The critical study on the internationalization of higher education in Taiwan

Li-chuan Chiang
National University of Tainan, Tainan, Taiwan
lcchiang@mail.nutn.edu.tw

When internationalization changed from experiencing the growth of outward mobility in the 1980s and 1990s to implementing particular practices on campus, Taiwan became an interesting case study for the critical examination of the key question about whose interests are served during the process of internationalization of higher education. This study aimed to explore the views of faculty and students about the internationalization of higher education in Taiwan to fill the gap between the policy rhetoric and realities. Providing empirical evidence to identify the perceptual gap between what is being said and what is actually happening is a promising step forward for higher education stakeholders as they consider what internationalization is for and for whom it is intended. The study began by interviewing 52 academics from various disciplines. Secondly, 14 focus groups with 122 students were undertaken. The results revealed that faculty critically questioned the idea of internationalization and students felt disengaged with internationalization. These views challenge the taken-for-granted assumption that institutional practices of internationalization benefit students’ learning. Based on the results, conclusions and suggestions are proposed.

Keywords: internationalization; higher education; Taiwan

Introduction

Globalization is shaping the landscape of higher education worldwide. The internationalization of higher education has become “an institutional imperative, not just a desirable possibility” (Hudzik, 2011, 7) and a key part appearing in institutional mission statements more than ever before (de Wit, 2009). However, the internationalization of higher education means different things to different people. Knight (2003, 2, cited in Knight, 2004, 11) refers to it as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education”. Being practical, this study defines internationalization as how higher education institutions enable international activities to enhance students’ learning in a way that nurtures their global competency and international perspectives.

In relation to internationalization there are many gaps between the idea and the practice. While the view that internationalization should be process-oriented is often quoted, activity-oriented internationalization has been observed. One of the gaps is between stated institutional priorities accompanied by their lack of commitment to curriculum internationalization and everyday practices that might enhance student learning quality (Bond, Qian & Huang, 2003). The institutional concern for accountability for internationalized has overtaken concerns about quality-related enhancement for faculty and students. A gap exists between the needs and rationales for internationalization of administrative staff and faculty. While students hope to add an international experience to enhance their learning experiences,
résumés and employability, the rate of participation in international activities on campus is relatively low. Creating a more culturally diverse learning campus environment is embedded with a deep belief that the inclusion of international learning would enhance students’ global competencies (e.g., Mok, Yu, & Wu, 2014, 20). The reality perceived by faculty and students tells a different story.

Faculty are critical to creating a student learning environment that develops global competencies and international perspectives. As Stohl (2007) observes, there is a lack of faculty engagement in the challenge of developing and sustaining internationalization in the 21st century. Understanding faculty views on internationalization would help to improve their engagement in it. This study also recognizes the different disciplinary cultures that might form different views about internationalization between natural science and humanities and social science disciplines. Some disciplinary fields like business and management think internationalization is essential and necessary, but others like engineering and physics question it as their disciplinary contents are already similar globally.

Students’ views are also worthy of serious consideration. The challenge for higher education to provide a qualified workforce with global competency (knowledge, skills and values) to live and work in the globalized era remains huge. To address such a challenge many documents and studies assert that internationalizing the curriculum is a key. As Leask (2001, 100) argues, “internationalizing university curricula is a powerful and practical way of bridging the gap between rhetoric and practice”. For moving beyond ‘wishing and hoping’, a strategic and informed intervention is needed to improve the learning environment in the process of internationalization (Leask & Carroll, 2011). An internationalized university curriculum is needed to promote internationalization at home that provides a supportive and inclusive environment to nurture international perspectives for all students, not just for international students. To a certain extent, the students’ views on an internationalized curriculum represent what the internationalization of higher education means for them.

Governments in selected Asian countries have adopted a series of initiatives to transform their higher education sectors and enhance their national competitiveness in the increasingly globalized world. Like most other Asian nations, the Taiwan government has recognized the importance of higher education in nurturing ‘soft power’ through avenues such as attracting global talents and internationalizing its higher education to promote its political, economic and cultural interests. To increase their competitive edge in higher education the government has set up two-rounds of five-year competitive funding since 2006 directed at top research universities and centers of excellence to pursue the goal of being a world-class university. Under pressure from neighboring countries such as Hong Kong, South Korea, Malaysia and Singapore to become a higher education regional hub, the Taiwan government has recognized higher education as an industry and established a goal to be the Higher Education Center for Southeast Asia. Currently, out of 1.3 million students in higher education, 44,700 (about 3.33 percent) are foreign students. Most are from Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan. They study business administration, engineering, agriculture and technology-related subjects. According to the official Action Plan for Higher Education Export by the Executive Yuan in 2011, it is planned that the population of foreign students will grow to 88,000 by 2014 and to 150,000 by 2020, accompanied by a growth in export value to US$0.79 billion in 2014 to 1.36 billion in 2020.

In response to government policy directions, higher education institutions have adopted strategies including offering English-taught programs, recruiting foreign students, increasing
publication of papers in international journals, and obtaining international accreditation for programs to achieve the goal of internationalization. Since internationalization strategies have changed from experiencing a growth in outward mobility in the 1980s and 1990s to implementing specific practices on campus, Taiwan has become an interesting case study for critically addressing the key question about whose interests are served during the process of internationalization at the institutional level. However, a review of scholarship on the internationalization of higher education in Taiwan reveals a similar pattern to the current international literature, that is, more of a focus on the learning experiences of international students and institutional strategies and practices of internationalization. For example, studies (e.g., Roberts, Chou & Ching, 2010; Hwang, Wang & Sodanine, 2011) have investigated the characteristics, the impact of stressors and social support on adjustment and learning experiences of international students, quantitatively and qualitatively. However, few studies critically examine the gap between institutional internationalization practices and the grounded views of faculty and students in terms of learning quality enhancement. This study aims to explore grounded views about the internationalization of higher education in Taiwan to fill a gap between the policy rhetoric and realities. Providing empirical evidence to identify the perceptual gap between what is being said and what is actually happening would be a promising step for higher education stakeholders as they seek to understand what internationalization is for and for whom it is for.

In the following section, the design for data collection is described. Secondly, the results drawn from faculty’s and students’ perspectives are presented. Based on the results, the issues and questions warranting further reflection and research on institutional practices of internationalization and learning quality enhancement are discussed. Finally, conclusions are drawn and suggestions proposed.

Method

This empirical study aims (a) to explore the views of faculty on institutional practices of internationalization in terms of enhancing student learning quality, and (b) to explore the students’ views on internationalization of curricula and its impacts on their learning to be internationalized. A qualitative approach is adopted for developing a thorough understanding of the personal experiences of faculty and students in the process of internationalization. Data in this study were drawn from two studies, funded by the National Science Council of Taiwan (newly integrated into the Ministry of Science and Technology, MOST).

Interviews

Based on the extensive literature and the study aim, open-ended interview questions were developed to allow interviewees to reconstruct their views and experiences on the internationalization of higher education in their institutions, particularly in terms of student learning quality. To collect rich and diverse data, interviewees from different institutional types and academic disciplines were invited. There were 52 semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews undertaken during the period between June 2008 and March 2009. Among them, 41 interviewees were from national universities, and 11 from private ones; 45 from general universities and 7 from technological universities. Among them, 28 interviewees were from natural sciences and 24 from social sciences and humanities.
Focus Group Study

A qualitative approach using focus group was selected for two reasons. First, it is an effective way to study the experiences of a particular group and to generate mutual discussion and idea exchange when participants have various degrees of involvement in internationalization, ranging from limited to some. Second, it is useful to study the needs of the participants who are the main beneficiaries of the internationalized curricula implemented as the core element of the internationalization.

Participants were enrolled in different types of universities and disciplinary areas. They were recruited through the International Student Services, the Registry, department heads, or course coordinators. Interested students were invited to attend one of the 14 focus groups, organized on different days and times during the period from March to May in 2011. The duration of each focus group was around 90 to 150 minutes. A variety of groups were formed, including six groups of undergraduates, five groups of postgraduates and three mixed groups. One hundred and twenty-two students (75 undergraduates and 47 postgraduates) participated in the focus groups. There were 109 participants (50 males and 59 females) who completed forms about their personal information and relevant experiences in international activities.

The probes developed for the focus groups consisted of three main questions. First, the participants were invited to share their past experiences and their future expectations related to going abroad for study and work. Second, they were asked to share their perceptions and experiences of how internationalization of curricula in their departments related to their learning that might, or might not, make them more internationally-oriented. This probe sought to increase awareness among participants of the possibility of internationalization at home through the course design and development. Third, they were free to share their personal strategies that enhanced their international experiences.

In each session, the participants were briefed about the study purpose and asked to complete the forms related to their international experiences. All participants were explicitly informed that the participation was voluntary in nature and that they were free to discontinue at any time. As facilitator the author encouraged participants to express their points of view, particularly for the less vocal undergraduates. One or two research assistants took notes to ensure that all comments were recorded. At the end of the session, the participants were thanked and presented a US$6 gift voucher for their participation in the study.

Data Analysis

All faculty interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and verbatim transcribed. The transcripts were used as the main source for data analysis. Coding procedures from open coding, axial coding and selective coding, as Corbin and Strauss (1990) suggest for grounded theory approaches, was undertaken to make sense of the interview and focus group data. In due course repeatedly reading transcripts made it possible: (1) to identify recurrent themes regarding what the internationalization of higher education meant for faculty and students; and (2) to explore their experiences in engaging in internationalization. To preserve anonymity, all interviewees and focus group participants were given a code.

Results

Since the length of the paper is limited, the findings reported here are purposively selected to focus on this study’s aims.
Faculty’s Perspectives

The results indicated that the interviewees did not share a common understanding of the meanings of the internationalization of higher education. A few defined internationalization as international activities, events and festivals, including attracting international students, inviting foreign scholars, expanding study abroad and exchange programs, signing international partnership agreements and international research collaborations and publications, and expanding English-taught programs. The interviewees (e.g., Nat.8, Nat.9, Nat.10, Nat.14 & H&S24) indicated that to become internationalized was mainly serving the institutional needs for performance and accountability instead of for enhancing the quality of education. Several interviewees from both natural and social sciences (e.g., Nat.9, Nat.30, Nat.43, H&S21 & H&S23) suggested that higher education institutions were losing their direction if they adopted competition for research funding, for ranking, for paper publications, and for international students and foreign scholars as their internationalization goals. The following views were also expressed by many interviewees:

1. Their institutions were ‘busy around’ in offering multi-various international activities respectively for faculty and for students.
2. Their institutions were more concerned about accountability than student learning quality enhancement.
3. Beyond the foreign language learning and English-taught programs, lack of a curriculum dimension and approach for pursuing internationalization was identified.

One phenomenon to be noted was the ‘catch-up mentality’ recognized by the interviewees (e.g., Nat.11, Nat.14, H&S18 & H&S21). Such a mentality suggested that Taiwan had no alternative except to bridge itself to the world through the process of internationalization. However, the current ways undertaken to form a bridge were distorted and ill defined. These approaches included worshiping the West’s strength, looking for their academic criteria as golden standards, and using English as medium of instruction. Having more English-taught programs seemed to show Taiwan was catching up with the trend of internationalization reflected in Asian countries, but interviewees (e.g., Nat.45 & H&S7) observed the negative effects on students’ learning. The interviewee from the Department of Literature (H&S7) where most of the existing programs were in English pointed out that “the current challenge for internationalization was how to effectively motivate student learning attitudes and to engage them in class discussion and raise meaningful questions even in Chinese”. She continued by questioning “why English for”. For internationalization to occur, institutional policies requested faculty to develop more programs taught in English, but the teaching quality and learning outcomes of these programs were a source of much concern to most of interviewees. For example, the interviewee from the College of Life Sciences (Nat. 45) expressed her concern that “such English-taught program in class packed with local students has become English class at the expense of professional knowledge contents and learning quality”. She argued that the reason for attracting international students was the academic capacity and quality of an institution which was more critical than what language it used as a medium of instruction.

Due to the institutional reward system, publishing academic works in international Science Citation indexed journals (SCI) and Social Science indexed journals (SSCI) was highly sought by faculty. However, enthusiastically pursuing publications in internationally-indexed journals consumed much of faculty’s time and energy that would otherwise have been applied to teaching, scholarship and service. The interviewee from the Department of Marine Environment and Engineering (Nat.43), annually identified for their teaching excellence, was
quite worried about the phenomena of SCI and SSCI, and domination of publications and
citations in daily academic conversations. The interviewee from the Department of
Architecture (Nat.30) at a comprehensive research university adopted the tragedy story of Dr.
Faust to describe the mentality of higher education in Taiwan as losing its ‘soul’ by taking its
current attitude to internationalization. For him, internationalization in Taiwan had forced
faculty to enter into “the English composition contest” or to “hire foreign post-doctoral
researchers” in order to write English papers to join SCI/SSCI publication club.

There was little institutional incentive or reward for faculty to enhance internationalization at
home through course design and development to benefit students’ learning. Most of
interviewees from both natural sciences and social sciences (e.g. Nat.9, Nat.12, Nat.30,
Nat.43 & H&S24) perceived a weak relationship between internationalization and students’
learning experiences at their institutions in terms of curriculum development, educational
quality, program offering, and learning support. The interviewee from the Department of Law
(H&S21) even suspected the dominant discourse of internationalization could drive out other
possibilities that might benefit student learning. He asked:

If we do best in cultivating and educating local talents to contribute to the local society,
why not do so? Where are we wrong? Why we are definitively compelled to fit into the
frame of internationalization?

The fundamental concern of many interviewees was how to increase students’ learning
motivation and prepare them to meaningfully engage in not only the global but also their local
society. However, it was not possible to achieve this outcome in an institution if it did not
recognize the use of internationalization as a means to enhance the quality of learning.

As more and more ‘international’ activities were adopted, a few of interviewees questioned
why ‘international’ merely and narrowly referred to activities related to English-speaking and
advanced countries. The interviewee (H&S22) from the Department of Law mentioned his
personal experience of applying the research funding for a study of labor law in the
Netherlands. He failed to obtain research funds because the Netherlands was not recognized
among the top countries in his field by the review panel. A similar situation happened to
another interviewee (Nat.14) from the Department of Forestry. He described his dilemma in
applying for funds to do research in those South-east Asian countries in which he was
interested. In the end to obtain funding he changed the countries he would study and applied
to America and Canada for his field work.

Students’ Perspectives

Reflections on students’ perspectives involved analysing the (1) extent of involvement in
international-oriented experience and career plan as the background to understand the
characteristics of the participants, and (2) students’ perceptions of the ways in which an
internationalized curriculum in their departments might enhance international perspectives for
their students’ learning experiences.

According to Table 1, more than half of the participants did not have any international
experience in terms of tourism, study abroad, and residence abroad before entering into the
university. Even for those who claimed to have international experiences, the experiences
were closely related to tourism. During their university years, over half of them claimed to
have international experiences. The top four international experiences were, in sequential
order, foreign language learning, attending international conferences in Taiwan, having international friends, and tourism. For their future career plan, less than one-third of the participants considered study abroad or working overseas, and even fewer considered migration. More interestingly, while 34.9% of participants had considered study abroad for their future career, the percentage of those taking up an exchange opportunity offered by their institution was as low as 5.5%. Interestingly, about 30% of the participants claimed that they had never heard about the internationalization of the curriculum. Among those who had heard about it, nearly half of them indicated that they knew about it from university documents, and one-third of them from their classes, particularly in the general education courses.

Table 1: The international experiences of the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses (Total=109)</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Before entering University</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes: 45 (41.3%) Tourism</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study abroad</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No: 64 (58.7%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>During University</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes: 61 (55.4%) Foreign language learning</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend international conferences in Taiwan</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have international friends</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange programs</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No: 48 (44.6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Future career plan</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To study abroad: 38 (34.9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To work overseas: 37 (33.9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To migrate: 11 (10.1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Heard about internationalization of curriculum</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes: 76 (69.7%) From University documents</td>
<td>53 (48.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From classes</td>
<td>41 (37.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never: 33 (30.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the participants took wait-and-see and nothing-to-do-with-me attitudes toward their institutions’ internationalization practices. The mismatch between the institutional intentions to internationalize students’ learning experience via holding various international activities and the students’ real feelings and engagement was strong. When coming to ask the participants about their courses in their departments, most of their courses were not related to any of the defining characteristics of internationalization of the curricula, such as curricula leading to internationally recognized professional qualifications, preparing graduates for defined international professions, leading to joint or double degrees, with an international subject area or language studies, and so on.

The participants were asked to answer the question that if their courses were developed toward the defining characteristics of internationalization of the curriculum, would that help
students’ learning to be more internationalized. Some of the participants held positive views that courses with international features would enhance students’ international experiences in terms of multicultural learning, mobility, and global connectedness. Participants (e.g., 4-3 & 4-4), for example, recognized that having internationally accredited courses and courses with training of cross-cultural communication and skills would benefit students’ learning and enhance their opportunity to be globally mobile. However, doubtful responses were often obtained. It was clear that the majority of the participants (e.g., 1-1, 1-5, 4-2, 6-4, 7-6, 7-8, 7-9, 8-5, 11-12, & 14-5) cared more about how courses were to be designed and delivered by faculty instead of the courses having or not having international features. The courses with international features did not automatically enhance students’ learning and international experiences. However, a handful of the participants (e.g., 4-2 & 8-5) still looked forward to having more courses with international features in their department simply because having a bit was better than nothing.

Discussion

Internationalization is ideally viewed as an integral element of educational development and innovation and a means to improve the quality of education (van der Wende, 1999). All these quality-related issues need to link internationalization strategies with policies for innovation, staff development, and quality improvement and should occupy a central place in continued internationalization efforts (Jenkins-Deas, 2009). However, the internationalization of higher education in Taiwan is another emerging reality, one with much work to do and progress to be achieved.

The study finds confusing and mixed responses to the current institutional practices of internationalization in Taiwan. Though there are diverse international activities on campus, an add-on activity, instead of process-oriented approach to internationalization, is clearly portrayed. The accountability for student learning to be internationalized is of much more concern than the quality-related matters in enhancing student learning. Whose interests are better served? The current internationalization practices benefit those better-resourced institutions and disciplines which are keen to perform well in offering English-taught programs, SCI/SSCI paper publications and international student recruitment. Those who have taken a more reactive approach to exploit the research opportunities during the process of internationalization look forward to higher visibility in the academic publications. All this seems to distract faculty’s attention away from thinking over the nature of education and care for learning. Faculty’s voices and narratives in this study challenge some of our taken-for-granted assumptions that internationalization practices would benefit students’ learning to a certain extent. Keeping in mind the reminder given by Hudzik and Stohl (2009), the current situation of being busy with many international activities would assign internationalization a secondary status in the eyes of institutional leaders and senior administrators.

The responses of student participants could be described as taking a more passive approach to the exploitation of internationalization opportunities for their learning and future career planning. Like Taiwan, many countries in the world are experiencing mobility-driven internationalization, that is, universities have invested much time and effort to provide mechanisms for student mobility, increasing enrolment of international students and climbing numbers of student exchange programs. However, student mobility is not as sizeable as it should be, and limited to the elite group of students. While universities are making a lot of effort to assist international students with their adaptation, this study reminds us that the
majority of students who are non-mobile need greater attention if we wish to reduce the relatively tricky gap between the policy hype and rhetoric and having-nothing-to-do with internationalization. How to motivate the majority of students to take advantage of institutional practices of internationalization to achieve their need to be globally competent is a challenging task.

As discussed above, the question of internationalization ‘for what’ and ‘for whom’ arises if internationalization of higher education only benefits a certain group of faculty and elite students who have more personal resources to pursue international experiences. The paper argues that simply holding more international activities or setting reward mechanisms for pushing for more English-taught programs and indexed journal articles will not guarantee the kind of learning environment for enhancing students’ international perspectives. An effective coordination is strongly needed between and among institutional, faculty and student aspects in terms of curriculum development, educational quality, program offering, and learning support.

In the document issued by the International Association of Universities (IAU) (2012), the inherent value of the internationalization of higher education is asserted but its potentially adverse unintended consequences are acknowledged. The prevalence of English, the pursuit of a single excellence model, brain drain caused by large-scale international student recruitment, and the risk of exclusion involved in the prestige game for international partnerships emerge. The IAU (2012) suggests that the higher education institutions everywhere should make their efforts to avoid or at least mitigate the potential adverse consequences in pursuing internationalization. For the Taiwan case, however, the efforts should be put into thinking over how to enlarge the positive and of reciprocal benefits of the internationalization of higher education for all faculty and students.

Conclusion

The case in Taiwan reveals the institutional anxiety for accountability in the internationalization process instead of being concerned with enhancing faculty’s commitment towards internationalization to benefit students’ learning and prepare them to live and work globally. The benefits of internationalization for student learning enhancement are full of lofty expectations but fraught with potential challenges if the questions and critiques of faculty are not addressed. Internationalization would show marked improvement in reality if faculty were convinced to recognize internationalization as a means for better scholarship and professional development. However, being realistic, this is not possible to be achieved if faculty is less rewarded by their institutional policies and less recognized by their peers in their disciplines. Thus it’s time for institutional leaders and senior administrator to think about how to create a positive and engaging environment for faculty to encourage them to commit to internationalization of the curricula that equip students with global competencies and international perspectives.

To achieve the goal of the comprehensive but not exclusive internationalization, the actions planned by the institutions should possess a spirit of engagement. The following suggestions might improve the engagement of faculty and students:

1. To call for a greater debate about the rationales for being internationalized and what learning outcomes a graduate should achieve to position the internationalization of higher education as a critical means to serve the needs of faculty and students.
2. To develop practical but quality-related strategies to make the coordination sustainable between faculty and student aspects through the institutional practices of
internationalization.
3. To regularly undertake a review process to examine whether or not these strategies have been institutionalized and effective to enhance learning quality for gaining a greater ‘buy-in’ not only from faculty but from wider student community.

While the sample from Taiwan might limit the generalizability of the results, we would nonetheless like to propose the valuable lessons we have learned as general recommendations to institution leaders to rethink the priorities for internationalization while there are so many competing agendas. Countries like Taiwan wishing to pursue international competitiveness under the frame of accountability should reflect deeply on how to integrate internationalization into education quality enhancement to benefit academics’ teaching and research and students’ learning. Finally, results should be taken with caution as more studies are needed to continue the understanding on-going process related to the experiences of faculty and students with multiple but divergent needs. The views of faculty and students might reveal some realities but not all since they might have been contextualized and filtered by their internal motivation and aspiration for internationalization.

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