

## From working in one higher education system to working in fifty countries

*Jon File*

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I am not an expert on the internationalisation of higher education (some of my good friends are) but my work in higher education policy and management has been almost entirely international since I joined CHEPS. This is in stark contrast to the first twenty years of my working life where the focus was more or less exclusively on South African higher education in the context of the struggle for democracy and the fundamental changes brought about by its achievement. Thus, the explanation of my own internationalisation is simple: moving from an internationally isolated country (until 1994) to one of the world's leading higher education policy centres.

But is it that simple? Two nuances: if I had stayed in Cape Town I would have been internationalised as well. The rainbow nation's re-emergence into the world changed its higher education institutions dramatically. The University of Cape Town today has almost 5,000 international students (19%) from 112 countries (one of the factors behind its 113<sup>th</sup> place in THE's ranking), whereas for most of my time there internationalisation was no more than a tiny blip on the policy radar. Second, yes, CHEPS from its foundation in 1984 has always placed a strong emphasis on comparative higher education studies, but from the late 1990s we developed an international portfolio of capacity building and policy-oriented projects alongside our international research work. Two of the most important elements of this portfolio were made possible by the Dutch government's commitment to development cooperation and to its support to the – then – ten EU pre-accession countries in the period 1999 – 2004. The first enabled us to run ten – and counting – multi-year capacity building projects in developing countries (Mozambique, South Africa, Uganda, Ethiopia, Yemen, Indonesia) and the second resulted in twenty CHEPS higher education policy seminars for senior university and ministry staff from the ten countries which have formed the basis for ongoing cooperation.

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So if my internationalisation was inevitable, then the form it has taken was significantly influenced by two world-historical events – the end of Apartheid and the fall of the Berlin Wall – and it continues to be shaped by the place and role of the Netherlands in Europe and in the world. Great experiences, I've had many, too many to mention. Except perhaps one: 25 of the countries that I have been fortunate to work in are wine producers (including Ethiopia!) but in this, my second major interest, I am staunchly anti-internationalist, supporting the resistance of local varietals to the global flow of over-wooded chardonnay.