Internationalising teaching and learning: perspectives and issues voiced by senior academics at one Australian university

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the gap between rhetoric and practice in internationalising the curriculum (IoC) from the perspectives of academics in key curriculum leadership positions at one Australian research-intensive university. It draws on an institutional research study, which found a range of understandings regarding IoC, as well as a number of commonly perceived challenges, such as the need to: 1) 'concretise' internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC)/internationalisation of teaching and learning, in a way that would account for disciplinary differences; 2) clarify uncertainty about leadership and responsibility for IoC; 3) address common misconceptions (such as that local/Australian issues have no place in an internationalised curriculum); 4) harness the cultural diversity of staff in order to enrich teaching; 5) address wider student welfare issues and create a more cosmopolitan campus. Interviewees' suggestions of how these challenges should be addressed will also be discussed.

Keywords

Internationalisation, internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC)/internationalisation of teaching and learning, Australian higher education, academic perspectives, internationalising staff.

Introduction

Universities have arguably always been international enterprises; however, globalisation has ushered in a new era in the way higher education institutions now operate. If universities are to become subjects rather than objects of globalisation, they must significantly re-orient their approaches to internationalisation – from a transactional model, predicated on inflows of students and funding to a transformative one which fosters reciprocal relationships that change the nature of all stakeholders involved (Marginson & van der Wende 2007). While universities worldwide have to various degrees embraced this challenge at the level of policy, a gap between rhetoric and practice still exists (Olson, Green & Hill 2005/2008; Green & Mertova 2009). This paper examines this gap from the perspective of academics with responsibilities for curriculum leadership at one Australian research-intensive university. .

Recent research on academic leadership has identified the considerable potential of a 'neglected group' of prospective curriculum leaders - for example, Teaching and Learning Deans, Heads of Schools, Chairs of Teaching and Learning Committees - who can 'influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute' at the coalface of teaching and learning (Anderson & Johnson 2006, p.2-3). Leadership is particularly important in relation to IoC because it requires a comprehensive, developmental approach across degree programmes, rather than courses (or units of study). Effective curriculum leadership is required to make the necessary connection between actions by enthusiastic individuals and the desired outcomes (Olson et al 2005/2008). This research study was designed to engage this neglected group of curriculum leaders through an action research project, utilizing predominantly a qualitative research method (consisting of semi-structured

interviews)[1]. The paper begins by defining the term internationalisation of the curriculum and considering previous findings about academic perspectives on the topic. It then turns to the present study, examining the challenges voiced by academics within the institution. Finally, it proposes some ways in which these challenges may be addressed, drawing on suggestions by the academics involved in the study.

'Internationalisation of the curriculum'

IDP Education Australia (1995) have defined 'internationalisation of the curriculum' as:

> the process of developing a curriculum which is internationally oriented, aimed at preparing students for performing (professionally, socially) in an international and multicultural context, and designed for domestic students as well as foreign students. (IDP 1995)

This widely accepted definition of IoC incorporates, at the very least, the values of a 'liberal' framework, with its emphasis on comparative, global perspectives and the ability to communicate across cultures (Hanson 2010). However, more recently, many have argued that IoC has a third goal: the ability to *act* responsibly in the face of global inequities (Clifford 2008; Hanson 2010). The Centre for International Curriculum Inquiry and Networking (CICIN), Oxford Brookes University, UK, has developed a more detailed account of these three key attributes as follows; '[C]omparative global perspectives' require not only disciplinary knowledge but also knowledge of 'other countries and cultures and competence in other languages'; 'intercultural competence' involves 'sensitivity to the perspectives of others, a willingness to try and put oneself in the shoes of others…(citing Olson & Kroeger 2001)'; while developing 'responsible global citizenship' requires an understanding of the need to 'engage with issues of equity and social justice, sustainability and the reduction of prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination' (Clifford 2008).

It must be noted that the concept of global citizenship which underpins CICIN's transformative approach to IoC is contested; like the concept of globalization itself, global citizenship has been associated with cultural imperialism on the one hand, and the responsibility to act for social justice on the other (Hanson 2010). Regardless of the contested nature of this third goal, it is widely acknowledged that in internationalising teaching and learning, it is not enough to focus on the content of curriculum; attention must also be paid to the process and the outcomes of learning.

Internationalising the curriculum (IoC) is also widely acknowledged to involve two equally important components: internationalisation at home (IaH) and outbound mobility of students and staff. The term 'internationalisation at home' denotes 'any internationally related activity with the exception of outbound student mobility', which fosters a cosmopolitan campus where students and staff of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds communicate openly and respectfully (Nilsson 2003, p. 31). IaH typically involves international and local content, face-to-face intercultural activities at the local level, as well as international online communications (Jones & Brown 2007). While there is agreement on the need for balance between IaH and outbound mobility (Wächter 2003), this paper focuses on the challenges and issues perceived by academics regarding the former.

Academic perspectives on internationalisation of the curriculum

Research shows that faculty academics are the harbingers of curriculum change; substantial curriculum development and changes to teaching and learning practice do not occur until academics are ready to implement them (Green & Schoenberg 2006; Clifford,2009; Bell 2004). Since differences between disciplines 'go to the heart of teaching, research and student-faculty relationships' (Becher & Trowler 2001, p. 4), engaging the academics responsible for teaching in the faculties is a vital component of any curriculum innovation. When Clifford (2009) investigated disciplinary understandings of IoC at an Australian university, she found a range of perspectives , which she grouped according to Becher's (1989) classification of the disciplines; that is, the 'hard pure' disciplines (theoretical sciences, such as mathematics and physics), the 'hard applied' disciplines (such as engineering), the 'soft pure' disciplines (humanities disciplines, such as philosophy) and the 'soft applied' disciplines (social science disciplines).

[1] A quantitative research method was also utilised to analyse data regarding student mobility. However, this part of the research will not be reported in this paper, as it is a subject another paper by these authors.

In her study, those in the 'hard pure disciplines' tended to view knowledge and ways of teaching and learning as universal, and culturally neutral. From this perspective, then, there is no need to implement IoC. Interestingly, similar findings emerged from a US study (Bond et al 2003). This view was found less in the 'hard applied disciplines', while those in the 'soft disciplines' tended to associate IoC with a more critical pedagogy (Clifford 2009).

Looking more broadly at academics' willingness or otherwise to engage with IoC at another Australian university, Bell (2004) found that academics with negative perspectives or minimal interest in IoC were both focused on curricular content and perceived major obstacles to curriculum change, while academics with positive perspectives perceived IoC as integral to or at least possible to achieve and generally had more sophisticated perspectives of the curriculum.

This overview of the literature points to the importance of engaging disciplinary academics in the process of implementing IoC. While the authors acknowledge the impact of disciplinary frameworks and conceptualisations of teaching and learning on attitudes to IoC in the faculties, the present study was designed to extend this current understanding by investigating the perspectives of senior faculty academics.

Research study

Background and methodology

The study was instigated by the Executive of a large research-intensive University, in order to establish current perspectives and practices of senior academic staff within the University's faculties, schools and research institutes. The ultimate goal of the study was to engage academic staff in a whole-institutional debate on IoC and a process of change.

It should be noted that IoC has been implicitly supported in the institution for several years in policy documents, such as the University's strategic plan for teaching and learning, and through the implementation of graduate attributes. However, at the time of the study, the institution did not have any specific policies, strategies or targets on IoC. Nevertheless, it is anticipated that this would change, partly as a consequence of the present research (Green & Mertova 2009).

The study utilized a qualitative research method consisting of semi-structured mainly face-to-face interviews (115) with all of the following:

- Faculty level: Executive Deans; Associate Deans, Academic (ADA); Associate Deans, Research (ADR); and the one Associate Dean, International[2];
- School level: Heads of Schools (HoS), School Teaching and Learning Chairs (T&L Chair);
- Research Institutes: Directors.

The interviews lasted between ten minutes and an hour, depending on the interviewees' interest, and were recorded and transcribed. Data were analysed in an inductive and iterative manner by the authors of this paper. Feedback was also invited from interviewees. Analysis was guided by a list of major themes drawn from literature and these were related to the themes emerging from the interviews. In reporting the understandings, the challenges and the proposed solutions below, interviewees will be referred to by their institutional roles, accompanied by numbers (to differentiate between them) in order to preserve confidentiality.

There were two key methodological limitations. Firstly, the research predominantly focused on a limited range of interviewees (i.e. leaders' perspectives), and thus it was impossible to draw any substantial conclusions regarding differences within/and between individual faculties and disciplines.

Understandings of IoC

[2] This position has been created only in one of the faculties.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, given the lack of IoC policy at the time of the study, the interviewees generally felt uncertain about the 'correct' (by which they meant, institutional) definition of the concept. Another relatively unsurprising finding, given findings from other studies (e.g. Bell 2004; Clifford 2009), was the wide variation of interest in, and understanding of IoC among those interviewed. There were some who expressed little interest in the concept and believed they had no role to play in internationalising the curriculum. At the faculty level, this group was predominantly made up of the ADRs and Directors of the Institutes. The following response from one ADR was typical of this group: 'my responsibility is more to do with research, so with the curriculum my input is minimal.' At the school level, this view was shared by some HoS and T&L Chairs, although at this level, it was usually also associated with a professed lack of understanding about the concept itself.

In line with previous research (Clifford 2009), there was also a tendency for those in the 'hard pure' disciplines to view their knowledge and ways of teaching and learning as 'universal', international in nature and culturally-neutral. This was reflected in a lack of interest or negative attitudes to IoC. However, these findings regarding disciplinary differences in understandings of IoC cannot be generalised due to the limited numbers of interviews conducted within individual disciplines.

Perhaps the most surprising and noteworthy finding in this study was a large number of interviewees who could be characterized as proponents of IoC. Despite their initial uncertainty about the meaning of IoC, a number of interviewees within the faculties and schools held highly positive attitudes towards IoC. Their views were well-informed, comprehensive, consistent with literature and similar irrespective of their disciplinal affiliations.

In describing what they believed to be the characteristics of an international education, these interviewees mentioned principles also found in the current IoC literature. These principles, with references to the literature are listed below, together with quotes from interviewees. One quote has been chosen in each case to exemplify understandings of the whole group:

- *Inclusive* – Linguistically and culturally diverse students shape the nature of the curriculum (Lawrence 2003).

  We are teaching people from very different backgrounds. Embracing that more, recognising that [the diversity of the student cohort] changes the nature of the course…[It isn't] about speaking to any particular cohort of students but making sure that it is accommodating . (ADA1)

- *Comparative and reflexive* – Comparative perspectives become ways of reflecting on one's own culture, ways of constructing knowledge, understanding and being (Sanderson 2008).

  How do you study philosophy of language in France, versus how you study it in English speaking countries? It's going to reflect the cultural differences, the differences in philosophical culture as it's evolved in France versus Australia… (ADA2)

- *'Intentionally' diverse* – Design curriculum so that diversity becomes a resource for all students (Jones & Brown 2007).

  It's also about ensuring that those international experiences are brought into the curriculum – the core curriculum –so that the students who don't get the opportunity to spend some time abroad actually get exposure … (ADA3)

- *Global and local* – Design curriculum which acknowledges the changing dynamic between the global and local (Shiel 2006).

  [Internationalising does not] mean there was no place for local content. For instance, teaching Australian political institutions … we couch the discussion in terms … of understanding and appreciating different perspectives on a country's political institutions … (HoS1)

Interdisciplinarity – Cross-disciplinary learning and teaching promotes better understanding and appreciation of global issues (Engberg & Green 2002).

> I hope our students would also acquire, while they're learning here [social sciences], knowledge about the global issues and how that impacts on [their future practice as professionals]…the global economy and so on (T&L Chair 1)

- *'Informal'* –Informal contacts between students can inform and enrich the formal curriculum. (Leask 2009).

> Having [students] working together across the boundaries…The curriculum could in fact foster this…But we need to support it through things like peer mentoring, buddy sessions, using video conference sessions etc. The curriculum makes a good springboard for this. (T&L Chair 2)

Challenges concerning IoC voiced by academics

Interviewees expressed a number of challenges regarding IoC. The most commonly perceived challenges concerned the need to: 1) define and 'concretise' internationalisation the curriculum (IoC)/internationalisation of teaching and learning (Wächter 2003), in a way that accounts for disciplinary differences; 2) clarify roles of responsibility for IoC; 3) address common misconceptions (such as that local/Australian issues have no place in an internationalised curriculum); 4) harness the cultural diversity of staff to enrich teaching; 5) address wider student welfare issues and creating a more cosmopolitan campus.

Firstly, most interviewees, regardless of personal understandings felt that the sense of uncertainty about the 'correct' meaning of internationalisation of the curriculum needed to be addressed. The following comment by an ADA typifies the sentiments expressed across most faculties and schools.

> I mean this is something that's come up at the Teaching and Learning Committee, and indeed I suppose the discussion always centres around: what does the University mean by internationalisation of the curriculum. (ADA1)

Related to the uncertainty about the 'correct' meaning of IoC was an interconnected set of challenges – the need to 'concretise' the concept within disciplinary contexts and to enable learning outcomes for all students. The following statement typifies this sentiment.

> I believe that internationalisation of the curriculum needs to account for disciplinary specifics, as internationalisation in different disciplines will manifest in slightly different ways. (HoS3)

Further, uncertainty about who was responsible for leading IoC was highlighted. There was one group who emerged as 'de facto' leaders in the area, the ADAs. Although they believed that they should be responsible for the area, they generally felt the need for more institutional guidance and support. This confusion is exemplified by the following statement.

> There is fogginess and a lack of leadership as to who is responsible for internationalisation of the curriculum. (ADA1)

Another widespread issue related to a misconception that local or regional issues or knowledge had no place in an internationalised curriculum. This view, represented in a statement of one T&L Chair below, is seen to be particularly problematic in schools and faculties that offer predominantly professional programmes that require accreditation at a state level.

> Our subject is very much locally-based, so I'm not sure how we can internationalise what we teach. (T&L Chair 3)

Some schools perceived the cultural homogeneity of their staff to be an issue, given that their student cohorts were more culturally diverse. A number of interviewees proposed utilising cultural diversity of staff wherever possible to enrich teaching and the student experience. However, they were mindful that such a potential solution also carries a number of challenges. For example, the workload implications were noted by one ADA.

> We've talked about how we could make better use of [staff] cultural diversity to enhance the teaching we were doing. But at the same time, there was a lot of concern in terms of workload. (ADA1)

The need for addressing wider student welfare issues was also highlighted by a number of staff. The concern with student welfare is expressed in the following statement made by an ADA.

> I also don't think the University as a whole is set up particularly well for international students in terms of accommodation that's available close to campus and at a reasonable cost. I think that's something that we'll need to focus on in the future. (ADA4)

This perception is supported by research in Australia (de Vita 2007) and internationally (Sovic 2008), which points to a range of concerns about the quality of the international student experience, including a low level of satisfaction among international students regarding their contact with domestic students.

Addressing the challenges

As part of the interview process, participants were asked to suggest solutions to the challenges they perceived. To a large extent the following suggestions are based on responses from interviewees.

The uncertainty about the meaning of IoC should be addressed by providing a clear definition of the concept applicable across the institution, in a manner that allows for development and implementation within the disciplines. Based on a number of interviewees' comments at a time when the University did not have existing policies or targets regarding IoC, the study found that it was imperative for the University to establish a framework for internationalising the curriculum. This would be particularly crucial to enable curriculum development, review, evaluation and benchmarking. As one ADA suggested, systematic reviews of IoC within programmes could be incorporated into existing curriculum review processes.

Several interviewees believed that developing discipline-specific, programmatic approaches to IoC ought to be supported by the University. Such support could include access to the institution's learning and teaching grants for the purpose of IoC curriculum innovation, collaboration with academic developers and others with expertise in IoC, dissemination of good practice within and across faculties, formal recognition and reward for good practice and innovation.

The following suggestions for addressing the uncertainty about responsibility for IoC leadership in the faculties, schools and institutes were also made: the university needs to provide clear role descriptions, and establish strong lines of communication between the senior management, the faculties, schools and institutes. This process should not be overly hierarchical. As one ADA suggested:

> Where we fall down is in [this communication] gap … it would be good … to work more closely to establish processes or get feedback. [We need] strategic talk sessions…. There's no point just meeting to [be told about] formal policy. What would be good would be to discuss things more broadly. (ADA5)

Another challenge mentioned by staff – a repeated misconception that local or regional issues or knowledge had no place in an internationalised curriculum – can be addressed by developing a deeper understanding of IoC among staff (e.g. through sharing case studies of good practice among schools and faculties and working closely with academic developers). Further, academics expressed realization that addressing student welfare issues requires a whole-institutional and sector-wide approach, utilizing both formal and informal ('hidden', 'latent') curriculum (Leask 2009).

As acknowledged by some interviewees, the idea of harnessing the cultural diversity of staff to enrich teaching and learning has merit, but also a number of difficulties in terms of operationalisation in a university context. At a time when academics generally feel overworked, and new international academics particularly so (Foote et al 2008), such a proposition would need to be considered carefully. In the short term however, it was proposed that the international connections of all academics could be harnessed more effectively, through a greater promotion of offshore teaching and research collaborations, and sabbaticals[3].

Conclusions

The paper has presented a case of an Australian research-intensive university where there was a perceived gap between internationalisation rhetoric and actual practice. The study found a range of perspectives, with the majority of Executive Deans and Associate Deans, Academic generally being positive about IoC, while the Associate Deans, Research and Directors of Institutes had limited interest. At the School level, opinions were most varied, ranging from enthusiasm and deep interest to a lack of interest and even cynicism. In line with previous research (Clifford 2009; Bond et al 2003), a belief in the 'international' and 'culturally-neutral' nature of disciplinary knowledge and ways of teaching and learning was found in the 'hard pure' disciplines. However, no substantial conclusions regarding disciplinary differences can be drawn from the current study, given the limited number of interviews within individual disciplines.

The study also uncovered a number of significant challenges. From the perspective of curriculum leaders, the University needs to develop a framework for internationalising the curriculum, which accounts for disciplinary differences and a diverse student body. Such a framework should enable curricular development, review, evaluation and benchmarking. One significant component of this would be a definition applicable across the institution. The second significant component of this framework would be to establish and support clear lines of communication and responsibility for internationalisation of the curriculum between the senior management, the faculties and schools.

Finally, it is hoped that other universities engaged in internationalising the curriculum may find some resonances and perhaps some guidance in the discussion of challenges and the ways of addressing them presented here.

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[3] For further discussion of these challenges and the ways they were proposed to be addressed, please refer to Green & Mertova (2009).

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