

Student perceptions of internationalisation of the undergraduate curriculum

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Abstract: Undergraduate students across all years at Griffith University were surveyed to explore the international dimensions of their experiences on campus to provide a “snapshot” or benchmark to guide further work in the area of internationalisation of the curriculum. About 50% of students indicated a personal international orientation or interest in international issues. On most items, nearly half of all students agreed that their courses and their experiences on campus had an international dimension. First year students reported significantly more positive perceptions and experiences compared with second and third year students. Students in the Health and Sciences Group tended to report significantly less positive perceptions and experiences than those in the Arts & Education and the Business & Law Groups. There was some evidence that international students and domestic students born overseas have a greater sensitivity to aspects of internationalisation of the curriculum. On all items a significant proportion of students did not perceive or experience international dimensions and a slightly larger proportion of students were not sure of the international dimensions of their experiences at university. Further work needs to be done to explore more fully and explain the basis of students’ perceptions and experiences reported in this study.

Keyword: internationalisation

Introduction

The term internationalisation of higher education has a range of meanings including the flow of students between countries; the internationalisation of curriculum; the development of international research links; the development of regional agreements for the recognition of higher education programs or some combination of these activities. Internationalisation is seen as a response to globalisation (Knight, 1994) and aims to develop international or cross-cultural dimensions in all aspects of a university’s operations, with the ultimate goal of developing students, graduates and staff for working effectively in a global environment (Hamilton, 1997). The underlying reasons for internationalisation of universities also include: staff and student mobility, student and staff development, mechanisms for maintaining academic standards and quality assurance and research collaboration (Knight, 1994).

The literature on the internationalisation of higher education curricula focuses primarily on the outcomes and the process. At one level it is about preparing a community for successful participation and cross-cultural understanding in an increasingly interdependent world. At an individual level, many university graduates are competing for positions in a global workforce. To be successful they need at least an international awareness; some will require a demonstrated ability to work in cross-cultural or

international contexts, and others will require international expertise in specific matters involving other cultures and countries. The mechanisms by which universities achieve their preparation of students for international study and employment are not well elaborated in the literature. Considerable discussion is devoted to initiatives that are essentially curricular additions or events (staff and student exchanges, study tours, multicultural days) that do not sufficiently infuse a curriculum with an international flavour that can impact on all graduates. In this paper we focus not on the *how* of internationalising the curriculum, but on the various dimensions of internationalisation evident in a curriculum, based upon the goals of internationalisation espoused in the literature. This range of characteristics of an international curriculum and student orientations provided a focus for exploring first, second and third year students' experiences and perceptions of different dimensions of internationalisation of their curriculum as a starting point, or initial benchmark for further development in this area.

Methods

Details of students' experiences of their course and their opinions were collected using a survey conducted within the regular cycle of university evaluations and surveys. The survey was conducted using www.SurveyMaker.com.au, a website that generates online surveys with a range of automated email and reporting features. The questionnaire was voluntary and administered in closed, confidential mode, hence all students had to explicitly provide consent to participate in the study upon access to the survey. The surveys were approved by the Research Ethics Committee. Students who were invited to complete this survey included all first year students enrolled at the institution, together with those second and third-year students who had completed previous first year surveys at University.

Curriculum internationalisation was measured using a series of 14 questions assessing curriculum content, teaching methods, perceptions of teachers and campus environment, a self-assessment of personal skill development and the extent to which their degree program had prepared them for working in an international environment. The questions were presented with accompanying response categories on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly disagree, Disagree, and Uncertain to Agree, and Strongly Agree.

Survey data were combined with data from the university administration and coded before analysis using SPSS (Version 12, www.spss.com). Analyses were conducted on raw data, rather than the collapsed scales shown in the Tables 1-9. One-way ANOVA or univariate analyses were conducted to examine the effects of citizenship and country of birth on perceptions. Multivariate analyses were used to examine the effect of academic group on students' perceptions and post hoc analyses, using Scheffe (if equal variances) or Dunnett's T3 test (if unequal variances), were used to identify significant differences between and among variables.

Results

Cases with less than 90% complete data were removed from the dataset, leaving a total of 501 of 1648 complete third-year, 418 of 1577 complete second-year and 856 of 6000 complete first-year data sets for analysis. The respondent group consisted of 65% females, 80% under 25 years of age, 80% Australian-born students and 6% fee-paying international students. The proportion of students from each campus was consistent with campus enrolments and there was roughly equal representation from the three broad academic groups.

Overall student perceptions and experiences

The responses from all students regarding their perceptions of internationalisation based are illustrated in Table 1. Less than half of students believed that their studies at university were preparing them to

work effectively in overseas countries. Similarly less than half of students agreed that the content in their courses was illustrated with examples drawn from different cultures or countries, that the content was presented from a range of perspectives or that assessment was framed in, or required them to apply their learning to, different cultural or international situations.

Working effectively in cross cultural groups was introduced to about half of students as group work was viewed as a good vehicle for developing cross-cultural perspectives. There was a significant correlation ($r=0.3$, $p<0.01$) between preparation for group work and positive outcomes from group work. About 40% of students agreed that their teachers had a deep understanding of how the discipline or profession operated in various countries around the world; a similar proportion was not sure. Student awareness of opportunities for country or language studies, or study abroad was variable, with roughly equal proportions unaware, unsure or aware of the possibilities.

Many students (45-50%) agreed that the social environment on campus enabled them to interact with international students and students from other cultural groups and develop understandings of their cultures and countries. On a personal level, many students (50% or more) indicated a belief their future depended upon an understanding of different international perspectives of their own discipline and that they took opportunities to develop their understanding of different perspectives. In response to the various questions, a high proportion of 20-33% of students did not perceive any international dimension in their curriculum or on-campus experiences.

Student perceptions and experiences by year in course

First year students were significantly more positive than others in their international orientation, their social interactions with others from diverse backgrounds and their overall view that their university studies were preparing them for the international workforce (Table 2). There were no significant differences between second and third year students in their perceptions and experiences.

Just under half of students in each year group agreed that the content matter in their courses was illustrated with examples from a range of cultural and geographical contexts. Significantly fewer first year students than second year students agreed that the content in their courses was presented from a range of perspectives, though there was a high proportion of first year students who were uncertain in their response to the question. In terms of subject matter, first year students indicated a preference for greater international content in their courses, which was in stark contrast to the views of second and third year students. Cross-tab analyses showed that this phenomenon was not associated with country of birth, citizenship or any academic group. A similar contrast was seen in students' perceptions of their teacher's understanding of how the discipline or profession operated internationally. Cross-tab analyses revealed that international students and overseas-born domestic students tended to view their teacher's international perspective less positively than Australian-born domestic students. Many students in all years agreed that group work was a useful experience for developing a greater understanding of other cultures and countries, though first year students indicated that they had less preparation for effective cross-cultural group work. Second and third year students seemed more aware of the opportunity to include language or country studies or study abroad as options within their degree program.

	Disagreement %	%	Agreement %
Curriculum, Teaching & Learning			
The content in my courses is often illustrated with examples from, or applied to a range of cultural and international situations.	22	34	44
The content of my courses is presented from a range of different cultural and international perspectives. **	20	31	49
I would prefer to study more about international issues than focus on Australian issues. (Reversed)	26	40	34
Assessment tasks in my courses are framed in international scenarios or require me to apply course materials or concepts to different cultural or international situations.	25	29	46
In my courses, we have been given a good introduction on how to work effectively in cross-cultural groups.	21	29	50
Group work in my courses provides a real opportunity to learn about different cultures and gain different perspectives about my area of study.	23	28	49
The teachers in my courses appear to have a deep understanding of how my discipline or profession operates in different cultures and countries around the world. **	20	40	40
In my courses this year I have become aware of how culture, religion and values have influenced, or shaped my area of study.	30	24	46
I am aware of, or have had, the opportunity to include courses on language studies, country or culture studies or study overseas as part of my degree program.	35	27	38
Campus			
Socialising with students from other cultures/countries is part of my daily campus life.	24	30	45
The social environment on campus enables me to gain an understanding of different cultural and international perspectives of the world. **	15	35	50
Personal Orientations			
I believe that my future depends on understanding international perspectives of my discipline.	14	30	56
I take every opportunity available to broaden my understandings and respect of different cultures, religions and other countries.	25	25	50
Overall Perception			
I believe that my studies at University are giving me the necessary content knowledge, skills and perspectives to work effectively in overseas countries.	33	31	36

** Excludes data from third year students.

Table 1. Students' perceptions of international dimensions in their curriculum and campus environment. (n=1775). Scale collapsed. % Percentage of respondents

	Year	Disagree		Agree	
Curriculum, Teaching & Learning					
The content in my courses is often illustrated with examples from, or applied to a range of cultural and international situations.	First Second Third	21 23 22	39 29 31	40 48 47	
The content of my courses is presented from a range of different cultural and international perspectives.	First Second Third	19 19 -	36 16 -	45 65 -	#
I would prefer to study more about International issues than focus on Australian issues. (Reversed)	First Second Third	18 58 50	32 27 28	50 15 22	*
Assessment tasks in my courses are framed in international scenarios or require me to apply course materials or concepts to different cultural or international situations.	First Second Third	28 21 25	34 25 25	38 54 50	*
In my courses, we have been given a good introduction on how to work effectively in cross-cultural groups.	First Second Third	31 9 12	37 20 23	32 71 65	*
Group work in my courses provides a real opportunity to learn about different cultures and gain different perspectives about my area of study.	First Second Third	22 24 26	33 25 23	45 51 51	
The teachers in my courses appear to have a deep understanding of how my discipline or profession operates in different cultures and countries around the world.	First Second Third	10 40 -	41 37 -	49 23 -	*
In my courses this year I have become aware of how culture, religion and values have influenced, or shaped my area of study.	First Second Third	16 40 40	34 16 16	50 44 43	*
I am aware of, or have had, the opportunity to include courses on language studies, country or culture studies or study overseas as part of my degree program.	First Second Third	39 27 36	27 31 24	34 42 40	*
Campus					
Socialising with students from other cultures/countries is part of my daily campus life.	First Second Third	19 32 30	31 28 28	50 40 42	*
The social environment on campus enables me to gain an understanding of different cultural and international perspectives of the world.	First Second Third	10 40 -	41 37 -	49 23 -	#
Personal Orientation					
I believe that my future depends on understanding international perspectives of my discipline.	First Second Third	8 20 20	30 31 29	62 50 51	*
I take every opportunity available to broaden my understandings and respect of different cultures, religions and other countries.	First Second Third	4 44 45	27 24 23	69 32 32	*
Overall Perception					
I believe that my studies here are giving me the necessary content knowledge, skills and perspectives to work effectively in overseas countries.	First Second Third	14 49 33	38 29 32	48 22 35	*

* 1st Year vs 2nd year, 1st vs 3rd year p<0.05. # 1st year vs 2nd year, p<0.05

Table 2. Students' perceptions of international dimensions in their curriculum and campus environment by Year in course. (First n = 858, Second n = 418, Third n = 501). Scale collapsed.

Student perceptions and experiences by academic group

Overall, a significantly smaller proportion of Health & Sciences students than Business & Law students agreed that their studies at university were preparing them for work in international contexts. In terms of personal orientations to internationalisation, Health & Sciences students, compared with Arts & Education and Business & Law students, were significantly less inclined to take opportunities to interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds and did not see an understanding of the international dimensions of their discipline as important to their future. These personal orientations were consistent with reported social interactions with international students on campus. The Arts and Health Sciences students also held significantly different views on the usefulness of the social life on campus in fostering cross-cultural interaction.

Internationalisation of the curriculum was generally seen most positively by Business & Law students compared with Arts & Education students and Health & Sciences students. There were significant differences amongst students from all three Academic Groups in terms of resources or teachers' use of examples or applications of concepts to different international or cultural groups in the curriculum. Business & Law students had a significantly more positive sense than Arts & Education or Health & Sciences students that the content in their courses was presented from a range of perspectives. These significant differences are reflected in students' views on assessment in their courses and on the extent to which they have become aware of how their discipline (or profession) has been shaped by culture, religion and other countries. In terms of the international content in courses, Health & Sciences students indicated a preference for focusing on more Australian material in their course that was generally consistent with their personal international orientation. The introduction to group work and use of group work as a vehicle for developing cross cultural understanding was seen more positively by Business & Law students than students from either Arts & Education or Health & Science. Students from all three academic groups expressed similar views on their teachers' understanding of how the profession or discipline operates internationally.

Perceptions of domestic and international students

Collectively, domestic and international students both had similar personal orientations to internationalisation and similar perceptions of how university was preparing them for international employment (Table 4). Compared with domestic students, the international students reported significantly greater social interactions on campus with students from other backgrounds and were more positive about the extent to which the social environment on campus was aiding the development of cross-cultural understandings. Significantly fewer domestic than international students believed that they had adequate preparation for cross cultural group work or that group work was effective in developing cross cultural perspectives. International students had lower perceptions of staff members' levels of international understandings of their discipline or profession.

Discussion

Smart, Volet and Ang (2000; p. 9) argue that to best prepare our students for successful participation in the global workforce, "it is crucial that they better understand each other's cultures, learn to communicate, socialise and work together and to network". There were three important findings arising from this study that have implications for this assertion. First, nearly half of all students recognised internationalisation dimensions of their curriculum and university experiences and there were significant differences in perceptions of domestic students and those with international backgrounds. Second, there were significant between-year differences in perceptions, orientations and experiences. Third, significant differences were found amongst students in the three academic groups with respect to their perceptions, orientations and experiences.

Internationalisation of the curriculum

International elements within the curriculum were identified by less than half of students surveyed. It may be the case that courses did contain some international dimension, however it may not have been explicitly referred to, or drawn upon in the course as a focus for learning. Student confusion about whether international examples or perspectives were core or peripheral to the subject matter may have contributed to the large proportion that indicated that they neither agreed or disagreed with the statements. There was no majority view regarding a need for an increased focus on international issues in courses, and this no doubt reflects the diversity of courses in which students in these surveys were enrolled. It is interesting to note that nearly one fifth of students in each year did not perceive any international dimension in their courses. About one third of students indicated that their studies at university were not advancing their knowledge and skills necessary for working internationally. A closer audit of courses and data from teachers may provide further data to explain this observation, particularly if all students are expected to have an ability to study or work trans-nationally after graduation

Group work

Group work is a considerable component of many university courses, often introduced to manage class sizes, though also to develop necessary team work skills. About half of all students agreed that they had a good introduction on how to work effectively in cross cultural groups, with less than one fifth disagreeing with the statement. First year students responded significantly less positively than others to the question about preparation for effective group work. This might reflect the large class sizes typical of first year and the difficulty in building such activities into curricula. It is also possible that group work was not employed in all courses, since the proportions of students disagreeing with the statement are relatively constant across citizenship and country of birth. International students responded significantly more positively to this question than domestic students, which may reflect their personal goals to interact with domestic, native English-speaking peers, their previous membership of collectivist societies or perhaps targeted support for them in particular courses.

The possibilities for group work to scaffold students in developing inter-cultural awareness and discovering different perspectives of their discipline area was realised by about half of all students who completed the survey. Significantly, one-quarter believed that group work was ineffective in developing these understandings. Nesdale and Todd (1993) argue that mixing amongst domestic and international students is, of itself, not sufficient to develop inter-cultural awareness, hence the absence of guidance may well have been detrimental to the learning of these students. Whilst domestic and international students may be willing to work in cross-cultural groups, there are also suggestions that the investment of time and effort necessary to make the group work successfully was high, and many students may not choose to work in cross-cultural groups again, given the choice (Cronin et al, 1999). Preparing students for cross-cultural group work was positively correlated with the development of cross cultural perspectives, thus the use of programs such as ExcelL (Mak et al, 1999) and specific cross-cultural communication skill development should be considered when planning for better group work outcomes.

Socialising on campus

International and domestic students had significantly different views on the extent to which they were able to socialise with other students on campus and the extent to which the campus environment facilitated socialisation amongst students of different cultural backgrounds. Overseas students often express their dissatisfaction with the lack of interaction they have with Australian students (AEI, 2002). Presumably this refers to informal, social contact. A study of international and local students at a New Zealand Business School (Daly & Brown, 2004) reported that interactions between the groups tended to occur more frequently in academic, rather than social situations. Local and international students both

appear to have reservations about initiating inter-cultural social interactions, which may be a reflection of equally poor understanding of each other's culture and appropriate ways to communicate (Mak et al, 1999). In social interactions, international students tended to be more passive because they had less confidence in independently starting and maintaining conversations conducted in a different cultural environment. Local students may have some disinterest in developing new friendships because of established social networks, time pressures with increased work commitments, or because of a lack of need or perceived benefit from the interactions. There is room for improvement in facilitating social interactions amongst students from diverse backgrounds, as nearly 20% of students responded negatively to the socialisation questions and nearly 30% of students offered neutral responses. Possible university responses to improve socialisation could include the use of buddy systems or mentoring, though these systems often involve selected local students and need support to maintain the buddy/mentor relationship. Another approach involves developing students' inter-cultural competence through approaches such as the Excell program (Mak et al, 1999) which has the potential to improve the inter-cultural competencies of all participants and hence facilitate greater social interaction.

Differences between years

First-year students' responses to many questions were significantly more positive than those of either second- or third-year students. This pattern was seen in cross-analyses looking at academic groups and country of birth and citizenship and did not appear to be age-related. A broader survey, and further analysis and audit of course outlines maybe necessary to consider underlying reasons for this finding. It would be useful also to explore the between-year differences further, through follow-up interviews to see, for example, whether their international orientation is constant, develops or wanes. The differences in international orientations between first year and later students, if confirmed in subsequent research, may provide supporting evidence for an increased marketing of study-abroad courses and exchanges to these students, perhaps encouraging them to undertake country-specific courses in preparation for later exchange or study programs.

Differences between academic groups

There were significant differences in terms of curriculum content, and preparation and effectiveness of group work amongst students from the three academic groups. Business & Law was seen as the group offering the most international curriculum. Students themselves reported greater social interactions across cultures and stronger international orientations and aspirations, perhaps reflecting the large numbers of international students in these programs.

Similarly, it was not surprising that students in the Health & Science Group reported significantly lower perceptions of internationalisation in their courses and campus interactions. Students in Nursing, Health Science and Environmental Science tended to report more positively than students in IT, Engineering or Science. The former three faculties have courses that focus on developing interpersonal communication skills (e.g. Nursing) and studies focusing on issues affecting other countries (e.g. Public Health, Environmental Science). The latter discipline areas are often portrayed as heavily fact-based and less inclusive (Cronin et al, 1999). Academic staff teaching in these disciplines often claim that "science is international," by its very nature. Whilst there is some support for this assertion, clearly students do not seem aware of, or share these perceptions, thus there is considerable room for improvement in the respective programs offered by this academic group.

Implications

In response to most questions, about one third of students, across all years, were uncertain about the presence of various international dimensions in their courses and programs and as part of their campus experiences. The basis of these perceptions requires further examination through methods that might include auditing of course outlines. Some discipline areas may need to consider closely the necessary knowledge and skills their

graduates need to study or work transnationally, and revise their curriculum and provide greater support for academic staff to broaden their international experiences.

Limitations

The sample from which this data was derived was a convenience sample that included first-, second- and third-year students who had previously been involved in First Year surveys. The sample is skewed with more females and younger students than typically comprises the University student population. The results should be interpreted and generalised with caution.

Conclusions

Internationalisation of the curriculum is a response to globalisation and is seen as a priority by universities that wish to make and maintain their reputation in the world. This study is one of the first at university level to explore students' perceptions of the international dimensions of their curriculum and campus experiences. There is scope for further work to understand the basis for reported perceptions and then to respond through curricular reform. The good news is that many students are interested in gaining international perspectives of their disciplines and do experience international dimensions in their studies. They also believe that the courses they are studying at University are preparing them for successful participation in a global workforce and globalised society.

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