

**Perceptions of Internationalization at Ashesi: A Private Liberal Arts College in Ghana**

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## **Chapter Abstract**

Internationalization in higher education institutions has traditionally been viewed as incorporating an international and intercultural breadth into the extant curriculum and campus ethos, with the aim of preparing graduates to “fit into” today’s multicultural world. Internationalization however holds different meanings between and within academic institutions, and by extension presents different contextual interpretations of the phenomenon to various academic settings hence inviting the question: What does internationalization mean to academic institutions operating in an environment unique from the West, which has largely been responsible for defining the concept of internationalization? This article emanates from a case study which examined how five stakeholder groups at Ashesi interpreted internationalization in the context of an African liberal arts college.

**Keyword:** Internationalization| Multiculturalism| Perceptions| Higher Education| Conceptualization

## **Introduction**

Many institutions of higher learning are increasingly becoming aware of the need to equip students with essential skills necessary to navigate a world characterized by increasing international and cross-cultural interactions (Adjei 1). According to Childress, a myriad of studies have suggested that students around the world and across various academic disciplines generally lack the necessary international awareness, multiple language fluency, and cross-cultural knowledge to navigate today's global workforce. As a response, many leaders in higher education institutions have tried to address the growing need for international and cross-cultural competence of students through internationalization (289-309). Knight defines internationalization as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher-education" (1-2). Internationalization, however, means many things to many people, especially in different academic contexts. The concept has been interpreted based on how stakeholders perceive it, how it affects them, how it affects their daily work, and how they want to use it. As explained by Adjei, "Internationalization is considered to be "an interactive, global and multicultural phenomenon which involves several countries, academic institutions, governments and the global workforce" (*Internationalizing a Private Liberal Arts College* 1).

Many institutions try to internationalize through emphasizing the development of international awareness among students by encouraging them to be internationally savvy throughout their academic experience. While some seasoned internationalization experts like Mestenhauser and Ellingboe have advocated for internationalization to be approached through the curriculum by emphasizing the international and intercultural aspects of what is taught (Mestenhauser and Ellingboe), others have recommended that internationalization should be approached from the perspective of equipping students with the necessary cross-cultural competencies needed to make meaningful contributions toward solving problems which are global in nature (Jon). Later discussions in this direction have advocated for the teaching of soft transferable and cross-cultural skills which can be used anywhere and in any organization

(Crossman and Clarke 599–613). While most universities have attempted to institute strategies to internationalize their programs, the direction an institution follows to achieve its internationalization goals, seem to be greatly influenced by the rationale for which the institution intends to internationalize.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> IAU (International Association of Universities) Global Survey on Internationalization of Higher Education is one of the largest and most significant studies done which outlines how different institutions approach internationalization and what the rationales behind their actions are. The findings of the survey suggested that amongst the regional blocks included in the survey (Africa, Asia and Pacific, Europe, Latin America and Caribbean, Middle East and North America), the various rationales for internationalization differs and are changing at a very rapid rate (Egron-Polak and Hudson 159-191). The survey suggests, for example, that while the United States is focusing on both internal and external international mobility aimed at exposing students internationally through increased study abroad programs for American students and making USA an attractive destination for international students, Europe, on the other hand, is focusing on the convergence of its institutions through initiatives like the *Bologna Process* which was signed in Bologna, Italy in 1999. Bologna emphasizes the harmonization of higher education throughout Europe to enhance mobility of students, graduates and higher education staff within the region, and also to facilitate the transferability of academic qualifications across Europe to enhance employability of graduates within the region (European Higher Education Area: Bologna Process). According to the survey, internationalization in Africa has over the years been approached in an unstructured manner with no set direction or common focus. Many institutions in Africa however, seem to be focusing on improving research and knowledge production. With the exception of Africa and the Middle East which had knowledge production and the advancement of research as their key rationales for internationalizing, the remaining five regional blocks included in the survey mainly focused on increasing international awareness of students as the main rationale for internationalizing.

At a time when many companies are reaching out to include cross-border employment as a vital part of expanding their global workforce, it is important to know why African institutions are not focusing on preparing their students to be equipped with the global competencies they need to navigate the very competitive multicultural work environment unlike many Western institutions. It is also important to know why international exposure and the development of cross-cultural competencies are not the main rationales for internationalizing in African institutions since universities worldwide are key stakeholders in preparing students for the global work environment.

With a vast majority of the world's population residing in developing countries which fall within regions where the literature on internationalization has not adequately covered, and the systems of higher education in such countries being challenged to interact and respond to internationalization in forms which do not contextually fit their realities, this investigation is important because most of the literature on internationalization has focused on how internationalization is evolving in academic institutions in Western and developed countries, leaving a relative dearth of scholarly investigation on how the phenomenon is developing in non-western and developing countries like in Africa and how these developing countries are interpreting the phenomenon which consequently shapes their rationale for internationalizing.

This article seeks to contribute to the dearth in literature on internationalization in non-western academic institutions by closely examining how the phenomenon is being perceived in an African liberal arts institution. It aims to gain insight into the lived experiences of how five stakeholder groups at Ashesi encounter and interact with the phenomenon of internationalization on a daily basis, which revealed to largely determine how they defined internationalization. The responses gained from the stakeholders, through the in-depth, semi-structured one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis, were guided by the question: *How are stakeholders at Ashesi University, experiencing, interpreting and defining internationalization?* The five stakeholder groups (N = 60) were made up of: current students selected from across the four year groups, faculty and heads of departments, university

leadership including the president of the university, senior administrators like the dean of students and community affairs, and five alumni.

Although the article does not suggest that the experiences expressed by the stakeholders is representational of stakeholders in all non-western academic institutions, and owing to Ashesi's liberal arts pedagogical approach which right away distinguishes it from many African higher education institutions, the article contends that the insights discussed are not limited to Ashesi alone and therefore is significant to contributing to the discourse of how the realities and encounters of non-western academic institutions can be brought into the internationalization discourse to give a more holistic interpretation of the phenomenon. To give a contextual background to this enquiry, the article proceeds by providing a contextual picture of the university's inception and structure, followed by a presentation of the findings and a synthesis of the findings.

Data constituting the findings of the study emanated inductively from interviews with the five identified stakeholder groups and deductively from the document analysis. The findings are presented in two parts: The first section draws largely from information on the University's website (Ashesi University College, "Ashesi at a Glance") and presents the setting, giving a general description of the university in order to provide the appropriate context through which to view and interpret the data gathered. The second section contains an analysis of data for the research question guiding this study, drawing on responses from both the interviews and document analysis. The analysis of the experiences of the stakeholders' leads to the conclusion that internationalization though similar in many ways irrespective of the location of the academic institution, can also vary contextually, based on how stakeholders interpreted and defined the phenomenon, the institutional mission and vision, and their sole objective for internationalizing whether these objectives are structured or not.

## **Contextual Presentation of Ashesi University College**

Ashesi is the first and only liberal arts college in Ghana and West Africa. The University offers a four-year bachelor's degree in Computer Science, Management Information Systems, and Business Administration based on a liberal arts core curriculum, a leadership and community service requirement and the only university in Ghana which runs an honor code system. Ashesi started with a pioneering class of thirty students, and had grown to a total student enrollment of five hundred and five full time students of which 91.5% were Ghanaians and 8.5% internationals mainly from West Africa at the time data was collected for this research. The University also had twenty full-time faculty, ten adjunct faculty, twenty-three faculty interns who assisted full-time faculty, one Fulbright Scholar, and forty administrative staff. Data revealed that Ashesi is in active partnerships and collaborations with international academic and business institutions which provided academic support, scholarships, internships and study abroad opportunities to the University and its students. Very significant of these international partnerships exhibited in the data, was a \$13million service partnership with the MasterCard Foundation of Canada to provide full scholarships to very talented and academically brilliant students from economically deprived backgrounds on the African continent. With Ashesi's internationalization mission of being a Pan- African institution dedicated to educating a new generation of ethical entrepreneurial African leaders dedicated to transforming the continent, the MasterCard Foundation at Ashesi seemed to be a strategic partnership which was going to allow the University to recruit heavily beyond Ghana to increase its international student's enrollment target of 30-50% by the year 2020.

### **Ashesi's Mission and Vision**

#### **Mission**

The mission of Ashesi University College is to educate a new generation of ethical, entrepreneurial leaders in Africa; to cultivate within our students the critical thinking skills, the concern for others and the courage it will take to transform a continent.

## **Vision**

Imagine if every Sub-Saharan African country had several small liberal-arts colleges, dedicated to nurturing critical thinking, effective communication skills, practical experience, and a true concern for society in their students. Such a development in Africa would make a tremendous positive impact on the continent. This is our vision: An African Renaissance driven by a new generation of ethical entrepreneurial leaders.

## **Findings**

The sixty stakeholders interviewed provided rich, descriptive, and insightful responses about their personal interpretations of what constituted internationalization and why Ashesi was internationalizing. The interview responses were diverse in content and scope, with one alumnus for instance stating that cross-cultural competency and nuances which constituted internationalization are not things a University can teach but are learned on the job. Because the interview questions were open-ended, the stakeholders were able to discuss extensively their personal experiences and interactions with internationalization, as they thought were relevant in their context, through their daily lives. This section presents the results of the data analysis with respect to the research question: How are stakeholders at Ashesi University, experiencing, interpreting and defining internationalization?

The rationale behind this question was to understand the contextual meanings stakeholders were attributing to the concept of internationalization. As is often the case with defining internationalization, the various stakeholders had different interpretations of what internationalization should be depending on how it affected them and their work. The Human Resource Manager, for instance, defined internationalization as: “having a cross-cultural diversity within your work force” (Interview, July 12, 2011), reflecting on his work as leading the hiring process of Ashesi’s work force. Similarly, most of the alumni believed internationalization meant being able to work anywhere in the world with the preparation their



educational experience at Ashesi had equipped them with. One alumnus, for instance, defined internationalization saying:

In terms of the work I do, I believe it means I can be working in PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) Ghana, pick up my bag tomorrow and be able to work in PwC Nigeria or U.S. But not even necessarily work with PwC, but basically with the skills and the mindset that I have received from my education, I can and should be able to compete with the best anywhere in the world. (Interview with '07 alumnus, July 25, 2011)

While divergent views about what internationalization is were expressed across the various stakeholder groups, most stakeholders broadly agreed on the following: *1) internationalization should demonstrate diversity and global competency; 2) internationalization is about operating an institution within an acceptable international standard; and 3) internationalization means bringing an international perspective to whatever one does.*

### **Internationalization should demonstrate diversity and global competency**

Most stakeholders interpreted the ability to “fit in” globally in different cultures as one of the key purposes of internationalization; hence, they believed that an international education should be able to prepare students for the divergent global cultural environment they are expected to fit into after they graduate from school. One stakeholder explained:

I guess it's about providing an education that creates students who can “fit in” and function anywhere in the world without barriers. Basically, creating global citizens and making sure they have the competencies to deal with the kinds of people they meet; the different cultures they come across. It is also very critical that they have an appreciation of the fact that the world out there is much bigger than what they see; and not to be afraid of that but be able to embrace the differences. (Interview with 2006 alumnus, July 9, 2011)

Similarly one faculty explained that: “Internationalization is giving an education through the curriculum, which takes student beyond Ghana as well as interactions within the university that reflect a culturally diverse environment, through international exchanges and research.” (Business Administration lecturer, June 10, 2011) Ninety-eight percent of all interviewees believed that any institution seeking to internationalize should be able to prepare students to deal with cultural diversity and also to become globally competent.

### **Internationalization is about operating within an acceptable international standard**

Stakeholders across board expressed the view that in order for an institution to be internationalized, it must operate within a set of global standards governing its everyday operations. These international standards they believed must cut across every aspect and unit of the institution, and must be standards which are “acceptable” and recognized by similar institutions all over the world. One student, for example, defined internationalization as “having an internationally standardized curriculum, which cuts across countries and different examination boards, now this will imply that students around the world study issues revolving around the same topics or theories.” (Interview, June 14, 2011) In the same way when asked what internationalization meant to him, the Founder and President of Ashesi defined the concept as:

Within the context of education, internationalization, to me, means operating at a global standard, following international norms and asking ourselves if we are operating at a standard where students from other countries will want to come and study here because of our world class standards or that our graduating students can work anywhere in the world and be successful because the standards we’ve trained them with are globally competitive and the same in other world class universities. (Interview, June 12, 2011)

In comparing Ashesi's standards to other universities in Ghana, the Founder and President was emphatic in explaining that Ashesi can be considered to be internationalized for the following reasons, which touched upon teaching methods, standard of conduct, and reaching a "global standard":

Some of the local universities here in Ghana teach by dictating notes and students learn by rote, which is not an international standard for a high functional university. Ashesi, for example, approaches plagiarism seriously; if you are using other people's work, proper referencing is a must. We have also developed an examination honor code, which is not common in Ghana, but many institutions worldwide have this. It teaches students self-leadership and this is also evidence of following international standards. If I walk into any institution in the United States, most members of the faculty have PhDs. At Ashesi, some of our faculty hold masters degrees and that level is not the norm for most world class universities so in that respect, we are not at the global standard yet. (Interview, June 12, 2011)

### **Internationalization means bringing on an international perspective to whatever one does**

Another feature all stakeholders believed internationalization should have was adding an international perspective to the day to day interactions that take place on campus. One department head described how he achieved this in the classroom when he is teaching by explaining:

"I make sure that in presenting the teaching materials, I extend the range of application into the international world. For instance I will compare Ghana Post to UPS or FedEx to bring the international perspective to it." (Interview with head of Bachelor of Arts Department, June 10, 2011)

One student also commented: "Some lecturers always ask if there are international students in the class, and they ask for their perspective on whatever issues we are discussing" (interview

June 14, 2011). Most faculty also believed that giving their students examples from international case studies and scenarios when teaching constituted an example of internationalization. Though there were these specific examples by stakeholders, they all agreed that the *international perspective* must be brought into whatever they did whether as students, faculty or administrators in order to consider themselves internationalized.

### **Additional components of internationalization at Ashesi**

In addition to the three ways stakeholders' interpreted internationalization, there were specific issues raised by more than one of the stakeholder groups. For example, the students were particularly emphatic that the use of "international textbooks" and e-library resources that gave them access to thousands of e-books, journals, articles and numerous educational resources which they used in their academic work, made the institution internationalized because by their definition, an international institution is one that had those facilities. This was particularly significant especially because similar facilities in many universities in Africa are non-existing, or their usage is overly stretched. Some of the university's administrators and students also mentioned that the completion of the ultra-modern campus complex was one of the climaxes of Ashesi's efforts to provide the ambiance needed for serious academic work as is the case in most international campuses. Having a permanent academic learning space, to these stakeholders was important and constituted Ashesi being internationalized since it contributed significantly to an international campus ethos. The university having its own structure was particularly important to all stakeholders because for close to ten years, Ashesi operated from a rented residential unit which did not convey the appearance of an internationalized institution, and therefore did not match Ashesi's international posture.

## **Synthesis of Significant Findings**

Before synthesizing the key findings, it is first necessary to review the research question addressed through this article: *How are stakeholders at Ashesi University, experiencing, interpreting and defining internationalization?* For academic institutions seeking to integrate an international dimension into their systems and culture, Knight's 1994 internationalization cycle suggests an awareness of the need, purpose, and benefits of internationalization for the stakeholders involved (Childress, *The Twenty-First Century University* 7). In this study, stakeholders demonstrated various understandings of internationalization and how they interacted with the phenomenon in their unique context. In general, they associated internationalization with training students to gain the needed competencies to address issues of diversity, to gain the necessary competencies to "fit in" the global work force, and to operate within a set of global standards. Internationalization was also associated with the infusion of an international perspective into the teaching, learning and everyday interactions on Ashesi's campus.

Although Ashesi at the time the study was conducted did not have a clear internationalization plan or strategy, the findings suggested that the process of internationalization, though not coordinated, structured or implemented intentionally, was taking place in multiple facets of Ashesi's everyday operations. The findings also suggested that stakeholders identified specific programs and activities currently being pursued by Ashesi and classified them as components of internationalization in their own context. Some of the components were similar to those included in the extant literature on internationalization, such as Harari's 1989 "spokes of the wheel," which include: study abroad programs, an internationalized curriculum, having international partnerships and collaboration and admitting international students (Harari). Stakeholders also identified components not discussed in the literature which are unique to their context. These included providing high-tech infrastructure such as adequate and appropriate physical buildings, digital libraries, computers and textbooks which are overstretched in most African institutions, but are necessary to allow students the opportunity to

participate fully in the global knowledge community; and adopting a four-year liberal arts curriculum which allows students to take core classes from different departments in the humanities, social sciences, etc. The liberal arts model of pedagogy is very unique to Ashesi. In most universities in Ghana and Africa, students' majors are predetermined when admitted to the university with no flexibility to change programs once they are admitted. Students generally also do not have the breadth of courses that the liberal arts education offers. The expressed goal of Ashesi using the liberal arts method was to expose students to a wide variety of options before they finally specialized in an area, as opposed to the prevailing system in other Ghanaian universities, where students are engaged in one department, remain in that department, and take almost all their courses from that department.

The significance of these findings for the scholarly literature on internationalization will be addressed in greater detail below. The following section, however, addresses the implications and recommendations coming out of this research for Ashesi University and other universities in sub-Saharan Africa that are also being encouraged to internationalize their campuses.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

This article examined how five stakeholder groups at Ashesi University, a private liberal arts college in Ghana, West Africa, conceptualized and defined internationalization based on their understanding of the phenomenon and their daily encounters with the concept of internationalization. The stakeholders interviewed believed that internationalization should demonstrate three things: *1) Internationalization should demonstrate diversity and global competency. 2) Internationalization is about operating within an acceptable international standard. 3) Internationalization means bringing on an international perspective to whatever one does.* In addition, even though the enquiry did not seek to analyze how internationalized Ashesi was, stakeholders defined internationalization by identifying some specific evidence like the presence of physical modern academic structures like access to e-library, ultra modern campus and the availability of international textbooks and high speed internet facility as some of

the characteristics that must exist in an institution which is internationalized. These findings have significant implications for the conceptualization of internationalization especially because the existing literature on internationalization has largely focused on universities in countries with more developed institutions of higher education, thus there is a distinct bias in the theoretical frameworks toward the conceptualizations of internationalization emanating from universities with vastly different institutional realities like Ashesi University. This final section of the article will discuss some of the implications of this bias and will conclude by raising several questions which can further the discourse on a much broader conceptualization of the concept of internationalization in higher education systems all over the world.

At the level of a broader conceptualization of the phenomenon of internationalization, it is very important for the current literature to capture the realities of non-western academic institutions in the discourse. This is because as is evident in the above data, institutions from these regions are experiencing and interacting with the phenomenon in ways that has not been captured in the present literature. In a developed country like the United States for instance, an institution would proudly showcase how internationalized they are by the high number of students they send on study abroad programs, government funding they receive to send even more students abroad, and the high number of international students they receive each semester. In contrast, an institution in a developing country would likely pride itself as being internationalized because it has the necessary physical infrastructure and basic facilities, such as international textbooks, internet facilities, and access to academic publications through digital libraries that allow its students to connect with the world beyond its borders. Both institutions apply internationalization in their unique context of what is relevant, possible, and most importantly, needed in their individual situations. Basic academic facilities which are crucial in every academic setting are mostly unavailable, or if available are often limited and/or in poor condition in many African institutions due to lack of adequate funding and the increase in the number of students demanding education at the post-secondary level. As one faculty member put it:

Ashesi is well resourced in terms of textbooks, and having access to computers and the internet which is not the case in other institutions in some developing countries. We also have unlimited access to journal publications, which makes our work easier. I can have all the good intentions as faculty, but if the student does not have these tools to learn with it is pointless! (Interview June 10<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Another significant reality of internationalization in non-western regions of the world that this article brings to the fore is the assumption that governments all over the world are involved in the internationalization discussion in all contexts, and that governments view internationalization as a means of developing their national human resources. This is often the case in developed countries, and indeed there have been several studies that showcase various governments' initiatives to support institutions that endeavor to internationalize and give their students an international exposure. The Fulbright Program in the U. S and the Erasmus Mundus Program in Europe are examples of such government financially supported programs to encourage international education to give international and intercultural exposures to its students. This is however not the case in most developing countries especially in Africa. With the exception of full sponsorships programs like the Ford Foundation International Fellowship Program, the Hubert Humphrey Program and the bilateral nature of the Fulbright and Erasmus Programs which support the sponsorship of African scholars abroad, individual African governments on the other hand do not have adequate funding to support such internationalization efforts because of the cost involved and the many competing interests for basic national development needs hence making internationalization of higher education institutions a lesser priority. It is then very important to approach institutions operating from these regions bearing in mind that their agenda for internationalizing may not necessarily align with their national governments as is the case of western and developed regions of the world.

Also, while there are several similarities in the rationale for many stakeholders to internationalize, there has been little research done on why parents for instance will want their children to gain an international education. While this might not be the case in most western and



developed regions of the world where students have a significant posture in the decision making concerning their education, in Africa, this decision is mostly made by parents who largely pay for the college education of their children. The Secretary General of the Association of African Universities provided insights into this situation confronting many African universities and reasons why African parents will send their children abroad. He explained how internationalization is being embraced by African parents on the continent by saying:

Internationalization of higher education in Africa means three things to parents who pay the fees: 1) Send your child to the nearest African country where your money can buy good education because you can't afford to take him/her to U.S. or Europe. 2) Send your child to the nearest country where there is no disruption in the academic calendar of the university because faculty or students are on strike for better pay or provision of academic facilities. And 3) send your child to the best university on the continent e.g. Ibadan in Nigeria, Legon in Ghana, Makerere in Uganda or University of Cape Town in South Africa. (Interview, July 25, 2011)

This insight shared by the Secretary General of the Association of African Universities raises very important questions on how a very key stakeholder, “the parents”, has not been captured in the internationalization discourse even in the west. Knowing the rationale that guides parents in making these decisions will go a long way to inform academic institutions both in the West and developing countries on their internationalization focus to ensure that the needs of this very important stakeholder group are met.

To conclude, the aim of this article was to analyze stakeholder interpretations of the concept of internationalization at Ashesi University College, a private liberal arts college in Ghana. The article also sought to understand how the concept of internationalization was evolving at Ashesi and to paint a vivid picture of how internationalization is occurring in a region which has seen little research work done on how the phenomenon is affecting their unique situation as an African institution. Ashesi and other institutions of higher education in Africa are

experiencing new pressures from stakeholders to internationalize their campuses. This article highlighted some of the ways the concept has been interpreted by stakeholders with the view that this greatly influenced their response to the phenomenon. While it is important to recognize that many universities in Africa are not liberal arts colleges like Ashesi, the findings from this study, though may be unique to Ashesi or specific to universities that are trying different approaches to higher education, show that the concepts and purpose of internationalization can be applied to any institution, whether public or private and with or without a liberal arts focus. There is much to be gained from an 'internationalized' campus, and this study suggests ways to achieve those ends, some of which closely align with previous theories and others that reflect the unique context in Africa. It is hoped that more African institutions will join the internationalization discourse and let the rest of the world know about their unique experiences with, as well as their interpretations of the concept of internationalization.

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