

What Can Students Learn in the Internationalised University?

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Introduction

In an era of increasing globalisation, it has become commonplace for universities to present themselves as institutions that are international as well as national and local in character. And at HKU and elsewhere, internationalisation has been making its mark not just on the way in which contemporary research and scholarship are carried out, but also in the goals and aspirations of the university curriculum. The ensuing vision is an inspiring one:

“Internationalised universities provide a meeting place of many cultures where valuable intercultural learning can occur; where there is the potential for the new, the challenging, and the unfamiliar to be the norm; where the taken for granted can be challenged; and where new ideas and ways of thinking are formed as a result of engagement with culturally different others¹.”

Yet translating this vision into everyday experiences of learning and teaching is not necessarily straightforward, and doubts have been expressed in some universities about how widely and how well it is being achieved. A former Harvard President, for example, has argued that his country’s students receive “very little preparation either as citizens or as professionals for the international challenges that are likely to confront them”². Others have suggested that some university curricula have been internationalised only in superficial ways that amount to little more than ‘intellectual tourism’³, or that there has been insufficient reflection on what intercultural learning might entail⁴ or how it might be actively fostered even on culturally diverse campuses⁵.

At HKU there is a strategic commitment to further strengthening of internationalisation across the curriculum, and this *Briefing* reviews current understandings about how it can enrich students’ learning and prepare them for life and work in a globalised world. The focus is on what has been called ‘internationalisation at home’ — in other words, by means of on-campus experiences within and beyond the formal curriculum — as well as through study abroad opportunities. By taking stock of what kinds of learning are achievable, the *Briefing* can serve as a foundation-stone for exploration of how to further embed internationalisation in course development, teaching-learning activities and approaches to assessment.

Four closely interrelated aspects of internationalised learning are examined, each of which foregrounds a particular type of learning outcome, as outlined in Figure 1:

- a **global outlook**, where the chief concern is with advancing students’ *knowledge and understanding*
- **global citizenship**, where the development of *attitudes* is centre-stage
- a commitment to **cultural inclusiveness**, where the emphasis is on *values*, and
- nurturing the *skills* associated with **intercultural competence**

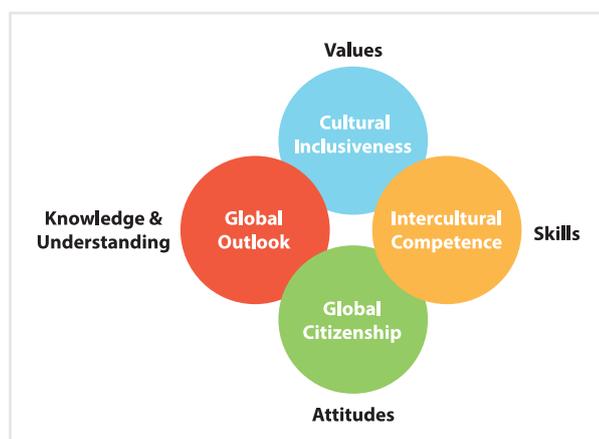


Figure 1. Types of learning outcomes

Global Outlook

The development in students of a global outlook or global mindset generally focuses on the internationalisation of curriculum content within and across disciplines or subject areas. The knowledge gained takes two main forms. The first is a fuller understanding *about* other nations and cultures, or the use of knowledge and perspectives derived *in or from* other nations and cultures, leading to what has sometimes been called ‘cultural versatility’ or ‘cultural agility’. In HKU’s overarching goals for four-year degrees, this is referred to as *intercultural understanding*.

The second is a richer grasp of issues of worldwide significance (for example, climate change, energy, health and poverty) and an appreciation of how global forces have an impact on our everyday lives. HKU students have an early opportunity to acquaint themselves this aspect of internationalisation by opting for courses in *Global Issues*, one of the four main Areas of Inquiry in the Common Core Curriculum⁶.

At the University of South Australia, the learning outcomes associated with a global outlook have been very helpfully dissected. The intention is that, by the time they have graduated, UniSA students will be able to⁷:

- a. display an ability to think globally and consider issues from a variety of perspectives
- b. demonstrate an awareness of their own culture and its perspectives and other cultures and their perspectives
- c. appreciate the relation between their field of study locally and professional traditions elsewhere
- d. recognise intercultural issues relevant to their professional practice
- e. appreciate the importance of multicultural diversity to professional practice and citizenship
- f. appreciate the complex and interacting factors that contribute to notions of culture and cultural relationships
- g. value diversity of language and culture
- h. appreciate and demonstrate the capacity to apply international standards and practices within the discipline or professional area
- i. demonstrate awareness of the implications of local decisions and actions for international communities and of international decisions and actions for local communities.

At HKU, as in UniSA and many other universities, this ‘journey of people, minds and ideas across political and cultural frontiers’⁸ extends beyond knowledge and understanding to fuller engagement through global citizenship.

Global Citizenship

The notion of global citizenship centres upon the attitudes universities seek to foster in their students. In one influential framework, these attitudes comprise three elements⁹. First is *acknowledging* the practical significance of one’s own and others’ cultural beliefs and values. The second entails *adapting* to differences between oneself and others in interactions in varying cultural contexts. Thirdly, there is *valuing* intercultural interactions with those from other cultures.

Leask has argued that a helpful way of thinking about global citizenship is not in the sense of the territorial and legal status we associate with national citizenship. Instead, global citizenship represents:

“A way of thinking about ourselves and others, awareness of how our actions affect others, respect and concern for their well-being, and a commitment to certain types of action to address world problems¹⁰.”

Indeed, the interwoven notions of responsibility and action can repeatedly be found in discussions in various countries of the meaning of global citizenship¹¹. At the University of Queensland, an internationalised curriculum is seen as comprising three fundamental learning outcomes, and the first two of these – an awareness of global perspectives and the capacity for cross-cultural communication – underpin the third, “the practice of responsible global citizenship”¹². In the UK, University College London is firmly committed to the goal of educating students who are not only aware of their social, ethical and political responsibilities, and ready to look beyond their individual and local interests and see the complexity of an interconnected world. They are also able to ‘solve problems through innovation and entrepreneurship’, as well as to ‘display leadership and work together to change the world for the better’¹³.

At HKU, the goal of active and responsible global citizenship is eloquently expressed in the four-year curriculum aim of Leadership and Advocacy for the Improvement of the Human Condition. It can be fostered through internationalisation at home, on- and off- campus, as well through study abroad opportunities, and is articulated as follows:

- playing a leading role in improving the well-being of fellow citizens and humankind
- upholding the core values of a democratic society: human rights, justice, equality and freedom of speech
- participating actively in promoting the local and global social, economic and environmental sustainability

Cultural Inclusiveness

While there is widespread acknowledgement of the importance of attitudes in enhancing intercultural learning, the closely interwoven dimension of values has also come to the fore in various recent reports and discussions, and particularly in relation to a commitment to cultural inclusiveness. It has been argued, for instance, that university programmes of study should desirably embody ‘an ethos of interculturality’ in which internationalisation is seen as:

“ a process through which individuals or groups learn better to communicate their aspirations, values and attitudes in intergroup situations, and to appreciate those of others¹⁴. ”

Similarly, striving to create a cosmopolitan campus ‘where students and staff from all cultural and linguistic backgrounds communicate openly and respectfully’ is viewed as a crucial feature of internationalisation-at-home¹⁵. It has also been firmly endorsed by undergraduate students at one international university, where tolerance and collective harmony were considered as the most important ingredients in intercultural competence¹⁶.

An aspect of cultural inclusiveness which has emerged as a focus of concern is evidence that the presence of international students on campus does not, in itself, generate authentic intercultural learning experiences or deep cross-cultural engagement¹⁷. There may be a reluctance on the part of many domestic students to interact with international students, whether through in-class activities or in more informal extra-curricular situations. The risk is that two parallel streams can be created, as one Australian study has noted, with uncertainty, anxiety and even resentment felt by both groups of students¹⁴.

It therefore seems crucial not simply to espouse intercultural inclusiveness as a curriculum goal, but to seek to facilitate it in more active ways¹⁸. In the formal curriculum, it seems vital not simply that students’ cultural diversity is respected, but that it is put to more direct use — in other words, that diversity itself becomes a curriculum resource within a class or year-group, or class of students, enriching the students’ learning¹⁹. It can lead all students to an appreciation of what has been called ‘both-ways cultural learning’ or ‘double-knowing’²⁰.

Peer interaction can also be boosted through the use of online collaborative tools such as blogs, wikis and discussion boards. And there is great potential in the design of projects where students work in cross-cultural teams — ideally, on tasks which are structured ‘in such a way that they cannot be successfully completed without a meaningful exchange of cultural information’²¹. Informally, too, there is scope for greater interchange of perspectives across cultural boundaries can be encouraged through strategies such as online peer mentoring schemes, cross-cultural lunches, and volunteering initiatives. Study abroad opportunities are of course also of paramount importance, and HKU’s strategic plan is to provide every undergraduate and research postgraduate student with international, experiential and service learning, and research opportunities by 2022.

Intercultural Skills

In many discussions of the internationalisation, it is the development of the skills and capabilities associated with intercultural competence that is the most highly prized learning goal, yet at the same time the most challenging one to fulfil. Intercultural competence has been defined as students’ capacities ‘to work with their own and others’ languages and cultures, to recognise knowledge in its cultural context, to examine the intercultural dimension of knowledge applications, and to communicate and interact effectively across languages and cultures’²².



Figure 2. Graduate employers’ ratings of global competencies (from CIHE, 2015)

The indispensable role which such skills play in the global economy is highlighted in a recent survey of a sample of UK companies which are high recruiters of graduates²³. As shown in Figure 2, the most important global competencies identified by the employers were an ability to work collaboratively with teams of people from a range of backgrounds and countries; excellent communication skills (both speaking and listening); a high degree of drive and resilience; and an ability to embrace multiple perspectives and challenge thinking. Surprisingly perhaps, there were much lower ratings for multilingualism.

The skills associated with intercultural communication have been dissected in the *Global People Competency Framework* developed at the University of Warwick²⁴. Four clusters of competencies make up the framework: knowledge and ideas, communication, relationships, personal qualities and dispositions. For instance, in the first cluster, the emphasis is on putting knowledge and ideas into action in a situation such as developing a cross-cultural partnership, where it can be challenging to draw appropriate conclusions about the perspectives, behaviours and ideas encountered:

“We tend to see the world through our own cultural filters, particularly when working from our home culture with little opportunity to immerse ourselves in other realities. When working with international partners, we can quickly misevaluate what we see, allowing negative stereotypes of others’ behaviour to replace the need for positive, flexible thinking²⁵.”

A range of qualities is therefore called for if misunderstandings are to be avoided:

“We need to be open to new ideas and ready to challenge our assumptions, and we need to avoid jumping to quick opinions about the behaviour we encounter (**new thinking**). In terms of our own behaviour, we need to be interested in how others’ goals for the project may be different from our own, and thus seek to explore and take them into account (**goal orientation**). In specific national cultural contexts, we also need to be proactive in researching the national sectoral contexts, values and behaviours of the people we encounter (**information gathering**). In multicultural groups we need to share and surface the different perspectives people have about an issue in order to promote problem-solving and creativity (**synergistic solutions**)²⁶.”

At Leeds Metropolitan University, a similar concern with building students’ capacities to put knowledge into action has led to the compilation of guidance to course teams in specifying curriculum outcomes that seek to foster cross-cultural learning²⁷. A range of the examples assembled is shown in Figure 3.

Students will be able to:

- explain how [*specific aspects of practice*] impact upon the lives of people locally and in diverse global contexts;
- critically review [*current U.K. practice*] through reference to practice in [*two*] other countries;
- present an analysis of [*the subject*] appropriately for an audience of diverse cultures and first languages;
- make a significant positive contribution as a member of a multicultural/ international team work project;
- effectively conduct primary research involving participants from a range of cultural backgrounds;
- synthesize a range of international data sources as the basis for an analysis of potential problems and benefits associated with [*the expansion of this practice*];
- critique the themes presented in [*this area*] from [*two*] alternative international perspectives;
- find commonly acceptable ethical solutions to complex global problems relating to [*this area*];
- present a critically reasoned and respectful argument in favour of one specific socio-cultural response to [*this area*];
- detect bias, stereotypical thinking and prejudicial opinion in published material relating to [*this issue*];
- advance creative solutions for [*this problem*] which demonstrate appropriate consideration of at least one global (non-U.K.) context in which they will be applied.

Figure 3 Examples of cross-cultural learning outcomes²⁶

A State of Becoming

Reviewing the rich array of experiences of internationalised learning explored in this *Briefing*, what are the main lessons for contemporary practice? First, and most obviously perhaps, the four dimensions outlined are not self-contained components, but closely interwoven, and so even new developments which, quite reasonably, may be particularly focused on one of the four also have to consider interconnections with the other three.

Second, if it is to permeate students' learning in lasting ways, internationalisation learning requires more than well-articulated learning outcomes; there also needs to be good alignment with teaching-learning activities, modes of assessment, and approaches to evaluating the quality of students' experiences at university.

Thirdly, as a pioneering Australian report is keen to stress, intercultural competence does not evolve in a linear fashion, but iteratively. Depending on their prior experience in different cultural settings, students will move at different rates between and across the dimensions of understanding, attitudes, values and capabilities²⁸. Betty Leask makes a similar point: intercultural competence is a state of becoming rather than a destination²⁹. That compelling observation applies not only to students but to teachers, support staff and academic managers and leaders. The journey to greater internationalisation is a shared one.



Acknowledgements

The photo on p.5 is courtesy of pholib@hku.hk

Notes

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