

Making the case for an internationalised curriculum

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Allen Kenneth Schaidle 24 February 2017 Issue No:448

We are often told that we live in a global era, driven in part by technology, globalisation and intensified international commerce. There is a great urgency to cultivate internationally minded and ready citizens. Higher education institutions worldwide are situated at the epicentre of generating the world's next legion of global citizens.

In the United States alone, institutions now commonly have study abroad centres or offices of international education and many have established international outposts.

At the core of internationalisation is an ambition for internationalised curricula. Through this, institutions aim to equip students with the tools they need to thrive in the global economy. Yet, despite the momentum surrounding the internationalised curriculum, its substance and benefits are still uncertain.

Roots

[David Killick](#), a leading researcher in internationalisation, [states](#) that internationalisation of the curriculum “entails ourselves adopting a critical stance towards the cultural range of its content per se, of the ways in which such content is then framed, and of the degree to which we enable and require our students to engage critically with all content as a mechanism to develop their global imagination”.

Therefore, the process of internationalising the curriculum does not entail a standard catalogue of courses or concepts. Rather, the process and final product incorporates assorted events, emphasising internationalisation and graduate attributes that are useful in a globalised society.

Previously, curriculum movements overemphasised the role of international students in promoting internationalised discussions inside the classroom. Today, the internationalised curriculum does not solely focus on recruiting foreign students, nor should it, but it does acknowledge the importance of fostering an inclusive learning environment for all by embracing all voices and perspectives.

Campuses regularly approach implementing internationalised curriculum reforms from [two angles](#). First, the quantitative approach uses pre-tests and post-tests to examine students' comprehension.

Second, the qualitative approach focuses on the learning process, urging student reflection on global issues and developing student responses to global themes. Hence it manifests as self-reflective portfolios, case study practices and problem-based learning.

[Vaughn Scribner](#), assistant professor of history at the University of Central Arkansas in the US, finds it important to internationalise his curricula to help students “reflect upon their position(s) in larger, interconnected, complicated networks”.

Scribner encourages “students to step back and look at the past – and the present – from the most objective, global vantage point possible. We have all of the tools, but we have to

use them correctly. I urge students to use technology to bridge global divides – ideological, physical, cultural, etc – and use these findings in their everyday lives”.

However, the internationalisation of the curriculum cannot merely exist in isolation. Rather, a university’s overarching philosophy, mission and curricula must create a [coherent narrative](#). Therefore, emphasising comprehensive internationalisation requires an alignment across the full range of educational experiences a student pursues while in college.

“The challenges and opportunities of an internationalised curriculum extend far beyond the walls of the classroom,” states [Chris O’Connell](#), senior advisor at New York University Abu Dhabi. As an administrator, O’Connell believes “the global perspective and habits of mind one can cultivate through coursework can and should be mutually reinforced, practised and integrated into residential living, co-curricular activities and pre-professional work experiences”.

“At its best, the nuances of an internationalised curriculum will resonate deeply among students in the course of their social, cultural and pastoral activities in ways that further embed globalised thinking into the fabric of an institution,” he adds.

Barriers

[Betty Leask](#), pro-vice-chancellor of teaching and learning at La Trobe University in Australia, [defines](#) barriers in the process of internationalising curriculum as identifiable factors “blocking movement toward your curriculum internationalisation goals”. However, while some blockers are avoidable or fixable, others are not and can hinder a university’s internationalisation goals.

Leask groups blockers into three categories: institutional, personal and cultural:

- Institutional blockers are structures in a university’s organisation stopping change. They emerge while designing a programme, course syllabus and-or lesson.
- Personal blockers involve a faculty’s enthusiasm for and commitment toward internationalising curricula.
- Cultural blockers arise from values and ideologies in a discipline or a university.

To enact change, committed leaders willing to oversee the challenges associated with internationalising the curriculum need to be identified. Besides leadership and support, producing convincing rationales also ensures buy-in from university members. Well-defined rationales stimulate participation and also confirm continued commitment.

Rationales

Geopolitical changes provided the first rationale for increasing internationalisation on campuses, with the end of World War II creating the conditions for universities [to embrace internationalisation](#).

Social issues drive curriculum change as do shared global issues, such as poverty, epidemics, climate and overpopulation, which demand new graduates able to confront them. Universities require curricula across disciplines to integrate global knowledge and unite students around ongoing international issues.

Thus, the [American Council on Education](#) argues that the curriculum must prepare graduates for internationalisation during their studies and for their future careers. For example, Ben Lanza, a freshman majoring in dietetics at Kansas State University in the US, finds his exposure to an internationalised curriculum empowering because his classes have prepared him to “help people reduce their risk of chronic disease and combat malnutrition around the globe”.

Graduate attributes

The development of graduate attributes has also become a leading rationale for internationalised curricula. Through an internationalised curriculum, students gain the attributes they need for future careers. Despite each discipline requiring distinctive talents, all employees now need heightened international awareness regardless of their field.

For example, after recognising the benefits of learning another language for her core requirements at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Sidrah Ahmed, a sophomore majoring in chemistry, enrolled in Arabic courses. "Not only will it make me more marketable, but I will also have more knowledge about different cultures and countries," said Ahmed.

Echoing the rationales cited by her professors, Ahmed stated: "In a globalised, fast-paced world like today, these skills are necessary in order to have a successful career."

Internationalising the curriculum does not require reorienting an established curriculum. Rather, for new graduate attributes to transpire, the curriculum must allow students the space to develop their own relationships with internationalisation. An internationalised curriculum helps graduates contemplate whether they have gained the skills they need to function in intercultural and international environments.

Universities maintain that graduates exposed to internationalised curricula are capable of making not only positive but also ethical contributions, as more internationally aware citizens, to their local and global communities.

Kim Bahl, a junior at Illinois State University majoring in middle level education with a language arts endorsement, can directly see how her internationalised teacher education curriculum prepares her to bridge local and global communities for her future teaching profession.

"Since studying language arts, we have learned about incorporating different cultures, domestic and international, through literature." Bahl highlights that, even though her clinical training is located in central Illinois, she is taught to keep a global mindset.

We are only at the shores of the internationalised curriculum ocean. Without a firm understanding the movement will never reach its full potential.

As institutions dive deeper into internationalisation, they will need to develop a stronger comprehension of the benefits and problems, just as previous curriculum movements did beforehand. If not, universities will never be able to navigate the uncharted waters of internationalisation.

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