From everyone's good thing to a security risk: Where is international education headed?

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[Opening slide]

We are in the midst of a major transformation at world level and the trajectories are highly uncertain. Inevitably, this deeply impacts higher education and research in multiple ways, and especially the cross-border and global system dimension. The immediate symptom of this transformation, and the reason we are here together today, is the normative sea change in policy approaches to internationalisation. The long arc of Anglophone-dominated globalisation is over. We remain internationalists, believing ourselves free to move across the world with the varied meanings this implies, and free to welcome and to work with others, but governments and societies, worldwide but especially in the Euro-American or 'Western' countries, have changed their attitudes towards internationalisation, and will change more. For many, internationalisation, yesterday everybody's good thing if not best higher education practice, the measuring stick, the highest reflexivity, the driver of modernisation and quality, is now a domain of dangers and demons, that must be guarded against. And its advocates are suspected of naivety, or disloyalty.

[*contents of paper*]

Why is it so? My main purpose in this opening paper is to attempt to explain the times we suddenly find ourselves in, the time of Trump and Putin, the time of the far right in European elections – Meloni is in power in Italy and Le Pen is expected to win in France –of the targeting of global elites, of ultra-patriotism, and of war both cold and hot. And how this is affecting and will affect

international collaboration and mobility in our sector. I will tell a story, which is just my version of the story of how we got here. Towards the end I will also discuss what is happening with international education in the UK.

[Mobility of people, ideas and knowledge has always been integral to higher education]

From its beginnings in the training of mobile state officials in China, in the Buddhist monasteries in India like Nalanda and Vikramashila, in Athens and Alexandria, in the scholarly madrassas attached to mosques in Damascus, Cairo and Cordoba, and the medieval European universities, higher education has always had a dual spatiality and this has been core to its identity. The pro-universities and universities combined on one hand a place-bound materiality and identity, and on the other hand an open mental horizon and the mobility of ideas and persons. Though this dual spatiality factored a tension into the foundations of higher education, a fault-line between place embeddedness and globality, mostly each supported the other. The Buddhist monasteries, the Islamic centres and medieval European universities evolved on one hand as situated local institutions, integral to cities, located in reach of states which intervened in them from time to time and vulnerable to geopolitics, as when the Buddhist monasteries in Northern India were destroyed at the end of the 12th century. On the other hand they were self-referential and partly disembedded institutions in which knowledge and people moved without limit.

Many higher education institutions shared common languages – state sanctioned Chinese writing, Sanskrit in India, Latin in Europe - and their knowledge was imagined in universal terms. There was much mobility between the Indian monasteries and visitors came from East and Central Asia. Scholars in Europe moved freely between institutions. The universal cast of the European universities, which paralleled the Church's own claim to infinity, was

formalised by a papal bull of 1233 CE which specified that anyone admitted as a teacher in Toulouse in France had the right to teach everywhere else without further examination. The privilege became widely imitated and a defining characteristic of European university. Along with the structure of legal incorporation, it grounded the partial autonomy of the sector, a tradition which proved resilient and which became codified in the modern university by von Humboldt's University of Berlin in 1810. Rulers could never fully surmount the university because, in a sense, it was always also somewhere else.

Nevertheless, the autonomy of universities and other higher education institutions has never been more than partial, always practised within laws, regulation, policies and mostly funding, and it can vary markedly. In today's higher education the state is never completely absent even from the private university sector. This is true even in the United States. American universities are traditionally understood as part of civil society and as independent traders in an education market of students. Yet the 2018 China Initiative showed that the federal government can very effectively discourage autonomous university dealings in China, in a practical way - no U.S. university president has visited China's peak science university Tsinghua since 2018, in marked contrast with the busy academic diplomacy of the preceding 15 years - and in often careless investigations and prosecutions the U.S. government openly violated the academic freedoms and human rights of American citizen scientists of Chinese descent, with only limited pushback from the sector, and less from civil society.

[Post-1990 globalization]

But I'm jumping ahead of my story. Before I discuss deglobalisation I need to discuss globalisation, more particularly the most recent wave of accelerated globalisation, worldwide convergence and integration and its manifestations in higher education in the 1990s and after. Globalisation in the economy began in

the 1980s but cultural and communicative globalisation, the aspect that has particularly impacted higher education, really took off in the 1990s, the era of Pax America and the newly expanding Internet.

Looking back we can now see that at the end of the Cold War was key, as much as communications. This apparently universal globalisation took place under a U.S. liberal capitalist hegemony in political economy, culture, higher education and knowledge. It was globalisation as Americanisation, sustained by Pax America, meaning that the global political hegemony was underpinned by the potential for U.S. coercion in the military sphere which operated as the guarantor of order in trade and academic mobility. It was a form of imperialism, albeit without the direct territorial rule that had characterised the guns and bible European colonial empires of earlier times. The U.S. hegemony in higher education was compatible with the values and practices of all Euro-American countries though to varying degrees, and it especially sheltered the Anglophone systems under the American umbrella.

In the 1990s and into the 2000s trade barriers were still coming down, and offshoring and supply chains were flourishing. Global integration in all sectors was quickened by networked communications after the Internet began in 1989. Higher education and knowledge became culturally globalised without full integration into the capitalist economy. But they were conditioned and influenced by the dominant ideology of the time. Neoliberalism did not create globalisation, but because the two tendencies coincided, they articulated each other. In higher education they converged in the growing primacy of economic policy in education, the idea of the global knowledge economy, the development of fully capitalist and neo-colonial student mobility in the UK and Australia, and the competitive ordering of world universities on a performative basis in global ranking, which gave form to the global market.

in the 1990s and after many Euro-American polities, led by the U.S. and the UK, and pan-national organisations such as the World Bank and OECD, were committed to a liberal capitalist reform agenda that valorised openness and freedoms in all domains, *providing that* those freedoms were consistent with capital accumulation. In the Anglophone world, in government and often also in universities, it was believed that the open liberal regime would expand the cultural influence of the Anglophone countries, spreading the role of English, and Euro-American norms in politics. Cross-border engagement and people mobility were valued because they were expected to encourage free trade in world markets. Capital accumulation was always the ultimate rationale. Cosmopolitan social inclusion was expected to optimise market reach.

The Anglophone countries wanted to open their universities to foreign students because as well as generating revenues this fostered a Euro-America-friendly business elite, enhanced national soft power, and spread Euro-American cultural influence worldwide ,and that was reckoned as good for business. Pax America enabled business goals to take primacy in national politics, rather than concerns about geo-political conflict and national security.

For their part, many in government in emerging countries supported liberal globalisation of the economy, universities and science as the privileged pathway to modernisation, despite the subordination of national-cultural agency that was entailed. Until the 2008 recession at least, most states were liberal capitalist supporters of internationalisation, meaning enhanced cross-border relations, and this readily spilled over into tendencies to global convergence in our sector. In higher education, and especially science where cross-border linkage was not marginal but integral, the norms of internationalisation became deeply entrenched, partly because they were

always embedded in the dual spatiality of higher education. The commitment of states to internationalisation in higher education and research lasted a decade longer than the free trade era in political economy, sustaining the momentum of global convergence in higher education until the late 2010s. The networked global science system grew by 5 per cent a year and cross-border collaboration peaked at 23 per cent of science papers in 2020. Cross-border student mobility rose from 1.9 million in 1998 to 6.4 million in 2021, with two students in five paying commercial fees. The same year 22 per cent of doctoral students in OECD countries crossed borders for study.

Globalisation enabled the sector to explore its dual spatiality and mobility in many ways. Millions of individuals used cross-border mobility to create possibilities and build their individual agency. Global science evolved as a bottom-up network outside national control. Governments could alter the participation of 'their' institutions, with difficulty, but not the network itself. Nor could they lock out global science, which is an essential resource for governments and industry. The open environment worked especially well for individual Anglophone institutions, including those in the United States. They expanded their strategic freedoms in cross-border partnerships, university consortia, offshore branches, and online education which like communication between scientists could not be effectively nationally regulated.

Whole systems combined their actions in the national and global scales, in positive sum fashion, to enhance their outcomes in both. This was very different to the present situation in which actions in the global and national domains often seem to be at variance with one another. The U.S. used a relatively open border to draw global talent into its universities. The UK and Australia worked the market in cross-border education to build resources, deepening research capacity and enhancing global reputation, generating a

virtuous circle that rotated through the scales. Likewise China pursued a national/global synergy, supported by ever growing state investment, with spectacular results. International collaboration, especially into the U.S., helped build national infrastructure while taking China's researchers to the cutting edge. State funding drew back diasporic scientists. Compared to the U.S., China had less outreach and more national capacity building but again, global and national actions strengthened each other in a circular process.

Governments supported, advocated and subsidised collaboration in higher education and some governments spent big to send their students abroad, schemes that still mostly survive though many might be on borrowed time. Cross-border linkages were routinely treated as proxies for quality, as in international comparisons of science. However, it is important to recognise that from the point of view of the states that housed and funded universities and science, the commitment to internationalisation was conjunctural and not permanent. In the U.S. it could hold only as long as economic openness and global trade were seen as primary in capital accumulation, and thereby furthered both American economic strength and political leadership, and Pax America provided an neo-imperial space in which the state could focus on national-global economic goals rather than conflict and national security.

In the period of high internationalisation Anglophone style or Anglophone influenced education and science became globally distributed in institutions across the world. And the effects of this were ambiguous in geo-political terms. It was long expected in American circles that this would simply foster global Americanisation. But it was not quite as unifying and homogenising as it looked. Worldwide higher education and science were normed in Western terms, yes. At the same time, globalisation in the economy, higher education and science fostered multi-polarity. There was an enormous expansion in

capacity in the non Western world, notably but not only in China. And the rising non-Western countries were not decisively integrated into the U.S. hegemony in the political sense. Because national political autonomy matters, economic and cultural integration could only go so far.

[Science systems where *output grew slower* than the world average rate of 5.38% per year in 2003-2022, compared to world average GDP per capita PPP $US 20,694 in 2022]

Let me focus on this growth of multipolar capacity for a moment, because it is one key to the present period, using the example of basic and applied basic science. The diversification of scientific capacity is made clear in the two charts I am now showing. These present two contrasting groups of national science systems. In each chart, the volume of science output is indicated by the size of the ball. The vertical axis shows the rate of annual growth in the number of science papers between 2003 and 2022. The horizontal axis shows national income per head, a rough measure of the material capacity to provide scientific production. The dotted line is the world average income per head in 2022.

The first chart shows science systems that after 2003 grew *more slowly* than the world average rate of 5.38 per cent per year. These are mature, largely Western science system systems, all established prior to 2003. They are mainly in countries with incomes well above the world average –only one of the slower growing systems, Ukraine, had below average GDP per head. Australia is one of the faster growing countries within the slow growth group.

[Science systems where *output grew faster* than the world average rate of 5.38% per year in 2003-2022, compared to world average GDP per capita PPP $US 20,694 in 2022]

The second chart shows national systems where science output is increasing *faster* than the word average rate. They are mostly relatively new science powers. Some of these countries have seen spectacular growth – almost 15.6 per cent per year in Iran, now one of the larger science systems with 60,940 papers in 2022 - not far short of France - and an incredible 26.2 per cent in Indonesia where the number of papers grew from just 387 in 2003 to 31,947 in 2022. Further, consider the diversification of global science in terms of the economic indicator. Nearly half of these fast growing science countries have incomes per head below the world average, on the left of the dotted line. The identifiable science systems include Ethiopia with a GDP of only $2,813 per head in 2022, Nigeria ($5,862), Pakistan ($6,351) and Bangladesh ($7,398). Like mass higher education, global science has spread to middle income countries and some low-income countries as well, including India, which now houses the third largest science system, bigger than those of UK, Germany and Japan

[Top universities in STEM research, Leiden ranking]

But it has been the development of China that has generated the geo-political rumbles. Between 2003 and 2022, the annual number of science papers from China in English in Scopus multiplied by ten, from 89,000 to 899,000. In the 2023 Leiden ranking of high citation papers, top 5 per cent papers, China had ten of the top 14 universities in physical sciences and engineering, and the top nine in mathematics and computing. Tsinghua had decisively achieved the status of world top STEM university, passing MIT.

From the viewpoint of universities that routinely recruite international students and build global research connections, multi-polarity in general, and the rise of China in particular, have been positive. This is not how everyone else sees it. University leaders and scientists understand the global as a distinctive zone of activity. So do mobile students, and educators working to form global citizens. [

[Top universities in other science fields]

However, governments see cross-border activity through the lens of methodological nationalism, the belief that national state and society are the natural form of the world. When internationalisation is seen in terms of a national arms race in innovation, the global space is marginalised and global phenomena are seen solely as outgrowths of nations and determined by them. Hence state support for internationalisation is always vulnerable to shifts in the political economy and geo-politics. And this is exactly what has happened.

The underlying conditions began to change about 2010. In political economy the growth of world trade and offshoring slowed and supply chains shortened.

[Post 2010 deglobalization and the new geo-politics]

By the mid 2010s nation-bound thinking, economic protectionism, nativism and opposition to migration were all increasing, and taking the form of aggressive nativism in many countries. In 2016 Brexit and Trump rammed the point home. At the same time the rise of China and other non-Western powers was weakening U.S. global hegemony. This further fostered disillusionment in the U.S. with liberal openness. There was no evident decline in the momentum of globalisation in higher education. However, a fault line between national polities and globally engaged universities had opened up. It was just a matter of time before global links in higher education were problematised by policy.

Once things start to change they can move very quickly. Nativism has a visceral quality in many countries, especially in the West though not only there – consider the aggressive and singular nationalism in Russia and India. As I see it nativism, with its fall-out in singular, bordered identities, anti-cosmopolitanism, deep distrust of difference and endemic migration resistance, is at bottom a defensive response to three fundamental sources of anxiety. First, the declining

living standards and poor future economic prospects of many people, which has fostered individual and family insecurity. Second, in the Western countries the decisive weakening of that comforting certainty of global superiority. This is also racialised: the fear that 'we are being replaced', grounded in the awareness that white folk are no longer always on top. Third, everywhere, in the Western and non-Western worlds alike, there is the climate-nature emergency, the growing realisation that there is no prospect that states either separately or together can effectively address it, and the radical collapse of positive expectations about the future. These three sources of anxiety have destabilised politics in many countries and driven the retreat into the certainties of bounded identity, which has become an end in itself.

By the early 2020s the fallout in cross-border collaboration and international education was becoming apparent in many countries, though it must be said that the new barriers to mobility were appearing largely in the West. Let me mention just two areas: research collaboration, and student mobility.

The first and most important sign of the change in geo-politics has been in relation to research collaboration within the common global science system. This is the U.S. decoupling from China in global science and technology. The change in U.S. policy began under Trump and has continued under Biden. The U.S.-China relation was and still is much the largest collaborative pairing in the science system. But in 2018 the Trump government's China Initiative, with bipartisan support, empowered federal authorities to investigate joint China-U.S. appointments and projects. Researchers with Chinese backgrounds were stigmatised. A survey by Jenny Lee found that 20 per cent of U.S. scientists of Chinese descent, and 12 per cent of other scientists, had broken ties in China after the China Initiative began. The China Initiative has officially ended but its

politics live on. Visas for Chinese doctoral students in some fields are restricted, and as mentioned, U.S. university leaders are discouraged from visiting China.

[Hugh White on Australia-China in higher education]

Between 2020 and 2022 the number of joint U.S.-China research papers in Scopus fell from 62,900 to 58,500. And the U.S. pressures other Western governments to reduce their nation's engagement in China. Though few research ties are in sensitive domains, states want to regulate China linkages on the basis of blanket securitisation of all cross-border agreements. Higher education is expected to simply fall into line, compromising its autonomy. For its part China continues to keep its borders open, but the rhetoric is becoming more nationally strident, and it may introduce its own restrictions in future.

What we have here is an incompatibility between the multi-polar development of global political economy, higher education and science, and the U.S. geo-political project. This is dragging countries allied to the U.S., and the West more generally, into the vortex. In this process university autonomy is jeopardised. Australia's doyen of strategic studies Hugh White, who understands the multi-polar world, and that China and the U.S. must share power, calls on Australian universities to 'push back against unthinking government over-regulation.'

[Constraints on international student mobility]

Second, constraints on international student mobility. New problems appear somewhere in the world almost weekly. France and Finland now have high fees for international students in place of near free places. Dutch and Danish politicians have moved to cap incoming students in English language courses. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which forced the mobility of many Ukrainian faculty and students, also isolated Russian universities from all global dealings.

The Putin regime routinely labels its local critics as ‘foreign agents’. This has become a term of abuse, the generic signifier of an untrustworthy person.

But perhaps the most surprising changes have been in the Anglophone countries, the apostles of free global trade in education and the prime neo-colonial beneficiaries from the global student market. Not just the United States, where cross-border student flows have often been hostage to geopolitics, but the commercial providers in Canada, UK and Australia. At almost the same time, all three have introduced tough visa regimes that are substantially reducing the inward flow of students. All three nations have suddenly moved from facilitating the growth of numbers, and enhancing export revenues, to giving priority to reductions in temporary migration.

While the stated reasons – housing congestion in Canada and Australia, the use of public facilities by students’ dependents in the UK – have a material basis, these reasons could have been invoked at any time in the past. I believe that the fact reductions in numbers are taking place now indicates a common response to nativist anti-migration pressures. It also signifies the new willingness of Anglophone states to give priority to border security over international trade. We have moved decisively away from the neoliberal era in which economic objectives provided the generic rationale of government.

My colleagues will discuss the situation in Australia. I understand that Canada is implementing a 35 per cent reduction in student visas compared to 2022 levels. International student numbers are being allocated between provinces on the basis of their share of the Canadian population. This will trigger large reductions in numbers on Ontario and British Columbia.

Australia and Canada are settler states in which migration is seen in more positive terms than it is in the UK. In the last 15 years migration resistance in the UK has fluctuated, as it does elsewhere, but it has often been strong and a shaping force in British politics. It was the chief factor in play in the lead up to the Brexit referendum in 2016. The Conservative party government has made repeated promises, never really implemented, to slash total migration.

[International students in UK higher education: 2008-09 to 2021-22]
Between 2012 and 2017 the number of incoming international students was held constant, while reductions were repeatedly floated. Boris Johnson's arrival as Prime Minister coincided with a drop in migration resistance and saw the renewed liberalisation of the market. A more competitive post-study visa regime was implemented in 2018. There was substantial growth in international students during the pandemic; and while numbers from China grew more slowly, enrolments from India surged, with visas granted to students from India exceeding those for students from China in mid 2022.

However, in 2023 the pendulum swung hard in the opposite direction. Three policy changes are leading to a large-scale reduction in numbers. First, the government announced a new policy on dependent student visas for implementation on 1 January 2024. Only postgraduate research students can bring family members with them on their student visa. This has led to large scale falls in applications from Nigeria and India. Second, the Home Office has significantly tightened its regulation of bona fide students. The UK insists on a strict but artificial distinction between education and migration. The crack down on applications seen as fundamentally driven by migration and income earning objectives has led to further reductions in numbers from India.

[**No longer flavour of the month in UK**]

Third, the government has asked the Migration Advisory Committee to review the post-study work visa. The Home Office Minister, James Cleverly, complained that 'international graduates are able to access the UK labour market with salaries significantly below the requirement imposed on the majority of migrant skilled workers'. The Minister also reiterated the alleged distinction between genuine students and those who had migration in mind. It is widely expected the salary level required in order to secure postgraduate work visas will be raised significantly. It has been suggested that these changes together will lead to a reduction of 30 per cent in total numbers in the next academic year. This will not undermine the top half of the Russell Group but will devastate the financial position of middle and lower tier UK universities.

The value of the unit of resource in UK higher education, the student tuition fee which pays 100 per cent of the cost of teaching for more than two thirds of first degree students, has fallen by 22 per cent since 2017. No political party supports an increase in fees. The only large-scale source of additional income has been non EU international students. They provided £9.3 billion in fees in 2021-22 (19.3% of income) compared to £4.7 billion in 2016-17 (13.0%). A 30 per cent cut in numbers will leave many institutions with nowhere to go.

[Conclusions]

My intuition in this paper has been that a radical change to the conditions of cross-border collaboration and international education is underway. Thirty years of broad consensus about the value of internationalisation, which contained tensions and profound contradictions but was nevertheless very widely felt, has given way to something else. The spreading securitisation of research places in jeopardy the collective science system, the combined repository of knowledge, which is crucial to addressing the Climate-Nature Emergency. Constraints on international mobility reduce the capacity of people

to learn by engaging the other. Given that the agentic mobility of persons and knowledge is foundational to the freedom and identity of higher education, the violations engendered by geopolitics, and bordered and singular nationalism, do not bode well. They are an existential challenge to autonomous universities.

The test for us is not how we conform to the U.S. geo-political project, it is how we express our autonomy in relations with the global South and the emerging middle countries. Here lies the opportunity for a constructive trajectory, out of closed borders and security paranoias, and beyond the terms of 1990s globalisation. For these countries there is a contradiction between the spread of post-colonial university capacity and the continued neo-colonial models of institution and the organisation of knowledge. Journals, bibliometrics and Times Higher and QS ranking are still patterned by the 1990 Anglophone cultural hegemony. English is the only language of universal global science. Rankings are grounded in the ideal Anglophone science university. The vast bulk of human knowledge is excluded as merely local knowledge. 'Internationalisation' in higher education in many countries has been experienced as an invasive Western internationalisation, generating an ongoing crisis of purpose and identity. At the same time, the emerging non-Western countries can now glimpse with clarity the possibility of a post-colonial world. Will we support them in that? I believe we should. Such a world can foster greater diversity in higher education and knowledge in future, generating rich resources for all. In the English speaking world, in countries that up to now have shared in a subordinate role in the U.S. hegemony, our engagement with the emerging countries and our orientation to the core issue of coloniality is one of the primary factors that will determine our future trajectory.

[Thank you for listening]