

Globalization and Internationalization of Higher Education: A Nigerian Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical narrative review of the complex relationship between globalization and the internationalization of higher education, with particular reference to the Nigerian context. Globalization denotes the macro-level integration of economies, cultures, and knowledge systems, while internationalization refers to the institutional strategies through which universities engage with the world via mobility programs, transnational partnerships, curriculum reform, and digital platforms. Drawing on peer-reviewed scholarship, policy documents, and position statements published between 2021 and 2025, this review critically examines the principal drivers of internationalization—economic, political, technological, and academic—and interrogates the attendant challenges of marketization, epistemic injustice, unequal access, and cultural homogenization. It demonstrates how Nigerian universities have navigated these forces within a context marked by chronic underfunding, colonial legacies, and asymmetrical global academic relations. The study further examines four emergent trends—digital internationalization, decolonial approaches, alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and glocalization—and argues that meaningful internationalization must move beyond competitive, Western-centric paradigms toward models that are ethical, inclusive, and contextually grounded. A synthesized conceptual framework is introduced to map the relationships between globalization, institutional mediation, and Nigerian higher education outcomes. The paper concludes with actionable policy recommendations addressing funding mechanisms, quality assurance reform, diaspora engagement, and digital equity. It proposes that internationalization be reconceptualized not as a crisis response or market strategy, but as a deliberate component of national development that contributes to global epistemic diversity and socially responsible academic cooperation.

Keywords: internationalization, globalization, higher education, Nigeria, epistemic justice, glocalization

INTRODUCTION

The higher education is at a crossroads, facing radical and rapid changes in the global realm. Within recent decades, universities are not only more receptive to globalization forces, but are also influenced by them, which lead to a variety of institutional responses that are widely referred to as internationalization. The term globalization is used to refer to the multidimensional processes of integrating nations in the realms of economics, politics, technology, and culture (Alkharafi and Alsabah, 2025), and the concept of internationalization is applied to the teaching, research, and service processes in higher education to add an international, intercultural, or global aspect (Shohel et al., 2025). Though the terms are used interchangeably, they serve at different levels: globalization is the macro-level form of structural condition, which provides the environment of cross-border interaction, and internationalization is the meso- and micro-level form of institutional reaction resulting in the adaptation, competition, and contributions of universities to the globalized environment (Fakunle and Hunter, 2024).

No greater need has there been to study this relationship. The world today is marked by unparalleled level of interrelation: national borders are crossed by international supply chains, virtual communication systems, global issues like climate change and pandemics, and the increased human capital mobility (Marginson, 2025). Universities cease being national institutions and become active components of a global knowledge system. An example of this trend is student mobility: According to UNESCO (2023), there are more than 6 million students

who study abroad today, and according to estimates, the number will be close to 8 million in 2025. Educators and scholars also take part in transnational labor, most scientific articles are now written in collaboration beyond the borders of a nation (Fu et al., 2022). The very knowledge, which was previously massively generated and justified in the Western epistemic frameworks, is now moving across linguistic, cultural, and disciplinary borders and universities have to think about what is legitimate knowledge and who is a knowledge generator (Shahjahan et al., 2022).

The paper will provide a conceptually based discussion of globalization as a process and factor that brings forth internationalization in higher education and will also challenge the assumptions, power relations and unwanted implications of current models of internationalization. It touches upon three overlapping issues: the conceptual clarity of the difference between internationalization and globalization; the institutional formations of internationalization strategies in diverse settings; and new controversies of equity and epistemic justice and sustainable international interaction. The paper places the Nigerian case in this wider analytical context, which sheds some light on the structural limitations and new agency upon which the international academic positioning of Nigeria is framed.

This paper is written with the approach of a critical narrative review, which is the systematic synthesis of peer-reviewed scholarship, policy documents, and position statements published between 2021 and 2025. Literature was identified using database searches (Google Scholar, JSTOR, ERIC, Scopus) with the words 'internationalization,' 'globalization,' 'Nigerian higher education,' 'epistemic justice' and 'decolonial pedagogy.' Inclusion criteria required: (i). publication date to be within 2021-25 (to ensure purchase in relation to post-pandemic and current geopolitical scenarios), to ensure that article relevance is taken into account to higher education policy, theory and/or institutional practice; and (ii) relation to the Nigerian context or comparative Global South dynamics. Theoretical and conceptual articles were prioritized, in line with the goal of the study to promote the progress of critical conceptual clarity rather than produce new empirical data. This methodological stance is supported by well-produced value of narrative review from the point of view of building paradigmatic contradictions and proffering alternative paradigms of explaining complex social procedures (Ameyaw, 2024).

The necessity of studying this relationship has never been so urgent. The world today is marked by unparalleled level of interrelation: national borders are crossed by international supply chains, virtual communication systems, global issues like climate change and pandemics, and the increased human capital mobility (Marginson, 2025). Universities cease being national institutions and become active components of a global knowledge system. An example of this trend is student mobility: According to UNESCO (2023), there are more than 6 million students who study abroad today, and according to estimates, the number will be close to 8 million in 2025. Educators and scholars also take part in transnational labor, most scientific articles are now written in collaboration beyond the borders of a nation (Fu et al., 2022). The very knowledge, which was previously massively generated and justified in the Western epistemic frameworks, is now moving across linguistic, cultural, and disciplinary borders and universities have to think about what is legitimate knowledge and who is a knowledge generator (Shahjahan et al., 2022).

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Conceptual Foundations

Any rigorous analysis of internationalization in higher education requires grounding in several interdependent theoretical traditions that illuminate its structural, ideological, and cultural dimensions. World-systems theory, associated with Immanuel Wallerstein and increasingly applied to global higher education, posits a hierarchical

world system comprising core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral nations (Marginson, 2025). In this framework, universities in core nations—principally North America and Western Europe—function as primary sites of knowledge production and research funding, while peripheral nations such as Nigeria tend to be positioned as consumers of externally produced knowledge (Alordiah et al., 2021). This structural inequality conditions Nigerian universities' internationalization practices, whereby partnerships with Western institutions are often pursued for legitimacy and resource access, inadvertently perpetuating dependency rather than enabling equitable collaboration.

The postcolonial critique provides a complementary and indispensable lens for understanding the epistemic dimensions of internationalization. Scholars argue that mainstream internationalization models frequently reproduce colonial patterns of knowledge hierarchy by privileging Western curricula, research methodologies, and evaluation standards while marginalizing African indigenous epistemologies (Sharma, 2021). In Nigeria, where colonial education systems were structured to serve imperial purposes, the uncritical adoption of internationalization strategies risks perpetuating what Shahjahan et al. (2022) identify as epistemic injustice—the systematic devaluation of non-Western knowledge forms in international academic exchange. Contemporary efforts by Nigerian scholars to decolonize curricula and integrate African philosophical traditions such as Ubuntu represent important countercurrents, albeit constrained by funding deficits and institutional inertia.

More optimistic theoretical perspectives are offered through the concepts of cultural hybridity and glocalization—the idea that global influences are not simply imposed but actively re-invented and blended with local conditions (Odong, Magara & Nabutto, 2025). In Nigeria, this takes the form of hybrid pedagogical models that integrate global standards with local relevance: engineering programs addressing rural infrastructure challenges, or public health curricula combining biomedical science with traditional healing epistemologies. Glocalization challenges the assumed binary between global and local, suggesting that meaningful internationalization must co-create contextually grounded knowledge that serves both national development and global understanding.

Crucially, globalization and internationalization must be analytically distinguished: the former constitutes a macro-level structural condition, largely impersonal in its operation, while the latter represents a deliberate institutional response shaped by policy choices, institutional capacities, and historical contexts (Fakunle & Hunter, 2024). In the Nigerian case, this distinction is particularly significant: Nigeria's integration into international academic networks reflects not simply global structural forces but also local policy decisions, colonial history, and ongoing debates about national identity and epistemic sovereignty.

Historically, Nigerian engagement with international higher education originated during the colonial period, when elite Nigerians were dispatched to British universities as instruments of administrative capacity building. Following independence in 1960, international cooperation was reframed as a tool of national development, with partnerships emphasizing capacity building in science, agriculture, and governance (Njoku, Mbionwu & Njoku, 2025). The structural adjustment programs of the 1980s, however, substantially reduced state investment in education, redirecting universities toward donor dependency and fee-based foreign programs. The proliferation of global rankings and digital platforms in the 2000s intensified the competitive logic of internationalization. Yet, as Alordiah et al. (2021) observe, Nigerian internationalization has remained largely asymmetrical—characterized by outbound student flows, external validation-seeking, and limited reciprocal research engagement.

More recently, a discernible shift toward more strategic and reciprocal internationalization has emerged. Nigerian universities are increasingly engaged in South-South collaborations with institutions in India, Brazil, and South Africa, and in regional initiatives such as the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA). The 2021 National Policy on Internationalization of Higher Education, despite persistent underfunding, signals an institutional commitment to aligning international engagement with national development objectives (Ogunode, Ugochukwu & Iroegbu, 2022). These developments suggest that while globalization generates powerful structural pressures, internationalization in Nigeria remains a contested and evolving project, shaped by local agency, critical reflection, and alternative visions of global citizenship.

Neoliberal Logics and Epistemic Injustice: An Analytical Framework

Two structurally linked critiques run through virtually all dimensions of Nigerian higher education internationalization and warrant consolidated analytical treatment before examining specific drivers and manifestations: the dominance of neoliberal market logic and the reproduction of epistemic injustice.

The reconversion of higher education into a market commodity, which was accelerated since the period of structural adjustment in the 1980s, has had a fundamental impact on the way internationalization is conceptualized and experienced. Under the neoliberal frameworks, international student recruitment is more of a revenue generator, international rankings are more of a marketing tool and transnational partnerships are being measured in terms of return on investment rather than pedagogical or social value (Sarpong & Adelekan, 2024). In Nigeria, chronic underfunding of public universities has compounded these pressures: institutions have grown to rely more heavily on fee-based international programs and donor funded partnerships to keep themselves afloat (Odong, Magara & Nabutto, 2025). While making economic sense, this orientation is risky because it risks subjugating educational equity and social purpose to financial imperatives-and that does not bode well for students in the low-income and rural communities.

Inseparable from what we have called market logic is epistemic injustice - the systematic devaluation of non-Western traditions of knowledge in international academic exchange. Mainstream frameworks of internationalization prioritize English-medium teaching, Western research methods and Eurocentric curricula, recreating colonial Orders of Knowledge (Shahjahan et al., 2022). For the Nigerian institutions, this is concretely reflected in such institutionalisation, where scholars have often been relegated to the role of data collectors versus co-investigators in international research consortia (Navarro et al., 2022); accreditation systems are still calibrated to the Western standards; and indigenous knowledge systems, such as the Ubuntu philosophy and the Yoruba epistemology, remain largely absent from internationalized curricula (Omodan, 2023). Decolonisation responses (e.g. African-centred curriculum reform and use of multiple languages for teaching), while important as counterweights, remain limited by a lack of financial resources and institutionality. Internationalization that does not address these twin structures risks to perpetrate epistemicide: that is, the erasure of local knowledge systems in the name of global integration.

These structural dynamics are mapped in Figure 1 below, which presents the paper's synthesized conceptual framework.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Globalization, Internationalization, and Nigerian Higher Education

LAYER 1 — MACRO GLOBALIZATION FORCES

Economic knowledge market)	Forces (global economy, labour)	Political/Policy Forces (soft power, SDGs, AfCFTA, CESA 16-25)	Technological Forces (digitalization, MOOCs, AI)	COIL,
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▼ STRUCTURAL CONDITION ▼

LAYER 2 — INSTITUTIONAL MEDIATION

INTERNATIONALIZATION STRATEGIES (mobility, TNE, IaH, curriculum reform)	NEOLIBERAL PRESSURES (marketization, revenue dependence)	DECOLONIAL COUNTERWEIGHTS (African epistemes, indigenous knowledge, glocalization)
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▼ NIGERIAN HIGHER EDUCATION ▼

LAYER 3 — NIGERIAN CONTEXTUAL CONDITIONS

ENABLING FACTORS - 2021 National Policy - South-South cooperation - Digital platforms & TNE - Growing diaspora networks

CONSTRAINING FACTORS - Chronic underfunding - Epistemic marginalization - Digital infrastructure deficits - Brain drain & weak QA

▼ DESIRED OUTCOMES ▼

Equity & Access

Epistemic Diversity

SDG Alignment

Glocal Citizenship

Source: Developed by the author from synthesized literature (2021-2025)

The framework conceptualizes three analytical layers: (1) macro globalization forces creating the structural environment for cross-border academic interaction; (2) institutional mediation where internationalization strategies, neoliberal pressures, and decolonial counterweights interact; and (3) the Nigerian contextual layer shaped by enabling policy developments and persistent structural constraints. The resulting outcomes—equity, epistemic diversity, SDG alignment, and glocal citizenship—constitute the evaluative criteria against which internationalization efforts should be assessed throughout this analysis.

Drivers of Internationalization in Higher Education

Internationalization in higher education is propelled by a constellation of economic, political, technological, and academic forces that extend well beyond Nigeria, though they manifest distinctively within the Nigerian context. Economically, the expansion of the global knowledge economy has intensified demand for cross-culturally competent, digitally literate, and globally skilled graduates (Marginson, 2025). Nigerian employers increasingly favour candidates with international exposure, compelling universities to align curricula with international standards and equip graduates for transnational labour markets. Simultaneously, declining state investment has driven institutions—particularly private and federal universities—to pursue international student enrolment as a revenue stream. Although Nigeria remains a net exporter of students (with over 85,000 studying abroad in 2023), institutions such as Covenant University and the University of Lagos have begun actively recruiting from the West African region and the diaspora (Odong, Magara & Nabutto, 2025).

Political and policy frameworks further structure internationalization. Globally, governments have positioned higher education as an instrument of soft power and economic competitiveness. Nigeria's 2021 National Policy on Internationalization of Higher Education explicitly links international engagement to science, technology, and innovation objectives, though its implementation remains constrained by bureaucratic inertia and insufficient funding (Ogunode, Ugochukwu & Iroegbu, 2022). At the regional level, Nigeria participates in the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25) and is positioned within the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) framework, which creates modest momentum for credit transfer and quality assurance harmonization, though institutional uptake remains limited (Alordiah et al., 2021).

Technological developments have substantially reduced barriers to international academic interaction. The post-pandemic acceleration of online learning has enabled Nigerian institutions to implement virtual exchange programs, MOOCs, and hybrid degree partnerships with international counterparts. Platforms such as Coursera and edX extend Nigerian universities' global presence without requiring physical infrastructure investment (Sangwa et al., 2025). Transnational education models—including twinning arrangements, offshore campuses, and dual-degree programs with UK and Malaysian institutions—have expanded student access and reduced costs. However, concerns about quality, accreditation rigor, and the wholesale importation of curricula without adequate localization persist (Odong, Magara & Nabutto, 2025).

Academic and cultural motivations remain central alongside economic and political drivers. Research collaboration is increasingly essential as global challenges—from climate change to pandemic preparedness—require transnational knowledge production. Nigerian researchers participate in international consortia addressing health (malaria, HIV/AIDS) and agriculture, frequently supported by the World Bank and Gates

Foundation (Njoku, Mbionwu & Njoku, 2025). Yet inequities persist: Nigerian scholars are often positioned as data providers rather than co-investigators in research agenda-setting (Navarro et al., 2022). Some universities, such as Obafemi Awolowo University, have integrated intercultural courses into general studies programs, while others partner with the British Council on virtual exchange initiatives. Cultural motivations—producing globally engaged graduates capable of intercultural dialogue—remain important, even as elite private universities enjoy disproportionate access to the infrastructure necessary to pursue them.

The distribution of these drivers is uneven across Nigeria's higher education landscape. While well-resourced private universities can invest strategically in internationalization, most public institutions contend with crumbling infrastructure and constrained budgets. Furthermore, the predominance of Western knowledge paradigms in global partnerships risks marginalizing Nigerian scholarship. Genuine internationalization entails not only participation in international networks but the repositioning of African epistemologies within those networks (Alordiah et al., 2021).

Manifestations of Internationalization

The internationalization of higher education takes institutional form across a range of practices spanning research, teaching, and service. Student and faculty mobility programs represent the most visible manifestation. While initiatives such as Erasmus+ and the Fulbright Program dominate international discourse, their penetration into Sub-Saharan Africa and Nigeria specifically remains limited and uneven. Nigerian students and academics participate in these programs in modest numbers, facing significant financial and bureaucratic obstacles (Sangwa et al., 2025). Regional schemes such as the ECOWAS Academic Mobility Scheme offer more accessible pathways but suffer from chronic underfunding and inconsistent implementation (Alordiah et al., 2021). Faculty mobility is similarly constrained, with most Nigerian scholars relying on short-term visiting fellowships rather than substantive international residencies for teaching or research.

Curriculum internationalization and multilingual education constitute a second significant manifestation. Elite private universities such as Babcock and Covenant have integrated courses in global ethics, international business, and cross-cultural management into core programs (Njoku, Mbionwu & Njoku, 2025). Public universities, however, typically lack the resources for syllabus restructuring, given overcrowded lecture halls and outdated accreditation frameworks. While English-medium instruction remains dominant, linked to both colonial tradition and international academic standards, multilingual education initiatives—incorporating Yoruba, Igbo, and other Nigerian languages—are gaining traction in select institutions as expressions of cultural identity and epistemic assertion (Sharma, 2021).

Strategic international partnerships and joint degree programs represent a third form. The University of Ibadan's collaboration with the University of Cape Town on climate resilience research, and Ahmadu Bello University's dual-degree program in petroleum engineering with a Malaysian partner, exemplify this trend (Ogunode, Ugochukwu & Iroegbu, 2022). While such alliances enhance institutional reputation and expand student opportunities, critics note that many arrangements position Nigerian institutions as data collection sites or host campuses rather than equal intellectual partners (Navarro et al., 2022). Authentic collaboration requires shared agenda-setting, co-authorship, and reciprocal benefit—conditions not consistently realized in practice.

Global rankings have also emerged as a significant driver of internationalization strategy. Rankings such as the Times Higher Education and QS indices assign substantial weight to international indicators, prompting universities like Covenant to foreground international research output and collaborations in their promotional strategies (Sangwa et al., 2025). Yet few Nigerian institutions appear in global league tables, owing to low publication rates, limited data reporting, and insufficient international visibility. The pursuit of rankings risks distorting institutional priorities, incentivizing English-language publication over community-oriented scholarship and elite international student recruitment over equitable access (Marginson, 2025).

Internationalization at home (IaH)—the intentional integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the domestic curriculum and campus environment for all students—is perhaps the most contextually appropriate and equitable model for Nigeria (Kapfudzaruwa, 2025). Facing financial and logistical barriers to physical mobility, Nigerian universities are implementing virtual exchange programs, international guest lectures via

Zoom, and global citizenship courses. The University of Lagos's 2022 Global Classroom initiative, which paired Nigerian students with peers in Ghana, Kenya, and Brazil to collaborate on sustainable development challenges, exemplifies this approach. Co-curricular activities—international cultural festivals, Model UN clubs, and language conversation circles—further cultivate intercultural competence among students who may never study abroad.

Importantly, IaH aligns with decolonial imperatives to globalize education without Westernizing it. By introducing Global South perspectives into the curriculum, IaH challenges the premise that global citizenship necessarily requires physical presence in the Global North (Sharma, 2021). Nigerian scholars are increasingly developing IaH modules that juxtapose Western theoretical frameworks with African philosophical traditions, fostering epistemic diversity as an intellectual norm rather than a peripheral addition. Effective implementation, however, requires faculty training, reliable digital infrastructure, and institutional commitment—resources that remain unevenly distributed across Nigeria's higher education system (Ofozoba, Nwobu & Okechukwu, 2023).

Critical Perspectives and Challenges

Commodification of Education and Marketization

The internationalization agenda has drawn higher education increasingly toward market logic, treating knowledge and student experience as commodifiable assets. In Nigeria, universities—particularly private institutions—recruit international students and develop fee-based transnational programs partly to compensate for state underfunding (Sangwa et al., 2025). While financially pragmatic, this marketization threatens to subordinate pedagogical integrity and social purpose to revenue imperatives. International students risk being constructed as income sources rather than academic community members, and programs designed for speed-to-market rather than curricular comprehensiveness. Such practices embed neoliberal culture within universities, eroding the conception of education as a public good—a concern particularly acute in contexts of structural inequality such as Nigeria (Sarpong & Adelekan, 2024).

Equity and Access

Internationalization benefits remain highly concentrated among the most privileged populations, amplifying existing inequalities. Participation in international programs in Nigeria is disproportionately limited to students with the financial resources to meet tuition fees, acquire digital devices, and maintain reliable internet access (Sangwa et al., 2025). Students in public universities, women, and those in rural regions face compounding disadvantages. International competence thus functions as an elite marker rather than a universally accessible educational goal. Visas, language proficiency tests, digital hardware, and travel costs constitute formidable barriers for low-income students, even where digital internationalization theoretically reduces physical mobility requirements (Kapfudzaruwa, 2025).

Brain drain compounds these equity concerns. Nigeria's high rates of skilled graduate emigration—increasingly facilitated by international education pathways—represent a significant loss to national development capacity. While brain circulation theorists argue that diaspora scholars can contribute remotely through collaboration and knowledge transfer, structural barriers including inadequate research funding and political instability impede sustained long-term engagement (Ofozoba, Nwobu & Okechukwu, 2023). Internationalization policy must therefore incorporate deliberate mechanisms to incentivize talent retention and structured diaspora participation.

Quality Assurance and Academic Integrity in Transnational Programs

The rapid proliferation of transnational education—branch campuses, twinning arrangements, and online degrees—raises serious concerns about quality assurance. In Nigeria, some TNE partnerships operate without rigorous NUC scrutiny, creating conditions for degree mills that undermine academic standards (Ogunode, Ugochukwu & Iroegbu, 2022). Without coherent national and regional quality assurance frameworks that are commensurate with international standards, students are exposed to credentials of questionable validity. Imported curricula frequently lack localization, resulting in pedagogical disconnect and suboptimal learning outcomes.

Cultural Homogenization versus Epistemic Diversity

One of the most persistent criticisms of mainstream internationalization is its tendency toward cultural homogenization—promoting a Western-centric conception of global citizenship that marginalizes local identities, languages, and epistemic traditions (Omodan, 2023). Nigerian campuses may celebrate superficial cultural diversity through international food festivals and multicultural events while neglecting the deeper restructuring of knowledge hierarchies. English-medium instruction and global ranking pressures further marginalize multilingual scholarship and community-oriented research. Authentic internationalization must cultivate what Mitchell (2023) terms critical interculturality—a dialogic engagement with difference that treats epistemic plurality as an intellectual and ethical imperative rather than a decorative addition.

Emerging Trends and Future Directions

Digital Internationalization and Virtual Mobility

The post-pandemic period has intensified digital internationalization, leveraging technology to enable international engagement without requiring physical travel. Online collaborative learning, virtual mobility, and hybrid international programs have expanded access for students in Nigeria and other Global South contexts, enabling participation in international learning at significantly reduced cost (Sangwa et al., 2025). Tools such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) connect Nigerian students with peers in Brazil, Germany, or South Korea on joint projects, substantially broadening access to global academic experience. However, this transformation demands reliable digital infrastructure, faculty training, and culturally responsive program design. Persistent deficits in internet connectivity and electricity supply—particularly in public universities—constrain the full realization of digital internationalization's potential (Kapfudzaruwa, 2025). Investment in digital capacity and pedagogical innovation that prioritizes meaningful interaction over content delivery is essential.

Sustainable Internationalization and Decolonial Approaches

There is growing recognition that prevailing internationalization models are ecologically, economically, and epistemologically unsustainable. Scholars advocate for sustainable internationalization characterized by reciprocal engagement, long-term partnerships, and reduced carbon footprints (Marginson, 2025). Closely related is the emergent decolonial imperative, which challenges Eurocentric assumptions embedded in global higher education. In Nigeria, this entails recentring African knowledge systems, legitimizing indigenous epistemologies, and restructuring curricula to incorporate African philosophical traditions and historical frameworks (Omodan, 2023). Institutions including Obafemi Awolowo University and the University of Calabar have initiated decolonial pedagogy programs in social science and humanities. Internationalization's future must entail not superficial diversity but structural transformation—dismantling colonial acculturation in knowledge production and institutional practice.

Internationalization for Societal Impact and SDG Alignment

Internationalization is increasingly linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, with universities framing global engagement as a mechanism for social transformation rather than prestige accumulation. Nigerian institutions are participating in SDG-oriented research consortia addressing clean water access (SDG 6), quality education (SDG 4), and climate resilience (SDG 13), frequently in collaboration with international universities and civil society organizations (Njoku, Mbionwu & Njoku, 2025). The Pan-Atlantic University's collaboration with Ashoka Africa on social entrepreneurship and decent work (SDG 8) illustrates this orientation. This shift reflects a broader move toward responsible internationalization, in which global cooperation is assessed by its contribution to local communities and national development rather than by institutional rankings or enrolment metrics (Mitchell, 2023). Accountability frameworks centred on community outcomes rather than publication counts are essential to sustaining this orientation.

Glocalization: Balancing Global Integration and Local Relevance

The negotiation of local relevance and global standards—glocalization—is reshaping internationalization practice in Nigeria. Rather than wholesale adoption of foreign curricula, universities are adapting international models to address national priorities: engineering programs incorporating sustainable housing solutions using local materials; public health curricula integrating biomedical and traditional healing knowledge (Ofozoba, Nwobu & Okechukwu, 2023). Multilingual pedagogy and community-based research, which validate local epistemological contributions, are further dimensions of glocalization. As Marginson (2025) argues, the most globally impactful universities are those with the deepest roots in their own societies, combined with genuine engagement in international networks. This dual orientation—globally informed, locally grounded—represents the most defensible model for Nigeria's internationalization ambitions.

Universities as Global Actors

Universities are not passive recipients of globalization's forces but active participants in shaping global agendas. Nigerian institutions are increasingly engaged in transnational governance networks—including ARUA and the Talloires Network for civic engagement—advancing their agency within global knowledge systems (Ofozoba, Nwobu & Okechukwu, 2023). Through advocacy for South-South and South-North equity, Nigerian universities contribute to challenging conventional power asymmetries in global academic exchange. Universities also bear responsibility for cultivating global citizenship—defined not as deference to Western norms but as critical engagement with global interdependencies, ethical responsibility, and intercultural dialogue (Kapfudzaruwa, 2025). In a geopolitically fragmented world confronting climate crises and widening inequality, the role of universities as agents of transnational solidarity has never been more consequential. Nigeria's demographic scale and intellectual potential position it to contribute substantially to global epistemic diversity and social justice—provided structural constraints are systematically addressed.

Taken together, these trends signal a paradigm shift: from competitive, market-oriented internationalization toward collaborative, ethically grounded, and contextually responsive global engagement. The aspiration is not to replicate Western models but to construct pluralistic, sustainable, and socially accountable forms of internationalization that honour both global interdependence and local intellectual integrity.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined globalization and internationalization in higher education through a multidimensional analytical lens, with sustained attention to the Nigerian context. It has argued that globalization—as the macro-level integration of economies, cultures, and knowledge systems—constitutes the structural precondition for cross-border academic interaction, while internationalization represents the strategic institutional response to these forces. The principal manifestations of this response—student mobility, transnational partnerships, digital learning, and curriculum internationalization—embody both significant opportunities and profound tensions, particularly in resource-constrained and postcolonial contexts such as Nigeria.

The relationship between globalization and internationalization is neither linear nor neutral. Internationalization is frequently shaped by global rankings, market pressures, and Western epistemic dominance in ways that reproduce rather than remedy structural inequalities. Nigerian universities—navigating the aspirations of global relevance against the realities of underfunding, colonial legacies, and epistemic marginalization—exemplify the challenges confronting institutions in the Global South. Yet they also exhibit a growing and consequential agency: in South-South cooperation, decolonial curriculum reform, and locally grounded responses to global challenges.

The policy, institutional, and pedagogical implications of these dynamics are substantial. At the national policy level, the 2021 National Policy on Internationalization requires sustainable financing, a coherent quality assurance framework, and incentives for equitable partnerships. At the institutional level, universities must reconceptualize internationalization as a socially transformative, faculty-engaged, and inclusion-oriented enterprise. Pedagogically, the imperative is to diversify the knowledge base, integrate African epistemologies, and promote critical interculturality as a foundational academic principle—not a peripheral elective.

Ultimately, internationalization's future must be ethically informed, contextually sensitive, and epistemically pluralistic. It must not mean integration into a homogenized global model but the co-creation of reciprocal, socially responsible modes of academic engagement. As Omodan (2023) argues, decolonizing internationalization requires reimagining it as horizontal exchange between diverse knowledge traditions rather than vertical knowledge transfer from Global North to Global South. This transformation demands courage, creativity, and sustained commitment from policymakers, institutional leaders, faculty, and students in Nigeria and beyond. Only through such transformation can internationalization fulfil its highest purpose: producing globally connected, locally grounded, and ethically engaged scholars capable of collectively addressing the shared challenges of the present era.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are organized by implementation level to facilitate actionable uptake by policymakers, institutional leaders, and academic professionals.

1. Funding Mechanisms — Sustainable Financing:

The 2021 National Policy on Internationalization must be supported by a dedicated Internationalization Fund administered by TETFund in which: (i) at least 5% of TETFund allocation be ring-fenced to support international partnerships, international exchange of faculty and global technical research (i.e. faculty exchange, fund retainerships for international orientations); World Bank/Global Bank: (iii) a model of matched funding to allow access of Internationalization Grants to institutions subject to demonstrated capacity and equity targets; and, and (iv) a Nigeria-Africa Diaspora Research Endowment Fund to co-finance South-South Donor coordination platforms - including the World Bank, African Development Bank, British Council and DAAD - should be formalized for a reduction of ad hoc project dependency.

2. Quality Assurance Reforms — Transnational Education Oversight:

The NUC should establish a Transnational Education Quality Framework (TEQF) which will: (i) require joint accreditation protocols for all twinning, dual degree, and offshore campus programs; (ii) ensure that contextual adaptation of curricula is a condition for TNE approval with a minimum requirement of 20% locally relevant content; (iii) provide a public register of the TNEs with annual quality audit reports; and (iv) assume benchmarking standards in Nigeria against the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) and the INQAAHE frameworks.

3. Diaspora Engagement Models — Structured Brain Circulation:

A three pronged diaspora game plan should comprise: (i) Virtual Faculty Programme formalizing the contribution of diaspora academics on Nigerian universities as online lecturers, thesis supervisors and curriculum advisors, with incentivized compensation, again, from NUC based on promotion criteria; (ii) Diaspora Research Re-entry Fellowships, competitive two-year positions allowing senior researchers in Diaspora to lead priority projects with guaranteed infrastructure and salary parity; and (iii) Diaspora Linked Partnership Initiatives incentivizing universities to formalize agreements with institutions where there are significant Nigerian academic communities.

4. Decolonial Curriculum Reform — Operationalizing Epistemic Justice:

Implementation should encompass: (i) a mandatory audit of undergraduate programs for representation of African epistemologies and indigenous knowledge, with published institutional action plans by 2026; (ii) revised NUC accreditation criteria incorporating an Epistemic Diversity Index; (iii) investment in African-language academic publishing infrastructure across major Nigerian language communities; and (iv) intercultural competence certification for faculty as a condition of advancement beyond senior lecturer rank.

5. Digital Infrastructure and Equity Access:

Priorities include: (i) a commitment to 95% reliable internet connectivity in all federal universities by 2027, funded through the Universal Service Provision Fund (USPF); (ii) equity-targeted digital access grants for female, rural, and disabled students; (iii) a national COIL Unit within NUC to coordinate virtual exchange partnerships with annual disaggregated participation data reporting; and (iv) standardized faculty digital pedagogy certification linked to salary progression.

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