INTERNATIONALISATION OF THE CURRICULUM AND INTERCULTURAL ENGAGEMENT – A VARIETY OF PERSPECTIVES AND POSSIBILITIES

Dr Betty Leask BA, Dip Ed, M. Applied Linguistics, EdD
University of South Australia

Internationalisation of the curriculum is complex and multi-faceted. This paper reports on research conducted in Hong Kong and Australia. A sample of staff and students involved in the same Australian degree in both locations were interviewed for insights into how they constructed internationalisation of the curriculum – what they thought it was, how they thought it could best be achieved and why they thought it was important. What they had to say was both predictable and unexpected. Using critical discourse analysis the implications of their perspectives for course and program development, for the professional development of academic staff and for student services are explored. The central role of intercultural engagement in the process of internationalisation of the curriculum is highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

One of the key challenges facing the global university community is the resolution of contradictory images of the internationalisation of higher education. On the one hand we have descriptions of approaches to internationalisation focussed on the preparation of graduates for participation in an increasingly globalised society (Knight and de Wit 1995; Leask 1999; Kalantzis and Cope 2000; Leask 2001; Leask 2003). On the other hand we have those who argue that internationalisation in higher education is primarily concerned with the recruitment of fee-paying international students by universities in the developed rich part of the world to the immediate and long-term detriment of universities in the developing, poorer parts of the world (Goodman 1984; Chitoran 1996; Hickling-Hudson 2000; Lee 2000; King 2001; Sharma 2002; Yang 2002). There are also interim positions where it is argued that there are multiple agendas (Knight and de Wit 1997; Gallagher 2002; Leask 2003; OECD 2004). The connections and relationships between internationalisation and higher education are complex and this complexity is reflected in the ways in which internationalisation is spoken about – the discourses that construct it. Internationalisation defies orderly, organized and rational analysis. Its meaning is not fixed, in place or time. On the contrary, different groups construct it differently at the same time in the same place, at the same time in different places, and at different times in different places.

This paper provides ‘snapshots’ of the experience of internationalisation through internationalisation of the curriculum in different places and from different perspectives. It strives for a deeper understanding of the complexity of internationalisation through exploration of the construction of curriculum outcomes related to internationalisation in two different cultural and educational contexts – Adelaide and Hong Kong. The research highlights the need to embed and integrate intercultural learning into the culture of the university – to assist all staff and all students to move into potentially uncomfortable intercultural spaces; to learn from and with each other within those spaces; to challenge their stereotypes and prejudices and to move
on from them. It outlines an approach to professional development and student services that provides multiple opportunities for this to occur.

BACKGROUND

Since 1996 seven Graduate Qualities have been used to assist curriculum planning and to facilitate curriculum change in all undergraduate programs at the University of South Australia (UniSA). To ensure that there is a correlation between the needs of the workplace and the depth achieved in the broad range of skills demonstrated by graduates of different programs, the balance of Graduate Qualities which will be developed in courses within a program must be described as part of the program planning and approval process. It is also a requirement that all Graduate Qualities are developed to some extent in all undergraduate programs. Graduate Quality #7, which relates to the development of international perspectives, should therefore be developed in all undergraduate programs, although it will be given more emphasis in some than in others and may have a different focus in different types of program. Graduate Quality #7 is the official representation of internationalisation in the curriculum and a range of resources have been developed to assist staff and students to interpret this Graduate Quality.

The University of South Australia (UniSA) delivered its first ‘offshore’ or ‘transnational’ program in Hong Kong over 10 years ago. Business Programs delivered in both Adelaide and Hong Kong follow the same curriculum and require the same assessment tasks. They are delivered primarily by Australian staff, but academic support is also provided by local tutors who act as ‘cultural translators’ for the content provided by the visiting Australian academics - the cultural outsiders in the offshore location (Leask 2004). Such sites of interaction offer a rich source of research data for the exploration of issues related to internationalisation of the curriculum in an international and intercultural environment. This paper reports on one small research study in this area, the findings of this study in relation to intercultural engagement and their implications for professional development for academic staff and services for students.

The research study consisted of two small, related case studies of staff and student constructions of Graduate Quality #7 (international perspectives) undertaken over a twelve month period. Five focus group interviews were conducted with students and eight 1:1 interviews with staff. All those interviewed were actively involved in UniSA undergraduate Business programs taught in Adelaide and Hong Kong. In Hong Kong the programs are offered in collaboration with a local partner institution. In the Hong Kong case study staff employed by the partner institution (referred to as ‘local tutors’), Adelaide-based staff who travelled to Hong Kong to teach and Hong Kong based students were interviewed. In the Adelaide case study domestic and international students and the academic staff who taught them (all of whom had also taught in Hong Kong) were interviewed.

The case studies incorporated a number of data-gathering techniques in order to compare the construction of internationalisation in Adelaide and Hong Kong - a complex issue with cross cultural as well as physical, positional (staff/student) and personal boundaries. The main source of data for the two case studies was the transcripts of the tape-recordings of the focus group and 1:1 interviews. Sections of the transcriptions of the interviews were analysed using an approach to critical discourse analysis informed by the work of Fairclough (1989; 1992) and Foucault (1972; 1981). This approach allowed exploration of the connections, patterns and recurring themes in the responses of staff and students in different locations to questions about internationalisation of the curriculum.

The research question in each case study was ‘How do staff and students in this cultural and educational context construct Graduate Quality #7 (international perspectives) and the roles of teachers and learners in its development’. What did they think international perspectives were and how would they know if they had developed them (students) ... or their students had
developed them (staff)? What characteristics would students who had international perspectives show? How could the development of international perspectives be assessed? What roles did teachers and learners play in the process of developing them?

The methodology provided opportunities for staff and students in both locations to speak about internationalisation of the curriculum ‘in context’ at the local, personal and professional level. The multiple perspectives gained in the case studies allowed triangulation of interview data within and across the case studies. This assisted in clarifying the constructions of internationalisation within each context and across positional, physical and cultural contexts.

WHAT ARE INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES?

The way in which staff and students in Hong Kong and Adelaide constructed international perspectives, the outcomes of an internationalised curriculum, in their discourse was very similar. They were related to globalisation; concerned with understanding difference and diversity and the role that culture plays in that and with effective communication with cultural others. They were likely to affect the way students think and act. They were seen as complex, multi-layered and multi-dimensional and therefore very difficult to assess. All involved in it appreciated the complexity of internationalisation. For example, while ‘difference’ needed to be understood on both a global as well as a local scale, this was not enough. Practical skills that would enable effective communication at the local level in spite of fundamental personal and cultural differences and contextual factors such as roles and responsibilities in the workplace were also highlighted as being an important aspect of internationalisation of the curriculum. Self-awareness was also said to be closely related to the development of an understanding of difference. It was seen as developing concurrently with an understanding of others but also enabling that development. The development of international perspectives was therefore viewed as more of a personal integrative process than a set of ideas and/or skills able to be transmitted generically - a process requiring considerable effort on the part of students and particular skills and knowledge on the part of teachers.

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS

All groups interviewed constructed the role of the teacher in the development of international perspectives in students as being primarily concerned with modifying and adapting the curriculum. There was, however, variation in the way in which the different groups constructed this curriculum adaptation.

The Adelaide-based staff highlighted the need for teaching staff to modify and adapt their teaching style to suit the needs of different groups of students and different cultural contexts (Hong Kong and Adelaide). In order to do this they require, of course, quite sophisticated international perspectives themselves. Students were more concerned with content than teaching methodology, with the provision of international examples, but they were also concerned with the teacher’s role in changing the way students think. Students saw the latter as an important outcome of the development of international perspectives related to personal growth, respect and tolerance for difference. But it was also related to the ability to operate in an increasingly globalised and multi-culturally diverse business world and the personal application of complex perspectives within professional contexts. These perspectives highlight how important it is that the internationalisation of content is not seen as an end in itself, but rather as an end to a means – a strategy which will assist learners to become more aware of their own and others cultures. However awareness is not enough, nor is tolerance and respect. What students talked about was the ability to actively and effectively engage with cultural others. Awareness, tolerance and respect are all important enabling factors of engagement, rather than end-points.
For the local Hong Kong tutors the focus was very much on adapting the curriculum brought by the Adelaide-based staff to the local Hong Kong context, providing appropriate Hong Kong or Chinese examples to illustrate principles and theories and working closely with students to encourage and coax them to change their thinking, to be more open, aware and understanding of cultural others. Their role was thus constructed as one of ‘cultural translator and mediator’ (Leask 2004). The Adelaide-based staff who travelled to teach in Hong Kong saw their role as ‘teacher in Hong Kong’ as being different from their role as ‘teacher in Adelaide’. In Hong Kong they were more concerned with coming to terms with the cultural context of the teaching and learning environment than they were in Adelaide. They were very concerned with the need to be flexible and creative in their teaching in order to meet the needs of the culturally challenging learning environment in Hong Kong. And while this was also a concern in Adelaide due to increasing diversity in the student population it was less of a concern than in Hong Kong. This is more akin to ‘contextualisation’ than ‘internationalisation’ – adapting content and teaching style to fit the local context, making it relevant and understandable to students, rather than internationalisation of the curriculum.

THE ROLE OF STUDENTS

Both staff and students interviewed for the Adelaide case study saw all students, international and domestic, as needing to develop their international perspectives and international students as able to contribute positively to this process. All students from other cultural backgrounds, whether they were enrolled in a program taught in Adelaide or Hong Kong, were also seen as being able to assist staff to develop their own international perspectives, although much more effort was put into this when staff were teaching in Hong Kong than when they were teaching in Adelaide. Cultural diversity within the student body was thus seen as a valuable resource for internationalisation of the curriculum. It was also, however, seen as requiring effort and planning in order for the benefit to be realised.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

Academic staff believed strongly that they had learned a great deal from their teaching in Hong Kong, that it had transformed them in some way and this was a significant part of this experience. All said that teaching in Hong Kong had helped them to develop their own international perspectives, both personally and within the discipline, as they were able to learn from students. However this was a process that had required considerable personal effort to deliberately create intercultural learning opportunities for themselves within and outside class. Academic staff based in Adelaide and travelling to Hong Kong to teach are the cultural outsiders in the offshore location. They are thus in a similar position to international students on exchange in another country—they are strangers, foreigners, in the host culture. As for some international students, for some teachers it is the first time that their own ‘taken for granted culture becomes visible to them or they realise that other people hold stereotypes and prejudices about them’ (Stier 2003, p. 80). The imperative to work towards intercultural understanding in this situation is very strong. The interviews with Adelaide-based staff teaching in Hong Kong indicated that teaching offshore is both an intellectual challenge and an emotional journey, one which requires academic staff, as strangers in a strange land, to come to terms with the perceptions that staff and students in Hong Kong have of them, with the differences and similarities between Hong Kong and Adelaide that confront them and challenge their stereotypes and prejudices, and which can lead to feelings of frustration, confusion and disorientation. It was also a process for which there was no professional or ‘workload’ recognition and for which they felt unprepared.

Intercultural competence, the ‘understandings, competencies, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation and identities necessary for successful cross-cultural engagement’ (Heyward 2002, p. 10) is a recurring theme in the discourses of internationalisation in higher education. Definitions of internationalisation in higher education have repeatedly emphasised the
intercultural. The preparation of ‘faculty, staff and students to function in an international and intercultural context’ (Knight and de Wit 1995), the process of integration of ‘an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education’ (Knight 2003) stress the ‘intercultural’ as an important part of internationalisation. The descriptions that academic staff gave of their learning experiences in Hong Kong were descriptions of dynamic intercultural learning – processes and activities which developed their skills, knowledge and attitudes and assisted them to relate, interact and function interculturally. They then transferred their learning to their teaching in Adelaide, their intercultural learning ‘there’ thus enriching their teaching ‘here’, ‘at home’. This strong theme of teacher as intercultural learner and, related to this, the need for teachers to be flexible and adaptable to new cultural environments as higher education itself becomes increasingly ‘globalised’, has implications for staff induction and professional development.

**Intercultural learning and internationalisation of the curriculum**

Intercultural learning is clearly an important part of internationalisation of the curriculum in any context. Knight (2003) describes the intercultural as ‘relating to the diversity of cultures that exist within countries, communities, and institutions’. Intercultural engagement and learning is not, however, an easy thing to achieve. As Paige (Paige 1993, p. 1) points out, ‘professional intercultural educators know that communicating and interacting with culturally different others is psychologically intense’ and has several risk factors associated with it, including risk of embarrassment and risk of failure (p. 13). ‘Intercultural education strives to develop critical engagement, self-reflection and sensitivity towards any aspect of interaction and communication between “self” and “others”’ (Papademetre 2003, p. 1). It involves the development of understandings of how the languages and cultures of others influence their thoughts, values, actions and feelings, and it is argued that this cannot occur unless we also understand the ways in which our own language and culture influences our actions, reactions, values and beliefs. This is complex and challenging and involves students and staff moving into a ‘third place’ (Lo Bianco, Liddicoat et al. 1999, p. 13), a meeting place between different cultures where there is recognition of the manifestation of cultural difference, and where equal and meaningful reconstructive cross-cultural dialogue can occur. This place may be simultaneously uncomfortable, challenging, enriching and exciting.

However, intercultural learning is often assumed to be an automatic outcome and benefit of intercultural contact whether that be contact resulting from having a range of cultures together on campus (AEI 1998, p. 2) and in class. The assumption is that proximity → intercultural contact → intercultural learning/competence. Given that ‘Australia now has one of the highest proportions of international students on campus of any country in the world’ (Smart, Volet et al. 2000, p. 9), we would therefore expect there to be high levels of intercultural competence amongst the university community in Australia. However, research in Australia and overseas into the interaction and engagement between different cultural groups on campus (Volet and Ang 1998; Robertson, Lane et al. 2000) does not support the crude proximity → intercultural contact → intercultural learning/competence equation. If intercultural learning does not occur automatically as a result of intercultural contact ‘at home’ it is probably therefore unlikely that it will be an outcome of offshore teaching for either staff or students without strategic intervention.

**A FRAMEWORK FOR STAFF AND STUDENT DEVELOPMENT**

The relationship of international perspectives to ways of thinking and doing is multi-dimensional and has implications for staff and students, for what is taught and how it is taught, for professional development and for staff induction.

The development of international perspectives is complex and difficult, exciting and valuable for staff and students. Their lives are busy. The development of international perspectives in
students requires strategic planning and particular types of support. Staff and students offshore and onshore will have different needs at different times. The development of international perspectives needs to be incremental and take account of the dynamic social, educational and personal contexts within which staff and students work. A conceptual framework for the development of teaching and learning services to assist the incremental development of international perspectives in all students and staff is described here. It is built around themes and sub-themes which emerged from the two case studies. The themes around which professional development for staff is organised are ‘mirrored’ for student services – and these services should be provided for all students – international and domestic students. The primary themes for academic staff development are ‘teacher as intercultural learner’, ‘teaching as an intercultural conversation’ and ‘teacher as manager of the intercultural learning environment’. The primary themes for the delivery of services to students are ‘students as intercultural learners’, ‘learning as an intercultural conversation’ and ‘students as managers of their own intercultural learning’.

Table 1: A framework for staff and student development of international perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students as intercultural learners</th>
<th>Teaching as an intercultural conversation</th>
<th>Teachers as managers of the intercultural learning environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategies for developing intercultural and international perspectives in and out of class</td>
<td>Setting intercultural learning goals within your profession/course</td>
<td>Providing/using feedback for intercultural learning (students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating effectively interculturally in and out of class</td>
<td>Making the most of intercultural talk in and out of class to achieve your goals</td>
<td>Strategies to get the most out of group work for intercultural learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources for intercultural learning</td>
<td>Communicating effectively across cultures in and out of class</td>
<td>Assessment of international perspectives (staff) How will I know how I’m going? (students)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The framework also identifies nine sub-themes associated with the six primary themes. The sub-themes provide a conceptual framework for the development of workshops and resources offered as part of induction, foundational professional development and ongoing professional development for staff and, for students, workshops and learning support resources for orientation, for integration into course materials and for continuous and end-point evaluation of their development of international perspectives. In some instances resources could be ‘stand alone’ (for example, a Teaching Guide for staff on Strategies for developing intercultural and international perspectives in and out of class and a Learning Guide for students on the same topic); in others the focus may be more devolved, such as integration of a range of suggestions into course booklets for students and a range of Teaching Guides for staff around the sub-theme of Making the most of intercultural talk in and out of class to achieve your goals. The framework allows for all staff and all students to be supported in similar ways to achieve incremental goals. However, the framework is not an end point – evaluation of the effectiveness of the framework and the strategies which sit within it should be undertaken regularly and used to review the provision of services to support the development of international perspectives in all students.
CONCLUSION

Internationalisation of the curriculum provides challenges and opportunities for both students and staff. Opportunities for transformational intercultural engagement with cultural others are abundant in Australian higher education but the challenges are varied and complex. For the challenges to be met, strategically planned professional development and student services for all students and staff are needed. Services need to take account of the needs of students and staff from diverse backgrounds working in diverse contexts and the complexities associated with moving into a ‘third place’ – a meeting place between cultures, a place of challenge and opportunity.

REFERENCES


Knight, J. and H. de Wit, Eds. (1997). Internationalisation of higher education in Asia Pacific countries. Amsterdam, EAIE.


Leask, B. (2003). Beyond the numbers - levels and layers of internationalisation to utilise and support growth and diversity. 17th IDP Australian International Education Conference, Melbourne, Australia.


Papademetre, L. (2003). Division of Education Arts and Social Sciences, Internationalisation Workshop Notes. Adelaide, University of South Australia.


