


# Chapter 4

# Leadership Perspectives on Sustainable Internationalization in Higher Education

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter explores how university leaders are reimagining internationalization strategies through a sustainability lens, urging a shift away from transactional, short-term global engagements toward more ethical, inclusive, and future-oriented models. Drawing on interviews, strategic documents, and emerging policy trends, the chapter unpacks the critical role of leadership in shaping institutional values and practices that align internationalization with long-term societal and environmental responsibilities. The chapter also confronts the tensions between competitiveness and cooperation, market logic and public good, inviting readers to reflect on the leadership mindsets and strategic commitments necessary to build a more just, interconnected, and sustainable higher education landscape. Through case examples and reflective analysis, it offers a roadmap for institutions seeking to lead not just globally, but responsibly.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In an era defined by global turbulence and transformation, the idea of internationalization in higher education stands at a critical crossroads. Once seen primarily as a

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symbol of institutional prestige or an instrument of market expansion, internationalization has grown into a multidimensional force—complex, contested, and profoundly impactful. Universities now find themselves navigating not only across national borders, but also across moral boundaries, cultural terrains, and ethical dilemmas (Spiro, 2022). In this context, the question is no longer whether institutions should internationalize, but how they do so—and with what consequences. For decades, the expansion of international programs, the establishment of overseas campuses, the global recruitment of students and faculty, and the rise of collaborative research projects across continents have reshaped the higher education landscape. These shifts have enabled a rich exchange of ideas, cultures, and innovations, fostering a more interconnected global academy. Yet, this wave of international activity has not been without complications. Alongside its many benefits, traditional internationalization has been marked by troubling patterns of inequality, environmental cost, and epistemic imbalance—where certain languages, knowledge systems, and institutional models dominate at the expense of others.

Today's higher education leaders are being asked to grapple with the limits of this inherited model (Kezar, 2023). They are being asked to think not just about expansion, but about sustainability; not just about visibility, but about values. What kind of global engagement contributes to a better world? How can international partnerships be both ambitious and ethical? What responsibilities come with global influence? These are no longer rhetorical questions. They are leadership imperatives. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this reckoning (Kayyali, 2020). It exposed the fragility of global mobility, the inequities embedded in digital access, and the importance of institutional resilience. But even before the crisis, the cracks were showing (Kayyali, 2022 a). Climate change, rising nationalism, the exploitation of international students as revenue sources, and the dominance of Anglo-Western academic paradigms had already begun to provoke calls for reform. It became increasingly clear that internationalization, if left unexamined, could reproduce the very global injustices higher education claims to challenge.

As universities look to the future, the call for a new paradigm has grown louder—a model of sustainable internationalization, one that is grounded in equity, ethics, mutuality, and long-term thinking. This paradigm recognizes that true global engagement is not about how far an institution can reach, but about how responsibly it can act. It acknowledges that higher education has a unique role to play in addressing global challenges, but only if it confronts its own complicity in perpetuating the systems it seeks to change. This chapter is an exploration of that paradigm, told through the lens of leadership. Because while sustainability may be a shared institutional goal, it is ultimately shaped by people—by the choices leaders make, the values they champion, and the futures they dare to imagine. It is about leadership not as control, but as stewardship; not as direction, but as dialogue. It is

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