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Two Internationalizations

Closing the credibility gap in *university internationalization*.

A STEWARDSHIP ARCHITECTURE FOR HYBRID INTERNATIONAL PORTFOLIOS

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OUTLINE

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A diagnosis of the credibility deficit in university internationalization, and a governance framework – the Stewardship Architecture – for the hybrid portfolios most institutions actually run.

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The value is real. The description has failed.

The internationalization of higher education has lost the ability to describe accurately the value it produces. Visa caps in Canada, dependent restrictions in the United Kingdom, tightened immigration settings in Australia, and intensified visa vetting in the United States have, between 2024 and 2025, exposed a credibility deficit the field had been building for at least a decade.

The deficit is not principally a communications failure. It is a typology problem with a hybridity problem layered on top of it, both concealed by a public-communications apparatus that the field built deliberately and operated successfully until quite recently.

The field uses one word – internationalization – to describe at least three structurally distinct phenomena, each operated under a different political economy and each requiring a different evidence base. The **Revenue Configuration**, dominant in liberal-market economies, treats international tuition as the structural shock-absorber of higher-education finance. The **Formation Configuration**, dominant in continental Europe and parts of state-funded East Asia, operates internationalization as a humanistic and pedagogical project. The **Capacity Configuration**, dominant across Latin America, much of Africa, and much of Asia, treats internationalization as a means of institutional and national capacity-building. Each is internally coherent; none is a degraded form of the others. Most institutions, however, run portfolios across all three and have no usable architecture for honestly reporting hybrid operations.

The paper's central proposal is the **Stewardship Architecture**: a governance and communication framework under which an institution running activities across all three modes can account for each on its own terms. Five principles define it. *Mode declaration*: every activity is identified as primarily Revenue, Formation, or Capacity. *Mode-appropriate evidence*: each is reported against metrics native to its mode. *Bargain naming*: every cross-mode partnership documents what each side seeks and contributes. *Portfolio reporting*: institutional reporting presents the three modes side by side. *Stakeholder calibration*: each audience sees the mode most relevant to its decision rights. The architecture requires no capital expenditure, no legislative change, and no

abandonment of existing programs. It requires the willingness to admit that one institution is running a portfolio that the field has been instructed to describe as a single phenomenon.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

On evidence and positioning.

This paper is built from the published literature, but the literature itself appears to lack system-level information of the kind required to analyze large-scale changes in a sector as structurally varied as global higher education. The bulk of the field's published work consists of single-institution case studies, regional analyses, and topic-specific studies – mobility, partnership management, branch campuses, intercultural assessment – and does not, in general, attempt to characterize the sector as a system of structurally distinct configurations operating under different political economies.

To address that gap, the analysis here is supported by experience drawn locally from work in Canadian higher education and internationally from many years of repeated engagement with partner institutions across multiple regions. Where the published literature is cited, it is cited; where the argument runs ahead of what the literature has formally established – particularly in the typology of three configurations and in the diagnosis of what the credibility deficit costs the sector – the paper draws on patterns observed across institutions, and those patterns should be read as practitioner inference rather than as findings derived from a formal study. The positioning is offered for transparency: the argument is intended to be useful to senior leadership now; it does not substitute for the system-level empirical work that the field still needs, and that the Stewardship Architecture, if adopted, would help to produce.

Introduction

Two internationalizations now operate inside every research-active university. The first is the synthesized internationalization that appears in strategic plans, vice-chancellors' speeches, press releases, and recruitment brochures – a single integrated story about global engagement. The second is the operational internationalization the institution actually runs, which on inspection turns out to be three structurally distinct phenomena, each operated under a different political economy and requiring a different evidence base.

The credibility crisis lives in the distance between the two: a public account that promises one thing and an operational reality that delivers another, with the gap concealed by a vocabulary that the field built deliberately and operated successfully until quite recently. No institutional report on internationalization can presently tell its readers, with the precision other parts of the university routinely demonstrate, what is being claimed and on what evidence.

The diagnosis is direct rather than critical. The institutions that built the synthesized account are not bad actors; they responded rationally to incentives that worked for fifteen years and have, in the last twenty-four months, ceased to work. The recommendations are correspondingly direct: not to abandon what institutions do, but to describe what they do in language that survives external scrutiny.

The configurations are three; the internationalizations are two.

The Catchall Term

The higher-education sector has actively hollowed out the concept of internationalization, transforming it into a nebulous term institutions deploy to claim any favorable position.

The most influential definition in the field – Jane Knight's framing of internationalization as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into post-secondary education (Knight, 2003) – is broad by design, and the breadth has been an enabling condition for its diffusion. In strategic plans, annual reports, vice-chancellors' speeches, press releases, recruitment marketing, and social-media announcements, the same word covers tuition recruitment, study abroad, branch campuses, capacity-building partnerships, joint research, and curriculum integration. Its conceptual ambiguity is an open ticket for any university to self-invite as an internationally oriented institution.

The absence of rigorous pedagogical assessment, complex student learning outcomes, or genuine intercultural-competence measurement in public accounting is filled with output indicators – number of mobile students, signed institutional agreements, and the economic impact generated by foreign enrollees (Deardorff & van Gaalen, 2012; Buckner & Stein, 2020). While such numbers tell a real story, they do not commit the institution to long-term transformational improvement. The reliance on volume metrics creates a quantitative illusion: an administrative shield that allows universities to broadcast an image of global integration while remaining structurally oblivious to the developmental value they produce.

The illusion is compounded by global university rankings, which weight institutional research output and reputation while treating teaching quality and social contribution as residuals (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2026). Rankings allocate prestige based on the proportion of international students and staff, formally rewarding raw enrollment volume as a proxy for academic quality. Because institutions prioritize these external validations over internal pedagogical missions, the value of international higher education becomes subordinated to the competitive metrics of a manufactured global market.

Structural Background

The current configuration of internationalization is not the product of a single decision. The Revenue Configuration emerged from the neoliberal restructuring of higher-education finance in Anglo-American economies from the 1980s onwards (Marginson, 2007; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). The Formation Configuration emerged from the post-war humanistic mandate of European universities, formalized in the Bologna Process and updated through the 2015 European Parliament redefinition (de Wit et al., 2015). The Capacity Configuration has older roots in the postcolonial period and the bilateral and multilateral development funding architecture of the late twentieth century, more recently consolidated through regional university networks, South–South cooperation, and national research-funding councils across the Global South (Teferra & Knight, 2008; Heitor, Horta & Salmi, 2016). None of these trajectories was designed to coexist with the others under a single conceptual heading; they accreted under one heading by historical accident.

The 2020–2022 pandemic exposed the fragility of the synthesized model. Institutions that had assumed perpetual growth in international tuition, frictionless mobility, and stable bilateral research access found all three suspended at once and were forced to confront, often for the first time, that their three configurations were operationally distinct and required separate adaptive responses (Huang, Crăciun & de Wit, 2022). The post-pandemic recovery did not return the system to its pre-2020 logic; it accelerated structural pressures that had been building for a decade. The 2018–2025 period added two further pressures: the securitization of research collaboration in the Five Eyes nations and the European Union, and the political backlash against migration that has reshaped the regulatory environment for international students in the four largest receiving countries.

The configurations themselves cannot be redesigned by institutional fiat. A vice-chancellor cannot, on her own authority, alter the visa regime, the domestic fee cap, the bilateral development budget, or the migration politics of her host country. What she can redesign is the description, accounting, and communication of the activities the institution already operates. The intent of this paper is to make that level of reform legible and actionable; it does not claim that governance

reform substitutes for political reform.

The postcolonial critique of internationalization, growing through the 2010s and 2020s, identifies that the existing configurations were constructed in patterns of asymmetric exchange and that partnerships across them frequently reproduce those asymmetries (Stein, 2021; Buckner & Stein, 2020). No governance framework alone resolves that critique. The framework proposed here provides a mechanism by which the asymmetries can be named, tracked, and contested. Visibility is a precondition for redress.

SECTION 04

Three Operational Configurations

Internationalization is dominated by three configurations, each internally coherent. A particular financial logic produces a particular set of stakeholders, who require a particular evidence base, against which the institution reports particular metrics. Each is also politically vulnerable in a different way, and each suffers a characteristic evidentiary failure when its language is borrowed by an institution operating principally under a different configuration.

4.1

Revenue

International tuition functions as the **structural shock-absorber** of higher-education finance.

ANGLO-AMERICAN
LIBERAL MARKETS ·
US, UK, CANADA,
AUSTRALIA, NZ

The Revenue Configuration is found principally in Anglo-American liberal-market economies – the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand – and in a few Asian systems with similar tuition-driven structures. The literature names adjacent versions of this phenomenon as academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), the marketization of higher education (Marginson, 2007), and education as export industry in Australian and UK policy

framings; this paper treats Revenue as the configuration in which international tuition recruitment becomes the structural condition of solvency rather than a complementary income stream. International fee income at UK higher-education providers reached approximately £11.8 billion in 2022/23, representing 23 percent of total UK sector income (HESA, 2024; House of Commons Library, 2024). For England specifically, international fees produced approximately £9.4 billion that year, around 20 percent of sector income (Tony Blair Institute, 2025). Comparable dependencies exist in Australia, Canada, the United States, and New Zealand.

Revenue mode is also no longer a strictly Anglo-American phenomenon. Several middle-income systems have built localized Revenue models to offset domestic underfunding: Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates host transnational hubs with branch campuses and regional fee-paying intakes; the Gulf states more broadly operate sovereign-financed branch ecosystems that combine Revenue and Capacity logics; and a number of Latin American and Southern African flagships now run fee-paying English-medium master's programs for students from neighboring countries. The 2024–2025 contraction in the Anglo-American core is likely to accelerate these intra-regional corridors. The configuration is therefore best understood as Anglo-American by origin and center of gravity but no longer by exclusive geography.

Within the Revenue Configuration, three sub-modes carry different credibility risks: high-tuition, low-support recruitment (the predominant UK master's pattern); medium-tuition, integrated recruitment (the Australian and parts of the Canadian pattern, with substantial student-support infrastructure and explicit post-study work pathways); and transnational education – branch campuses, franchised programs, and joint ventures delivered in the source country or a regional hub. The first is most exposed to the charge that recruitment volume is doing the work pedagogy is being credited for; the second is most defensible under migration scrutiny; the third stands or falls on local regulatory accommodation and the competence of the in-country partner.

The configuration answers to the board, the finance ministry, and the immigration department, and operates under the disciplining pressure of the global rankings. Success is measured in fee revenue, enrollment volume, employability, and post-study work uptake. The characteristic evidentiary failure of the Revenue Configuration is the practice of claiming Formation outcomes – intercultural competence, global citizenship – in defense of a system that operationally is a

credentials business. A senior administrator who states that the institution's 35 percent international student share confirms its commitment to global citizenship is making this error. The recruitment metric is Revenue; the outcome claim is Formation; and the literature does not support the inference that the first produces the second without deliberate pedagogical engineering (Harrison, 2015; Deardorff & van Gaalen, 2012).

4.2 International engagement is operated as a **pedagogical and Formation** **humanistic project.**

CONTINENTAL
EUROPE, THE
NORDICS, STATE-
FUNDED EAST ASIA

The Formation Configuration is found principally in continental European state-funded systems, the Nordics, and parts of state-funded East Asia, including Japan and South Korea. The literature names adjacent versions as comprehensive internationalization (Hudzik, 2011), internationalization at home (Beelen & Jones, 2015), and internationalization for society (de Wit, Hunter, Howard & Egron-Polak, 2015); intercultural-competence assessment (Deardorff, 2006) provides its evidence base. The 2015 European Parliament redefinition – the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society – is the authoritative statement of this configuration's rationale.

The stakeholders are the ministry of education or research, the European Commission for institutions inside the EU, accreditation bodies, faculty governance, and a public that expects higher education to function as a public good. Success is measured in pedagogical outcomes – intercultural competence, language acquisition, civic disposition – alongside research collaboration quality and graduate readiness. Genuine intercultural competence does not emerge from mere exposure to diversity; it must be deliberately developed across cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains and assessed with multi-perspective tools (Deardorff, 2006). Without explicit pedagogical scaffolding, domestic students have been observed to resist intercultural group work and avoid contact with international peers, defaulting to what Harrison and Peacock (2010)

characterized as passive xenophobia.

The characteristic evidentiary failure of the Formation Configuration is the practice of treating exposure as evidence of outcome. The pro-vice-chancellor who reports that eighty-five percent of our students took at least one course with international content this year is reporting on content delivery, not on intercultural development. The first is easy to count; the second requires assessment infrastructure that few institutions yet maintain. Mobility itself reaches only between two and three percent of the world's tertiary students (UIS, 2024) and is socioeconomically selective even within that minority (Granato & Schnepf, 2024). The conservative response is process metrics where outcome metrics are unavailable: an activity reported as Formation should at minimum document the design features the literature identifies as preconditions of intercultural development. Process metrics are the honest interim, sustained until outcome instruments mature, that prevents Formation from being silently squeezed out of the portfolio by what is easier to measure.

4.3

Capacity

Internationalization is a means of institutional and national **capacity-building**.

LATIN AMERICA, MUCH
OF AFRICA AND ASIA

The Capacity Configuration is found principally in state-funded systems across Latin America, most of Africa, and much of Asia. Its defining feature is that internationalization is operated as a means to acquire research infrastructure, faculty training, access to global knowledge networks, and graduate placement abroad – capacity the domestic system does not yet sustain at the required scale. The literature names adjacent versions as capacity-building internationalization (Teferra & Knight, 2008), internationalization for development (de Wit, Jaramillo, Gacel-Ávila & Knight, 2005; Gacel-Ávila, 2007), and South–South cooperation; the postcolonial critique (Stein, 2021; Buckner & Stein, 2020) addresses the asymmetries that arise when this configuration partners with Revenue or Formation actors. Although it is the dominant operating mode for the majority of universities in the majority of national systems, it is comparatively under-represented in the most-cited journals and policy literature of the field.

The stakeholders are the ministry of education or science, the national funding council, the rector, faculty leadership in priority disciplines, and partner governments. Success is measured in governance performance, co-authored publications, doctoral placements abroad with documented return, faculty receiving advanced research training, equipment access via partnership, and joint grant capture. Co-authored publications and doctoral placements are useful indicators, but they are also indicators defined within the Northern academic system, and used alone they quietly redefine Southern capacity in Northern terms. A robust Capacity reporting framework pairs them with endogenous indicators: retention of domestically trained faculty, grant-leadership share in South-South consortia, localization of methods and equipment, and contribution to the domestic doctoral pipeline.

The characteristic evidentiary failure of the Capacity Configuration is the under-articulation of the capacity bargain in cross-configuration partnerships. The vice-rector for research who reports that the institution signed twelve new partnership agreements with European universities last year is reporting transactional volume, not capacity transfer. When a Latin American flagship signs a partnership with a UK research-intensive institution, the Latin American partner is overwhelmingly seeking capacity outcomes; the UK partner is overwhelmingly seeking research access; and neither side names the difference in the agreement. The partnership routinely under-delivers on the capacity dimension because the metrics in use measure none of what the configuration requires.

SECTION 05

The Hybrid Reality

The descriptions in Section 4 are typological. Pure-type institutions exist but are concentrated at particular points in the global system: small for-profit private providers operating only in Revenue mode; certain niche European liberal-arts institutions operating only in Formation mode; certain regional Global South institutions whose international engagement consists almost entirely of donor-funded capacity partnerships. The great majority of

universities run activities across all three modes simultaneously. A British Russell Group university typically operates predominantly in Revenue mode while running Formation programs in undergraduate liberal arts and capacity partnerships with African universities funded through UK official development assistance. A Brazilian flagship operates predominantly in Capacity mode while running English-medium master's programs for fee-paying students from neighboring countries (a localized Revenue mode) and Erasmus+ exchanges (Formation). Three modes, one institution, in each case.

Three modes, one institution. Most universities run a portfolio they have been instructed to describe as a single phenomenon.

A more honest description of the typical research-active university in 2026 is that it operates a portfolio of internationalization activities distributed across the three configurations in proportions that reflect its political economy, mission, and history. The portfolio is rarely documented as such. Most institutions have no internal accounting that names which activities operate under which configuration; the strategic plan describes internationalization as a single priority, with goals and metrics that combine elements drawn from all three configurations into a synthesized statement that maps onto none of them precisely. An international office that treats its master's recruitment program (Revenue) and its African research partnership (Capacity) as instances of the same phenomenon will systematically under-resource the second, mis-measure the first, and confuse its public communications about both.

Buckner and Stein (2020) demonstrate this synthesizing pattern through content analysis of association policy documents; Marginson, Yang and Brotherhood (2025), through interview data with English higher-education leaders, show the same leaders describing Revenue and humanistic logics as distinct in private and synthesizing them in public-facing language. The synthesis is a public-facing strategy that the field's most senior practitioners can describe with precision when speaking off the record. The hybridity claim does not extend to the entire global higher-education population: regional teaching-focused universities, community colleges, and small private providers running a single recruitment stream or a single donor-funded partnership are operationally single-mode. The architecture proposed in Section 8 is correspondingly built for institutions whose international engagement spans configurations – predominantly

research-intensive and mid-sized-or-larger universities running activities across two or three modes simultaneously.

SECTION 06

Why the Conflation Persists

The conflation between configurations originated as historical accretion (Section 3) and was sustained, in the period from approximately 2010 forward, as deliberate strategy.

Both registers operate. At the level of the field's long-run development, three trajectories with different genealogies came to share a single conceptual heading because no one designed them to coexist. At the level of senior institutional leadership over the last fifteen years, the synthesis was actively maintained because it produced reliable returns.

Marginson, Yang and Brotherhood (2025), drawing on interviews with senior English higher-education leaders, document the strategic character of the maintenance directly: the same leaders who articulate the field's public account of global public good and intercultural mission describe, in private, an operating logic in which financial sustainability requires the moral framing to remain politically viable. The synthesis is also sustained by an internal divergence between faculty and senior administrators (Childress, 2010; Stohl, 2007; Bedenlier & Zawacki-Richter, 2015): senior leaders frame internationalization in synthesized terms while faculty experience an incentive structure that rewards international activity inconsistently. The public account is produced by administrators; the substance is produced by faculty; the two communities are using the same word to describe different objects.

6.1 The Strategic Plan as Genre

The international strategic plan is a genre. Read across institutions and continents, the plans converge on a small vocabulary of synthesized goals: a global community, intercultural competence, transformative student experiences, mutually beneficial partnerships, world-class

research, and contribution to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. These goals are typically supported by metrics that count things rather than measure outcomes: number of memoranda of understanding signed, number of countries represented in the student body, number of partner institutions, growth in international student share. Buckner and Stein (2020) show that the field's defining vocabulary is structured around an undifferentiated rationale that allows institutions to claim simultaneously pedagogical, civic, and economic outcomes through the same activities. The plan, in its current genre conventions, is engineered for the conflation. What is missing, almost universally, is the disaggregation.

6.2 The Senior Leader's Speech and the Partnership Press Release

The opening address at a sector conference – at APAIE, EAIE, NAFSA, CBIE, AIEA – has its own rhetorical register. The speech opens with a number, proceeds to a story, pivots to a larger purpose, and concludes with a call to deepen the work. Marginson, Yang and Brotherhood (2025) document that the same leaders deploying this register in public describe the underlying logic in private as a financial arrangement requiring a moral framing to remain politically viable. The press release announcing a partnership operates in the same register: a signed memorandum names the signatories, the country, the disciplines, and broad purposes, but rarely names what each side is contributing, what each side is seeking, or what evidence will demonstrate that the partnership has done what it claimed. Both sides count the agreement against their respective targets; neither has named the bargain.

6.3 The Recruitment Marketing Stack

The vocabulary of international student recruitment has its own register, oriented to the prospective family considering an investment of substantial private capital. These materials are designed to convert, not to inform. The cost of the convergence between this register and institutional self-description is that the most public-facing communications become the most rhetorically inflated, and the inflated rhetoric flows back into the strategic plan, the speech, and the press release. By the time the institution is asked to defend its 35 percent international cohort to a skeptical migration ministry, the only language available is the language built to recruit. The defense sounds, to the regulator, like the brochure – because it is the brochure.

6.4 The Sector Association and the Equilibrium's Breakdown

The sector associations – NAFSA, EAIE, AIEA, CBIE, IAU and IIE globally, OUI-IOHE in the Americas, APAIE in the Asia-Pacific – shape the field's vocabulary through their conferences, journals, training programs, and policy briefs. Comprehensive internationalization, the field's most successful single phrase, was coined within this ecosystem (Hudzik, 2011) and has been adopted across institutional strategic plans on every continent. From approximately 2010 to 2023, this communication ecosystem produced a synthesized account that served institutional interests reliably. The 2024–2025 policy environment broke that equilibrium on three fronts. The migration backlash – Canada's January 2024 study permit cap (IRCC, 2024, 2025); the United Kingdom's January 2024 dependent visa restriction, which produced a 13 percent year-on-year decline in main-applicant student visas (UK Home Office, 2024); Australia's tighter immigration settings; and intensified United States visa vetting – made Formation language read, to a skeptical public, as a euphemism for revenue extraction. The fiscal scrutiny following the Office for Students's identification of a sector-wide deficit risk, with 45 percent of English providers modeled to report a deficit in 2025/26 (Office for Students, 2025b), made Revenue metrics read, to faculty and accreditors, as evidence that pedagogical claims were unmet. The securitization of research collaboration in the Five Eyes nations and the European Union applied a third pressure to Capacity-mode partnerships. The institutions still operating the synthesized account in 2026 are continuing a strategy that worked for fifteen years and has, in the last twenty-four months, ceased to work.

SECTION 07

The Credibility Deficit

The credibility deficit is not abstract, but its primary costs are not the visa caps and migration restrictions that have dominated sector commentary in 2024 and 2025. Those policy moves are exogenous shocks driven by domestic migration politics; they would

not have been prevented by better internal accounting, and they are not the subject of this paper. Their effect, rather, has been to make visible a deficit that had been accumulating for at least a decade, undetected because the synthesized account that concealed it was producing reliable returns until quite recently.


-64% NEW STUDY PERMITS IN CANADA, 2025 VS. 2024	23% OF UK SECTOR INCOME FROM INTERNATIONAL FEES	57 → 36 US PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN HIGHER ED, 2015–2024 (%)	~7M STUDENTS CROSS BORDERS EACH YEAR · >US\$100B
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7.1 Defining the Credibility Deficit

The credibility deficit is the documented and growing distance between the outcome claims universities make about their internationalization activities and the evidence those institutions can present in support of those claims when external observers ask. It is not a popularity deficit; popularity reflects whether stakeholders like the institution, while credibility reflects whether stakeholders trust what the institution says about itself. It is, more precisely, the deterioration of a working agreement that prevailed for roughly fifteen years – under which universities described their international engagement in synthesized terms and stakeholders accepted the synthesis without demanding the underlying disaggregation. The agreement broke during 2024 and 2025.

Public confidence in higher education has fallen in measurable terms across the destinations that host most international students. Gallup's confidence-in-higher-education series recorded 57 percent of US adults expressing a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in 2015; by 2024 that figure had fallen to 36 percent, the lowest reading in the series, recovering modestly to 42 percent in 2025 but remaining 15 points below the 2015 baseline (Gallup, 2024; Gallup-Lumina, 2025). The Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education identifies three immediate factors driving the decline: the price of higher education, the admissions system, and the substance of what is taught (Yale University, 2026). None of these factors is principally about internationalization, but each is consequential for it: a sector whose general legitimacy is contested has correspondingly less latitude to defend any single line of activity.

The regulatory and fiscal evidence is more concrete still. The Office for Students's November 2025 update reports that 124 English higher-education providers – approximately 45 percent of those modeled – face a deficit in 2025/26, with one in six holding less than thirty days' liquidity (Office for Students, 2025b). Canada's permit data are starker: by April 2026 reporting, the federal cap had produced only 75,372 new post-secondary study permit approvals in 2025, a 64 percent year-on-year decline (ICEF Monitor, 2026). Australia recorded an 18 percent decline in new student visas through the first six months of its cap (ApplyBoard, 2025). The United States issued approximately 401,000 student visas in 2024, 10 percent fewer than in 2023 (Boundless Immigration, 2025). Each of these moves demonstrates that external bodies are now drawing perimeters around international education that the sector did not draw for itself, and on terms the sector did not set.



The deficit is the distance between what is claimed and what can be demonstrated.

WHAT IT COSTS THE SECTOR

7.2 The Loss of Self-Understanding

The first cost of the credibility deficit, and the one most often overlooked, is that the sector has lost an honest understanding of its own international work. When the strategic plan, the internal budget, the board update, and the public report all describe internationalization as a single phenomenon, an institution cannot disaggregate the activity even when its own leadership

requires it. The senior team that wants to know how its African research partnership is performing receives a report on international engagement in which the partnership's outputs are aggregated with tuition revenue and exchange counts. Universities are running portfolios whose internal composition they cannot read. The cost is strategic, not transactional: a sector that does not know which of its commitments are working cannot reverse course on those that are not, cannot scale those that are, and cannot make the case that the work it does is the work it claims.

7.3 Loss of Institutional Autonomy

When universities cannot demonstrate accountability for their own activities, regulators do it for them. The Office for Students's financial-sustainability reporting is a regulator doing the descriptive work the sector should have been doing for itself; the OECD's 2025 framing of a sector-wide rhetoric-evidence gap is similarly external accountability filling an internal vacuum. Most consequentially, the intensified government scrutiny of employability outcomes and societal contributions of academic programs, increasingly tied to continued public funding, is effectively governments specifying what counts as legitimate university work because universities have not specified it themselves (Nicol, 2025; OECD, 2025). Each such move reduces autonomy in ways that are difficult to recover.

7.4 Strategic Misallocation

Universities make capital investments, partnership commitments, and program launches based on the same synthesized rationale that has now lost its public credibility. A university that built a branch campus on the rationale that international engagement contributes simultaneously to mission, revenue, and capacity cannot easily disaggregate those goals when the campus underperforms on any single dimension. Lane and Kinser (2014) record at least 27 international branch campus closures between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, and approximately ten percent of established branch campuses had ceased operations by 2014 (Wilkins & Juusola, 2018). Michigan State University's 2008 Dubai campus illustrates the recurring failure mode: opened on a synthesized case in which financial returns were framed as secondary, it announced the closure of all undergraduate programs two years later. Each rationale had been mobilized as part of a synthesized case at approval; none could be defended on its own terms once the financial

component collapsed. The modest claim consistent with the broader argument is that a branch campus launched with a defensible mode declaration produces an evidence base that leadership can read in subsequent decisions, while one launched on a synthesized rationale loses each of its supporting cases when one component comes under pressure.

7.5 Partnership Volume Versus Partnership Depth

The American Council on Education's Mapping Internationalization survey has documented that institutions had been pursuing partnership development without the strategic infrastructure to manage what they were signing: a majority reported no formal strategy for partnership development (Helms, Brajkovic & Struthers, 2017). Sutton and Obst (2011) characterized the prior phase of the field as one in which institutions pursued maximum signature volume rather than partnership depth. The cost of unnamed bargains flows in both directions: a capacity-side institution that expected capacity transfer and received transactional volume has absorbed an unnamed cost, and a revenue-side institution that committed reputational and faculty time to partnerships that did not generate the research access implicitly assumed has absorbed an unnamed cost as well. Naming the bargain at signature is the single intervention most likely to reduce the misallocation on both sides.

SECTION 08

The Stewardship Architecture

8.1 What Stewardship Means

The Stewardship Architecture is a governance and communication framework under which an institution running activities across the three operational configurations can account for each on its appropriate terms, name cross-configuration partnerships explicitly, and communicate its accomplishments without claiming what it cannot demonstrate. It

is not a fourth way of operating internationalization. It operates at a different level, organizing the three modes rather than competing with them. The word stewardship is chosen deliberately: the institution is stewarding a mission across multiple operational modes, is responsible to multiple stakeholder communities, and the credibility of its work depends on its ability to show that it understands, manages, and reports on each component honestly.

Voluntary adoption is risk mitigation. The alternative is to have the same evidentiary gaps exposed by external bodies acting under their own incentives. An institution that describes its three configurations on its own terms – fully and in advance – is better placed to negotiate its compliance perimeter, to defend its political settlement with its publics, and to define its evidence base before someone else does. The credibility advantage is not principally moral; it is structural and political. The architecture is not universally applicable: for genuinely single-mode operations it is over-engineered, and in jurisdictions where openly declaring a Revenue or Capacity configuration would expose the institution to legislative retaliation, the public-facing portfolio report may need to be deferred or staged while the architecture remains useful as an internal discipline. Stewardship is a risk-management tool, not a moral imperative.

8.2 Five Principles

01 Mode declaration

Every activity is explicitly identified as primarily Revenue, Formation, or Capacity, determined by primary funding source and primary stakeholder accountability rather than by mission rhetoric. Mixed declarations are permitted where activities genuinely span configurations, but must specify the primary mode and the secondary features.

02 Mode-appropriate evidence

Each activity reports against metrics native to its declared mode. Borrowing legitimacy across modes – claiming Formation outcomes from Revenue activities, Capacity outcomes from synthesized partnership counts – is prohibited as explicit reporting policy, precisely because the underlying incentives remain in place.

03 Bargain naming

Every cross-configuration partnership documents the bargain explicitly: what each side seeks, what each side contributes, where the asymmetry sits, and how it will be managed. Success metrics are tracked separately rather than collapsed into a single partnership count.

04 Portfolio reporting

The institution's annual internationalization report presents the three modes side by side rather than synthesizing them. The reader can see, at a glance, what proportion of engagement runs under which configuration and what evidence supports each.

05 Stakeholder calibration

Each audience receives the version of the report that foregrounds the mode most relevant to its decision rights. Differentiated audience versions derive from a single master document, not from separately authored statements.

WORKED EXAMPLE · NAMING THE BARGAIN

Synthesized clause: The parties agree to foster collaborative research, reciprocal mobility, and joint contribution to global scientific challenges.

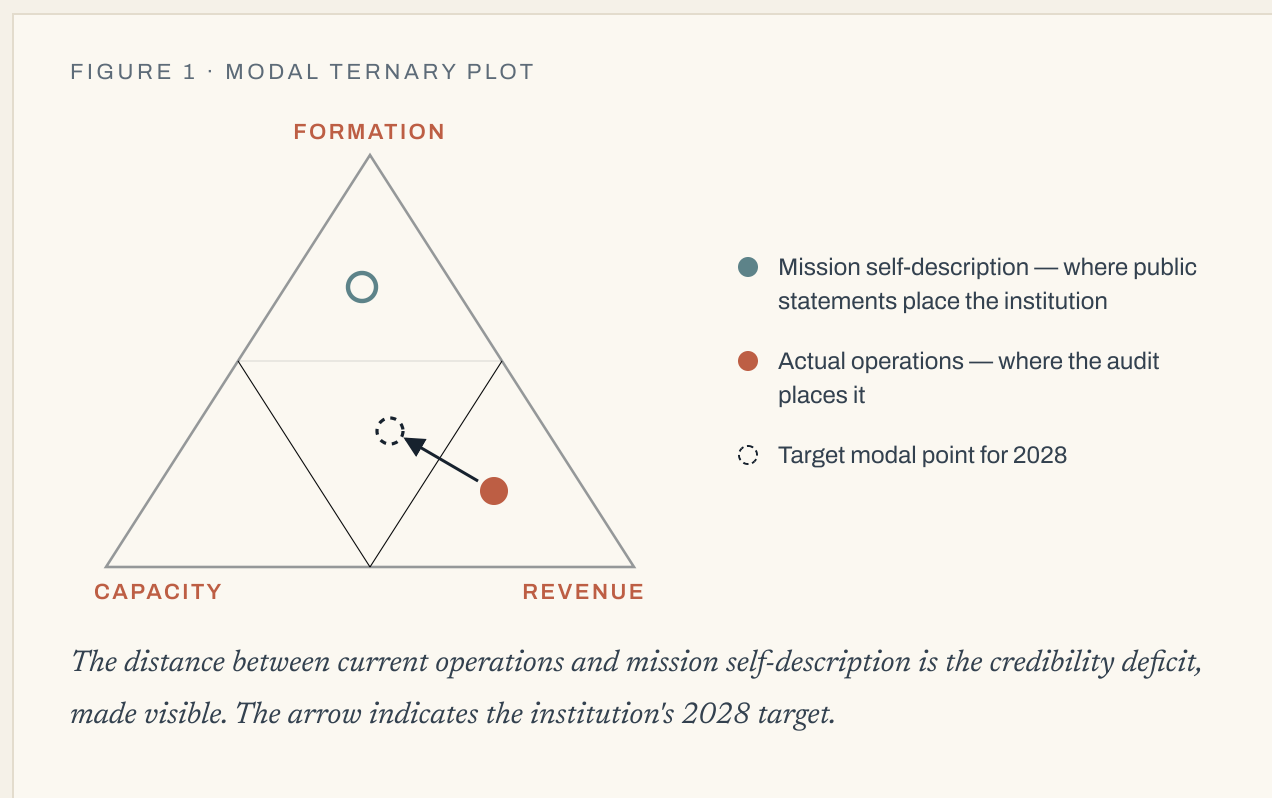
Stewardship clause: The Northern partner contributes laboratory access, dual-supervised PhD positions, and co-authorship rights, in exchange for access to ecological field sites and genomic samples. The Southern partner contributes site and sample access, in exchange for €60,000 in laboratory equipment installed at its facilities, two fully funded PhD studentships per cohort with documented right of return, first-author rights for its post-doctoral researchers, and a four-year transition under which the Northern partner shares analytical methods sufficient for the Southern partner to run the work independently thereafter.

The synthesized clause looks like a partnership and resists evaluation; the stewardship clause is unmistakably a bargain and is straightforward to evaluate. Only the second is recoverable as evidence in front of a regulator, a funding council, or an internal review. The architecture is in the first instance an internal discipline – the university retains full ownership of its own information and its own narrative.

Bargain naming has a known limit, raised by the postcolonial literature (Stein, 2021; Buckner & Stein, 2020): naming an asymmetry is not redistributing the power that produced it. The architecture's response is that visibility is a precondition for redress and that an undocumented asymmetry has worse outcomes than a documented one – partnerships fail more often, capacity transfer goes undelivered, and the weaker party absorbs the cost without recourse. The naming is therefore a defensive instrument for the weaker party, not only an analytical convenience for the stronger.

8.3 Visualizing Modal Distribution

A useful diagnostic that emerges from the audit phase is the modal ternary plot, in which the institution's portfolio is positioned within a triangular figure whose vertices are Revenue, Formation, and Capacity. The plot makes visible what proportion of the institution's international engagement, weighted by activity intensity, runs under each configuration. It is intended for board and provostial discussion, not as a public-facing instrument.



The placements are produced by an activity-level audit conducted in advance. For each activity, four questions are answered: what is the primary funding source; what evidence is currently collected (volume metrics, outcome metrics, both, or neither); who is the primary audience for reporting; and is the outcome claim defensible on its own evidence base under external scrutiny. The aggregated answers produce the modal coordinates and, more usefully, identify the specific activities at which the credibility deficit is concentrated. The figure is the summary; the audit is the substance. Boards that move directly to the figure without the underlying audit are repeating, in a more visually compact form, the synthesized reporting the architecture is intended to displace.

8.4 One Report, Three Angles

The architecture does not require multiplying reporting documents. It requires structuring the existing single annual report so that the three configurations are visible within it: an opening framing that addresses all three together; three configuration-specific sections; and a closing portfolio commentary that returns to the integrated frame and names any modal rebalancing the year ahead will require.

CONFIGURATION	TYPICAL ACTIVITIES	HOW IT SHOULD BE REPORTED
Revenue	International tuition recruitment; English-medium master's programmes; branch and overseas campuses; transnational education; rankings management; post-study work pipelines.	Fee income by source country and programme; new-entrant enrolment volumes; revenue concentration by sending country; graduate employment outcomes; financial-sustainability ratios; modelled exposure to a 20-40% contraction in any single sending market.

CONFIGURATION	TYPICAL ACTIVITIES	HOW IT SHOULD BE REPORTED
Formation	Internationalization at home; virtual exchange and COIL; intercultural curriculum integration by discipline; study abroad with structured assessment; faculty development for intercultural teaching.	Intercultural-competence assessments using validated instruments (Deardorff framework and successors); pedagogical-design feature compliance; participation rates across the full student body; graduate dispositional surveys; disciplinary translation of formation outcomes documented unit by unit.
Capacity	Faculty doctoral training abroad with documented return; joint research with capacity-transfer terms; donor- and ODA-funded programmes; regional research consortia; equipment-access partnerships; doctoral pipelines for staff renewal.	Co-authored publications by discipline, paired across globally and regionally indexed venues; doctoral-return rates with placement tracking; faculty career trajectories within the domestic system; alignment with host-country research-priority frameworks; grant-leadership share in South-South funding; documented localization of methods and instrumentation.
Stewardship overlay	Mode declaration for every activity; bargain naming in cross-configuration partnerships; portfolio-level governance and quarterly review; a Stewardship lead reporting to the Provost or VP equivalent.	A single annual report with portfolio framing followed by three configuration-specific sections; explicit cross-configuration activity register with named bargains; portfolio-level commentary on modal balance; differentiated audience versions derived from the master document.

The architecture's principal output is not a new operating model. It is a credible institutional voice. Under stewardship, the same university that previously claimed undifferentiated global citizenship outcomes can now say, accurately: we operate three lines of international engagement;

here is what each contributes; here is the evidence we have for each; here is what we cannot yet show, and here is what we are doing to address that gap. This is the kind of voice that boards, regulators, ministries, and journalists currently expect from finance, research compliance, and student safety. It is the kind of voice that internationalization has not yet developed at scale.

SECTION 09

Conclusion

The internationalization of higher education in 2026 is not in crisis because it produces no value. It is in crisis because it has lost the ability to describe accurately the value it produces.

Each of the three configurations is substantial and largely defensible on its own terms. Revenue underwrites the financing of liberal-market higher education. Formation, where properly designed and assessed, produces pedagogical outcomes that justify its place in the curriculum. Capacity has shaped the research base of countries that are now major contributors to global science. None of the three is the same as either of the others, and no real institution operates only one of them. The credibility problem is not just that the configurations have been conflated, but that the hybrid reality of most institutions has never had a usable governance framework, and that the public-communications apparatus of the field has been engineered, with no individual's bad intent, to keep that hybrid reality undescribed.

The Stewardship Architecture is the framework. It requires no capital expenditure, no legislative change, and no abandonment of any existing program. What it requires is the recognition that the descriptive accountability the sector did not produce for itself will, if not produced now, be produced for it – by regulators, by migration ministries, and by the political environment – on terms the institution will not have set. The single most consequential adoption decision available to leadership in 2026 is to commission a Stewardship Audit of the existing internationalization portfolio and to formally adopt portfolio reporting that presents the three configurations side by side.

The credibility deficit is current. The architecture to address it is now available. The decision is whether to adopt it.

SIMULATE THE SOLUTION

The Stewardship Classifier

To help universities apply the Stewardship Architecture, we have developed an interactive tool that maps your institution's internationalization portfolio across the three configurations and identifies where the credibility deficit lies.

[Access the Stewardship Classifier →](#)

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Two Internationalizations

Closing the credibility gap in university internationalization –
a Stewardship Architecture for hybrid international
portfolios.

Carlos Vargas

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