

# Internationalisation of the curriculum: Challenges & opportunities

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## Key words

Curriculum,  
Higher education,  
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## Abstract

*Internationalized curriculum development is critical to all institutions aiming to approach internationalisation coherently. Research on the internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC) focuses on the curriculum concept encompassing all aspects of learning and teaching (Kemmis & Fitzclarence, 1991). It works at formal, hidden and informal levels. The present work is a critical review of a research piece opinion by Sue Robson (2015) 'Internationalisation of the Curriculum: Challenges and opportunities' emphasising the contribution to this matter of the Higher Education Academy (HEA internationalisation framework but also showing what is missing and needs to take place concluding that a more comprehensive framework would have better-added value for internationalising higher education*

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## 1. Introduction

I would start this paper by stating that I agree with the fundamental ideas being raised in this opinion piece of Sue Robson (2015) *'Internationalisation of the Curriculum: Challenges and opportunities'*. The key issue shown in this opinion piece, concerning the internationalisation of higher education, is that "A more comprehensive approach to internationalisation is needed (with focus on quality and value) enabling all staff and students to have an internationalised experience, whereas one important dimension of this is the internationalisation of the curriculum as the way global understanding, mindset and skills to be developed". Because there are many who perceive the context of internationalisation differently and express their thoughts using the wrong language, and since language expresses mindset, inappropriate use of words shows a lack of understanding. So, I agree that a better conceptualisation of what is the *quality* (?) and which is the *value* (?) of internationalisation is needed to be clarified and justified so that gaining the right understanding, then to use the right wording, and then, to think, plan and move on having the right focus on the right direction'.

### 1.1 International versus Global & Higher Education Framework

I am concerned about two issues that may challenge further research:

a) Everywhere in this opinion piece is used the term 'internationalisation', but the target is our students to develop 'global mindsets'; so, the term international and global mean the same?

According to Rezaei. et al.,(2018), globalisation in higher education has two meanings: The commercial one where globalisation is a one-way economic and cultural communication where a dominant economy influences the culture of other economies; globalisation of higher education is affected by the process of being McDonald. In this context, internationalisation is a creative and deliberate action for sharing the assumptions and dominant patterns. Researchers and educational institutions play an independent role in knowledge production, reproducing and adapting their products to their own needs.

The second approach is called 'globalising'; this results from human social life's evolution, strengthening interactions among societies and cultures. Hence, globalisation is unification and single polarisation of the world; globalising is dissonance and multi-polarisation. Internationalisation reflects economic, cultural, scientific, and political transactions based on consensus and interactions among nations. So, internationalisation is the same as globalising, but it is different from globalisation. One end of the spectrum is globalisation, and the other side is internationalisation. Internationalisation of higher education regards mutual exchanges, is consensus-based, a pre-planned process including teaching, research, and services in higher education and internationalisation of the curriculum follows the distribution of the academic curriculum and its products beyond national borders contributing to the development of international knowledge, skills, and values ((Rezaei, Yousef, Larijani, Dehnavieh., Rezaei, Adibi, 2018).

b) It is mentioned that the curriculum (IoC) is one dimension of the internationalised higher education aiming at the facilitation of intercultural learning (the term 'intercultural' serves 'international' but is it enough for being global?); that the Higher Education Framework of internationalisation offers guidance to be delivered '*a more global and inclusive learning experience to students*', besides the overlap of the two terms 'global vs international' showing confusion in perception and thinking, I wonder whether we can be considered internationals having applied the above. Agreeing on the point that the focus is more on the 'inputs' (what we consider essential to be included in our curricula, practices etc) than 'outputs'(what is produced' since nothing is mentioned 'how' we evaluate the extent of achieving being internationals or internationalised oriented knowledge institutions), my low opinion is that *putting in, reacting on sth* (we should not forget that for some -countries, systems, organisations, individuals-internationalisation efforts include the concept of *reaction* towards competition, or *adoption of trends* and does not necessarily action/behavior which expresses attitudes, values, beliefs, assumptions) I believe that comprehension serves cognitively the value and quality of internationalisation to be understood , however, what is the most critical issue is people, organisations and knowledge-based institutions besides this understanding, to have the 'international thinking' or 'global thinking' which is a further mental step; to believe and internalise the value out of it. So, having a comprehension of sth reflects attitude driven by this value, or it may imply a deeper understanding of acting better? I believe that achieving to adopt the importance of internationalisation in our 'value system' developing 'international thinking' (comprehension contributes towards this direction) which will result in international attitude, and this would help more. Reflecting on this article, I agree with the focus here, but I believe it could be enriched considering the above. For example, when teaching the concept of internationalisation in my classes, I plan many activities to facilitate my students' understanding: I select many chapters from textbooks, international journal articles from authors from many different countries, I form groups with a global synthesis of students, challenge students to share & reflect on their international experience, analyse international cases, through 'role play' address problems, invite international speakers, etc., trying to comprehend what internationalisation is and what its value', but, teaching without believing in this value what should mean?

## 2. What is missing?

*More far-reaching curriculum reforms and innovative pedagogical approaches may be required to foster dispositions, values, and skills with engaged global citizenship.* I agree with this. Research findings confirm that current efforts are still not enough. More fundamental change is required across all aspects of higher education regarding institutional culture, ethos, and values (Gorard, Smith, May, Thomas, Adnett, & Slack, 2006). Caruana and Spurling (2007), reviewing research on internationalisation in higher education, claim that an '*infusion*' approach to curriculum design not only takes account of cultural pluralism in the selection of course content (De Vita et al. 2003) but also encourages staff and students to think critically about their values

and biases which, they say, 'engender 'inclusive strategies' and flexibility allowing for negotiation of assessment tasks between students and lecturers and the 'linking' of assessments' (Caruana & Spurling 2007, p. 65).

Caruana (2009) argues that focusing on generic graduate attributes for employability purposes would result in unintentionally detracting institutions from a needed more-reassessment of practices, purposes, principles required by diversity. Such reassessment regards the deconstruction of our conceptual understanding of critical thinking or/and critical literacy in developing a curriculum that incorporates various perspectives and gives the space to cross-cultural obstacles & boundaries by the deployment of threshold concepts in learning teaching strategies. Although this facilitation of border-crossing might seem somehow strange to some educators in higher education, it is supported that the best way forward is through an evidence-based and research-informed approach to curriculum design rather than a 'best-practice checklist' approach. In times of uncertainty and changes, it is required a pedagogy to view 'mind as constructor' that focuses on the knowledge construction ability and interaction with the world than to have a pedagogy with a 'container' view towards the mind where possession of knowledge and skills assumes the ability to apply, transfer and manipulate them (Su, 2008). Also, developing a 'pedagogy of recognition' embracing the idea 'being with the world' will deconstruct people's understanding of critical thinking processes addressing 'how' we students can be engaged students with texts and theories so that to create the right place for the examination of multiple perspectives which construct, then reproduce, knowledge (Caruana, 2009). So, all these elements and approaches have to be reflected in a comprehensive framework for internationalising Higher Education.

Finally, besides more comprehensive approaches and the importance of inclusivity & sharing of experience in learning and teaching, it is also important to be explored, even more further ways of widening *participation* and *diversity*, which would result in even more innovative teaching, a source of different knowledge, an enriched social and cultural environment and improved learning outcomes for all.

*Culturally responsive teaching can make sure that domestic and international students have chances to interact, to develop a sense of responsibility towards themselves & others and develop the self-efficacy and resilience they need to live and work in diverse learning environments.* I agree that these skills are essential for preparing students through a teaching approach & philosophy that should reflect international and intercultural values and intercultural knowledge for culturally informed responses and effective communication with diverse students. Inclusive teaching and learning should take place where pedagogy, assessment and curricula are developed and take home to engage students in accessible, meaningful, and relevant knowledge to all. It regards individual differences and individual as the source of diversity which enriches the learning and lives of others (May, & Bridger, 2010). All academic staff should contribute to designing, developing, and delivering modules or programs to be *integrated* into line with the values and context of the curriculum, inviting students to interact, exchange with others. So, *the teaching and learning processes as a whole, including the way we ask students to learn, the way/s we assess that learning., and methods of engaging students towards learning, are essential.* The internationalisation of IoC is a journey for the staff as well as they have the chance to learn more, to challenge, to practice theory. However, it is not enough to develop a global mindset when institutional, cultural climate or discipline cultural values might reflect behaviours and mentalities, perhaps not in line with the staff's internationalisation spirit. Institutional, cultural climate influences values and behaviours the macro and micro workplace culture influence.

*Often, IoC focuses more on inputs than outcomes; for me, the important is not only what HE institutions do, what and how to design learning, teaching, assessment but what the result is and how it is evaluated: e.g., what type of skills, attributes, values graduates develop. Activities and other inputs that constitute an internationalisation strategy often become the means to achieve goals that are 'left fuzzy' (Green, 2002).*

Killick (2008) argues that university education should be 'fit for purpose' in a globalising world, and a 'starting point' is an evaluation of graduate attributes.

*The emphasis that is placed in various dimensions of IoC will reflect how the institution, discipline policymakers conceptualise internationalisation.* I agree with this. External drivers towards change (for example, supply and demand, legislation and directives) as well as internal drivers (for example, restructuring) are defined as influencing the successful embedding of approaches towards student diversity and internationalisation in general (May & Bridger, 2010). I believe that the way an issue is understood/perceived, then it is rational in such a context to be reflected in policies and practices. However, we all know that institutional, cultural values and organisational climate generally influence policies, behavioural patterns, and way of thinking. So, I believe choices, priorities of what should be emphasised in a curriculum do not regard only what is understood, what has been comprehended, and what the institutional strategy, politics, institutional values, and climate priorities and how these can be implemented.

*More collaborative & comparative research would assist to a better understanding how knowledge is constructed ; how professional practices differ in other cultures; and how students' holistic experience can promote intercultural learning alongside their disciplinary area* I believe that since internationalisation in higher education requires being open, inclusive, culturally interactive, sharing & challenging assumptions and dominant practices, encouraging mutual exchanges (Rezaei, Yousef, Larijani , Dehnavieh., Rezaei, Adibi, 2018), collaborative and comparative research where scholars from all over the globe work towards a common goal, contributes a lot to internationalisation through the process of networking, exchanging knowledge and intercultural perspectives, testing & elaborating existed research approaches & results incorporating inter-cultural issues and knowledge, developing new theories through an intercultural awareness reaching valid results with international implications, sharing practices and methodologies, thus experiencing a common understanding of knowledge construction. In this scholar exchange knowledge and work process, our students can actively contribute to this through sharing & reflecting their experience and cultural perspectives assisting the learning environment to be enhanced, inclusive, more collaborative (student-student, students-instructors-scholars), helping all to get a better inter and cross-cultural awareness.

*Regarding higher education evaluation, the position in global rankings 'the new currency of quality'. It is based on the number of international staff and students, the number of international exchanges, and international joint publications. However, these can be considered merely as prerequisites for the university developing a global outlook. It has to be integral to the strategy for achieving institutional goals.* I agree that evaluation results build the international institutional perspective and look more as prerequisites for being considered as international; the value of internationalisation should contribute towards the vision of the institution and should be part of it; there should be an internationalised policy with clear objectives also justifying 'how' internationalisation is integrated into the strategic plan of the institution, as well as; internationalisation in the internal quality assurance system of the institution to utilise approaches such as internationalisation benchmarking, peer learning and networking as part of its improvement strategies. Internationalisation effectively integrated into its organisation and decision-making structure, it enables the coherent implementation of all elements related to institutional Internationalisation: Vision,1) Policy 2) Realisation 3) Improvement strategy

*Internationalisation happens in practice: new conceptualisation, understanding about the quality and value of internationalisation to be generated.* Better experience helps for appropriate actions. Wrong perceptions or lack of deep understanding or/and a 'local' than 'international' approach towards perceived values and practices instead of a critical and comparative perspective of worldwide perspectives lead to inappropriate set of standards for selection of practices and actions. Explore, understand, adapt, and

share. Decisions, policy making, curriculum, practices to reflect in practice the right, commonly agreed international values. Teaching, research, institutional collaborations can assist in this direction. So, I agree that it is important to be shared and perceived correctly by all involved parties (policymakers, institutional leaders, tutors, scholars, students on an international basis) a common, deep, understanding of 'what' the context and the values of internationalisation is, 'which' are the educational and pedagogic practices to reflect the above, all to perceive these in the right way so that all to speak the same language' and exchange mutually agreed practices. However, this can be taken place to some extent because considering that some viewed internationalisation as a reaction of universities to the process of globalisation (Van der Wende 1997; Qiang 2003) designed to meet the challenges posed by the globalisation of economics, societies, and human resources (Van der Wende 1997) by considering national identities and cultures as main elements of higher education internationalisation (Qiang 2003). Qiang maintained that we could not describe internationalisation in all countries homogeneously, as the process is influenced by history, culture, resources and different concepts from place to place; internationalisation influences academic programs and the student body and creates new administrative structures (Stromquist, 2007).

*A more comprehensive framework for institutional benchmarking is called for.* A complete framework leads to a better, clear, and correct understanding, which contributes to correct decisions, design & application of appropriate practices assisting knowledge-based institutions in competing with each other on standards that are clearly defined, understood, and agreed. However, I believe that a conceptual framework should be needed to precisely and clearly define the links between the university internationalisation areas and strategy development as well as to be used for assessing universities' current internationalisation processes and generating new strategies (Onise, 2015). Internationalisation is now perceived as one of the main parts of university life and one which brings many benefits, considering that the strategy is set correctly and executed. (Onise, 2015). Adams (2001) presented the positive sides of internationalisation, such as giving more educational choices to learners, encouraging traditional institutions to introduce innovative in context ideas & projects, supporting home education systems to be more competitive and providing home institutions with the chance to generate more income and explore new sources of funding. However, in order for all these to be achieved, there has to be a good understanding; a comprehensive and conceptual framework to be developed to assist researchers in this area.

Caruana (2009) at a UK University shows that adopting learning and teaching strategies which would encourage students to challenge the cultural bias in discipline knowledge construction valuing qualities (e.g critical thinking and empathy) considering many different perspectives, is shown that efforts to apply those strategies are dogged by feelings of uncertainty and lack of confidence. In a similar way, evidence from other Universities (e.g. the South Australia University), which has developed a comprehensive internationalisation information toolkit assisting educators in developing learning outcomes with reference to many different cognitive and attitudinal levels of cross-cultural engagement, seems that this continues to be a significant challenge; maybe these toolkits provide an excellent contribution to supporting curriculum change in the field of internationalisation as they keep better comprehensiveness.

*The HEA international framework offers a guide to University program leaders and tutors seeking to deliver a more global and inclusive learning experience; it provides a structure for the university to benchmark its position against other HEIs.* I sincerely believe that the HEA Framework guides, challenges, and contributes towards the understanding of the nature and importance of internationalisation, facilitating high education institutions to develop the right programs, curricula, learning & teaching approaches so that to become competitive.



The concern of a more flexible curriculum that responds to the needs and expectations of the diverse students addressing the challenges faced by local and global communities will help to ensure a more grounded approach. As the nature of internationalisation is a creative one, based on mutual exchange of knowledge and assumptions, as well as it is dynamic in the process of addressing changes and incorporating intercultural elements on a continuous basis, flexibility instead of rigidity is of critical importance; a curriculum which is addressed to students of diverse background, experiences and needs should be open to incorporate all these experiences, to include elements that are of international interest, so, it has to be flexible so that to be continuously inclusive and dynamic serving common values and addressing the needs and welfare of all.

As Warren (2002) stated regarding the integrated approach, 'It targets all students and assumes that 'students bring varying cognitive, linguistic, knowledge and cultural resources to the learning situation' and that they need to be guided to develop the critical and communicative skills and conceptual repertoires that will enable them to deal with academic tasks' (p 87).

### 3. Conclusion

One of the key shifts in recent years has been in conceptualising internationalisation beyond recruiting international students. Recognising that internationalisation means more than where students come from (Lunn, 2008; Turner and Robson, 2007) or can happen "by osmosis" (Martin, 2000 in De Vita, 2007, p.162), internationalisation has recently expanded to what students learn, how they interact, and what values their programme promotes. For example, Fielden links internationalisation to the concept of a global citizen, thereby requiring that internationalised curriculums engage with a skillset that helps to "achieve social cohesion in a multi-cultural society" (Fielden, 2007, p.23). I agree that although there are some good efforts till now towards internationalising Higher Education by the HEA framework, however, a more comprehensive framework would have added value so that all that is needed for preparing our students to achieve social cohesion this to be assisted by internationalised Higher Education.

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