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Magne, PJ

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Internationalisation and curriculum development: why and how?

Pollyanna Magne: Associate Professor & Educational Developer, Plymouth University

Abstract

Today's globally interconnected world offers a vast array of new opportunities, but has simultaneously created a need for greater intercultural understanding (Koehne, 2006). This article provides a rationale for the role that Higher Education must play in preparing students for the global market place. It outlines the scope of the 'internationalisation' agenda within Higher Education and goes on to explore the notion of what it means to 'internationalise the curriculum'. The article offers an approach to curriculum development which uses a gap analysis tool (developed by the author) and discussion across disciplinary teams. A series of short case studies demonstrate different ways in which the curriculum at one university has been enhanced through internationalisation. Examples include: a range of teaching and learning approaches; cultural cafes; research opportunities; fieldwork and peer learning. The conclusion summarises how a range of activities can enhance the curriculum and develop greater intercultural understanding so vital to the graduates of today.

Key words: internationalisation; globalisation; curriculum development; intercultural understanding; co-curricular

The term 'internationalisation' is used to cover a range of notions and activities (Leask, 2005). At its narrowest, it might be understood only in terms of attracting international students to local English universities, sometimes without much thought as to how we may then make best use of the opportunities this opens up. In its widest sense internationalisation may also cover the domain of transnational educational activity whereby programmes designed in one country are delivered in another (Dunn & Wallace, 2008), or where entire campuses are built and form an 'outpost' of their host institution. For the purpose of this article we are going to consider internationalisation in terms of the development of inclusive and globally relevant curricula, designed to enable students to develop the intercultural competence needed for professional careers in a globally interconnected world.

Whilst not every student will want to work overseas, many will work for international companies or an industry that has clients or collaborators around the world. As a result of student fees we know that information such as the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey included in the Key Information Set (KIS) is carefully reviewed by

prospective students and often their parents as they consider university options (Pennell & West, 2005). This prompts many Higher Education Institutions to think not only about the disciplines that they teach, but to what extent those programmes equip students with the skills and credentials to rival their peers in the increasingly competitive job market. As such the HE curriculum needs to prepare students for this global market place (Bremer & Van-der-Wende, 1995) and make this explicit not only in their marketing, but also in their discipline and the teaching and learning approaches that they employ.

It would be irresponsible to brush aside some of the challenges of enabling students from across the globe to study effectively together. To ignore the issues would suggest that we are too afraid to acknowledge them, or worse, have not got the inclination to understand the issues and see how we might turn this international learning environment to our advantage. For example the literature tells us that international students take a while to acclimatise and that they need support in order to do this successfully (Kelly, 2009). To compound this we know that UK students can be reluctant to mix with international peers thus increasing the latter's sense of alienation in an already foreign country (Heffernan et al, 2010). There is also the challenge that many institutions face of developing an intercultural awareness amongst staff as well as students. For example a common misconception amongst staff is that Asian students, particularly those of a Confucian heritage, refuse to engage in active learning whereas the student would explain that silence denotes careful consideration and may be a sign of deeper learning activity, than someone who speaks constantly without first thinking their ideas through (Trahar, 2007). Equally Scandinavian students might be criticised for sparse citation of relevant literature, and over opinionated work, which would be less surprising if we were better informed about the value placed on critical thought and 'positioning' in Scandinavia leading to well formulated opinion (Ongstad, 2002). The British student, who typically has far less language input throughout their education than their peers, may also find it hard to imagine or appreciate the enormous energy required by their international counterparts to function and study in a language that is not their mother tongue (Trahar, 2007).

So there are challenges posed by the internationalisation agenda, but it also provides a rich source of opportunity. An internationalised curriculum offers many benefits: it may help to educate students who have had limited exposure to travel and other cultures; it may also help to attract international students (and more importantly keep them); it will appeal to those with ambitions to work in multi-national settings; and it will equip graduates to function effectively in a global society.

So what does an internationalised curriculum look like and how should you go about getting there? Before we answer the practicalities of this question we need to determine what we mean by the word 'curriculum'. Some traditionalists such as Bridges (2000) make a strong case for focusing almost entirely on the disciplinary content of a programme. However employers tell us that subject knowledge, on its own, is not enough, so the more pragmatically minded institutions concerned with the employability and success of their graduates (particularly in this global economy), think about the curriculum not only in terms of its content but also the teaching and learning approaches within it (Pegg, 2013). Here the

methods used in the learning environment are deemed to be as significant as the discipline that is being taught. For example some claim that engineering graduates who are used to a problem based approach, are more ready for the working environment, than those who are text book trained, but unused to solving problems (Seidel & Godfrey, 2005). In addition to this Boyd et al (2007) encourage us to think about the ‘architecture’ of the curriculum which is concerned with semester or term structure, modularisation, and the length of the academic year. As we consider what an internationalised curriculum might look like, this article will take the word ‘curriculum’ in its widest sense encompassing: the structure of programmes; approaches to teaching and learning; co-curricular strands; and indeed specific disciplinary content.

As is the case with much developmental work, a good place to start when considering internationalisation of the curriculum, is an analysis of what good practice already exists and where the gaps are. In workshops run to facilitate this development we often start with a gap analysis tool (developed by the author). This asks colleagues a number of questions ranging from, *‘to what extent does your programme embed examples/material/resources from a range of cultures in the curriculum?’* through to an examination of the level of *‘teaching and learning activities designed to enhance social integration’*, and *‘opportunities for international research collaboration’*. Having identified what they do well and where the gaps are, colleagues are introduced to some of the literature around internationalisation and invited to critique it, adapt relevant ideas for their own discipline, and share examples of good practice. This is a process that requires a collegiate approach, whereby the whole programme team develop ideas together so that they can see how these span across the programme and feed in to each other (Magne, 2013).

Experience from running such workshops indicates that, in addition to the much needed intercultural awareness, academic colleagues also benefit from reviewing a range of examples of an internationalised curriculum to help them get started. As a result of a recent internationalisation conference and subsequent online discussions, I was asked to share here some of the successful approaches to internationalisation of the curriculum. These form the basis of ideas which address teaching and learning approaches, skills development, peer learning, use of alumni and social integration to name but a few, all of which underpin the success of a truly internationalised curriculum. There are many more examples, but my thanks go particularly to those named below for use of examples from their disciplines and the ‘wider curriculum’ of the student experience.

1. Teaching and learning approaches

Discipline: Architecture, undergraduate. **Lead:** Dr Giovanna Guidicini

Gap identified: Opportunity to introduce teaching and learning approaches from the European continent which present different perspectives and ways of studying and working

Development: Summer School based in European country (initially UK) with mix of host students and staff, and mainland European students and staff. The teaching on the summer school is delivered by participating staff from all over Europe in the style typical of their home country/university. This offers the students a chance to experience a range of different teaching and learning approaches and adapt to new challenges and expectations.

2. Skills Development

Discipline: Architecture, undergraduate. **Lead:** Toshiko Terazono

Gap identified: Understanding of cultures that architects may work in. Opportunity for hands-on development of traditional building techniques in a heuristic, cross-cultural environment.

Development: Project trip to Japan during which students design and build a structure for a local community, using traditional timber construction, with the support of specialist carpenters. UK architectural practices regularly work in Asia and the Middle East (Jamieson, 2010). A significant proportion of architectural programmes in the UK focus on the ‘meaning of buildings’ and design principles. The importance of teaching more technical (or construction) skills in architecture is currently under debate. This summer workshop places students in a cultural context and country very different to their own, thus offering them the opportunity to develop the aptitude and the capacity to work in such contexts, whilst also developing the craft of building with traditional materials.

3. Research opportunities

Discipline: Biomedicine, undergraduate. **Lead:** Dr Michael Jarvis

Gap identified: opportunities for undergraduates to engage in real research during their undergraduate studies

Development: Live science research project centred around the long-term aim of producing a ‘disseminating’ herpesvirus-based vaccine to prevent bovine tuberculosis (bTB) in wild badger populations. This project is situated within an international collaboration between two laboratories (Robert Koch Institute (RKI) Berlin, Germany and Plymouth University, (UK) and funded by a grant from the Seale-Hayne Educational Trust. This provides an opportunity for undergraduate students to engage in real research in a foreign country and experience the nature of international collaboration and expertise, whilst also living for a few weeks immersed in that culture.

4. Peer learning

Discipline: Business management, undergraduate. **Lead:** Waimun Lim

Gap identified: Large cohorts of Chinese students and UK students who did not mix.

Development: When studying management styles the groups including students from both nationalities were identified and set by the tutor. Chinese students brought case studies of management styles typical of Asian companies and explained these. UK students brought case studies of management styles typical of UK companies and explained these. The project was to explore and discuss why/wherefore/merits and challenges of the different approaches with the benefit of cultural understanding and explanation (from peers) to support discussions.

5. Peer assisted learning scheme (PALS)

Discipline: Cross disciplinary, undergraduate. **Lead:** Carolyn Gentle & Julia Dawson

Gap identified: opportunities for experienced students (usually in their second or third year of study) to develop peer learning leadership skills, and for less experienced students to participate in, and benefit from, peer learning sessions within their programme to reinforce and discuss learning.

Development: The scheme is now in its 3rd year and available in a third of University programmes. A number of international students have benefitted by training and facilitating sessions as PALS leaders or by attending sessions as PALS students. This academic year there are international student leaders in Marine Biology, Chemistry, Architecture, Accounting and Finance, Nursing, Psychology, Computing and Economics. All 1st year students on participating programmes are allocated to a group where they have the opportunity to improve their academic work, develop their skills and their learning through exploration and discussion of disciplinary topics. Furthermore, PALS provides a space where international students can practice their English Language skills and become more familiar with British life and culture, particularly the expectations and culture of university life in the UK.

6. Alumni and networking

Discipline: Publishing, Masters level. **Lead:** Ms Miranda Spicer

Gap identified: Further opportunities to increase networking activities and make better use of successful alumni in the international arena, both in promoting the MA and in enriching the current cohort experience.

Development: As part of the course, students attend an international trade fair: London Book Fair. To make the most of this networking opportunity, students are set a number of tasks prior to the book fair, including contacting and making appointments to meet publishing companies exhibiting there. This ensures that students structure and optimise their time and it creates opportunities to engage with potential employers.

The programme team also maintain contact with alumni worldwide, in order to be able to invite alumni back to Plymouth to meet current students and share experiences of international publishing. This ensures current MAs are exposed to the most up-to-date opportunities and methods of approach in an international working environment.

7. Field work

Discipline: Geology, undergraduate. **Lead:** Dr Kevin Page

Gap identified: 10 day field-trip takes place in Spanish region renowned for its geological exposure. Disciplinary learning is immense, however opportunities for intercultural exposure, learning and awareness almost entirely missed.

Development: Include course content which relates to cultural, ecological and legal aspects of the international context in relation to geology. Develop collaboration with international

(local Spanish) partners and provide opportunities for groupwork and intercultural interaction in the classroom between staff and students from the partnering institutions. This will enrich the fieldwork experience through intercultural exchange and group work in addition to the disciplinary learning.

8. Cultural Cafe:

Discipline: Cross disciplinary, under and post graduate. **Lead:** Carolyn Gentle

Gap identified: international students and staff and their families often feel they have extremely limited opportunities for social contact with members of the university community. The Cultural Café is a social space that is open in the evenings for those who don't want to be in an environment serving alcohol and who are keen to make new friends.

Development: The Cultural café has been operating since 2011 and seeks to be inclusive by welcoming anyone who visits and ensuring they can join in with any activity or event which is going on. This means there are no closed events or events for which entrance is paid. The range of activities so far has included Diwali and Christmas celebrations, Irish Music evenings, a Greek evening and a Romanian evening in association with Peninsula Arts. Students are always welcome to put on their own events including projects associated with their studies and just-for-fun things such as board games evenings. Finally the Cultural Café hosts a weekly Languages café for those who want to practise speaking and listening in a foreign language.

9. Critical reflection

Discipline: Social work, undergraduate. **Lead:** Hayley Smith

Gap identified: A need to support students to critically reflect on their experience both whilst away on placement in developing countries and upon their return to study.

Development: Weekly Skype (audio-visual) contact is offered in an attempt to address isolation by increasing 'visibility'. This enables the tutor to see non-verbal cues regarding student well-being, which can then be discussed. Students who can see familiar surroundings via Skype report reduced levels of anxiety and the freedom to explore any domestic difficulties they may experience such as questions about culturally appropriate challenges; gender-role expectations, or dress code in addition to social work based issues. On return to the UK the academic term is punctuated with meeting opportunities to offer support through the re-acclimatisation phase. This provides students to shift from a feeling of 'dis-orientation' towards a 'new consciousness', a re-framing of student understanding about self and their relative place in a wider world (Larson & Allen, 2006).

10. Writing Cafe:

Discipline: Cross disciplinary, under and post graduate. **Lead:** Helen Bowstead and Christie Pritchard

Gap identified: Many international students struggle to produce written assignments that meet the demands of the UK higher education system. This may be because of issues with language but difficulties may also be the result of coming into a UK Higher Education Institution from a different educational background.

Development: The Writing Café provides a welcoming and purposeful space where students can receive support with their written assignments from trained student Writing Mentors (some of whom are also international students) and/or members of the Learning Development team. In a relaxed and informal environment students are encouraged to talk about the challenges they face when writing with their peers and to explore strategies and techniques that can improve their written communication skills.

Conclusion

What these examples (given above) aim to demonstrate are the multiple approaches to internationalising the curriculum. Some of these initiatives are designed to enhance interaction in the classroom by using the students themselves as a resource. Note though that both the local and the international students had an equal role to play. In the Peer Learning example students explained and explored management styles from various perspectives, and cultural insights were sought after, rather than regarded as ‘quirky’ or marginalised. The Summer School requires *all* students, both local and international, to adapt to unfamiliar teaching styles and draw on the benefits of developing a wider range of learning strategies.

The Peer Assisted Learning Scheme (PALs) and Cultural Cafe examples demonstrate initiatives relating to the wider curriculum encompassing the whole student experience. This is what Pegg (2013) refers to as the ‘co-curricular’, approach. Pegg states that rather than seeing such activities as extra-curricular, it is important that they are emphasised as an essential part of the students’ development and valued as such (*ibid*). For example PALs at Plymouth University runs in over 60 programmes and is integral to the architecture of those degrees. The end of year PALS report (Gentle, 2014, p.1) indicates *enhanced employability skills for PALS leaders particularly in organisational management, communication, and teamwork*. It notes the support PALs provides for the internationalisation agenda including *PALs for Transition to Masters*, which focuses on issues such as: isolation; being an overseas student; and understanding university academic culture. Here the learning is a two way process between the PALs leaders and their fellow international students.

The Field Work example recognised missed opportunities in the international setting and proposed ways of enriching the fieldwork experience through intercultural collaboration in the classroom. The Critical Reflection case study demonstrates how audio-visual contact, and a re-acclimatisation process on return from placement in a developing country, can assist students to adapt to their situation whilst away and develop a new consciousness about the world in which they will work.

The interconnectivity of today’s world and the ability for people to travel across the globe in a matter of hours has changed the dynamic of the environments in which we live and enlivened our cultures. Gaining intercultural understanding is no longer just a pursuit of interest, but recognising the value of many different realities and knowledges (Koehne, 2006)

is now a vital factor in the success of most careers. As many authors argue academia is no longer just for academia's sake, but also has a role to play in preparing graduates for their future careers (Harvey, Moon & Geall, 1997; Knight & Yorke, 2003). The examples given in this article demonstrate a few ways of internationalising the curriculum in Higher Education. They are taken from just one institution and show how the internationalisation agenda has been realised across the university and woven into the fabric of the whole curriculum with a view to enriching the student experience.

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