

# Internationalizing Higher Education: A Critical Overview

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## Abstract

Internationalization has become one of the central themes of higher education in recent years. This theme or agenda has many manifestations including: competing for a greater proportion of international staff and students, encouraging staff and student exchanges between institutions, internationalizing the curricula for home students, and fostering a greater degree of intercultural contact between students. Straddling these various initiatives are also two other major dimensions through which higher education now legitimates its purpose: the development of graduate attributes as well as global citizens. Some initiatives are primarily directed at institutional economic benefit or prestige in the pecking order employability, others at enhancing students' employability, and yet others focus more on citizenship and civic responsibility. These are not mutually exclusive although there has been a more recent concern with the development of the latter. This paper provides a critical overview of the internationalization agenda taking into account recent literature in the field and highlighting some problematic issues.

**Keywords:** higher, education, internationalization, citizenship

**Main Conference Topic:** Higher Education

## Introduction

Across many higher education institutions, internationalisation has been appropriated within the larger culture of marketisation. This has played out in a number of ways: seeking to improve market share of international students and the higher fees that accrue from their recruitment, attracting more international staff and an index of the prestige and global position of an institution, and developing international partnerships as a means of enhancing international reach and influence (Lumby and Foskett 2016). Despite the increasingly competitive and marketized climate in higher education an alternative approach to internationalisation strategies and processes has emphasised ethical, social, cultural and academic aims (Pashby and Andreotti 2016). In this vein, a key challenge for aim for the internationalisation of higher education is the inculcation of international and cross-cultural perspectives and understandings among students in order to prepare for a more globalised world in a broader sense, but also including an increasingly globalised knowledge economy.

Therefore, the aim of internationalizing higher education is also related to notions of citizenship and preparedness for a more globalized world, not only in terms of labour mobility, but also with respect to the understandings, experiences and perceptions of the non-mobile majority (de Wit et al., 2015). Internationalization at home has been usefully defined by Beelen and Jones (2015: 76) as the 'purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments'. This 'purposeful integration' effectively means that curricula need to be internationalized with teaching staff being key to the enterprise

(Bedenlier and Zawacki-Richter 2015). However, contextualizing curricula and learning outcomes in programmes of study and their associated assessment criteria for ‘at home’ students who may well have limited contact with other forms of internationalization is a particular challenge (Jones 2014; Jones and Killick 2013; Beelen and Jones 2015). However, while challenging, the pay-off is worth the effort in terms of enabling students to explore and engage with global issues and each other (Nilsson 2003; Seeber et al. 2016). The development of ‘global mindsets’ (Jones and Killick 2013) can lead to ‘a greater capacity to manage difference, change and complexity’ (Marginson 2017), and a greater understanding and acceptance of ‘plural cultures’ (Mak 2010)

## **Internationalization at Home**

Robson, Almeida and Schartner (2018: 21) argue that the internationalization at home agenda can be used to promote more social and values-based goals for all students and that this is timely given

‘...recent political events in the UK (the Brexit vote), America (the presidential election) and Europe (with political unrest arising from the large-scale migration of thousands of people fleeing conflict) have revealed deeply rooted social schisms.’

Higher education institutions can therefore utilize the internationalization at home agenda to address the underlying manifestation of these issues in terms of attitudes and perceptions towards political or economic, religious or cultural, ethnic or linguistic conflict (Marginson 2017). In addition, this agenda can also be used as a means of developing attributes and abilities that contribute to the active and responsible citizens in globalized, knowledge-based economies (Barker and Mak 2013).

However, Robson, Almeida and Schartner (2018: 31) found in their case study of two universities in the United Kingdom and Portugal that the ‘much vaunted internationalized university experience for all’ (particularly for the non-mobile) are not systemically prioritized in institutional agendas for internationalization.’

Part of the problem is how internationalization is operationalized across various institutions. As Man Ling Lee (2005: 210) argues

‘...interculturalism in teaching is not about covering multiple cultures, rather it is about working through a dialogue between cultures [...] the focus should then be on the dialogue itself rather than on the multiplicity of voices for the sake of inclusivity. In short, our job is to ensure that students can carry out a critical dialogue with others, regardless of who they are. This is a life skill that does not end with a course or a program of study.’

The importance of graduates acquiring intercultural competence (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017) is an aspect of the notion of the ‘global graduate’ who is able to recognize and value cultural difference.’

As well as the personal citizenship dimension illustrated above, there is also an employability dimension. For example, in the United Kingdom, Diamond et al. (2011) report that employers value graduates who, amongst other things, have a global mind set, intercultural agility, and embrace multiple perspectives. Kumaravadivelu (2012: 4) argues that the current period is one in which

‘...cultures are in closer contact now than ever before and influencing each other in complex and complicated ways. This development is creating a global cultural consciousness, and along with it, creative and chaotic tensions that both unite and divide people.’

The challenge for higher education institutions is how to operationalize the internationalization agenda in such a way as to inculcate in students an intercultural awareness and ability to be operate a complex globalized world. However, research over recent years has consistently pointed to a lack of discussion within higher education institutions, weak levels of support for the internationalization agenda, and gaps in institutional rhetoric and strategy claims, and pedagogic practices in the classroom (Bond et al. 2003; Dewey and Duff, 2009). Bond et al. (2003) suggested that in addition to the problems outlined above, there is often inadequate institutional support, work overload amongst staff, and failure to recognize disciplinary specifics. The problems are further compounded by a lack of recognition and reward associated with efforts in changing pedagogic practices in favour of a more internationalized approach (Dewey and Duff, 2009; Florenthal and Tolstikov-Mast, 2012).

Barnett (1994) has suggested that the implementation of new initiatives in higher education institutions with respect to quality are often viewed by staff as a bureaucratic imposition leading to resistance in the face of eroding levels of academic autonomy. In the ever-changing landscape of higher education initiatives, agendas, and strategies, internationalization can seem as a top-down imposition that first-and-foremost serves institutional ends in terms of prestige and economic interest in response to a changing global context. The corollary of this is that from the perspective of staff it can seem like a further erosion and constraint of academic freedom in terms of curriculum design and delivery. However, the internationalization agenda is not simply yet another slogan or means of economic strategy to be pursued by higher education institutions. Green and Whitsed (2012: 3) argue that the internationalization of the curriculum is difficult to define because it couples two fuzzy, ideologically laden terms: “internationalization” and “curriculum”. However, a greater breadth to understanding internationalization can be linked to other concepts and initiatives, such as graduate attributes, global citizenship and the inclusive curriculum, to make for a more coherent and integrated approach to curricular reform.

### **Global Citizenship as a Graduate Attribute**

The notion of global citizenship is a somewhat changeable, and contested concept (Hunter et al. 2006). The internationalization agenda in higher education has shifted ground from being simply and economic driver to different and new context to that of the philosophical debates regarding citizenship and globalization (Carter 2001). In the context of higher education, it is often presented as a set of competencies and set within institutional frameworks as a graduate attribute in terms of a capacity that is developed throughout the curriculum regardless of subject or disciplinary background. Whilst the articulation of global citizenship in this way varies across institutions, the dispositions or capacities often ascribed to it such aspects as an openness to other points of view and cultures, an understanding and appreciation of social and cultural diversity, a respect for human rights, and sense of public or civic responsibility. However, when referred to as a graduate attribute, its meaning is often assumed and not specified by institutions. Kirk, Newstead, Gann and Rounsaville (2018) in their study found that academic staff are often unclear on how such a diffuse graduate

attribute might best be embedded into their curricula. The danger here is that academic staff engage in a tick-box exercise in which they tick-off various criteria associated with graduate attributes as related to their curricula and pedagogy “without considering how they are actually going to develop and test these attributes” (Leask 2013: 10). Thus, while the concept may be attractive to institutions and be associated with a “good feel” (Clifford and Montgomery, 2014), there is a danger that it can be adopted as nothing more than an “empty rhetoric” Henderson (2013:736).

Joseph (2013) advocates a more genuinely more transformative approach to higher education that focuses on encouraging student to challenge assumed cultural hierarchies. Such an approach emphasizes the cultural and social aspects of global citizenship and the scope for intercultural learning as a significant aspect of the curriculum. This is a more expansive and critical understanding of global citizenship, one that is not shy away from the political impact of higher education in enabling students to critically evaluate and challenge familiar or typical practices, perceptions, norms, values and beliefs (Caruana 2011), or question Western bias and privilege within curricula and to perhaps lead to significant revisions to current pedagogic practices.

### **Graduate Attributes and Intercultural Contact**

The idea that students from different countries and cultures provide a beneficial experience for home students, whilst appealing as broad liberal aim in developing intercultural understanding, is nonetheless somewhat vague with respect to actual pedagogic practice. However, an educational experience that trades on intercultural contact raises several important pedagogical issues, and in particular its relevance for the development of graduate attributes. Turner (2009: 242), for example, draw attention to some of these:

‘In what context does the evidence support the idea that wider social and cultural integration encourages better individual academic performance, for example? How far is social learning and interpersonal development represented as an intrinsic part of the curriculum? How does the curriculum ensure that attempts to facilitate student integration are adequately supported, evaluated, and assessed? Are teachers able to deliver the skills development that would enable students to achieve the sophisticated levels of intercultural communication inherent in diverse group interactions?’

While higher education is faced with challenges arising from the widening of participation in socio-economic terms within local populations, there is also an added dimension of problems associated with the internationalization agenda. If the focus on graduate attributes is thrown into the mix then the complexity of pedagogic issues that confront higher education is apparent. The discourse of graduate attributes is culturally and ideologically loaded and therefore it is incumbent upon educationists to adopt a critical, if also supportive position with respect to their dominance in higher education policy.

This raises the issue of the local-global dimension to graduate attributes and how we begin to develop this so as to encourage students from the outset to consider themselves and their relationship to their studies within this much broader context (e.g. with respect to environmental issues and ethics or with respect to the relationship between science and human rights). This is set within the context of challenges that the coming decades may bring, including: new relationships between humans and technology, the opportunities and challenges of aging populations, the development of new forms of knowledge and democracy, the challenges of climate warming and environmental disruption, and the

potential for radical economic and social inequalities (Facer 2011). Marshall's (1950: 74) classic, definition of citizenship considers it as: "a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties which the status is endowed." Derivative of this, he distinguishes three kinds of citizenship that have developed in a sociohistorical trajectory over the course of the past two centuries: civil, political and social. It is evident that higher education has a part to play here in helping students to connect up knowledge with identities, statuses, rights and responsibilities. This has the potential to include many disciplines, and not just the social sciences. In this sense citizenship and the notion of graduate attributes can be related to a recognition of different identities as well as aspects that may be universal.

In this regard it is worth pointing out that the framing of teacher-learner relationships and associated rights and responsibilities is a key aspect in relation to learning activity (Tennant, McMullen & Kaczynski, 2010). This in effect means the creation of 'deliberate relationships' with students where the nature of rights and responsibilities change over time and through which they can claim greater power (Tom, 1997). This is based on a reflexive awareness of the purpose of the relationship as one of education. Key features of this are explaining to students how and why their learning activities have been designed, the establishment and negotiation of rights and responsibilities, and the analysis of power dynamics. Whilst these may seem somewhat high level aim, they translate into aspects such as assessment which for many lecturers is emotionally sensitive and intellectually demanding but for students can seem as if it is not only their learning that is being evaluated but also their developing personal identity (Light & Cox, 2001: 169).

It is also the case that not only students need to reflect upon their own cultural assumptions, academic staff also need to as well. For example, Murray and McConachy (2018: 3) write

'In fact, much of the literature on the internationalized classroom takes an interaction-centred view of participation for granted, and thus frequently treats students from non-Western backgrounds in stark – and, we would argue, quite superficial – terms as "difficult" students, based on the (frequently ethnocentric) perception that they are reluctant to speak, offer opinions, be critical, or contribute to or take the initiative in group work activities.'

They further go onto point out that participation is assumed to involve students in discussing and talking through points with one another in class and that academic staff "take it as given that participation is speaking out and that other less overt, non-verbal forms of engagement do not qualify as participation" Murray and McConachy (2018: 3). In other words, the cultural assumptions drawn upon by academic staff involve ethnocentric judgments of the cultural "other" and in so doing fail to recognize that 'participation' may also involve other modes of activity that do not assume the voicing of individual views or arguments. As Murray and McConachy report in their study of staff views on participation by students in terms of an intercultural class setting, while staff show a high degree of willingness to work across cultures and manage cultural differences in a positive way, they tend to focus on the 'other' in problematic terms due to lack of participation. Thus, participation in itself is a cultural act and one that needs to be engaged with in a reflexive manner by both staff and students.

These issues cannot be addressed without bringing into question strategies for teaching, learning and assessment, and how these impact on undergraduate programmes. For example, much of the graduate attributes literature stresses active learning or inquiry-based learning. However, the challenge is not only to provide students with a translation of their curriculum into learning activities but for those very activities to manifestly demonstrate their relevance to the internationalization of higher education Jones (2009) points out that generic attributes are very much context-dependent, and shaped by the disciplinary epistemology in which they are conceptualized and taught. Her study involved an examination of the teaching of generic attributes in physics, history, economics, medicine and law within two Australian universities. Skills such as critical thinking, analysis, problem solving and communication are conceptualized and taught in quite different ways in each of the disciplines, and of course are culturally dependent, most often associated with the Westernised notion of ‘independent learning’. Jones goes on to suggest that a re-disciplined theorizing of generic skills and attributes which frames them as part of the social practices within disciplines is required, one that integrates attributes within disciplinary epistemology. However, while agreeing with this position, it is also the case that disciplines do not sit outside of cultural contexts and therefore these contexts should also be considered.

## Conclusion

The internationalization of higher education in its various forms offers the potential of engendering a wide range of qualities and skills. However, much of the focus to date has been in terms of an individualistic notion of graduate attributes and, more often than not, one that almost focuses upon employability. Whilst this aspect is important there is the danger of skewing the purpose of higher education as no more than a preparation for work. This paper has suggested that one way of avoiding this narrow focus is to consider the internationalization agenda as related to citizenship within the context of a globalized world and one of increasing intercultural contact. In a such a world is evident that national and local concerns and issues are not separable from wider global issues. While the internationalization agenda has been beneficial, it has nonetheless sometimes been loosely thought of as offering a good experience for local students to encounter people from other nations and cultures or through curricula that contain more international examples and perspectives. However, the educational benefit of this is difficult to achieve and requires careful thought around the issue of pedagogic assumptions that will lead to this outcome. The approach suggested in this paper is to broaden the focus of graduate attributes to include issues of internationalization and intercultural contact. This approach encourages both staff and students to consider the mutual relationship between self, discipline and culture as part of an ongoing communicative activity, rather than as simply an instrumental process. This is still a challenge in terms of how educators help students to acquire not only subject content, and not merely competencies, but a real engagement with how to evaluate and use knowledge in relation to issues of global citizenship.

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