

# 345 Internationalisation of research and the shifting geopolitics of higher education in the European Union

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## Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

## Abstract

This paper identifies the European Union's (EUs) shifting approaches towards internationalisation in research between 2012-2022 and distinguishes between two periods. We argue that these periods represent shifting geopolitical environments that shaped the EU's agendas and priorities. We suggest that the EU's perception that its economic interests, global position and normative values were threatened, resulted in a shift in its approach to internationalisation in research from a liberal agenda which espoused openness, towards a more pragmatic and political agenda with a focus on ideological differences, regional interests and protectionism. As academic science becomes increasingly multipolar and nationalistic in nature, this periodisation sheds light on the connections between the shifting geopolitical environment, higher education and internationalisation in research.

## Full paper

In recent years, higher education scholars have argued that the architecture of neoliberal globalisation has deteriorated (Pan, 2021a), nationalism, populism and protectionism have resurfaced (Brøgger, 2022) and geopolitical tensions are intensifying (Marginson, 2020). Recent studies perceive tensions on university campuses, as extensions of these geopolitical tensions (c.f. in Australia and USA, Lau, 2020; Ross, 2020; Yao, & Mwangi, 2022) and the literature is already shifting towards a greater focus on geopolitics in higher education analyses (Moscovitz and Sabzalieva, 2023).

This paper will examine the impact of geopolitics on higher education (HE) and particularly on internationalisation as this is an educational arena where national priorities often collide (Lee, 2021). We aim to understand shifting approaches to international research collaboration in a period of geopolitical upheaval. We focus on research because there is rather less scholarship which focuses on internationalisation in this domain (Bedenlier et al., 2018; Woldegiyorgis et al., 2018). Our empirical entry point is an analysis of European Union (EU) research policies towards internationalisation. The EU, a political and economic union, has championed internationalisation in research through the creation of the European Research Area (ERA), which aims to create a single market for research, innovation and technology (Chou, 2014); and the EU Framework Programmes (FPs), its main instrument to finance collaborative research. We focus on the EU for three reasons: firstly, it administers the world's largest cooperative science programme, Horizon Europe, with a budget of €95.5 billion. Secondly, the EU strives for transparency, and thus provides public access to a large number of documents for analysis. Thirdly, less is known about the approaches of regional organisations towards higher education and international research collaboration (Robertson, 2016), thus a study of the EU's shifting approaches towards internationalisation in research, has potential to shed light on a less understood level of international research collaboration.

We analysed official documents on EU international research collaboration from 2012 to 2022 and identified two periods. These periods represent the EU's shifting approaches to internationalisation in research, from the pursuit of a liberal agenda promoting open research and international cooperation towards a focus on competition, ideological differences, regional interests and protectionism. We revealed the antecedents and geopolitical conditions which triggered this shift. We argued that this shift in approaches from openness and international cooperation to selective closure and foreign interference was spurred by geopolitical tensions, which resulted in the EU's perception that its economic interests, global position and normative values were threatened. We suggested that the EU began with utopian visions about the possibilities of neoliberal globalisation, open societies and economic collaboration and ended up withdrawing to a more closed and protectionist position, as perceived threats to its interests escalated. Over time, the rationales for international research collaboration, dominated by economic prosperity and global

influence, broadly remained unchanged; thus we demonstrated that similar rationales under shifting geopolitical conditions, resulted in different approaches (openness; protectionism).

This study contributes to a growing interest in the geopolitics of higher education linking it to one of the most salient issues in the field: internationalisation. It contributes to understanding the intersections of higher education, interests, geopolitical environments, and agency at the regional level (Moscovitz & Sabzelieva, 2023). Our periodisation provides a base for those analysing the shifting geopolitics of and approaches to internationalisation in research in other contexts, particularly at the regional level, contributing to comparative understanding of the effects of geopolitical environments on international research collaboration. This study can be useful for future research on the EU, which may take a longer historical perspective or include futures FPs. The EU has likewise promoted internationalisation at the student, staff and institutional level through mobility programmes (e.g. Erasmus), the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the Bologna Process and more recently the European Universities Initiative (EUI) (Charret & Chankseliani, 2022; Rensimer & Brooks, 2023). While this paper focused on research, we posit that geopolitical tensions are likewise affecting these programmes and thus, the shift that we have identified in research, may shed light the shifting geopolitical environment of internationalisation in cross border teaching and student mobility. As the infrastructure of neoliberal globalisation continues to deteriorate, nationalisms and populisms are reignited, authoritarian governments proliferate, supply chains decouple and the world becomes increasingly multipolar, we affirm the need for attention to the geopolitical environment of higher education. We anticipate that internationalisation strategies will be further aligned with national/regional interests and ideological positions, with far-reaching effects on individuals, societies and higher education systems.

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