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INTERNATIONALIZATION AT A CROSSROADS – INSIGHTS FROM THE 6TH IAU GLOBAL SURVEY

In an era marked by profound disruption—from the global pandemic to geopolitical realignments and climate anxiety—the internationalization of higher education faces both tremendous challenges and transformative opportunities. The recently released 6th IAU Global Survey on Internationalization of Higher Education offers a timely, comprehensive pulse-check on where institutions stand and where they’re headed. This landmark survey, conducted by the International Association of Universities (IAU), collected responses from 722 higher education institutions (HEIs) across 110 countries. The findings highlight a higher education landscape in flux—characterized by evolving motivations, resource disparities, and the complex interplay between global aspirations and local realities.

Global Connectivity vs. Resource Disparities

Encouragingly, 77% of institutions report that internationalization holds high importance within their strategic agendas—an increase from previous surveys. Yet the report underscores a critical tension: while the intention to internationalize is widespread, implementation often falters due to financial constraints and inequitable global engagement. Institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, cite brain drain as a top societal risk, while HEIs in the Global North worry about administrative overload.

New Modalities and Persistent Gaps

One of the more positive developments is the mainstreaming of virtual internationalization. Virtual exchanges, COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning), and online preparatory courses have expanded dramatically—fueled by the pressures and innovations of the COVID-19 era. Despite this digital acceleration, access remains uneven. Institutions with limited infrastructure or funding risk being left behind in the “digital divide.”

At the same time, internationalization “at home” has gained momentum. Three out of four institutions report greater emphasis on curriculum integration of global perspectives. Still, such efforts remain marginal in some regions, and are often not backed by robust policy frameworks or student engagement strategies.

From Mobility to Mission-Driven Internationalization

The survey reflects a shift in how internationalization is framed—not just as a mobility metric but as a holistic institutional value. This includes fostering intercultural competencies, advancing sustainable development, and supporting vulnerable groups such as refugees and marginalized learners. However, less than half of the surveyed institutions currently assess the impact of their internationalization activities on local communities—a missed opportunity for reinforcing higher education’s societal role.

Call to Action: Reimagining Partnerships and Priorities

One of the most revealing findings is the disconnect between internationalization rhetoric and practice. While many HEIs champion inclusive, socially responsible internationalization in theory, implementation lags. To move beyond aspirational discourse, institutions must Embed internationalization into core teaching and research practices. Institutions prioritize regional cooperation and South-South partnerships, especially in underrepresented areas. They must ensure that international strategies are equitably resourced, monitored, and evaluated. Heads of institutions should treat DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) and sustainability not as add-ons, but as central pillars of global engagement.

The 6th IAU Global Survey highlights a pivotal moment for developing countries to redefine their role in global higher education. While structural and financial barriers persist, there is growing opportunity for inclusive, strategic, and locally-relevant internationalization. For Bangladesh, this is not just about sending students abroad—but about transforming local institutions into globally connected, socially impactful hubs of education and research.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR BANGLADESH

Strategic Internationalization Is Growing—But So Are Gaps

The 6th IAU Global Survey confirms a notable global consensus: 77% of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) now consider internationalization a high strategic priority. This represents a significant shift toward treating internationalization not as a peripheral activity but as a core institutional value aligned with global collaboration, capacity building, and sustainable development.

Yet this growing emphasis also reveals deepening disparities, especially between institutions in well-resourced and under-resourced regions. For countries like Bangladesh, where many HEIs still depend on ad-hoc partnerships or individual faculty networks, this report sends a clear message: strategic and whole-institution internationalization planning is no longer optional—it is essential.

While Europe leads with 85% of HEIs having formal internationalization strategies, only 61% in Sub-Saharan Africa have such frameworks—and a significant portion are still in the process of developing one. Although Bangladesh falls within the Asia & Pacific category (with mixed participation), the report indicates that only about half of HEIs in this region have well-defined geographic or strategic priorities for internationalization.

The key takeaway for Bangladesh is to move beyond fragmented or mobility-only approaches. Instead, the country's universities should embed internationalization into institutional policies, curriculum, and research. These may align with national development plans and UN SDGs, particularly in areas like education equity, climate resilience, and digital capacity. Universities forge regional partnerships (e.g., within SAARC and broader Asia-Pacific) for mutual development rather than over-dependence on Global North institutions.

As the report shows, institutions with clear strategies, monitoring frameworks, and budget allocations are better positioned to thrive globally. For Bangladesh, that means policy reform at both the institutional and governmental levels—ensuring that internationalization is inclusive, development-driven, and sustainably financed.

Virtual Internationalization Is a Game Changer

The latest IAU Global Survey underscores the transformative potential of virtual internationalization, especially for developing nations like Bangladesh. By leveraging digital tools such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), virtual exchanges, and online global classrooms, Bangladeshi institutions have a unique opportunity to overcome long-standing barriers like high travel costs, limited scholarship availability, and stringent visa requirements. These virtual modalities enable institutions to foster global engagement and

cross-cultural learning without the logistical and financial burdens of physical mobility. For this shift to be effective, however, universities must make strategic investments in digital infrastructure and faculty training. Building the technological and pedagogical capacity to deliver high-quality virtual learning experiences will be key to positioning Bangladesh as a forward-thinking player in global higher education. This approach not only democratizes access to international experiences but also aligns with broader national goals for digital transformation and educational equity.

Capacity Building Is a Rising Priority

The 6th IAU Global Survey highlights that “international development and capacity building projects” have experienced the greatest surge in importance worldwide. This trend reflects a growing recognition that sustainable internationalization must go hand-in-hand with strengthening institutional capabilities. For Bangladesh, this presents a strategic opportunity. Universities can tap into cross-border research funding, engage in technical collaborations, and facilitate faculty development programs by partnering with institutions and networks committed to educational development. Such partnerships not only enhance academic quality and global visibility but also build the foundational strength needed to participate meaningfully in the international higher education landscape. By focusing on capacity building, Bangladeshi institutions can bridge performance gaps, support innovation, and align more closely with the global movement toward inclusive, impact-driven internationalization.

Brain Drain Remains a Major Risk

The issue of brain drain emerges as a critical concern in the 6th IAU Global Survey, particularly highlighted by institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa. This concern resonates strongly with the Bangladeshi context, where many talented academics and students pursue opportunities abroad and often do not return. The loss of skilled human capital weakens local academic ecosystems and undermines long-term development goals. Addressing this challenge requires a multi-layered strategy. Bangladesh must focus on creating meaningful incentives for scholars to remain within the country’s higher education system or to return after gaining experience abroad. This can include offering competitive research grants, career advancement opportunities, and modern academic environments. Equally important is the development of robust local research ecosystems that actively engage members of the Bangladeshi diaspora through collaborative projects, visiting appointments, and joint supervision of students. By valuing and integrating global expertise within national frameworks, Bangladesh can turn the threat of brain drain into a force for academic renewal and innovation.

Equity and Inclusion Must Be Central

The 6th IAU Global Survey reveals that 87% of Higher Education Institutions now integrate Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) into their internationalization strategies—a powerful indicator of a global shift toward more inclusive academic engagement. For Bangladesh, this presents both a challenge and an opportunity. True internationalization cannot be limited to urban, elite institutions or privileged student groups. Instead, it must extend its reach to include rural students, women, and marginalized communities who have traditionally had limited access to global learning opportunities. This requires intentional policy measures—such as targeted scholarships, accessible digital platforms, and inclusive curriculum design—that remove barriers and empower underrepresented groups. Ensuring equitable participation in international programs is not just a matter of fairness; it strengthens the entire higher education ecosystem by fostering diverse perspectives, promoting social mobility, and cultivating globally competent citizens from all corners of the country.

Regional Collaboration Is Underutilized

South-South Partnerships is a missing opportunity waiting to be seized. Despite the growing discourse around equity and global collaboration, the 6th IAU Global Survey reveals that South-South partnerships remain underprioritized on the global stage. This oversight is particularly significant for countries like Bangladesh, which stand to gain immensely from deeper engagement with neighboring nations facing similar developmental challenges and educational aspirations. Rather than relying solely on partnerships with Global North institutions, Bangladesh has a strategic opportunity to assert regional leadership by fostering stronger ties within the SAARC framework and broader Asia-Pacific networks. This includes collaborative research, joint degree programs, student and faculty exchanges, and shared digital learning platforms. These partnerships can offer more contextually relevant solutions, reduce dependency, and empower institutions to co-develop knowledge that is locally grounded yet globally informed. By championing South-South cooperation, Bangladesh can help reshape the internationalization landscape into one that is more balanced, inclusive, and sustainable.

English-Medium Programs Are Growing

The global trend toward English-Medium Instruction (EMI) is gaining momentum, as revealed in the 6th IAU Global Survey. Institutions in both English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries are increasingly adopting English as the primary language of instruction to facilitate international collaboration, student mobility, and global recognition. For Bangladesh, expanding EMI offerings presents a strategic avenue to strengthen its position in the international higher education landscape. By offering programs in English, Bangladeshi universities can appeal to a broader pool of international students and faculty, especially from neighboring Asian and African countries seeking affordable, quality education in English. Moreover, EMI enhances graduates' competitiveness in global job markets and supports cross-border academic partnerships. To achieve this, institutions must invest in language training for faculty, revise curricula, and ensure quality assurance mechanisms are in place. With thoughtful implementation, EMI can become a key driver in Bangladesh's journey toward becoming a regional education hub.

CONCLUSION

As we look to the future, the 6th IAU Global Survey reminds us that the internationalization of higher education is not a monolith—it is contextual, contested, and constantly evolving. Institutions must now navigate this complexity with strategic foresight and inclusive intent. Only then can internationalization truly fulfill its promise—as a driver of innovation, understanding, and shared global progress. For Bangladesh, internationalization is not about imitation, but innovation rooted in context. The 6th IAU Global Survey urges developing nations to take ownership of the internationalization narrative—making it inclusive, digital, and development-driven.

The 6th IAU Global Survey offers more than just statistical insight—it presents a compelling call to action for higher education institutions, especially in developing countries like Bangladesh. The findings illuminate both the opportunities and inequities that define the internationalization landscape today. For Bangladesh, the path forward requires a deliberate shift from fragmented efforts to cohesive, policy-backed strategies that integrate internationalization into the core mission of higher education.

This means embracing digital platforms to democratize access, investing in faculty development, addressing systemic risks like brain drain, and ensuring that marginalized groups are not left behind. Moreover, it calls for reimagining international partnerships—not as extractive engagements, but as mutually enriching collaborations rooted in shared regional

challenges and aspirations. English-medium instruction, virtual exchange, and regional cooperation are not just trends—they are strategic imperatives.

Ultimately, internationalization must serve a broader social purpose: enhancing academic excellence, driving sustainable development, and fostering inclusive global citizenship. With vision, investment, and commitment, Bangladesh can transform these insights into action—and emerge not as a passive participant, but as a proactive leader in the global academic community.

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