that returns back to the shore, our constant crucifixion, that everything that is done in Lithuania regarding internationalisation and studies, is bad, and finally it ends up washing over us. (Female, Humanities)

She also elaborated on the general discourse regarding higher education in Lithuania. Quality of higher education has been repeatedly used by politicians as a stick to beat universities with. In the past decade, poor quality has been used politically to justify closures and mergers of universities, cited as an argument for not increasing funding for the sector. Ever since Lithuania joined the EU, the prestigious choice, according to the public discourse, is to study abroad. Therefore, quality discourse is prominent, yet certain academics are also aware of the problematic implications it brings. Overall, idealism as an ideology behind internationalisation was not expressed by many, though, there were latent idealistic notions that might point to a tacit acceptance of it.

5. Concluding remarks

I think that we are now sitting in a kind of an echo chamber. We're all saying very comfortably acceptable things that everyone knows very well. There was nothing I would disagree with. <...> But we said nothing new, none of us said anything that the others didn't know. Was anybody surprised? (Male, Technical Sciences)

As expected, all three of Stier's (2006) ideologies were present in the discussions among academics. However, instrumentalist views were dominant. Instead of focusing on what internationalisation *means* to them, the participants overwhelmingly focused on what it *does*. This is also a consequence of the lack of conceptual clarity as the informant's rationale for internationalisation was inherent to its conceptualisation. The reason a member of the group gave for *why* they needed internationalisation stemmed from *what* they believed internationalisation was. Since the term 'internationalisation' is often used but rarely defined, informants struggled to define it and focused on what it *does* or rather *can do* for them which circled back to the rationales for internationalisation. Those personally involved in internationalisation activities referred to financial gain or stability, with most participants conceptualising internationalisation as an instrument to achieve something, be it related to

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funding, better study quality, prestige, or labour market requirements. Most had had an administrative position throughout their academic career which can result in a more administrative approach. The experience of quality assessment and other instances of managerialism in higher education also influences the debate in the higher education community on its development and change. The Rector's office-led organising of the focus groups may have played a part in the instrumentalist nature of the debate as well.

The findings of this study are similar to research recently conducted in specific universities in Portugal (Lourenço, Andrade & Byram, 2020) and Ireland (Clarke & Hui Yang, 2019) as well as across borders (Castro et al., 2016). Similarities were observed not only in the general approach but also with regards to specific issues such as lack of institutional support or internal communication, clear institution-wide understanding of internationalisation and incentives for its implementation. Specific to our study was the conceptualisation of internationalisation as a means of survival. While economic rationales were at play in other contexts, such strong wording was an exception. This may refer to a bigger crisis in the higher education context where the main concern is not future development but rather avoiding extinction.

Attention needs to be drawn, however, also to the things that have not been said. The prevalence of instrumentalism focuses the discussion on the management of internationalisation. Internationalisation is viewed as an achievement, a box to tick, which contradicts the definition of internationalisation as a process but can be understood given that internationalisation is often used as a measure in various university rankings and performance evaluations of the academic staff. Moreover, internationalisation of curriculum, of teaching and learning get subverted into discussions of quality which is presupposed for anything international. There is a disconnect between what internationalisation is believed to be (or what we want it to be) and what it actually becomes. According to de Wit, over the past 30 years the focus on economic motivations has increased and internationalisation is increasingly driven by national, regional and global rankings (de Wit, 2020).

The instrumentalist ideology that permeated the debate shaped the discussion into what internationalisation is as an institutional endeavour, but not an educational one. A great variety of personal and institutional rationales also point to a lack of a systemic understanding of internationalisation. Educational goals are not as prominent, and the impact internationalisation has on students is described vaguely and incidentally. A tendency to not question the status quo and the top-down push to internationalise can also be observed. It speaks to the broader dissatisfaction in the academia but there is also a certain conceptual vacuum of internationalisation. It seems as if everybody knows what it means but it means something slightly different to everyone. In absence of at least an institution-wide shared understanding, internationalisation loses its capacity for educational change and is reduced to a performance indicator.

The outcomes of internationalisation should not be disregarded, and instrumentalism is not to be seen as a disagreeable ideology *per se*; however, its domination poses certain threats. It can result in a disregard of educational issues such as teaching critical thinking and developing intercultural competence. It maintains a safe distance from uncomfortable topics such as systemic discrimination of international students and the change that we have to experience ourselves rather than demand of others. It does not require questioning of why 'international' almost always refers to Western European and almost never to, for example, South American. Institution-wide reflection of what internationalisation *means* could be one of the ways that help institutions focus more on internationalisation as a sustainable educational process rather than just a means to an end. Finally, more research should tackle the different global conceptions of internationalisation to expand on the importance of context to internationalisation rationales and processes and question the perception of internationalisation as merely a performance indicator.

Notes

¹ Grouped according to the current Lithuanian legislation: Mokslo sričių klasifikatorius (Classification of Scientific Fields), TAR, 2018-12-20, Nr. 20934.

² The Lithuanian word used in such instances was 'neapsimoka' which while literally translated as 'doesn't pay off' also has connotations with other kinds of investments such as time and effort, therefore, a non-literal translation was chosen here.

³ During the Soviet occupation of Lithuania after World War II, the official policies referred to the creation of a 'Soviet man', and citizens were not deprived of their right to speak their own languages and nurture their own cultures; however, they had to acknowledge the importance and primacy of Russian culture and language. Russian was also considered to be the primary language for science and education. For more information: Weeks, Theodore R.: Russification / Sovietization, in: European History Online (EGO), published by the Institute of European History (IEG), Mainz 2010-12-03. URL: <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/weekst-2010-en> [Accessed 2023 03 01].

⁴ Clog-dance is a Lithuanian folk dance the name of which is also used to refer to a very narrow understanding of cultural past and folklore as it literally means 'clog-legged', i.e., clumsy.

⁵ Visuomenės požiūrio į migracijos procesus Covid-19 kontekste tyrimas, 2020 liepa. // Report on Society Attitudes on Migration Processes in the context of COVID-19, July 2020. Accessible on the internet: <http://bit.do/renkuosilietuvatyrimas202007> [in Lithuanian].

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