Internationalising the Curriculum: An exploratory study

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Abstract

While internationalising the higher education curriculum is an accepted priority of universities, governments and global agencies like the OECD, much work remains to be done in terms of understanding exactly what internationalisation involves and how best to achieve it. The purpose of this research is twofold: to explore how internationalisation of the curriculum is understood and operationalised within the marketing program of one university and to identify strategies to increase internationalisation. Depth interviews were conducted with five academics. Results indicated implicit strategies embedded in courses with the inherent assumptions of graduates working in a global environment. Two themes emerged with suggested strategies to increase internationalisation: a focus on best practice teaching versus a focus on strategies clearly focused on internationalisation.

Keywords: curriculum, graduate attributes, course, teacher
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Introduction

In today’s globalised world, universities are facing increasing pressure to produce graduates who are global citizens, that is, graduates who can work, live and socialise anywhere in the world. In developing these global citizens universities need to meet the needs of both domestic and international students. While internationalisation can be embedded at all levels and facets of the university from mission statements and graduate attributes through to physical facilities and cafeteria menus, the curriculum decisions at the individual course level are perhaps the fundamental building block of an internationalised curriculum.

While LeBlanc (2007) highlights that internationalisation of the curriculum is not a new concept, in a recent review of the internationalisation of the curriculum literature, Caruana (2007) identified that literature has grown significantly since 2003, particularly in Australia and the United Kingdom. There is consensus in the literature that research is still in its infancy (Edwards et al. 2003) with many inconsistencies and gaps including a lack of common language and understanding of key terms (AUCC 2009, Gannon 2008, Rizvi 2007). There is further agreement that: research to date has focussed more on outcomes rather than process (Crosling et al. 2008, Pimpa 2009); that many sources focus on the perspective of international students and ignore domestic students albeit with an emerging consensus that internationalisation of the curriculum should involve more than international students and sending home students abroad; that the literature to date has failed to consider the professional development needs of academics; and finally ‘what is conspicuously absent is any consideration of internationalisation of the curriculum from the viewpoint of disciplines, departments and faculties’ (Caruana 2007 p 47). Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore issues raised in relation to international curriculum within the marketing discipline, specifically considering how academics understand and are operationalising internationalisation of the curriculum and how further progress can be made.

The Literature

We begin by exploring the meaning of the term internationalisation of curriculum. While the OECD (1996) define internationalisation of the curriculum as an attempt to introduce an international orientation in content, aimed at preparing students, both domestic and foreign, for performing professionally and socially in an international and multicultural context, Rizvi (2007) criticises this definition as lacking specificity and being too abstract as it gives little guidance on implementation or interpretation. The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC 2009) concur highlighting that there is no universally applied definitions and consequently each university needs to define terms clearly for their own context. More recently Leask (2009 p 210) defines internationalisation of the curriculum as ‘... the incorporation of an international and intercultural dimension into the content of the curriculum as well as the teaching and learning processes and support services of a program of study’. A final warning identified in the literature is the need to realise that a truly international curriculum should not be confused with a westernised curriculum (Rivzi 2007).
At an organisational level much work has been done by several institutions worldwide on internationalising the curriculum. The AUCC identified internationalisation of the curriculum as an area where progress is being made but where key challenges remain. The AUCC developed a checklist of good practice for Canadian universities to use (AUCC 2009). Leeds Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom have comprehensive guidelines for curriculum review focusing on knowledge, experience at course level and experience beyond course level and provide a series of potential key questions for self review (Leeds Metropolitan University 2009). While in Australia universities such as the University of South Australia have internationalisation of the curriculum clearly embedded at all levels from graduate attributes through to course level (Leask 2009).

Turning specifically to business faculties, a key external driver for internationalisation has been accrediting bodies like AACSB (Association for the Advancement of Collegiate Schools of Business) who nominate ‘multicultural and diversity understanding’ as a key general knowledge area that should be present in all undergraduate business degree programs (AACSB 2008). Kwok and Arpan (1994) highlight that a wide variety of approaches have been used to internationalise business curriculum with no single approach optimal for all schools but with many schools still falling short of providing businesses with global employees. Their 1994 study found that 57% of schools (internationally) had global or international somewhere in their mission statements but curricula targets and objectives were very low with most business schools seeking little more than awareness. Infusion of international content and perspectives into existing courses was the most common approach with a key issue low levels of faculty international experience. Within business faculties, the marketing discipline was identified as the functional area with the highest internationalisation. Kwok and Arpan’s 2002 follow up study found that infusion was still the most common strategy and while progress had been made in all areas achievements were still low. LeBlanc (2007) supports these findings of business schools embracing internationalisation but falling short in implementation. He further highlights a variety of strategies including infusion, new international courses, international partnerships and faculty exchanges to assist in internationalising faculty. Key barriers to internationalisation were found to be apathy and resistance by some faculty and departments within faculties operating as silos (LeBlanc 2007).

In their study of a business faculty, Crosling et al. (2008) found that disciplines such as marketing and management are more amenable to internationalisation as they are more culturally embedded but confirmed the major barrier of lack of interest by many faculty members due mainly to time pressure and limited real achievement. The limited real achievement is supported by Zimitat’s (2008) survey of students which found that only 52% of students believed they were being prepared to work internationally and only 25% agreed that content was presented from a variety of different cultural and international perspectives.

Considering the individual faculty member, Caruana notes that ‘universities will only produce global citizens if they are taught by global citizens’ (2007). Kwok and Arpan (2002) affirms that faculty internationalisation is an essential ingredient for an internationalised curriculum with professional development such as teaching and living aboard and self learning through reading critical. Faculty exchange,
undertaking joint international research, consultancy, and publications are additional ways faculty can internationalise (Black 2004, LeBlanc 2007).

While a variety of models and typologies for evaluating internationalisation of the curriculum have been presented, none have been widely adopted (Caruana, 2007). Edwards et al. (2003) propose a typology with three levels constituting a staged approach from international awareness, to international competence and international expertise. Within the typology three further areas are then explored, teaching strategy teaching method and outcome learning. However they caution that no single approach will be ideal for all universities. Reviewing several sources, common areas evaluated include, the individual faculty member, course content and the strategies and methods used to deliver the course.

Method

Given the dearth of previous research exploring the internationalisation of the curriculum within the marketing discipline, this study used an exploratory approach by considering the curriculum of one undergraduate marketing program within a business faculty at one university. Indepth interviews were conducted with the five academics within the discipline, with each interview lasting about one hour. The interview guide covered academics understanding of internationalisation of the curriculum before going on to explore the three areas of the individuals international profile, course content and course teaching strategies. This marketing department, although small, consistently achieves above university average teaching results both internally and in terms of graduate surveys, with three of the five academics being University Medalists for Teaching Excellence. All staff are experienced academics (minimum 8 years full time teaching) and are at Level B and above. Further, a review of University documentation highlighted that while internationalisation did appear in strategic planning documents, it was not reflected in graduate attributes and nor was it explicit in faculty documents, accreditation documents for the marketing program or individual course objectives.

Results and discussion

From initial discussions of the term ‘internationalising the curriculum’ two key themes emerged, who was being internationalised and how internationalisation should be approached. In terms of who was being internationalised, two respondents very strongly highlighted that all students, both international and domestic needed an international awareness or perspective in their courses, while the remaining three respondents focused on international students as the main driver for internationalising the curriculum, with domestic students either not considered or an afterthought. In terms of the second theme of approach to internationalisation, one group saw internationalisation as a distinctly unique issue requiring separate strategies, resources and training, while the second group perceived internationalisation as simply one more form of diversity in the student cohort and advocated a generic approach to good teaching practice, that is, students have ‘more in common than differences’.

When asked to assess the level of internationalisation of current curriculums, responses reflected a variety of approaches, with academics noting the lack of formal
direction from graduate attributes and program and course objectives, that is, the inclusion of international perspectives was wholly the result of individual teaching practice. Varying levels of internationalisation were present in all courses, from a low of 20 percent in introductory courses to higher levels of up to 100 percent in advanced courses.

Next, in terms of individual profiles, respondents were initially asked to rate themselves as internationally aware, internationally competent or internationally expert. Of the five respondents, two rated themselves as internationally aware, one as internationally competent and two as internationally expert. Further questions addressed where they had studied, their levels of international teaching experience, international research, training and development in internationalisation and how they keep up with international content. Unsurprisingly, the two respondents who were internationally expert had studied, worked, researched and taught internationally for several years, while those with lesser actual international experience rated themselves as less expert. Professional training and development in the area of internationalisation of the curriculum was limited across all respondents, due mainly to the lack of formal oncampus programs. One respondent had recently spent a period of professional development working with an international university specifically to gain further experience, while another had attended a one-off workshop offered by the university some years previously. All academics kept up to date through both academic and general publications.

Turning to course content, again respondents were asked to rate their content as being either internationally aware, internationally competent or internationally expert. Courses were rated as either aware or competent with no course content being expert. The aware versus competent ratings seemed to reflect student progression with entry level courses aware and more advanced courses being classed as competent. In all courses no explicit reference to internationalisation was made in course objectives however it was implicit with all courses having texts that were either international or Australian with international examples. Assessments were designed to either accommodate all students or at a minimum give non-Australian students the flexibility to modify the topic. Lecture content and notes were sourced from a range of domestic and international sources. One respondent stressed the need to ‘ensure a good mix of both domestic and international content’ as both were important. No assessments were specifically structured to target internationalisation, for example no group work specifically mandated the inclusion of multiple nationalities in groups.

Turning to course delivery, again overall ratings ranged from internationally aware to internationally expert with a variety of approaches used. One academic regularly obtained class lists (including country of origin) before teaching commenced to specifically identify the mix of nationalities to ensure relevant examples, while other respondents gauged the mix of nationalities when classes began. While all respondents highlighted the use of strategies like incorporating examples, one respondent highlighted a focus on generic good teaching practices to accommodate all learning styles, and others highlighted some of the drawbacks of some international students in terms of having to slow down delivery and keep expression simple to accommodate those with lower level English skills.
Finally, respondents were asked what one action at an individual, discipline, faculty and university level would aid further internationalising the curriculum. Individual actions included checking make-up of classes before commencement of teaching through to support for professional development in the form of teaching overseas. At a discipline level, responses ranged from ‘do nothing as by nature marketing is an international discipline’ through to suggestions for an audit of all courses and some form of benchmarking and review by curriculum development teams. The actions proposed at Faculty and University level included a need for more generic resources and sharing of good teaching practice through teaching seminars, the need for dedicated international curriculum experts to provide support, a top-down direction through clear graduate attributes, a visiting international teacher program to bring best practice to the university and greater facilitation of opportunities to teach overseas.

Conclusions and implications

The results of this exploratory study support many of the findings in the current literature with respondents reflecting the continuum of being motivated by the presence of international students in the classroom through to a focus on internationalising for both international and domestic students. Current practice also reflects the university specific context with no clear top-down guidance or support and a reliance on marketing being inherently international by nature but with explicit addressing of internationalising of the curriculum not evident. Two key benefits of this study are evident: first, the establishment of clear benchmarks against which progress can be assessed and second, the identification of good practice which can serve to inform and improve the teaching of all discipline members. In the absence of immediate top-down direction and support, the discipline can immediately adopt a bottom-up approach to best practice in this area. Some of the suggested strategies for improvements would be very easy to implement immediately, for example the provision of teaching lists clearly identifying student profiles, while other suggestions require longer time frames and greater resources. The research also raised issues for further research, specifically the issue of focusing on best practice in teaching in general or treating internationalisation as a distinct teaching issue.
References


