

# Internationalisation: Differing Interpretations and Associated Student Experience Implications

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## Abstract

Although ‘internationalisation’ is now a common feature of many UK Higher Education Institutions’ (HEIs) strategic statements, it seems there is a lack of clarity on what the term means and how it ought to manifest within processes and practices in higher education. Via the synthesis of relevant literature, this paper explores a number of interpretations of internationalisation and identifies three broad themes, each with differing ideological underpinnings and associated implications to the student experience offered within UK HEIs.

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## Introduction

One by-product of the increasingly multicultural context of UK higher education institutions (HEIs) is the increasing use of the term internationalisation. However, it seems with increased usage comes greater ambiguity around what the word actually means. Indeed, the range of interpretations and manifestations of the term has been widely discussed within the discipline of the internationalisation of higher education Knight (2011), a leading academic in this field, suggested that the word has become a,

“catch-all phrase... used to describe anything and everything remotely linked to worldwide, inter-cultural, global or international...[and] losing its meaning and direction” (p.1).

This paper reports on three differing interpretations of internationalisation which have emerged through conducting a literature review. The starting point for this comparison of interpretations is Schecter’s (1993) three goals of international education programmes which are labelled as *liberal*, *pragmatic* and *civic*. A comparison of these goals with similar models borne out of more recent empirical studies (Warren, 2005; Chan and Dimmock, 2008) is given, and the ideological underpinnings and student experience implications of these varied perspectives are explored.

## Findings

### *Internationalisation as a tool for westernising global education*

According to Schecter (1993), within international education programmes, the *liberal* goal is focused on broadening the minds of university students and developing their appreciation of and respect for differing perspectives in order to be able to function within a multicultural context. Although this may initially appear a noble position to take, it also raises ethical issues as the concept of one person being able to broaden the minds of others immediately suggests that there is a power relationship in play. Within the context of internationalisation,

this may manifest as practitioners within English-speaking universities in the developed world holding the view that they are helping to broaden the less-developed minds of those visiting from developing nations. In this sense, although the liberal is internationally aware, their starting position is entrenched within their own cultural context; a phenomenon described by De Vita and Case, (2003) as ‘ethnocentric western didacticism’. They suggest this approach to internationalisation is “...based on the principles of knowledge dissemination and an exclusively western cognitive learning process” (p64). A further indicator of this perspective may occur in the growing trend of transnational programmes, where western universities establish local campuses, or build partnerships with locally-based universities in other countries, yet utilise the same processes, curriculum, assessment and pedagogical practices as used in western universities. In this way, the liberal educationalist is similar to the *cultural restorationist* in Warren’s (2005) model who seeks to preserve traditional values and academic standards.

However, Chan and Dimmock (2008) define this as the *globalist* approach which is driven by self-interest and focused on exporting a national/ institutional-based model to other parts of the world. This is a view shared by De Vita (2007) who suggests that this approach is staunchly in an “exclusively commercial agenda” which, rather than embedding more international perspectives within curriculum and pedagogy, instead results in “the legitimisation of a discourse that treats education as a marketable commodity” (ibid, p.162). However, it seems inevitable that if education is to be perceived as a commodity, the quality of the service provided will become a crucial factor in the student experience. For example, it is argued that unfamiliar ‘western-centric’ curriculum content and teaching approaches can inhibit overseas students’ propensity to engage in lessons (DeVita and Case, 2003; Caruana & Spurling, 2007) thus potentially impeding their ability to achieve success and gain the ‘maximum return on their investment’. Therefore, in order to fully meet the needs of the customer i.e. the increasingly diverse student population, it would seem that a review and adaptation of institutional processes, formal and informal curricula and pedagogic practices would need to be conducted.

Although Kehm and Teichler (2007) suggest that the significant increase in research being undertaken aimed at practitioners and policy-makers indicates that internationalisation has become a more central concern within HEIs and has moved on from “...the traditional British way of ‘internationalisation through import’” (Teichler, 1995, p.162), Caruana and Spurling (2007), highlight that there is a difference between being aware of cultural difference and valuing it. This issue appears to be evident within this interpretation which seems to be based on the presupposition that one culture is superior to another and thus, that the educational practices of one culture are more valid than those of others. They argue that the basis of this tension is between the Confucian and Socratic models of learning and that a debate around the validity of both models is required as “...without this debate ‘conceptual colonialism’ and ‘institutional discrimination’ may be the outcomes of continued efforts to internationalise the curriculum” (Caruana and Spurling 2007, p.67).

#### *Internationalisation as a method for developing graduate employability within a global context*

The second of Schecter’s (1993) three goals of international education programmes is *pragmatic* where the focus is on developing the knowledge and skills of students for employability within the global marketplace. This is fully aligned with a facet of the models

proposed by both Warren (2005) and Chan and Dimmock (2008). Both the *moderniser* (Warren, *ibid*) and the *translocalist* (Chan and Dimmock, *ibid*), perceive the main function of education as producing a workforce which enables graduates to compete globally. However, it should be noted that according to Chan and Dimmock (2008) the translocalist is keen to promote a strong sense of national identity within a global context.

The pragmatic rationale appears to move away from the overtones of cultural superiority evidenced within the liberal approach and instead seems to strive for mutual understanding of cultural and professional practices, albeit in the interest of economic gain. This is likely to be a result of increasing interdependency driven by the globalisation of national economies, which in turn has caused a realisation that an appreciation of and respect for the way other countries conduct business, will foster greater opportunities for sustaining domestic growth. In relation to internationalisation within UK HEIs, it seems that this rationale is likely to manifest itself in the *infusion* approach whereby scholars recognise the importance of including international perspectives within their existing course content and adjust their syllabus accordingly (De Vita, 2007). This has led to a growth in disciplines broadening their scope to include modules focused on areas such as developing cross-cultural communication skills, foreign languages, exchange and study abroad programmes and comparative studies (De Vita, 2007). However, a criticism of this approach is that it is often adopted on an ad hoc basis and by specific faculties (such as Business) who see a direct correlation between internationalisation and their subject area (Schoormann, 1999). This links to a further shortcoming in that although the approach focuses on internationalising the curriculum, it neglects to address the review and adjustment of pedagogic processes where required to ensure that the teaching and learning fostered is culturally inclusive. This is something which is argued as pertinent to all disciplines (Schoormann, 1999; De Vita, 2007).

In a globalised economy, it is difficult to argue against the relevance and importance of this interpretation, particularly as economic development continues to strengthen in Brazil, Russia, India and China (the BRIC nations) and Africa. A further motivator for UK HEIs to embrace this approach is the government's recent White Paper (2012) which decrees that prospective students and parents should have access to graduate employability statistics to inform their higher education decision-making process.

However, despite the welcoming of diverse cultural and professional perspectives that this interpretation fosters, it appears to fail to accommodate the diverse educational perspectives which a multinational cohort brings in that there is little or no focus on adapting pedagogic practices and assessments. This again raises the question of whether overseas students have an equal opportunity for success as their counterparts who have progressed through the British education system.

#### *Internationalisation as an ethos for promoting global social justice*

The above discussion appears to illustrate that a common shortcoming of both the liberal and pragmatic interpretations of internationalisation is the absence of a culturally inclusive pedagogy across all disciplines which provides "...an equal opportunity for success to every student by providing equitably for the learning ambitions of all, irrespective of their cultural backgrounds" (Haigh, 2002 cited in De Vita, 2007, p.164).

Stakeholders within HEIs who concur that this should be the goal of education within an international context, would be defined by Schecter (1993) as striving for the *civic* goal of international education which aims to cultivate global citizens who are committed to striving

for global democracy. Both Warren (2005) and Chan and Dimmock (2008) offer a similar perspective in their models which they label as *progressives* and *internationalists* respectively. The commonality in all three interpretations of this view is that education ought to be a transformative experience that embeds global democracy and equality within all of its dimensions (Schoormann, 1999).

This view of education is guided by critical pedagogy which argues that social structures and relations are heavily dominated by, “Western/Euro/U.S.-centric ways of knowing the world” emerging from a prevalence of “epistemologies of empire...and Western imperial regimes” (McLaren, 2011 p.382). As a result, rather than expect learners from differing cultural backgrounds to conform to and perform against these unfamiliar and unjust academic expectations, teachers are encouraged to reflect on the influence of these culturally situated structures and relations on their practice in order to make changes which aim to facilitate a learning environment which acknowledges and accepts difference thus striving to create a more democratic global society (McLaren, 2005).

However, there are limitations to this interpretation of internationalisation in that it demands all stakeholders within HEIs to reflect on their positionality within their role and enact change to meet the global social justice agenda. Although it is argued that such reflection can enhance intercultural competence within all participants involved in the teaching and learning process (Coryell et al., 2012), the reality is that fulfilling this requirement demands significant investment in three areas; intellectual investment, whereby the ideology, pedagogy and curriculum is reframed and relevant training and development is undertaken; emotional investment, which acknowledges that internationalisation may require a refocus of and/or suspension of personal research agendas; temporal investment, which recognises that it takes time to prepare for and implement change whether that be cultural or process change (Coryell et al., 2012).

Further reflection on these issues highlights additional concerns. Firstly, the intellectual and emotional investments suggest that all stakeholders would subscribe to the political and ideological stance which underpins this approach. Yet, a number of studies reviewed as part of this paper suggest that ideology is often varied both within and across disciplines and departments (e.g. Chan and Dimmock 2008; Coryell et al., 2012) and the theories discussed support this. Furthermore, the most significant of these investments is that of time, as it is only with the benefit of time that the other two investments could take place. However, time for review, reflection and improvement is often lacking within UK HEIs, and as funding constraints and the commodification of higher education continues, and teacher-to-student ratios come under the spotlight, it is perhaps unlikely that institutions will be in a position to invest the required temporal capital.

## Conclusion

This synthesis of texts appears to reveal a commonality amongst a range of models of ‘internationalisation’ which present three overarching interpretations of the term. Assuming that the starting point for education provision ought to be equality of opportunity (QAA, 2012), then with its income generation-focused, western-centric and culturally superior approach to offering education to a diverse student population, the interpretation of *internationalisation as a tool for westernising global education* presents itself as least ‘fit-for-purpose’. Yet, as the knowledge economy continues to increase and government funding

continues to be reduced, it appears to present itself as the path of least resistance with the maximum economic benefits, as it seems to demand minimal or compartmentalised change within institutions.

The interpretation of *internationalisation as a method for developing graduate employability within a global context*, at least moves towards a desire for mutual understanding. However, whilst its pragmatic focus on curriculum and employability skills is clearly relevant within a globalised economy, its failure to address pedagogy could legitimise pedagogic apathy within faculties which in turn could impede equality of opportunity for all learners.

In an attempt to tackle this potential apathy, *internationalisation as an ethos for promoting global social justice* challenges practitioners to embrace critical pedagogy, recognise their positionality within their teaching and learning context, and seek to make constructive and inclusive changes with a view to elevate education from merely an economic and functional tool, to a socially transformative lever striving to provide equality of opportunity for all. The ethos is difficult to argue with, but the process of embarking upon such a cultural change is likely to pose both practical and ideological limitations. However, a useful resource for engaging with these challenges is the Higher Education Academy's Internationalisation Resources Centre (HEA, 2014) which provides research insights, pragmatic tools and research and practice networks to assist institutions, support staff and lecturers to better understand and effectively implement internationalisation within their processes and practice. Such resources may assist us all, as key stakeholders in the teaching and learning process, to reflect on whether the environments which we create and operate within are truly meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. However, perhaps more importantly, it will enable us to evaluate the extent to which we, as institutions and individuals, are meeting the QAA's equality standards by endeavouring to provide learning experiences within which all participants' contributions are valued and accepted.

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