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How to cite:

Slade, Sharon; Galpin, Fenella and Prinsloo, Paul (2012). Exploring stakeholder perspectives regarding a 'global' curriculum: a case study. In: Ryan, Janette ed. *Cross-Cultural Teaching and Learning for Home and International Students: Internationalisation of Pedagogy and Curriculum in Higher Education*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 141–155.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

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Exploring stakeholder perspectives regarding a 'global' curriculum: a case study

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ABSTRACT

As higher education becomes increasingly borderless, with technological innovations and globalisation allowing higher education institutions to reach beyond their own geopolitical boundaries, different stakeholder groups have a range of expectations regarding the meaning of an 'international' curriculum. These expectations may differ starkly from the hype and rhetoric of the discourses of the internationalisation of higher education. Often these expectations and assumptions result in specific claims regarding curriculum design, development and delivery.

Students are registering to study with overseas institutions which offer programmes often developed within considerably different cultures and contexts than the students' own. Institutions offering 'international' qualifications are in danger of (and often accused of) prescribing Anglophone epistemologies as universally true and applicable. Such curricula may result in cultures losing their distinctive features or becoming syncretistic mixtures of cultural practices dislocated from their original locations.

This paper shares the findings of a research project in the context of a large distance learning Business School in which 500 students, faculty, tutors and employers were surveyed regarding their expectations of an MBA with a stated claim of providing students with an 'international' learning experience. The findings reveal that the different stakeholder groups have very different views of what they expect from both an international business curriculum and an international mix of students. While all stakeholders stated several advantages of being exposed to diverse contexts (local and global, private and public) and different cultures; students and sponsors considered the 'international' nature of the curriculum to be less important than tutors and faculty. The findings will be of interest to faculty, curriculum and instructional designers, tutors, employers and higher education management.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999, the internationalisation of higher education has been embedded in the broader discourses on global citizenship, the competencies of graduates, curriculum development and pedagogy. The Policy Brief (2004) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/33/60/33734276.pdf>), clearly states that “Higher education has become increasingly international in the past decade as more and more students choose to study abroad, enrol in foreign educational programmes and institutions in their home country, or simply use the Internet to take courses at colleges or universities in other countries” (OECD 2004:1). It also states that the ‘four leading English-speaking countries alone (the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada) account for more than half (54%) of all foreign students in the OECD area’ (OECD 2004:2).

Various authors (eg Altbach & Knight 2007; Britez & Peters 2008; Callan 2000; Dell & Wood 2010; Haigh 2002; Hudzik 2011; Kehm & Teichler 2007; Morey 2000; Schoorinan 1999, 2000; Söderqvist 2007; Torres 1998; Westwood 2006) have explored the implications of the internationalisation of higher education on curriculum development, pedagogy and delivery beyond the issues of funding, policy and access.

There is an urgent need to take into account the differing frames of reference (epistemologies and ontologies) for international students and ‘local’ students. A number of authors (such as Torres, 1998) would agree that even ‘local’ or indigenous students are increasingly not homogenous. However, it is not only the student body that is becoming increasingly diverse. Faculty, administrators and tutors are mirroring the diversity of the student population, and they have their own perceptions, stereotypes, epistemologies and ontologies.

This paper shares the analysis and findings of a survey which considers the viewpoints of students, administrators, faculty, tutors and employers regarding what it means to offer an MBA in an increasingly internationalised context.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

While the internationalisation of higher education is well-accepted, the impact on curriculum development and delivery is less clear. Even more unclear are the perceptions of stakeholders such as students, faculty, tutors and employers regarding the meaning of internationalised curricula.

These stakeholders play a crucial role in the design, development and delivery of the curriculum – and their views and perceptions regarding what students and employers want crucially influence the curriculum and its realisation.

How do curriculum design, development and delivery address these perceptions and the broader strategic aim of preparing our business graduates for an internationalised, networked and increasingly globalised world?

What do students ‘want’ from a qualification such as an MBA? Do they have need for a curriculum that addresses international issues and provides them with the necessary competencies to act in an increasingly international environment?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, we provide a brief overview of the discourse regarding the internationalisation of higher education, before specifically exploring literature regarding the broader context of internationalisation and globalisation.

It is easy to embrace uncritically the internationalisation of the curriculum without interrogating its claims against the backdrop of globalisation trends and practices (see, for example, Yang, 2003). In the light of the increasing transnational and cross-border operations of multinational organisations and their accompanying impact on the composition of workforces, diversity and issues of multiculturalism are pertinent (Banerjee & Linstead 2001:685) and require careful consideration in any discourse on the internationalisation of the curriculum. Perhaps then, the internationalisation of the curriculum is in response, *inter alia*, to the increasing diversity of students and the roles of multi and transnational corporations that may operate across geopolitical borders (Miyoshi 1993).

Callan (2000:16) states that “A reading of the literature on the internationalization of education, both European and worldwide (particularly North American), shows that the concept has been understood and applied in a *highly variable fashion*” (emphasis added)(also see Söderqvist 2007: 18). The different scopes and definitions of the term ‘internationalisation’ continue to shift according to “varying rationales and incentives for internationalization, the varying activities encompassed therein, and the varying political and economic circumstances in which the process is situated” (Callan 2000:16). Varying interpretations and claims also result from different “regional differences” and “historical associations”(Callan 2000:16). There are also variations and overlapping meanings between the terms internationalisation, globalisation, cross-border, transnational and Europeanisation (Callan 2000; Knight 2004; Knight 2007). It falls outside the scope of this paper to interrogate these differences, but we agree with Callan (2000: 21) that there are multiple juxtapositions between these terms and that, under the influence of new technologies and geopolitical formations (see, for example, Appadurai 1990), the notion of internationalisation will continue to be contested, and the surrounding discourse will grow and be redefined (see, for example, Kehm & Teichler, 2007). For the sake of this paper, we accept Knight’s (2004:5) proposition that: “Internationalisation is changing the world of higher education, and globalisation is changing the world of internationalisation” (Knight 2004: 5).

Van der Wende (1997:55) states that the internationalisation of the curriculum “... is intended to improve foreign language proficiency, enhance understanding of other countries and cultures, and strengthen intercultural competence and cross-cultural communication skills”. McFadden et al (1997) propose that an internationalised curriculum should promote equity and social justice; improve inter-group relations and the promotion of intercultural competencies; reduce prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination; support the acquisition and the imparting of knowledge of human diversity and commonality as well as the acquisition of knowledge for cultural consciousness regarding one’s own and other cultures; and develop skills in the critical understanding of the processes of knowledge construction (also see another approach to achieve this described by Morrey 2000). Schoorinan (1999) proposes the internationalisation of the curriculum as “an ongoing, counterhegemonic educational process that occurs in an international context of knowledge and practice where societies are viewed as subsystems in a larger, inclusive world”. An internationalised curriculum that is counterhegemonic calls for the representation of multiple cultural perspectives, a variety of pedagogical styles and multidirectional, dialogic communication; as well as an examination of the rationale for an internationalised curriculum.

Despite the growth in research into internationalisation, it remains “fuzzy” (Kehm & Teichler 2007:261), and research into internationalisation outside of the English language is generally not accessible. Despite these drawbacks, internationalisation has become part of the mainstream focus, a priority issue and a “normative topic with strong political undercurrents” in higher education (Kehm & Teichler 2007:262). These authors identify seven broad themes namely 1) mobility of students and academic staff; 2) mutual influences of higher education systems on each other; 3) internationalisation of the substance of teaching, learning, and research; 4) institutional strategies of internationalisation; 5) knowledge transfer in which the

notion of “employability” is pertinent; 6) cooperation and increasing competition, and 7) national and supranational policies regarding the international dimension of higher education (Kehm & Teichler 2007:266).

It is clear from the literature review, that perspectives on internationalisation within higher education range from acceptance of it as factual (e.g. Söderqvist 2007) to counterhegemonic practice (Schoorinan 1999).

RESEARCH CONTEXT

This study was done in the context of two modules comprising the first Stage of the MBA programme at the Open University Business School in the UK. The research focused on surveying students, tutors, faculty, administrators and employers involved with these modules regarding their perceptions and expectations of the content and delivery of an MBA programme.

MBA students could study one of two modules at Stage 1 – one provided a direct entry route onto the MBA for graduates with some middle/senior management experience. The other module provided an entry route for students who had worked through a previous entry qualification and were assumed to be aspiring managers. Both modules were available for delivery in two formats: one provided direct tuition contact time via an online medium, the other provided direct tuition face-to-face. The online tuition versions were available to students globally and attracted a wide range of international students, while the face-to-face tuition versions were available only to students in the UK and mainland Europe. As well as seeking an improved understanding of student and other stakeholder perceptions, we wanted also to ascertain whether there were any differences between students, based largely on known characteristics, such as educational background or country of study.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was sent to over 2000 recipients from five stakeholder groups, students, tutors, faculty academic staff, faculty support staff involved in the production and presentation of the MBA and employers/sponsors. Questions were largely identical across all stakeholder groups, rephrased as appropriate, with the aim of obtaining comparable data for analysis. They sought to identify reasons that students would register for an MBA; the challenges that managers face; the knowledge, skills and values which managers need to face these challenges, the advantages and disadvantages of working in multicultural and international groups and the challenges in working in such groups. Each group was also requested to list topics they felt should be included in an MBA and their perceptions regarding the meaning of an “international” degree.

The student survey was tested on a small pilot group. It was then sent to all students registered within a single year across both Stage 1 MBA modules (direct graduate route and non-graduate entry route) and for both face to face and online tuition versions. Tutor, faculty and administrator contact details of those involved with these modules were provided by the Business School. Employers were selected as those having sponsored students on the modules for whom clear contact details were available.

The surveys were sent via a URL link in an explanatory email invitation to all stakeholder groups between 13 and 20 September, 2010. Two weeks later, a reminder was sent to those who had not responded, or who had started and not yet completed the survey. The survey was live for four weeks.

The surveys attracted the following response rates (Table 1):

Table 1: Overview of the response rates of the surveyed stakeholder groups

Stakeholders	Potential responses	Complete responses	Response rate	Incomplete responses	Response Rate	Total no. responses	Response Rate
Students	2123	327	15.4%	179	8.4%	506	23.9%
Tutors	79	31	39.2%	12	15.2%	43	54.4%
Faculty	14	5	35.7%	5	35.7%	10	71.4%
Administrators	17	6	35.3%	2	11.7%	8	47.1%
Employers	63	7	11.1%	5	7.9%	12	19.1%

The researchers undertook a thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clark (2006: 79). We agreed what might constitute a theme and whether to focus on a rich description of the data set, or a detailed account of any one particular aspect. In choosing between semantic or latent meanings, we opted for semantic meanings as described by Braun and Clark (2006:84), identifying themes within the text at face value, that is, we did not attempt to interpret further the possible meanings of the entries. We followed their guided process and became familiar with the data before generating initial codes. These were cross-checked between the three researchers and agreement sought, before being used to generate themes. Themes were subsequently cross-checked between the researchers and consensus sought on the scope of each.

OUTCOMES

Due to the volume of the dataset, we have not attempted to describe the outputs from our analysis of all of the survey questions here. We therefore present and analyse our findings with regard to stakeholder perceptions on the reasons for study and the challenges and skills required by managers today, and any resultant impact on the internationalisation of the MBA curriculum. Further analysis and discussion will form the basis of a later paper.

Reasons for studying an MBA

The survey asked respondees to provide reasons why students register for an MBA (registered students from their own perspectives and the other stakeholders responding in general). A total of 1,492 responses of students (n=506) were coded and classified into themes given as career progression; sponsored by employer; personal development; the status of the MBA; to improve management skills; increase in knowledge; for the qualification; adding value to their organisations; networking and 'other'. 'career progression' included all responses referring to aspiring for promotion after completion of the MBA; job security; changing jobs; increasing chances of finding a different job; and/or seeking more responsibilities based on studying for an MBA. The category 'personal development' included responses referring to self-improvement; personal fulfilment; improving personal skills, etc. The 'other' category included responses such as "Boredom while on maternity leave"; "Interested in learning"; "I wanted to spend my spare time constructively" and "understanding of the world".

The most provided reasons by *students* were clustered under career progression (28%); personal development and self-improvement (17%); increase in knowledge/expertise (15%) and improving management skills (9%). All stakeholders listed career progression most frequently. However, tutors, faculty, administrators and employers listed ‘Improve management skills/acquiring specific skills’ as the second most provided reasons, as opposed to ‘personal development and self improvement’, listed by students. There was no substantive difference between the different student responses registered on the different modules/versions, nor when the dataset was reviewed regarding gender, race, educational background or occupation.

Challenges faced by managers

This question asked each of the stakeholder groups to list three main challenges faced by managers today. In asking this question, we sought to understand the context for studying a ‘global’ or ‘international’ MBA. What were the issues that the various stakeholders assumed that (future) managers would face, and how might the MBA prepare them for those issues?

Students ranked their answers in order of significance. The reasons provided by the student groups were analysed and thematically clustered. Table 2 provides an overview of the perceptions of the different stakeholders regarding the challenges that managers face, and demonstrates the differing perspectives of students versus other stakeholder groups.

Table 2: Overview of stakeholder views on the challenge managers face

	Students	Tutors	Faculty and administrators	Employers
1	People management ¹	The changing context ²	The changing context	The changing context; people management
2	Developing as manager/ becoming a leader ³	Developing as manager	Developing as manager	Resource management ⁴ Developing as a manager Ethics ⁵
3	Sustaining growth/ strategic planning/ leadership ⁶		People management Personal ⁷ Sustaining growth	

- 1 Conflict management and resolution; performance management; motivation; communication; organisational culture
- 2 Organisational change; economic downturn and changes; budget cuts; political changes; uncertain future;; internationalisation
- 3 Continuous professional development; delegation; keeping abreast with change; multitasking; work life balance; job security; knowledge transfer; confidence in decision making; organisational politics; social skills
- 4 Financial management; budgets; limited resources
- 5 Doing the right things in the right way; values; environmental sustainability
- 6 Leadership in changing times; innovation; planning for restructuring/adaptation; doing the right thing for the company; deciding on priorities; strategy implementation; anticipating crises
- 7 Own identity, work-life balance; own personal dreams and insecurities

Other categories mentioned were: Stakeholder/shareholder and network management; Project and operation management; Information and knowledge management; Relationship with seniors/hierarchy; Multicultural and diversity issues and other.

As a whole group, students ranked the 'changing context' as the 4th most important challenge that managers face, while the other stakeholders considered it to be the most important. This is crucial for our exploration (and understanding) of the impact of internationalisation on curriculum design and delivery. It would seem that students were either unaware of the impact of the changing context on managers, or tend to focus on more immediate issues such as people management (e.g., conflict resolution; staffing issues; performance management, etc) and strategic planning in their day-to-day operational function as managers. It may be that dealing with the changing context is possibly the prerogative of senior and executive management, while Stage 1 MBA students are working at a more operational level.

The responses of the student group could be further categorised under a number of characteristic headings, for example, gender, age, occupational status, educational background, country of study and ethnicity. When refining the student group, we noted the following differences.

Country of study

The majority of students were UK-based (n=313), with a further 174 students based in mainland Europe and 19 students in other parts of the world. The smaller, 'rest of the world' group gave a much greater prominence to the changing context than the other two groups. The challenge most frequently cited by UK and European students was people management.

Occupational status

In this category, students were grouped (self-selected) into: modern professional (n=104), senior managers or administrators (n=121), middle or junior managers (n=94) and traditional professional (n=36). There were other groupings, but the numbers were too small to be meaningful. Modern professionals included, for example, software engineer, area sales manager or consultant, and traditional professional included occupations such as solicitor, army officer or accountant.

People management was the most frequently cited response for all groups. Traditional professionals gave a much narrower range of responses, focussing mostly on people management and strategic planning. Middle or junior managers mentioned developing as a manager more frequently than the other occupational groups.

Age

The changing context was mentioned most frequently by the most mature students with the number of citations decreasing generally with age. Younger students had a greater focus on strategic issues and, unsurprisingly, on manager development.

There were no substantive differences in response according to the students' educational background, and very little difference between gender groupings, although the changing context was seen as much more relevant to male students than females

Skills needed by managers

A follow-up question required stakeholders to list the three most important skills that managers need (in response to the challenges already listed). The responses of all groups were analysed and thematically clustered. Table 3 provides an overview of the responses.

Table 3: Management skills needed by stakeholder group

	Students	Tutors	Faculty and administrators	Employers
1	People skills ¹	Leadership and strategic thinking ²	Leadership and strategic thinking	Leadership and strategic thinking People skills
2	Leadership and strategic thinking	People skills Other	People skills	Communication skills ³ ; Willingness to learn ⁴ ; Plan, organise ⁵
3	Communication skills	Financial and numeracy skills Emotional intelligence ⁶	-	-

1 Facilitating consensus, listening, motivating; managing performance

2 political skills; influencing; charisma

3 Clearly, often; language ability

4 Adaptable; flexible

5 prioritising; work allocation; project management skills

6 Self-awareness; ability to reflect

Other skills mentioned were: delegation; analytical and critical thinking; networking with different and between different stakeholders; knowledgeable/expertise/ understanding; time management; change management; integrity/credibility; creativity and emotional intelligence.

People skills, leadership and strategic thinking were frequently mentioned by all groups. It was interesting that whilst both student and employers frequently cited 'communication skills' as important, neither the tutor or faculty/administrator groups ranked this highly. Perhaps this reflects their focus on skills that can be *taught* within a standard curriculum.

In terms of student characteristics, there were no substantive difference in response between genders or educational status. Differences between ethnic groups are mainly reflected in the responses for country of study.

Age

The oldest group of students were much less likely to mention leadership skills than other age groups, perhaps reflecting their existing positions within organizations. They were also the only age group to suggest the importance of financial and numeracy skills to any real degree.

Occupational status

All occupational groups except traditional professionals suggested that leadership, strategic thinking and decision-making skills were most important. This was most apparent amongst the senior manager group.

Traditional professionals opted for people management as most important – this category was deemed 2nd most important by all other occupational groups.

Unsurprisingly, traditional professionals mentioned knowledge and expertise more frequently than other groups. Other groups thought planning, organizing and managing processes were more important.

Country of study

Non-UK/European students rated communication skills more highly than other nationalities – perhaps not surprising in this context, as it may be presumed that they include students with English as a 2nd language.

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear there are differences in perceptions between the challenges and skills required for today's managers across a range of stakeholders, and so also clear that any curriculum developed in response should take account of those differences. Other work would seem to confirm that responses to this question do depend on the perspective of the respondent. For example, a study by Andrews and Tyson (2004) of 100 executives in over 20 countries to identify the knowledge, skills and attributes which young business leaders need to succeed suggested that the primary requirement is to provide an executive education which is 'global in its outlook and content ... to prepare business leaders with global business capabilities'. The main focus of students surveyed in our study tended to be internal, and looking to develop skills which would be more immediately of use.

Within the student group itself, there were differences in perspective across a range of characteristics, with, for example, non-western students placing a greater emphasis on the changing context and communication skills than students based in the western world. It seemed clear that students could also have different perspectives based on their existing career path.

Should universities then develop curricula which provide students with what they (think they) need? This apparent mismatch between student expectations and those of tutors, faculty and sponsors might result in disengagement and frustration on the side of students. Conversely, if the curriculum does not deal with the reality of what managers may face, students may be even less prepared for what awaits them as they progress in the organisational hierarchy. Caruana (2011) discusses the tensions between creating a curriculum which reflects and responds to the diversity of students' backgrounds and cultures and the need to be seen to retain academic rigour.

Whilst we are still struggling with "the fuzzy notion" of internationalisation of the curriculum (Kehm & Teichler 2007:261), this research shows some clear implications for future curriculum development that purports to meet the requirements of students in an international work context.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

How can curriculum design, development and delivery address these findings, satisfy stakeholders and equip our students for the challenges of an internationalised future?

Issues of people management are cited as the most important challenge faced by managers, by all student groupings. With increased internationalisation/globalisation of the work force, these issues become more challenging as employees increasingly work across cultures. However, although people management skills were universally cited as important by students, what is good practice in one cultural context may not be appropriate in another. Curriculum developers must decide whether a single context – whether western or not - is more appropriate or attractive than a multiple context. If the preference is to attempt a balance

of perspectives, other issues around the composition of both a curriculum development team and the appointment of tutors to support an 'international' curriculum arise. Is this best achieved by further recruitment of staff from a wide range of national contexts, or does this simply introduce fresh differences (between social background and organisational experience, say)?

There are perhaps other means of addressing context. For example, students may be formed into groups which reflect their own contexts and have tutor support which further enhances their own national, cultural or professional requirements. Alternatively, students may be deliberately mixed to ensure that a curriculum developed to suit a range of contexts remains prevalent, and collaborative work then serves to enhance a wider understanding and appreciation beyond their immediate experiences. This latter accords to an extent with work drawn from a study by Caruana and Ploner (2010) looking at managers, staff and students from six universities located in England, Wales and Australia which suggests that an internationalised curriculum should take account of students' diverse backgrounds and prior learning experiences and provide curriculum space to discuss and reflect on transitions.

Much of this can be supported with an appropriate use of technology, to better support dispersed groups, for instance, although it is important not to assume that all students have equivalent access to those technologies. Similarly, most business schools increasingly ask students to reflect and engage with the curriculum in different ways – are there similar national/cultural issues relating to student willingness or interest to do this?

Further analysis of the survey responses will indicate whether the 'international' perspective is indeed as relevant or interesting to students and sponsors as we have assumed. Any curriculum will have a range of focus areas, and it would be foolish to adjust the emphasis of any programme without sufficient evidence to support that. Further, any significant change in curriculum content or delivery may have implications for existing accreditation bodies and the general need to retain accreditation.

FURTHER WORK

The researchers acknowledge that we have barely skimmed the surface of the data contained in the questionnaire. Not only is there a substantial amount of analysis still to be done, but a number of the above findings and analyses need to be triangulated with focus group interviews, individual interviews and further exploration of the more contested variables such as ethnicity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors acknowledge the input of Jan Jones, IET, Open University in supporting the survey design and management of the survey process. We also acknowledge the Open University Business School for funding the Fellowship which allowed this study to take place.

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