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# Priorities in Internationalization Shift From Research to Preparing Students

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Universities around the world are more focused than ever on internationalization, but new data reveal some surprises about institutional priorities and motives.

The findings are from a survey conducted from March to July of this year by the Paris-based International Association of Universities, whose members include higher-education institutions in 150 countries. Eva Egron-Polak, secretary general of the organization, presented the results for the first time here on Friday at the annual conference of the European Association for International Education.

The data have just been compiled and are still being analyzed, Ms. Egron-Polak emphasized. The study is so new that it has yet to be given a title. But even an overview of the results shows that major shifts in the internationalization of the higher-education landscape have already taken place since the International Association of Universities' last data on the [issue were compiled](#), in 2005.

Strengthening research capacity through international collaborations, which in 2005 ranked second in importance only to internationalizing the faculty and student body, is no longer among the top three rationales institutions cite for why they are internationalizing. Instead, their current priorities, in order of importance, are improving student preparedness, internationalizing their curricula, and enhancing their institution's international profile and reputation.

The global economic crisis is also having a clear impact. This year most institutions singled out insufficient financial resources as the leading internal obstacle to internationalization. Financial constraints did not even figure among the top three responses in the 2005 survey.

Limited faculty interest and involvement were leading internal constraints in both 2005 and 2009, as were the limited experience and expertise of staff members.

Visa issues that hinder international mobility, as well as the difficulties posed by credentials from different higher-education systems, are key external hurdles to internationalization. Despite the participation of 46 European nations in the Bologna Process, a vast overhaul of higher-education systems designed to foster mobility and increase degree transparency, recognition of degrees remains the single most commonly cited external obstacle to internationalization for European institutions.

### **Risks of Internationalization**

The survey asked institutions with an internationalization policy which regions they considered geographic priorities. As in 2005, the responses reflected a focus on outreach within the colleges' own regions, but to a lesser extent than previously.

For North American institutions, Asia and the Pacific region are the top priority—a shift from 2005, when Europe ranked equally high. But institutions in the Asia-Pacific region, Africa, and Europe regard their home region as their main geographic priority in efforts to internationalize. Europe is also the region with which institutions in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Middle East would most like to form partnerships. North America was not the top geographic priority among survey respondents in any one region.

"More institutions are also citing risks in internationalization," Ms. Egron-Polak said, and the risks with which they are preoccupied have remained relatively constant since 2005. Those include the commercialization of higher education, the brain drain of academic talent, and the dangers of foreign degree mills. "Increased elitism is being seen as a real problem," said Ms. Egron-Polak, referring to the difficulty that students from some regions have in gaining access to international-education opportunities.

Institutions in the Middle East and Africa are also concerned about the risks that might come from an overemphasis on internationalization. In sharp contrast, for institutions in Europe and North America, the most common reply to a question about the risks of internationalization was to give no reply.

The data were compiled from an online multiple-choice questionnaire that the International Association of Universities e-mailed to a geographically proportionate sample of more than

5,000 institutions around the world, including all of the association's member institutions. The survey drew 750 responses, although Ms. Egron-Polak emphasized that the figure did not reflect a true response rate because it was unclear how many questionnaires had actually cleared spam filters and reached their destination.

At her presentation on Friday, Ms. Egron-Polak asked the roomful of university administrators responsible for international outreach, who were the survey's target audience, how many had actually received the e-mail invitation. Only a few raised their hands. Despite the proportionately low number of responses to the survey, the respondents reflected the general geographic distribution of global higher-education institutions, Ms. Egron-Polak said.

In the same session at which Ms. Egron-Polak presented her organization's new data, Jarred A. Butto, of the American Council on Education's Center for International Initiatives, highlighted some results of [recent surveys](#) his organization has conducted on the internationalization efforts of American colleges.

Much of the data reveal a gap between what institutions say they want or intend to do, and what they are actually doing. Three-fourths of the respondents to one survey, for example, said they highlight their international activities in their recruitment literature, but less than 20 percent said they had developed specific international or global student-learning outcomes. "The challenge is creating an overall strategy," Mr. Butto said.

Some of the responses to the International Association of Universities survey also reflected inconsistencies. The number of institutions reporting that they have an official internationalization strategy actually has dropped, from 82 percent to 67 percent, since 2005. "I can't figure it out, we'll have to dig into some of the other questions to try and find out why," Ms. Egron-Polak said. "But the good news is that for those with a policy, the budget has gone up."

The International Association of Universities will be scrutinizing its new data more deeply over the next few months, asking regional experts to break down and analyze the data by regions. Ms. Egron-Polak said she expected the report based on the data to be published sometime in the first half of next year.