

**Points of departure and developing good practices for responsible  
internationalization in a rapidly changing world**

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## Background

Responsible internationalization has become an increasingly used term to promote relationship building in a world which is increasingly shaped by the growing impact of global challenges and geopolitical competition (Council of the European Union, 2023). Amidst these changing global conditions researchers and universities have learned that they need to adhere to an expanded set of norms related to the research endeavor (Shih, 2022). Today these norms include for researchers well known aspects such as research integrity, academic freedom, openness, research excellence, and research ethics, but also newer aspects related to societal impact (Global Research Council, 2019), research security (National Science Foundation, n.d.), science diplomacy (Turchetti & Lalli, 2020), and knowledge security (NWO, n.d.). However, a difficulty with managing these aspects is that they in tandem are quite contradictory. For example, how can openness in the research endeavor be maintained when national security concerns increase compliance-based measures and raise suspicions of foul play from foreign governments? Or how can the opportunities presented in international research be reciprocally distributed at an institutional level to avoid concerns about an unlevelled playing field? These questions that require more than black or white answers are just part of new issue sets that are formed when researchers and university administrators need to consider an increasingly broadening set of aspects in their professional and academic roles. It is with this background that responsible internationalization has become popularized and set a direction where responsibility is a prime norm to handle the increasingly complex environment.

The need to relate to a broadening set of aspects is largely triggered by responses from governments (Nature, 2021) to manage in a quickly changing world, where increasing geopolitical conflict, the deterioration of a global rules-based order, new technological developments, pandemics, and climate change is the new normal. At the governments' disposal to induce behaviors and compliance in national science systems there are legislative capacities and funding mechanisms to provide directions for national universities and researchers. For instance, in Australia public funding has been withdrawn for several research projects by the Minister of Education in the past funding cycles because they have been deemed as not being in the best interest of the nation (Francis & Sims, 2022). In the United States (National Science and Technology Council, 2022), the United Kingdom (National Protective Security Authority, 2023) and China (Mallapaty, 2023) stricter policies and legislation have in the last few years been enacted to protect their national science systems from foreign appropriation and control. The policy and legislative regimes cover aspects such as data management, protection of critical technologies, and tackling foreign interference. While most other countries have yet to follow suit with similar legislation for the research sector, interdependencies in the global science system means that the actions of these science power houses have a significant impact on others. China, the United States and the United Kingdom are among the top scientific collaborators for the majority of advanced science nations in the world (Grieger, 2022). Universities have managed the new pressures by using a plethora of responses ranging from citing academic freedom to complying with export controls and disclosure requirements. This, however, seems to not have been enough and more proactivity from the researchers' side has been requested by managements of universities (see Söderholm, 2023) as well as by governments and various state agencies (Myklebust, 2023; National Protective Security Authority, 2023).

It is against the above backdrop that the term responsible internationalization has gained increased traction in the past few years. The term has been adopted to raise awareness of the changing conditions for the academic research endeavor and induce more responsible practices in research (Council of the European Union, 2023; Shih, 2023). The latter can for instance entail curtailing behaviors in international collaborations that risk leading to ethics dumping (European Commission, 2018), double dipping (Silver 2020; Pritt & Noto, 2022), or direct dual use of

research (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2023). Nonetheless, the term represents today more an ambition rather than a framework driving clear narratives, well-articulated goals, or structured responses and behavioral changes.

### **Why responsible internationalization?**

I have been working with responsible internationalization since 2018 as a social science researcher, funding program manager and policy expert. In 2020 I was the main author of a report on responsible internationalization which was released by the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education (STINT), KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Karolinska Institutet and Lund University (Shih, Gaunt & Östlund, 2020). The report was quickly adopted by the Swedish academic sector as a good practice document and in June 2023 the Swedish government tasked three agencies to develop guidelines for responsible internationalization (Ministry of Education, 2023). The report on responsible internationalization, together with guidelines on international collaboration by Universities UK (2020) and the German Rectors' Conference (2020), were also identified by the European Commission (2022) as examples of good governance practices. Since the release of these documents, the understanding of what constitutes good practices and meaningful responses on national levels have generally improved, albeit the knowledge has not reached a broader audience, and to a lesser degree been formalized in training and education.

But is this formalization necessary, and how does responsible internationalization differ from the other norms that researchers and universities should be adhering to? Is responsible internationalization not just another notion that will complicate the lives of researchers and university administrators? Moreover, are universities and researchers not already responsible, and does the notion of responsible internationalization insinuate that researchers are irresponsible? These questions have been posed to me numerous times. My answer to these questions is that a clearer framework and rationale for responsible internationalization is needed because of the following:

- **Responsible internationalization is already an established term used by universities, research funders and policymakers** in many parts of the world. However, in order to systematically raise the level of responsibility in international collaborations, knowledge needs to be systematized and methods for implementation developed. Researchers, universities, state agencies, government officials, and politicians need to gain better knowledge of what needs to be handled, why this is done and how. The logic is simple, with more responsible collaborations, i.e. those that can realistically manage the complex set of norms (from openness to securitization), the possibilities to maintain a relatively open and internationally networked science system is increased (although the openness just seen a decade ago will likely not come back). The opposite behavior on the other hand will trigger more securitization. But raising awareness about complexities in the world per se is not enough to induce responsible behaviors on an institutionalized level. It is important to note that while researchers and university administrators generally have the ambition to be responsible, knowing right from wrong with respect to managing in a complex world are not things that will come automatically. It is my experience that this needs to be explicitly discussed and learned, as with any other skill in life. Moreover, guidelines and directions can be helpful, but they are in my experience not really helpful without also significant awareness raising, abilities and inclusive forums for dialogue. Today there are just too many (conflicting) guidelines, and the directives are sometimes so simplified and general that they add little to researchers' capabilities in managing international collaborations.

- **Responsible internationalization can be seen as a way to develop reflective ability** concerning the broader set of conditions that researchers and universities today need to handle. Risk management is of course a part of this larger palette, but it is important to note that the main motivation to conduct risk analysis is to be able to have international collaborations and not to end them. In a minority of cases international collaboration should not be initiated or continued (for instance when there are sanctions involved, direct dual use risks<sup>1</sup> or when grave transgressions of individual rights or ethics are occurring), but the rationale for how to handle these extreme cases cannot set the direction for how the majority of international collaborations are being approached.
- **Responsible internationalization focuses on the relationship level.** Research is seldom conducted in isolation. Advanced research in particular is often conducted in international networks, as it requires complementary capabilities, excellent scientists, and resources (Shih & Forsberg, 2023). Moreover, research that deals with global challenges also needs to have a global outlook and be internationally inclusive to really have impact and be meaningful. Cumulatively cross border collaborations are increasingly taking up a bigger share of research conducted in the world today. Hence to not address responsibility in international relationships would be missing a big part of the research endeavor. Here notions such as research security (National Science Foundation, n.d.), trusted research (National Protective Security Authority, 2023), and sometimes even science diplomacy (Ruffini, 2020) differ since they focus on unilateral goals, e.g. from the perspective of a nation. Responsible internationalization offers insights that counter and balance unilateral views, and the zero sum game logic.
- **Responsible internationalization focuses on agency rather than compliance** (for instance an important component of research ethics deals with complying with national laws). As such it offers possibilities to address questions and issues that individual researchers and research groups having international collaborations are encountering. The establishment of laws and rules generally occurs in the aftermath of repeated transgressions with adverse impact and are thus reactive. By focusing on responsibility opportunities are given to epistemic communities, research administrators, or university managements to proactively respond to “irresponsible” research behaviors as perceived by university collectives, policymakers and politicians, at the same time a positive narrative can be created around what the academic sector is actually doing to improve the situation. This can also lead to the nuancing of some of the more protectionist narratives that today is present in the general debate about the role of science in society, where national competitiveness and sovereignty is emphasized before any other goals.

### Working with responsible internationalization

Given the above understanding, what could be good ways of working with responsible internationalization? So far the work that I have conducted have focused on the following areas:

- **Applying a parsimonious logic to identify pertinent issue sets:** Universities need to improve knowledge of which sets of issues that are the most essential to cover in order to reduce bureaucratic burdens and make impact where it matters. This does not mainly entail focusing on delineated problems related to, for example, research integrity (although such matters are important and part of internationalization challenges), but on a concrete level identify broader issue sets that are forming a downward spiral of increased securitization. For example, an issue set can be how to collectively manage reciprocity, including aspects such as resource endowments, mobility, research publications, data sharing and accountability. It is important to devote resources and

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<sup>1</sup> Some research is intended for dual use purposes, such as for example NATO funded research projects.

attention to managing sets of issues interactively. If universities do not deal with interconnected issue sets meaningfully, the responses from governments might instead be increased securitization and more requirements. To identify sets of issues it has become obvious that gray areas in international research collaboration and the trade-offs are particularly important to consider. For example, a simple heuristic method that I have been using in training workshops for responsible internationalization is to separate collaborative activities into black and different shades of gray (with often unclear demarcations, which make behavioral guidelines difficult to use and there are risks for governmental or organizational overreach). The collaborations in the black area have empirically shown to be few in numbers and the main strategy has been to identify and avoid such collaborations. In the black area, raising awareness and guidelines are important, as well as organizational capability to identify and set red lines. The majority of collaborations are however, in the gray area, which is vast. In the gray area, universities need to be able to guide, and support researchers, and for this transparency about international research projects is integral. The researcher also needs to have enough competence and understanding of the context in, which their partner is working in. Hence the gray areas require active management as well as improved reflexive abilities and understanding of contextual factors.

- **Develop models for management and contextual analysis:** Management skills are necessary especially when complexity increases. Models of management need to be developed that handle issue sets emerging from global developments. While knowledge of the world is important, it also needs to be contextualized for specific purposes. Hence knowledge of global developments, issue sets and how these challenges should be managed need to interact. At this stage universities are still catching up with what should be managed. Codifying accumulated experiences and following up on different responses and their effectiveness in dealing with various challenges are important. Additionally, the effects of various responses should be taken into account so that the proportionality of actions is well understood. From here models for management and contextual analysis can be developed.
- **Describing the nature of reciprocal exchanges:** Reciprocity is essential to promote, as non-reciprocal collaborations or perceptions of such seem to be a major reason for further securitization of research. Focusing on reciprocity may further the discussion of the values created in international research collaborations but also systematizes the understanding of various risk–benefit perspectives. In the past year deepened discussions have started to emerge with respect to how reciprocal exchanges can look like when legal and policy contexts, resource endowments, and individual as well as system goals differ. Such discussions have been held at and between universities, and between research funders (such as at the Global Research Council’s annual meeting in 2023).
- **Finding meaningful vectors to disseminate knowledge and methods:** The work with responsible internationalization integrates new issues with established practices. For instance, researchers are used to working across borders, but with today’s stricter export controls in advanced science nations there are now potential graver legal ramifications of working openly. At the same time the academic merit system still incentivizes open collaboration, excellence and sharing of data. Finding meaningful vectors to address new challenges in very established structures and practices is not easy. The forums or networks discussing challenges need to be aware of the problem, have relevant knowledge of the issues, be sufficiently open to change, and spend enough time to work on the sets of issues long enough to make an impact. To help this process it has been helpful to have a knowledge-based approach to identifying the sets of issues, management models that can address the issues in established structures and providing narratives for a way forward. Sometimes it has been easier to develop new networks for

the purpose of advancing ideas around responsible internationalization. The challenge has been to overcome the lack of legitimacy and resource constraints in the initial stages.

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