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## An investigation into best practices in internationalising curricula

### Abstract

The number of international students at UCA has doubled since last academic year. With the targets for international recruitments moving ever higher, additional opportunities for international students to study at UCA have been created through short courses, exchange and transfer opportunities along with the development of UCA course franchises with partnership universities. As a result, there has been a growing interest in the significance of an international curriculum, but the struggle to define its purpose, meanings and practices among academics continues. The majority of advice on designing internationalised curricula guide university practitioners with long lists of dos and don'ts.

However, what seems to be missing are the insights which transcend the arguably overused terms. In order to provide a deeper understanding, there is a need or a broader perspective on the curriculum – one not limited to international students but concerned with offering an international learning experience to all working in the higher education (HE) landscape of internationalisation. In an attempt to investigate the ‘internationalisation of curriculum’, this review of a larger case, including broader aspects of internationalisation will shed light onto several relevant popular theoretical frameworks, provide UCA staff and students’ insights on the issue and, make a number of recommendations.

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## Introduction

The number of international students at UCA has doubled since last academic year. With the targets for international recruitments moving ever higher. Additional opportunities for international students to study at UCA have been created through less traditional 2 + 2 (2 years at the ‘mother’ institution and the 2 years at UCA), short courses, exchange and transfer opportunities along with the development of UCA course franchises with partnership universities; for example, the joint initiative with Xiamen University, China – Institute of Creativity and Innovation. As a result, there has been a growing interest in the significance of an international curriculum, but the struggle to define its purpose, meanings and practices among academics continues.

The majority of advice on designing internationalised curricula guide university practitioners with long lists of dos and don’ts. However, what seems to be missing are the insights which transcend the arguably overused, business-oriented terms, such as ‘intercultural competence’ (Clifford, 2009), ‘global skills’ (Haigh & Clifford, 2010), ‘international dimension’ (Phillips et al., 2009: 1455), ‘cross-border education’ (Bates, 2005) or ‘addressing cultural diversity’ (Clifford and Montgomery, 2011; Leask, 2009) in order to provide a deeper understanding. There is a need or a broader perspective on the curriculum – one not limited to international students but concerned with offering an international learning experience to all working in the higher education (HE) landscape of internationalisation.

In an attempt to investigate the ‘internationalisation of curriculum’, this review of a larger case, including broader aspects of internationalisation (originally carried out as part of a PhD titled ‘Re-imagining the Internationalisation of Higher Education – a case study of a UK university’

(John, T., 2016)) will shed light onto several relevant popular theoretical frameworks, provide UCA staff and students' insights on the issue and, make a number of recommendations.

## Literature Review

Although the requirement for a comprehensive internationalised curriculum has long been acknowledged, the precise nature of it in HE remains unclear. There are numerous general definitions (Knight, 1997). For instance, the OECD (1994 cited in Rizvi and Walsh, 1998, 2) states that the international curriculum has “an international orientation in the content, aimed at preparing students for performing (professionally/socially) in an international and multicultural context and designed for domestic as well as foreign students.”

It seems that the focus is on developing an inclusive culture that supports the holistic growth of both home and international students. One of its aims is to enable them to develop effective strategies for improving not only their global employment prospects but also their awareness of the social implications of working in international fora.

For Byram, intercultural competence (IC) refers to people's “ability to interact in their own language with the people from another country and culture,” while Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) takes into account language teaching and focuses on “the ability to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language” (p. 71). In Byram's (1997) view, a person who has developed ICC is able to build relationships while speaking in the foreign language; communicates effectively, taking into consideration their own and other people's viewpoints and needs; mediates interactions between people of different backgrounds, and strives to continue developing communicative skills.

For Bates, a comprehensive curriculum can be designed:

*‘...only by crossing boundaries into cultures and subjectivities beyond our experience; only by committing ourselves to the defence of society and personality; only by the redress of exclusion and disadvantage on a global scale can we truly imagine a global curriculum.’ (Bates, 2005: 107-108).*

Bates argues that there are three key elements that an international curriculum should take into consideration. First, he notes that so called international curricula are fundamentally hegemonic and to avoid this social justice needs to be ensured for all. In other words, make sure the curriculum is accessible to all because it is the responsibility of those living in the advantaged parts of the world to take care of those outside this circle.

Second, international curricula ought to encompass crossing borders within and across societies and cultures. Bates (*ibid.*) advises that the curricula should include intercultural communication topics and intercultural understanding to enable the ‘other’ to contribute to an autonomous social structure. By the same token, Bates recognises the human factor rather than market-oriented morality and if that is the case, internationalisation of curriculum should entail a commitment to freedom and inclusion, and “our recognition of the need to both secure society and personality from the ravages of the global market” (Bates, 2005, 107-108). What is more, David Killick’s (2014) notion of intercultural communication addresses the issue of UK based and international students neither learning from each other nor integrating very well. He puts responsibility for this at the door of lecturers and calls on them to design curricula that are international and integrative. This requires, for example, that student projects enable them to research approaches in their own countries (or comparative of different national perspectives) and that by presenting these to each other students will learn about how things are and are not done elsewhere without privileging any part of the world over another.

Furthermore, internationalisation of curriculum is often associated with critical pedagogy. This approach stresses a student-centred education with students vigorously contributing to the construction of knowledge with tutors guiding student learning by helping them develop their critical thinking, critical analysis and reflection (Brookfield, 2005). It is suggested that such an approach not only builds these academic skills but also students’ interpersonal skills and sense of ethics.

Ethics related to equity, justice and sustainability have always been key to the internationalisation of curriculum (Giroux, 1992; Whalley, 1997; Nilsson, 2003). For Edwards *et al.* (2003) this recognises the need for students to cultivate a sense of responsibility towards themselves, others and future generations as well as feelings of empowerment and self-efficacy. The fresh emphasis on global citizenship is further conceptualised by Clifford and Montgomery (2011). Raising the awareness of global citizenship among students involves knowledge of the world as well as apprehension and a preparedness to be active.

Although the internationalisation of British HE curricula has been identified as a high priority, the majority of writers on this issue appear to agree that HE institutions need firstly, to reassess the totality of their students’ tertiary educational experience and secondly, rebuild their formal and informal curricula for a new future that foregrounds personal integrity and ethics (for example Clifford & Montgomery, 2011; Barnett, 2010; Turner & Robson, 2008).

Support for internationalised curricula, usually described as a process of infusion and bringing an intercultural and international dimension into the extant curriculum, is widespread (for example, Harari, 1981; Francis, 1993; Knight, 1994; Mestenhauser, 1998; Scott, 1998; Clifford and Montgomery, 2011; Ryan, 2013). Such curricula are reported most often in comparative and

international studies, international development studies, foreign language studies, international business and management, and communications (for example, Ryan, 2013; Clifford & Montgomery, 2011; Sovic & Blythman, 2013; Carroll and Ryan, 2005) leaving other disciplines lagging behind or not even on the touch line. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of field trips opportunities for domestic students, and in placements for research, exchange programs for staff, faculty and students. Such strategies are presented as evidence of internationalising curriculum. In other words, the internationalized curriculum is often classified as a program or course offering.

A number of universities have developed manuals and resources for developing international literacy and intercultural competencies (Ryan, 2013; Clifford & Montgomery, 2011; Sovic & Blythman, 2013; Carroll and Ryan, 2005). Recent research focuses on professional development for practitioners related to the internationalisation of the curriculum, with some writers critical of current approaches, and others focusing on students' learning experiences (for example, Ryan, 2013; Clifford & Montgomery, 2011; Sovic & Blythman, 2013; Carroll and Ryan, 2005). These initiatives signify increasing concern with how universities engage with the task of teaching in an internationalized setting. However, in some cases internationalisation of the curriculum is viewed as a product rather than a process that requires a rethinking learning and teaching approaches (Beck, 2008).

Mestenhauer (1998) is critical of the infusion approach to internationalising the curriculum, whereby academics infuse or add pieces of international content on to the curriculum while the main content of the curriculum remains untouched. Instead he argues that the viewpoint approach would be more effective. This means viewing international students as a resource by bringing their knowledge and experience into the classroom. However, the full potential of an internationalised curriculum cannot be achieved simply by the presence of international students.

On the other hand, Bond (2006) highlights the limitations of the infusion approach. She prefers to address internationalised learning rather than internationalised curriculum (for example, Bond & Thayer Scott, 1999, Bond, 2006). In her view, internationalised learning involves applying knowledge about the socio-cultural context of other societies, developing skills in responding to cultural difference, how one behaves in intercultural circumstances and how one maintains one's own cultural integrity while understanding and working with others (Bond, 2006, 2-3). Consequently, internationalised learning requires an interdisciplinary approach to exploring a field of study, an emphasis on experiential and active learning, integration with other international activities, promoting comparative thinking, broadening knowledge of at least one other country of culture and encouraging self-reflection on one's own culture and ways of cognition (Bond & Thayer Scott, 1999, 65). All these require academics to get out of their comfort

zones and explore and promote other intellectual traditions they have very little or no knowledge of.

Giroux (1992, 15) had a similar vision of academics assuming new roles as ‘transformative intellectuals’ who challenge both themselves and their students to cross self-imposed barriers on the borders of disciplines and cultures. He argues that universities need to invite, and support academics and students to become ‘border crossers’, to engage in an exploration of their own history and to reach an understanding of self and their own culture in relation to others in the global environment. For some, these border crossings will happen locally where indigenous knowledges should be celebrated rather than marginalized and inferiorised (for example, Clifford and Montgomery, 2011; Reagan, 2005; Okolie, 2003; Boufoy-Bastick, 2003; Teasdale & Ma Rhea, 2000; Dei, 2000). In addition, Gough (1999) envisions these borders as transnational spaces where the criss-crossing of new and increasingly complex patterns of interconnectedness destabilize relationships and our own sense of identity.

As already stated, the notion of internationalisation of curriculum remains under-theorised. However, the current literature suggests that the way forward is to view the internationalized curriculum as a process rather than a product (Beck, 2008). But how will a changed approach such as this influence the cultural space of curriculum, and enable the spaces of internationalisation to be transformed and re-imagined?

## Methodology

The methodology of the study was broadly constructionist and interpretive<sup>[1]</sup>. A critical ethnography methodology was adapted to analyse and present qualitative primary data gathered from narratives through documents, questionnaires, focus groups and semi-structured interviews on the participants’ perceptions, experiences and attitudes in relation to the international education setting. The focus group participants recruited through snowballing and opportunity techniques – 27 MA international students (5 focus groups), 12 lecturers (3 focus groups) and 2 student union members took part in the study. Informed consent has been collected from all participants. Thematic analysis was adopted to interpret the raw data. Accounts of students and staff experience and perceptions were jointly constructed by the participants and the researcher. Issues of reflexivity<sup>[2]</sup> were addressed throughout the study to enhance the rigour of the research. Thematic analysis – a categorising strategy for qualitative data was conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of issues under investigation. Data was imported into NVIVO, qualitative data analysis software that allowed more systematic analysis of the very rich text-based and/or multimedia information, where deep levels of analysis of large volumes of data are required and coded according to emerging themes. The analysis was also shared for verification with some participants and other researchers.

Emerging themes were explored to understand how the intercultural experiences of students and staff in an international education setting, impact academic debate, policy development and practice within HE institutions more broadly.

## Findings

Through engaging both staff and students in surveys, focus groups and interviews, I explored a plethora of attitudes towards the increasing presence of internationalisation, but what is more, they openly spoke about their understandings of an internationalised curriculum. In the discussion, which follows, the focus is on using global perspectives to enhance course curricula to raise intercultural awareness among both students and staff.

### Staff views

For some academics, designing an internationalised curriculum meant ‘adding’ an international case study to the curriculum as a first step; others were reported to be more adventurous, actively using international students’ background knowledge to boost intercultural competencies. In general, staff were comfortable in ‘adjusting’ their course content and classroom pedagogy. However, one area, often unaddressed and sometimes even rejected, was responsible citizenship (Clifford, 2009; Haigh & Clifford, 2010). Incorporating topics such as human rights and freedom of expression was reported as rare. For many academics, the main challenge was to question not only pedagogy, but also the epistemology and ontology of their disciplines, a shift ‘from the comfortable spaces of knowing to the uncomfortable places of learning’ (Phillips et al., 2009: 1455).

### Staff Strategies

In focus groups with academics and also in responses to the survey, debates were fierce around solutions to accommodating postgraduate international students’ learning needs. Staff provided various examples of how they addressed curriculum design.

Some participants believed the nature of some of the curricula was already global; however, it had to be carefully nurtured. As explained by a senior lecturer in the Staff Survey:

Fashion, like many parts of the creative industries, likes to see itself as global – but this is actually a matter of consumption and industrial production rather than a creative design issue. On the fashion course, with its emphasis on original, often conceptual design, meaningful internationalisation implies, for instance, global references (political, economic, social, cultural, etc.), combinations or syntheses of working methods or the integration of local markets. When

these issues are properly debated, researched and applied to design processes, value is added to fashion.

In the Staff Survey, the same senior lecturer shared another example of good practice from the internationalised curriculum.

The projects in the first term of PG study are designed to connect geographical and cultural areas and to synthesise methods and approaches, e.g. we have been running a design module on ‘cultural exchange’ with an integrated lecture/seminar series; furthermore we build group projects with HE-partners from outside the UK into the curriculum to foreground international exchange and its application to the creative industries; also guest speakers and invited workshop contributions are drawn from an international pool of professionals – so the internationalisation of the research, development of design and professional field is promoted at all levels of the PG study.

Interestingly some participants argued that an internationalised curriculum would support integration between home and international students. As explained by Stephan, a Learning Development Tutor:

*‘There are so many possible changes that can be made in the curriculum to strengthen internationalisation. We need to investigate how to feed in things into practice – if the tasks were worded in a different way, it would enable students to play to their strengths, and staff could enrich the course. If the courses were done like that, that would also help with the integration between international and home students.’*

On an organisational level, while participants offering Learning Development support reported opportunities to liaise with colleagues, they highlighted that there was very little interest from the subject tutors in working in this way. One commented: “I personally never had an academic asking me for my expertise on curriculum development or learning materials. However, I have developed relationships with some staff – when they do a workshop, they intentionally sit in, because they know I’ve got a teaching background, so they ask me questions about how I set things up.”

The curriculum-building consultancy was relatively new and some academics feared colleagues in the wider university did not know about its existence: “There is this huge influx of international students, but we are asked for help very rarely. I think staff are not sure how to cope with it and acknowledge they do not know how to do their job. There is a bit of a hole in there.”

It was also reported that academic staff were in a difficult position, as they did not want to assume international students were cognitively less advanced and therefore felt unable to ask for guidance on developing an inclusive curriculum.

### **Students' views**

In contrast with the staff, the majority of students, when asked about the content of the curriculum, felt it was already relatively 'internationalised' and appreciated how tutors tailored the programmes to different students' needs:

Even though our main tutor is British, he will always show examples from different countries, because I have classmates from Colombia, China, India and America. So I think it is a good thing for us, because I believe that I learn a lot. Each time we talk it is a new experience for me. I can guess inspiration from the different examples. [Ha, Chinese student]

Students seemed to genuinely feel that exposure to different cultural perspectives prepared them to be successful global citizens:

It's enjoyable that we are so diverse and the curriculum reflects it. It's nice to learn about other cultures and really in the learning process you deal with different walks of life throughout your life so it's kind of practical to being able to experience that in your studies, kind of be ready for the rest of the duration of your life. [Mari, Bulgarian student]

Some students also recognised the value of exposure to international staff and professionals from various industries, too. A Taiwanese student, for instance, observed that "in general the tutors give different examples from different countries; they do not only focus on examples for western culture, now I feel I can develop my knowledge [from] different teachers and practitioners from different countries".

## **Discussion**

While some staff considered their course curricula as 'organically' international due to the content of the syllabus, others thought the design of an international curriculum required more active involvement on the part of main subject tutors as a tool for the integration of home and international students. On the other hand, international students themselves seemed satisfied with course content.

Although staff and students commented on how curricula celebrated diversity through adding 'international' case studies to the syllabus, it is possible to argue that there was considerable

potential for international and home students to work together more on real-world issues such as sustainability, equality and justice, so moving into the realm of values and ethics (Haigh and Clifford, 2010). None of the participants shed light onto what happens if there is a cultural clash in the classroom due to exposure to complex social or political issues, arguably missing important opportunities for learning.

There was some guidance for staff at the university on approaches to pedagogy and curriculum that supported intercultural communication. While there were isolated examples of good practice and an emerging awareness of approaches that promoted intercultural competences, the attempt to develop a coherent overall approach to internationalised pedagogy and curriculum was insufficient.

There needs to be a closer relationship between informal and formal learning and a recognition of the importance of the social context of learning through, for example, the development of mentoring schemes (Killick, 2014). The university needs to provide opportunities for all new staff and students to collaborate with an existing student or a staff member, ideally from a different culture, to maximize the benefits of the cross-cultural exchange.

Leask (2009) notes that improved interactions between home and international students are dependent on the way we use both the formal and informal curricula to encourage and reward intercultural engagement, a key outcome of an internationalised curriculum. However, this requires a campus environment and culture that motivates and rewards interaction between international and home students both inside and outside the classroom.

While the debate on more internationalised curriculum continues, a number of recommendations for both policy makers and teaching staff on how this aim can be achieved from the findings of this study:

- A changed philosophical approach to designing an intercultural curriculum needs to be implemented
- Leaders must implement internationalisation through concrete programmes, activities and projects (e.g. expanding the number of students from diverse backgrounds, integration of international and home students on campuses, extending study abroad opportunities for all programmes, developing cross-border research partnerships and collaborations, internationalising the on-campus environment and curriculum).
- Cross-cultural communication training should be provided for all university stakeholders, including administrators, policy makers and educators in issues related to internationalisation
- Staff should be encouraged to adopt more interactive pedagogy, allowing space for critical reflection on students' own and others' backgrounds

- Academic schools should recognise their pivotal role they play in curriculum and research in the implementation of internationalisation
- Academic schools should define their goals for internationalisation through more active engagement with international opportunities
- HE leaders and curriculum designers ask themselves the extent to which social justice for all students has been privileged and thus, is what they are doing/proposing ethical?

## Conclusion

While it is unrealistic to suggest we cease to use ‘international’, geographic or ethnic labels or problematic conceptual terms such as ‘culture’, these descriptions need to be used with awareness of their complexity. A more considered approach to the language we use to describe each other and the learning context in which we interact might go some way to improving intercultural communication. We should also consider ways forward that will take account of situatedness of social, educational and cultural practices in universities (Ryan and Louie, 2007).

Internationalised university experiences cannot be achieved by simply increasing casual exposure between home and international students (Harrison, 2007). Rather, the tasks and activities that require students to engage in intercultural communication should have meaning, purpose and authenticity in the students’ personal and academic contexts. “Decolonising the curriculum is about rebalancing the Eurocentric outlook of a university and this requires a deep interrogation of structures that produce inequalities” (Felix and Friednberg, 2019). Decolonising starts with individuals critiquing themselves and looking inward to the origins of their own identity. The university staff and students must reflect on the implications of West being considered the only reliable sources of knowledge, and allow other cultures to shape our understandings.

In the quest for a more inclusive understanding of what internationalisation involves, this should not be presented as a twofold relationship of international and home or self and other (Pierce, 2003) but as a complex site of struggle, tension and conflict. By the same token, this ‘troublesome space’ in which intercultural communication occurs should be perceived as useful and transformative rather than problematic (Savin-Baden, 2008).

On the level of social practices, the university needs to address the tensions between home and international students, and the lack of inclusion, consideration of and thoughtfulness about the needs of international students through top down support and encouragement with, for example, writing curricula or unit handbook exemplars of good practice. The lack of such support is a serious oversight on the part of the university. Equally, new ways of looking at teaching and learning need to be developed that do not rely simply on assumptions of previous

experience. It may be useful to abandon the idea of the stereotyped learning styles associated with international students as rote learners unable to engage critically. Instead, the universities need to articulate their philosophical approach to internationalisation that works with the ‘troublesome space’ by identifying the variety of approaches that embrace the diverse ‘learning cultures’ rather than employing a cosmetic approach that superficially solves the problem (Davies and Ecclestone, 2008). To fuel creative explorations across these ideological borders by students and staff, we need to create safe spaces for this high-risk work, and support experimentation with new curricula, new pedagogical relationships, and the re-examination of our own taken for granted acceptance of the world (Clifford & Montgomery, 2011).

## Footnotes

[1] This study embraced the constructionist view that multiple realities are socially constructed by individuals. By choosing this interpretive epistemological stance, it is assumed that knowledge can be gathered through understanding lived experiences (Carr and Kemmis, 1986) and predisposes me to research within a qualitative framework. As suggested by Henwood (1996, p.26), “researchers who adopt a more open, interpretative, constructionist stance have a clear affinity for qualitative research. ” n a similar vein, Merriam (2002, p.3) suggests: “The key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world.”

[2] Reflexivity involves a constant dialogue between the researcher, the research process and the research outcomes. “Self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as a researcher” (England, 1994: 82) helps reflection on how researcher and participants’ ‘positionality’ (gender, age, class, ethnicity, personality, previous experience, power, etc.) affect researcher-researched relations.



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