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Embracing and resisting border pedagogies: Student views of internationalising the curriculum in higher education

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Abstract: *Universities have responded to changes in the social, political and economic environments by repositioning themselves as internationalised institutions. There has been a new focus on producing graduates fit for living and working in multicultural, global environments. This focus has required changes to the curriculum but little attention has been paid to the student view, or understanding of, internationalising the curriculum and its challenges. This paper presents the perceptions of internationalisation of the curriculum of students from three different countries. It shows that internationalisation of the curriculum fits with students' expectations of their university education and that they see the abilities of staff, the curriculum content, and the learning environment and teaching strategies as areas of concern. There appears to be a parallel need for staff and students to be challenged to engage in critical pedagogy and 'border crossing'.*

Keywords: *internationalisation of the curriculum, multicultural, academic development*

Introduction

Internationalisation of the curriculum has moved beyond being a fad to being fundamental to the purpose of university education. The large increase in the numbers of international students in Australia over the last two decades prompted serious consideration of internationalisation of the curriculum. The debate on internationalisation of the curriculum was widened in 1999 by Nilsson's conceptualisation of 'Internationalisation at Home' (Nilsson, 2003). Nilsson's concern was with the 90% of students who remain at home and also need to be prepared for living and working in a globalised world and for becoming responsible world citizens.

For the Australian university in this study a further dimension has been added to deliberations of internationalisation of the curriculum by the development of offshore campuses in Asia and Africa. These differently situated campuses have brought new perspectives and new demands to the parent university. How to foster the personal and professional growth of a diverse student body for a globalised economy and pay attention to the development of values and attitudes towards justice, equality, democracy, sustainability of the global environment and issues of development, has become a critical curriculum issue at the university.

A substantial literature on international students has familiarised us with issues for international students: culture shock from the newness of everything and the need to adjust to new roles, and the

need to fit in and belong; and study shock from the new learning environment, teaching strategies and staff-student relationships (McNamara and Harris, 1997; Robertson et al, 2000; Ryan and Hellmundt, 2003). However, Pyvis and Chapman's (2004) study is one of the first to look at the views and aims of students studying offshore, and little attention has been paid to the views of domestic students of International Education.

This paper, from a study of staff and students, presents and discusses perspectives of students on the internationalising of the university curriculum. The students are studying at one university, but located in three different countries. The backgrounds, experiences and geographical locations of the students differ but their expectations of their tertiary education are similar and in line with the university's internationalisation policies. However, questions are raised as to the extent that the university has embraced critical pedagogy with the introduction of internationalisation.

The study

A study was carried out at an Australian university to discover current orientations of staff and students to internationalising the curriculum, to reveal current practice in the area and to stimulate further activity in the area. A qualitative methodology was chosen to gain in-depth understanding and to target staff actively involved in internationalisation of the curriculum.

The University has six campuses in Australia, one in Malaysia and one in South Africa. Staff and students were interviewed in all three countries. Nine students were interviewed in Australia, four in South Africa and two students in Malaysia. The interviews were carried out by two research assistants in Australia and by staff members at the overseas campuses. The interviews followed a structured questionnaire, were taped and transcribed. The transcripts were entered into NVIVO for categorisation.

The students were asked what internationalisation of the curriculum meant to them and what they had learnt about other cultures from their social and educational experiences at the university. The interview focused on course content, teaching strategies and assessment practices that the students perceived as contributing to internationalisation of the curriculum, and on their preferences. They were also asked what attributes they thought staff should have to be able to teach an internationalised curriculum and what attributes students should acquire from such an education.

Student voices

Quotes from interview transcripts are coded with the country of origin of the student and the campus e.g. [Russia, MSA]. The campuses are shown as: MA = Australia, MM = Malaysia, MSA = South Africa.

Demographic details

The demographic details of the students interviewed are shown at Table 1. The students are shown by their country of origin (which may not indicate their ethnicity) as this was considered to be a better indicator of their educational background. The students were very diverse in terms of their educational backgrounds, especially in English language skills, computer skills and prior knowledge of subjects.

The two Malaysian campus students, one of the South African campus students and five of the Australian campus students were local students, although two of the latter had been born overseas. The other seven students were international students. Eight of the students were under 25 and seven in the 25-34 age group, six were female and nine male. The students were studying a range of disciplines and two were postgraduates. English was the first language for five of the students.

Campus	Country of origin	First language	Other languages
Malaysia	Malaysia	Chinese	English, Malaysian
Malaysia	Malaysia	English	Malaysian
South Africa	Botswana	Tswana	English
South Africa	Botswana	Tswana	English
South Africa	Zimbabwe	Shona	English
South Africa	South Africa	Tsonga	English, Zulu, Sotho, Tswana
Australia	Poland	Polish	English
Australia	Australia	English	-
Australia	South Africa	English	-
Australia	Singapore	Malay-Tamil	English
Australia	Malaysia	Bahasa Malay	English
Australia	Serbia	Serbian	English
Australia	Australia	English	-
Australia	Australia	English	-
Australia	Brunei	Malay	English

Table 1. Demographic Details of Students Interviewed

The meaning of internationalisation of the curriculum to the students

The students saw internationalisation of the curriculum as being about intercultural knowledge and understanding, i.e. knowing about other cultures and that different people have different ways of viewing and comprehending the world. It meant giving people the opportunity to share different views and to move beyond the dominant culture of their campus and/or discipline. It also meant being able to apply their knowledge and understanding in different environments, being mobile, being prepared for living and working in the outside world.

In the real world people have to be aware, whatever you're doing you need to know that difference is going to impact on whatever you do, your relationships. I mean that's not just somebody who comes from overseas and has a different accent. I mean it's something that permeates every aspect of being an educated person. [Australia, MA]

One student emphasised that intercultural communication can involve 'discomfort or misunderstandings or mis-communications'. She did not see this as something to be 'fixed' but something to be aware of, that we need to realise the reality that we won't necessarily 'understand each other and we shouldn't pretend that we do, but we should find ways to acknowledge that'. [Australia, MA]. A South African campus student spoke about the misconceptions that students from different countries brought to the campus about each other, and the playing out of rivalries. They saw how working together in small multi-racial groups on tasks helped to breakdown those barriers, to build understanding and their confidence to cope in such groups.

The students saw the curriculum as developing them as ‘thinkers’, to be open-minded, adaptable, flexible and creative. They wanted to understand the content of their courses well and to have the ability to research information and to develop confidence and leadership skills.

Students spoke of being responsible and one spoke of the need to acquire an ‘ethical’ way of living [South Africa, MA], to consider other people’s values and goals and not override them with their own. Students from overseas also wanted to be able to take back something worth while from their course for their local context. The Malaysian campus students spoke of having the ability to apply what they have learnt to the common good.

Critical factors

The students highlighted three factors they saw as critical for internationalisation of the curriculum: the staff, the curriculum content, and the learning environment and teaching strategies.

Critical factor 1: The staff

The students were asked what values, knowledge skills and attitudes they thought teaching staff should have to be able to teach an internationalised curriculum. The students at all the campuses expressed the same attributes. They thought staff needed to be open-minded, flexible, inclusive, have an understanding of other cultures, be enthusiastic, inspire students to learn, be academically good, have a good command of English, be caring, approachable and understanding of their students. They should also be hardworking.

The students wanted the lecturers to get to know them and to be aware that students from some cultures have difficulty contributing in class and asking questions. They wanted the staff to be sensitive and flexible to respond appropriately to their needs. The students in Malaysia and South Africa especially talked about staff taking time to talk to students, to build relationships with them and to be available outside of the classroom to discuss work. The international students emphasised how lonely they felt and how a short conversation could make them feel noticed and cared for. They emphasised that students are motivated through fear or through feeling cared for. Students sometimes felt stereotyped as ‘lazy’ when they were in fact having problems understanding the content of the course.

The Malaysian and South African students commented on their lecturers ‘knowing their stuff’ but finding it difficult to communicate it to the students. They discussed the need for student and staff-staff evaluation of teaching. They saw one of the challenges of internationalisation of the curriculum as creating the openness and willingness among staff to learn about other cultures and about teaching.

The students recognised that they needed to be taught by staff who brought multiple perspectives to the discipline knowledge and who were sensitive to the backgrounds of the students. Some students saw a dominant cultural background in the people who wrote and delivered courses in their areas ‘good old Anglo-Australians’ [Australia, MA] and a resistance to change.

The students also recognised that some of the staff are from overseas and others have immigrant ethnic backgrounds, and so already have experience of different cultures and different value systems. They saw the need to encourage the diverse teaching staff and students to share their perspectives.

Critical factor 2: Curriculum content

The students were asked about their current curriculum content and how far it had met the needs of internationalisation of the curriculum and how it needed to be changed.

Here views diverged. A number of the Australian based students felt that the curriculum did not need to be changed. One student felt that what was done at present was quite adequate, that:

In Education [there is] a lot of emphasis in teaching on understanding students needs and responding to students . . . most activities were designed to be inclusive for everyone to get an opportunity to speak and put across their opinion [Australia, MA].

A student at the Malaysian campus argued that it is better to have a generalised course rather than targetting certain ethnic groups and said that in discussing case studies in class they accepted that people with different upbringings saw things differently and *'we thrash it out and come to a compromise'* [Malaysia MM]. An international student in Australia expressed the view that the *'[university] is already an internationalised university. . . a lot of people here are from all over the world, that the curriculum . . . seems to me to be fairly diverse and decentred . . . we have a globalised understanding of our place in the world'* [Serbia, MA]. Another said, *'I'm not quite sure if the curriculum should be changed that much, I think it already accommodates everybody'*. [Australian, MA]. However, a student from the South African campus argued strongly that dealing with issues for developing countries was critical to the future work environments of the African students [Botswana, MSA].

The Australian focus of the curriculum was particularly noted except for a few courses that used American textbooks and taught American theory. A number of students felt that the addition of texts from Asia, African and other places would be helpful. However, others said that even though examples were used from other cultures, the examples were too small to give a cultural understanding as such, and they did not feel that they were learning in a multi-cultural way.

The students saw that it was impossible to learn about all cultures in the world and one student commented that it would be impossible to meet everyone's needs, that the curriculum could end up diluted to the point where it has little value. [Singapore, MA].

Underlying issues of curriculum are epistemological questions and the concept of the 'universality of knowledge' was frequently used by the students. Many of the students started from the premise that the knowledge they were learning was 'international', *'chemistry is chemistry, physics is physics'* [Serbia, MA]. However, as they continued to talk the students produced contradictory statements describing the context in which theoretical principles applied affecting the operation of those principles and the reaction to those principles. The students saw that the rules, regulations, laws, practices and ethics were different in all countries. Outcomes would, therefore, be different in different contexts. *'The theory just does not apply in practice'* (Malaysia, MA).

Critical factor 3: Learning environment and teaching strategies

A major concern for the students was their relationship with staff and the classroom environment. The students came to university from different educational backgrounds with different experiences and different needs. One student described experiencing not only culture shock but 'study shock' on entering an Australian university. This included new ways of relating, reading, learning, studying, writing and participating, and also sometimes studying in a foreign language. Students at all campuses said that staff needed to be sensitive to their different educational experience and to assist them to understand the norms of the class and to interact within the class.

One area of difference was respectful behaviour. Some students found a variety of behaviours in the university classrooms difficult to accept, such as calling out to answer questions and the informality of addressing staff by their first name.

Students saw their relationship with staff as very important. A South African campus student described the opportunities that arose with their joint staff-student campus facilities, to get to know staff and talk to them about their courses.

A number of students discussed the value of working in groups to aid their intercultural understanding and building their confidence to work co-operatively. There was a plea that staff randomly assign students to racially mixed groups as it was very difficult for students to ask a group (of another race) if they could team up with them. They recognised that when they stayed with their own friends, who came from a similar backgrounds, with similar experiences, that their learning was limited

The students from the South African campus wanted attention paid to lecturer's presentations skills. They were concerned about the pace and tone of delivery and the speed of moving through the material. They found it difficult to ask questions in class and wanted more time in class to discuss content. Again the need to be tutored in skills for classroom participation arose.

Students commented on the use of English language as an inclusive medium for everyone in the class but of the need to discuss material in their own languages to get a real understanding of it. Some students discussed using the Language and Learning Services for assistance in the areas of reading, writing, oral presentation skills, critical reading and report writing. Two of the African students described their difficulties with the emphasis in their courses on reading, having come from an oral culture where learning is achieved through listening, discussion and remembering. They found it hard to absorb information through reading.

Discussion

The higher education environment in Australia is already multicultural, with over 100 different countries represented at the university studied. The students in this study are familiar with this environment and embrace it and the intercultural learning that it offers. The students exhibited a sophisticated understanding of internationalisation of the curriculum and highlighted the critical role of teaching staff in internationalisation of the curriculum and in their own learning.

The students' preferences were for a warm relationship with their teachers, a sensitivity to their learning needs, and induction into the different academic and classroom cultures. Pyvis and Chapman (2004) emphasised the need for offshore students to negotiate an identity in their class groups and social adjustment has been shown to aid academic success (Novera, 2004). However, a number of studies have shown cultural differences in the notions of 'warm relationships' and a 'warm classroom environment' (Otten, 2000; Dunstan, 2003; Dunn & Wallace, 2004). The less hierarchical student-teacher relationships in Australian classrooms and the relative informality is often cited as problematic for Asian students and the way Australian academics facilitate student-centredness has been shown to be confronting (Novera, 2004). Pyvis and Chapman (2004) illustrated how what is seen as good pedagogical practices in Australia can create discomfort among offshore students.

Despite difficulties with behavioural expectations in the classroom students in this and other studies want to be engaged in active learning and reported that when left alone to study they are unclear of lecturer's expectations. The students in this study enjoyed small group work and the chance to get to know and learn from other students. They particularly requested that staff organise them into multi-cultural groups to enhance their learning. Bremer and van der Wende (1995) also found that students liked to learn this way and that they became more analytical, more flexible in their thinking and more problem solving and critical as a result.

The students in this study also discussed the use of the English language as one of the factors affecting their comfort in class and in independent study. However, they made few comments about the privileging of the use of the English language and the limitations that places on access to and interpretation of knowledge (Pennycook, 1994; Kontoulis & Williams, 2000; Huang, 2003) or the risks to their own language and culture (Knight, 2004).

The curriculum offered by the staff appeared to be accepted by the students as an international curriculum. However, their discussion was focused on intercultural learning and there was little feeling of the students having a deep sense of the politics of their own location and asking for a curriculum that addressed important social, political and cultural issues. The exception was the students from the South African campus where their positioning in 'developing' countries raised questions of the relevance of the curriculum to the needs of their countries. This may reflect a lack of critical pedagogy in use encouraging students to reflect on their learning. Rizvi (2002) emphasised the building of life long learning skills and ways of thinking to develop an awareness of our own culture and perspectives as well as others. He described the need for questioning skills, the ability to think reflectively and culturally about knowledge creation and the capacity to determine how knowledge is globally linked.

The level of student engagement with internationalised curriculum indicates an 'academic-as-tourists' (Mohanty, 2003), approach, the politics of cultural difference not being addressed, and how cultural difference is implicated in the construction and organisation of knowledge. With academics based in Australia, Asia and Africa, the collision of the local with the global is inevitable and should provide fertile ground to debate and create new perspectives and knowledges and ways of doing.

Before students can 'cross borders' staff may need to 'internationalise' by developing new sets of knowledge and new modes of thinking, valuing and behaving (Paige & Martin, 1996; Knight, 2004). Teekens (2003) has drawn up a profile of an ideal lecturer involved with internationalisation of the curriculum and sees the cognitive knowledge and skills and the attitudes that teachers and students need to develop as similar. The profile includes issues relating to using a non-native language of instruction, cultural differences, learning and teaching styles, the academic discipline and personal qualities. Teekens sees teachers as generally knowing little educational theory so they can find it difficult to analyse the knowledge and the teaching and learning styles that they are using in their teaching. Teachers also need specific language skills to teach students for whom English is a non-native language as each national group 'are using the language [English] in their own cultural context and not realising that the others may be understanding the words but not comprehending the meaning as it was intended' (Teekens, 2003:113). The teachers also need to have the vision and leadership to promote intercultural understanding and foster openness to cultural diversity.

To progress internationalisation of the curriculum universities need to invite, and support, academics and students to become 'border crossers' (Giroux, 1992), to view the world from different perspectives and to question long held views of knowledge and what those knowledges mean in practice. Giroux (1992:15) argues for teachers to take on new roles as 'transformative intellectuals' who challenge themselves and their students to cross the borders of disciplines and of cultures. Giroux sees this as meaning not to be educated to the 'social forms' but to question the forms, i.e. engaging in a critical pedagogy that encourages the exploration of one's own history and place to reach some understanding of self and of one's own culture in relation to others in the global environment.

Conclusion

The issues of internationalisation and globalisation affect all Australian universities. The students in this study welcomed their multicultural environment and intercultural learning and wished to develop the

critical skills to become useful members of society. The students saw the issues affecting internationalisation of the curriculum as related to the positionings of the staff. The ability and willingness of staff to explore new perspectives and understandings affected their ability to give the students the opportunity to 'cross borders'. Despite their understandings of the aims of International Education there was little evidence of the students critically questioning the use of English language as the medium of instruction, or the epistemologies and the curriculum privileged in their institutions. The main challenge to the parent university was from students in South Africa raising issues of development as imperative to their education. If universities are to maintain their relevance to students in today's globalised world, staff and students need to be willing to embark on a journey to become 'border crossers'. The university under study offers a unique environment in which to explore and embrace border crossing.

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