

Navigating crisis: Higher education internationalization at times of war

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This study examines the impact of war on higher education internationalization and asks how institutions and individuals in the academic community adapt and respond during crises. It utilizes Israeli internationalization during the 2023/24 Israel-Hamas war as a case study, analyzing changes in policies and practices across five public higher education institutions. Data includes institutional policy statements, interviews with internationalization policymakers and practitioners, and administrative records. Policy discourse analysis and descriptive statistics are employed to identify the shifts in the internationalization agenda and reveal how academic agency operates in conflict settings. The findings fill a scholarly gap in the understanding of internationalization during war, by conceptualizing wartime as a policy window for academic agency. This research contributes to understanding higher education's role in geopolitical crises and offers practical insights for sustaining internationalization efforts amid instability.

Full paper

The higher education internationalization agenda is typically framed within the context of peace. However, with the rise of global crises in recent years, this peaceful contextualization limits our understanding of internationalization during times of crisis, such as war. Internationalization is defined as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2003). This dynamic and multidimensional process varies across countries and over time, driven by economic, academic, political, and social factors (Stier, 2010; Yemini, 2017). While the definition encompasses various geopolitical contexts, events like war necessitate a reevaluation of higher education internationalization.

One understudied aspect of internationalization during war is the agency of individuals in war zones, who are often seen solely as victims or villains, while not accounting for them responding to, engaging with, and leading international policies and practices. This study aims to fill this gap by conceptualizing higher education internationalization as a policy window for wartime agency.

Israeli higher education is a relevant and interesting case study. The Israeli academic system, known for its "glocal" identity, combines world-class academic achievements with local state and nation-building efforts (Mizrahi-Shtelman & Drori, 2021). Internationalization is a system priority, supported by government agencies and global partners, and embedded in policies, agreements, and budgets. The

events of October 7th and the subsequent war have introduced significant internal and external, pragmatic and ideological, challenges to this internationalization agenda.

This study re-examines internationalization in times of crisis by addressing three key questions: (1) What changes occurred in short-term internationalization policies and practices during the 2023/24 academic year? (2) How are stability and changes in the internationalization agenda framed in the policy narrative, articulating the policy drivers, mechanisms, and implications? (3) What does the reconstructed policy narrative reveal about systemic, institutional, and individual agency?

The research focuses on five public institutions committed to internationalization, including two research universities and three academic teaching colleges, varying in location, size, disciplinary focus, internationalization infrastructure, funding, practices, and the impact of the war. This diversity provides a broad perspective on the war's impact on internationalization.

Data includes institutional policy statements, communications with international colleagues, interviews with policymakers and implementers, and administrative mobilization data. A policy discourse analysis will be conducted, following the changing policy narrative, including policy drivers, mechanisms, and implications (Shanahan et al., 2018). Descriptive statistics of administrative data from the internationalization offices will contextualize the policy narrative.

Interviews, conducted via Zoom and lasting up to 60 minutes, will follow a protocol tracing ideas, politics, and implementation practices that shape the policy narrative. Interviewees will consent to be quoted, but names will remain anonymous to focus on policy rather than personal narratives. However, participants will be reminded of the potential for recognition within the small Israeli academic community.

This work-in-progress is expected to contribute to the scholarship on higher education internationalization during war, by conceptualizing academic agency beyond victimhood and villainhood, and encouraging institutions and practitioners to engage with their international socio-political mission in changing geopolitical circumstances.

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