Internationalization at a Distance: A Study of the Online Management Curriculum

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Abstract

This paper explores how part-time students in an online international management course perceived various features of the course learning design and whether international perspectives were built into their learning experiences. The focus of the study was on cross-cultural differences across groups of learners in the United Kingdom, in other European countries and in Russia and studying the course in different languages. Using a mixed method approach, the study's results challenge the distinction between "internationalization at home" and "internationalization away" perspectives on curricula, due to growing numbers of students studying online from their home countries. Study participants reported high degrees of engagement with international perspectives, but their experience can be best described as "internationalization at a distance," where traditional campus-based acculturation effects were not observed. The article concludes with a discussion of opportunities for management

educators to develop a "glocal" approach to online course curriculum design, intentionally blending global perspectives with locally-relevant knowledge and managerial skills.

Key words: management education, online education, curriculum design, globalization

Introduction

Online management education, a field of study that has emerged in the past two decades (Arbaugh, 2014; Arbaugh, Desai, Rau, & Sridhar, 2010; Arbaugh & Hwang, 2013), has been shaped by two key developments—internationalization and integration of web-based technologies into teaching and learning. Internationalization, defined as an emphasis on multiple cultural perspectives and cross-border transfer of knowledge (Teichler, 2004), is almost an indispensable feature of higher education in the 21st century, especially in the fields of business and management education.

Today in English-speaking countries, international students comprise substantial proportions of total enrollments. For example, in 2013–2014 in the United Kingdom, 62% of postgraduate students and 30% of students across all levels studying Business and Management came from overseas (UKCISA, 2013a; Universities UK, 2014). In Australia in 2014, approximately 30% of students in all fields were international (Australian Government Department for Education and Training, 2014). In the United States in 2011–2012, approximately 4.8% of students with majors in Business and Management were international (Institute of International Education, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Likewise, online delivery of management courses has become virtually ubiquitous (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2013). In 2011–2012, approximately 20.4% of the total number of international students registered with a higher-education institution in the United Kingdom were studying through some form of flexible, distance, or open learning and were based overseas (UKCISA, 2013b), while in the United States in 2012, 11% of all undergraduate and 22% of postgraduate student registrations were for purely distance courses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

This combination of cultural diversity and the potential for connectivity with peers from across the globe is a key characteristic of management education today, creating

opportunities for designing and delivering truly global online courses. However, though technically and logistically feasible, as evidenced by examples of open-learning platforms in the form of MOOCs (massive open online courses), the question whether a truly global online course can be designed is still open. By exploring accounts of international students studying an online course in Business and Management with a UK university, this study aims to shed more light on how perceptions of various features of learning design (e.g., focus on Western European and US perspectives, use of asynchronous media, role of tutor as facilitator of learning) and views on the degree to which international perspectives were built into their learning experiences might vary across groups of learners, based in different countries and studying the course in different languages. In particular, the study attempts to address two key research questions: How important are various facets of international curriculum to online learners in the contexts in question? and What is the degree of cross-cultural differences among students studying a management course in English and Russian? Though not the focus of this research, the study also considers questions about the transferability of Western online management education to other types of contexts and the possible adaptation to learning materials, teaching, and learning approaches involved in this transfer. In contrast with previous cross-cultural management education research that employs comparisons of dissimilar learning contexts (e.g., Western vs. Asian countries) or learners, the sample of this study has some common characteristics, insofar as the Russian educational system has historical roots in French and German traditions of higher education (Holmes, Read, & Voskresenskaya, 1995) and Russian national culture shares some aspects of both European and Asian cultures (Hofstede, 2007; Naumov & Puffer, 2000).

Literature Review

Two rather dissimilar but complementary bodies of literature inform the design of this study. First, the study draws on research in online management education, which began

exploring implications of redesigning courses in Business and Management for online delivery in the mid-1990s. Early studies focused on the effectiveness of online teaching (compared with more traditional classroom-based teaching), the changing roles of instructors, interaction patterns in the online environment (Arbaugh, 2000; Berger, 1999), and the degree of transferability of various types of classroom activities to the online context (Bigelow, 1999; Meisel & Marx, 1999). Online collaboration was another theme of early online management education studies and was considered in the context of virtual global teams, groups, or dyads with regard to building trust, distinguishing between task and goal orientations of participants, understanding communication patterns (Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999), developing higher-level cognitive skills (Yoo & Kanawattanachai, 2001), and solving customer-service issues (Newman & Hermans, 2008).

Later studies increasingly involved students from outside the United States and incorporated cross-cultural perspectives by researching the impact of linguistic and cultural differences on learner experiences (Hornik & Tupchiy, 2006; Hu, 2009; Keith & Simmers, 2013), the benefits of developing skills of cross-cultural communication (Sauers & Walker, 2004), and the degree of intercultural awareness (Lou & Bosley, 2012). Studies on the development of cultural intelligence (MacNab, 2012) and a global mind-set (Erez et al., 2013) were also typically set in the context of culturally diverse teams working on online collaborative projects across borders. Given the importance of technology for learning in web-based or virtual classrooms, a wide range of studies investigated the use of online media in management education, including videoconferencing, computer-based simulations (Sinkovics, Haghirian, & Yu, 2009), synchronous chat (Cox, Carr, & Hall, 2004), and asynchronous forum discussions (Comer & Lenaghan, 2013).

A second source of conceptual underpinnings for this study was research on curriculum internationalization coming from various fields of higher education research,

including management education. Clifford (2013) distinguished between the additive approach (e.g., Banks, 1999; Bremer & van der Wende, 1995; Olson & Kroeger, 2001) to curriculum internationalization and the transformative approach (Schoorman, 2000), the latter focusing on counterhegemonic orientation and action in addition to the embedding of cross-cultural perspectives into teaching. Crosling, Edwards, and Schroeder (2008) contrasted pragmatic to ideological approaches to curriculum internationalization. Pragmatic approach focuses on gaining advantage in a competitive global environment and on the usefulness of lifelong learning skills in the increasingly interrelated world of the future. In terms of location internationalization at home (Nilsson, 1999) and internationalization abroad (Knight, 2004), perspectives on curriculum internationalization were suggested. Internationalization at home can be defined as a broad range of internationally related activities that occur on a home campus (Wächter, 2003) and internationalization abroad refers to activities that happen abroad or across borders (Knight, 2004).

Both internationalization and management education researchers noted the tensions between the intended goals and learning outcomes of Western programs of study and learning experiences of international students. Van Auken, Borgia, and Wells (2009) reported significant differences in perceived degrees of skills building, understanding of functional knowledge, and degrees of satisfaction by Chinese students following a joint undergraduate program of Business Studies as compared with those of their peers in the United States. Hwang, Ang, and Francesco (2002, p. 70) found that the view of "the silent Chinese" (i.e., Chinese students showing interest and engagement, but rarely contributing in class) commonly held in Western universities masked considerable variety of feedback-seeking behaviors, including those happening outside the classroom and linked to face-saving and other culture-specific attributes of Chinese culture. Mellahi (2000) surveyed Asian, Arab, and African graduates of 28 UK business schools and found significant biases in the MBA

curricula toward Western, particularly U.S., leadership values: "Graduates from the three cultures reported that they were coerced into adapting to the majority Western management paradigms by tending not to challenge the universality of Western management paradigms in classrooms, and frequently struggle to make sense of the material from the perspective of their cultural norms and values" (p. 303). Bartell (2003), as cited in Turner and Robson (2007, p. 69) described this approach to curriculum as "symbolic internationalization," in which internationalization of content is confined to "an outward-looking perspective with international engagement within an otherwise domestic focus." This rather tokenistic approach to international curriculum was echoed by Thompson and Gui (2000), whose analysis of "Asian" MBA programs in Hong Kong revealed that, despite reference to the regional context in their titles, the content of the programs was firmly rooted in Western perspectives on management, with occasional links to local business contexts and perspectives. Drawing on the analysis of MBA programs in South and Southeast Asia, Thompson (2002) and Sturdy and Gabriel (2000) suggested that, despite obvious tensions between the worldviews offered in Western programs of management study and local management know-how, the lure of "international" MBA programs in that part of the world was strong enough to attract students with largely instrumental or practical orientation. Liang and Wang (2004) and Liang and Lin (2008) went further to argue that, owing to the influence of case studies created in Western countries, case studies written for MBA programs in China in the 1990s and in the first decade of the 21st century were increasingly "de-cultured" and simplified.

Although studies in the field of online management education elucidated the impact of technology, institutional, and cultural contexts and individual characteristics on learner experiences, their focus was mainly on the development of skills and competencies of a global manager or a management student rather than on issues of curriculum design.

Moreover, their emphasis was more on learning rather than teaching online courses, which is surprising given the relatively well-established links between approaches to and conceptions of teaching and student learning experiences discussed in both general higher education (e.g., Prosser & Trigwell, 2014; Ramsden, 2003) and online management education literature (e.g., Arbaugh, 2000; Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2006; Arbaugh, DeArmond, & Rau, 2013). Preference for survey-based research designs contributed to surfacing patterns in student learning without exploring them in depth. Premised on Zhu and Bargiela-Chiappini's (2013) framework, the etic approach, with its focus on universal cultural dimensions, was preferred to the emic approach, which aims to provide insights into culture-specific complexities and nuances. Internationalization studies mostly focused on faculty and institutional perspectives and on accounts of full-time, on-campus students. Experiences of Chinese and occasionally students from other Asian countries were considered representative of the views of international students, especially when their accounts were contrasted with those of peers in Western countries. However, management (Emmerling & Boyatzis, 2012; Tsui, Nifadkar, & Yi Ou, 2007), management education (Eisenberg et al., 2013), and online management education (Lee, Becker, & Nobre, 2012) are shaped by a rich interplay of cultural factors, including national culture. Hence to fully appreciate the diversity of student perspectives on international curriculum, it is important to go beyond West-to-East comparisons and draw on accounts of management learners from diverse cultural groups. Methodologically, internationalization research has been dominated by case study approaches, qualitative research methodologies (e.g., in the form of focus groups) (Trahar & Hyland, 2011), and semi-structured interviews (Harrison & Peacock, 2010), which has limited the generalizability of their findings beyond the context in which the data were collected. No comparative cross-cultural studies of international online management learners have been reported to date.

Aims and Methods

The study discussed in this paper aims to gain deeper insights into student perspectives on the international curriculum in the context of an online management course taught to students in the United Kingdom, several other countries of the European Union (EU) and the former Soviet Union (FSU). The focus of the study was on learner accounts of studying an international online management course by exploring both cross-cultural differences in their responses, their cultural or contextual specificity and employing both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

For the purposes of this study, international students were defined as those who completed their secondary education or above outside English-speaking countries and whose first language was not English. Curriculum was defined broadly as a variety of learning experiences that students are exposed to in the course of their studies and that arise from their interactions with the teaching and learning materials and resources, their tutors, and other students (Kelly, 2009).

From the methodological perspective, a mixed-method approach to research design was adopted, in which student responses were drawn from both the questionnaire data and from more in-depth telephone or in-person interviews. The questionnaire was derived from the work of Simmock (1989, as cited in Stohl, 2007), who identified three levels of learning that took place in a series of negotiations between the United States and Japan with respect to trade in the 1980s. Stohl (2007) adapted this typology for the context of curriculum internationalization and suggested that similar stages occur when students learn about, from, and with others to incorporate three levels:

1. Acquiring knowledge and facts about other cultures,
2. Learning from people from other cultures, and

3. Working collaboratively with others from other cultures.

Based on Stohl's (2007) typology, 32 items pertaining to student views of their present and future experiences of international curriculum were designed by the project team. The questionnaire aimed to explore relationships among students' demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, highest educational qualifications, country of residence, national group with which the respondents identified themselves), their previous international exposure (through travel, work, and other experience of interacting with people of other cultures), their views on the degree to which international perspectives were built into their present learning experiences, and their expectations of their prospective learning experiences (see Table 1 for sample questionnaire items). Quantitative data analysis techniques included descriptive data analysis, factor analysis, analysis of correlations, and one-way and multivariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA and MANCOVA).

Insert Table 1 here

To achieve content validity of the questionnaire, all statements were written in a clear, simple language without use of jargon, colloquial expressions, or clichés; in terms of their content, all items were related to respondents' own cultural and learning experiences. Cover letters were written to accompany both pilot and main study questionnaires, detailing the nature, scope, and purpose of the study, principles of sample selection, guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity for all those involved, and the possibility to withdraw at any stage. Another step toward achieving content validity was offering both pilot and main instruments for expert review. Two academics, one from the UK institution and one from the Russian partner, shared their views on survey items and suggested minor corrections to the wording of some of them. Because both Russian and English versions of the questionnaire were used, the Russian version was validated through expert review from two Russian-speaking academics and back translation from Russian by one of the academics in the

Russian university. The instrument was pilot tested on the respondents whose characteristics were similar to those of the target group. Internal consistency coefficients were at appropriate levels—between 0.76 and 0.88 for the scales on present learning experience and between 0.70 and 0.98 for the future learning experience scales—and so the instrument was deemed appropriate for use in the main study.

The interviews explored student perspectives on the degree to which international perspectives were built into their present learning and future experiences in more detail. As was the case with survey responses, the interview respondents were fully informed of the goals, nature of the study, purposes and processes of data collection, and guarantees of confidentiality. Personal details of participants and any information that could help identify them were not included in any of the publications or reports. The interview respondents' names have been anonymized.

Qualitative data in the form of interviews, responses to open-ended survey questions, or e-mails were coded using the "deductive coding" (Ryan & Bernard, 1998, p. 613) approach, in which some of the codes were derived from the provisional list of key interview themes and others were inductively inferred from the participants' responses. The transcripts were first coded using the open-coding and theoretical coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) approaches. Finally, when patterns in the data began to emerge, the transcripts were coded selectively, and the final list of interview themes was developed from the lists of codes that occurred most frequently or provided illuminative insights (Suter, 2014) into student perspectives on curriculum internationalization.

Institutional and Course Contexts

The study was conducted at two universities: a large distance learning university in the United Kingdom and its partner university in Russia. The UK university offers a wide range

of courses and qualifications in various subject areas, including Business and Management, in several EU countries. Its Russian partner mostly concentrates on teaching business and management courses in Russian translation across a network of regional centers in the countries of the FSU.

The UK university's teaching and learning model is based on a separation of work between centrally based academic staff and associated teaching staff (or tutors). Central academic staff are in charge of the design of teaching and learning materials and the overall oversight of course delivery, while tutors are responsible for day-to-day teaching. Traditionally, the university's teaching and learning materials were print based, but in the past two decades, more interactive web-based content and activities have been incorporated.

The course selected for the study was presented over a six-month period and comprised one of the two parts of the Professional Certificate of Management. Most of the course's learning activities centered on student independent study of a mixture of print-based and online resources and complemented by weekly contributions to online activity threads in tutor-group forums (TGFs) and by two face-to-face day schools (i.e., extended tutorial sessions each lasting up to seven hours). Consistent with Allen, Garrett, and Seaman's (2007) typology, the course in question can be described as being taught online, as more than 80% of the presentation of content and interaction among participants was conducted on the web. The course covered basic models and theories in the field of Human Resource Management and Management of Organizations and was targeted at adult learners with some management experience but with little or no experience of studying management at a higher educational level. The course was designed by a team that mostly comprised central academic staff in the United Kingdom, but also included external consultants, tutors, and academic staff from the partner institution. Using Fowler and Blohm's (2004) typology of intercultural training, the course relied on culture-generic experiential learning activities, as it mostly covered

management theories and models that originated in Western Europe or North America and students reinforced their knowledge of the module material by exchanging experiences of management with their colleagues. As geographical proximity was used as the key criterion for tutor group allocation, relatively little contact occurred between learners residing in different countries and even in different parts of the same country. The design of the courses did not explicitly aim to develop intercultural competency (Bennett, 1993, 2004), intercultural mind-set (Hammer, 2012), or other cross-cultural skills or competencies.

The Russian partner institution was allowed to amend up to 25% of the material to reflect local conditions. In addition, in contrast with the UK version of the course, in which teaching and administration were organized around 13 regional centers, in Russia and other FSU countries, up to 76 study centers affiliated with the partner institution were allowed to register students for the course in question. Pedagogically, the course combined the principles of constructivist (Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Lebow, 1993; Stinson & Milter, 2006) and problem-based learning. The learning tasks were set in authentic, real-life contexts that were familiar to learners, who were encouraged to reflect on possible solutions to the problems they encountered in their management or professional practice, following the problem-solving frameworks suggested in the module as well as their online interaction with other students and their tutors. The design of learning activities emphasized the development of reflective skills, self-directedness, and, to a lesser extent, collaborative skills.

Tutor groups on both versions of the course comprised up to 20 students, and most of the teaching and learning activities took place within each tutor group. In addition, students had access to online course-wide conferences, which were tutor moderated and where they could interact with students from other parts of the same country or from other countries. However, the main interaction hub was the TGF, in which students were asked to post their contributions to weekly online activities and to discuss them with other students in their tutor

group and with their tutors. The tutors mostly adopted the role of facilitators in the TGFs, designing the online conference structure, moderating, contextualizing the theoretical material, and providing examples of their own. The central academic staff were not directly involved in teaching the course, but interacted with tutors in the online tutor forum, which was used as the main feedback channel between the course team and the tutors. The Russian version of the course had virtually the same content and activities, but there was significantly more room for contextualizing delivery at the level of individual regional centers. For example, up to eight face-to-face tutorial sessions were organized in some regional centers, and most of the experienced tutors used cases and examples to reflect the nature of management not only in Russia and other post-Soviet countries but also in local regional or even industry contexts.

Survey Results: Cross-Cultural Experiences and Views of Present and Future Learning Experiences

In total, 766 students were registered on the English-version course, 135 (or 17.6%) of whom were based outside the United Kingdom or were non-EU citizens living there and 861 were studying the Russian version of the course. The survey was completed by 232 respondents; Table 2 summarizes their key demographic characteristics. The Russian partnership (RP) students were more likely to be younger, new to studying with the university in question. They also had higher educational qualifications than the directly taught (DT) sample, in which 31 of 69 respondents (or 44.9%) had qualifications equivalent to advanced secondary education (A levels) or below, compared with all 163 survey participants in the RP sample who had higher education qualifications or above. The sample characteristics were roughly in line with characteristics of student populations studying the course in general.

Insert Table 2 here

Among the DT students, 63.4% were based in England, 15.4% in the three other UK countries or in the Republic of Ireland, 19.2% in other countries of the EU and 2% outside the EU. Among the RP students, 81.4% were based in Russia and 18.6% in other FSU countries. The Russian sample was also more heterogeneous than what might have been expected, with responses to the online survey coming from students representing 41 regional centers in Russia and five other countries of the FSU, the largest groups being based in St. Petersburg (19 survey respondents) and Moscow (18 respondents).

When asked about their previous cross-cultural experiences (through fluency in foreign languages and time working or living abroad), a group of 15 DT students based in continental Europe had distinctly different responses from other survey participants, in that all (i.e., 100% vs. 27.8% of UK-based students) were fluent in more than one foreign language and seven (or 46.7%) spent at least a year living or working abroad (see Table 3 for more detail). DT students were more likely to be working with colleagues from other cultures (87% of the sample) than students based in FSU countries (62.3%). In the RP group, 21 of 24 Ukrainian respondents (or 87.5%) reported speaking more than one language compared with 57.1% of students based in Russia, which is largely due to both Russian and Ukrainian being widely spoken in Ukraine. Owing to differences in demographic characteristics and previous cross-cultural experiences among students studying the different versions of the course, further analysis was required to explore dissimilarities between the DT and RP groups.

Insert Table 3 here

As the questionnaire scales have not been previously used in the context under study and to reduce the number of variables in further analysis, all the 32 questionnaire items were subjected to a principal component analysis, which is one of the most common types of factor analysis in which both shared and unique variance in the data is taken into account. After the initial factor solution was obtained, the data set was submitted to oblique rotation by a

varimax method. Three criteria were used for factor retention: item groups with eigenvalue greater than 1.0, examination of Cattell's (1966) scree plot, and running of parallel analysis (Watkins, 2000). As a result, three factor-based scales (both pertaining to present and to future learning experiences) were designed:

1. Focus on enhancing own management skills and performance (FOSP),

2. Focus on factual knowledge about international business (FFK), and

3. Focus on cross-border communication and collaboration (FCC).

Internal consistency coefficients for all three scales were between 0.6 and 0.9 on both English and Russian versions of the questionnaire and thus were at appropriate levels to be used in further analysis. Comparisons of mean factor-based scale scores revealed few differences between RP and DT students (see Table 4). However, when variables related to previous cross-cultural experiences (i.e., foreign language fluency and experience of living abroad) of the respondent were controlled for using the MANCOVA procedure, group differences appeared on the FOSP and FFK scales. Students studying the Russian version of the course were more likely both to report a greater degree of emphasis on factual knowledge of international business and to regard this as an important aspect of their present and future studies than DT students.

Insert Table 4 here

RP students were also more likely to agree that their present learning experience focused on enhancing their own skills and performance, which can be partly attributed to the practice-based nature of course activities and the overall emphasis on independent study. Another explanation might be the relative scarcity of business and management courses focused on practical application of knowledge rather than on theory in the context of Russian higher education (Efimov & Lapteva, 2011).

To gain more insight into student views on present learning experiences compared with their expectations of future learning experiences, mean scores for present vs. future learning experience scales were examined using the MANOVA 2×2 procedure. A version of the course (DT or RP) was used as the independent variable and type of learning experience (present vs. future) as the dependent variable. Students studying both versions of the course expected more focus on factual content related to international business ($F_{(1, 205)} = 68.93$, $p = .006$) and more opportunities for cross-border communication and collaboration ($F_{(1, 205)} = 218.18$, $p < .001$) in their future studies. The differences in terms of desired focus on enhancing own management skills and performance were not significant ($F_{(1, 205)} = 0.87$, $p = .353$).

Results of Qualitative Data Analysis

In addition to analysis of survey responses, qualitative data collected in the form of face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, responses to follow-up e-mails, and responses to the open-ended item in the survey were analyzed. In total, 22 students were interviewed in the first weeks of their studies, and four of them participated in follow-up interviews after three months' time (see Table 5 for information on the interview sample and interview methods). Both interview samples relied on volunteer participation, but while the DT students were contacted directly by the project team by e-mail with a request to participate in telephone interviews, RP students were informed of the study before or after their first tutorial and were interviewed in the regional centers the project team visited. Students studying the course in English came from eight different EU countries and represented 13 different nationalities. Students following the Russian version of the course were studying with two regional centers: one in the Urals region and the other in the European part of Russia. Seven participants returned responses to the e-mail sent in the third month of the course asking

students about their progress, and of these, three participated in follow-up interviews toward the end of their studies.

Insert Table 5 here

Interview data were complemented with analysis of open-ended comments to the survey provided by 33 participants, six (or 8.7% of the total number of respondents) of whom completed the English version of the questionnaire and 27 (or 16.6% of the total number) the Russian version of the instrument. Four key themes emerged from the analysis of qualitative data:

- Focus on own professional development in the local context,

- Blending locally relevant knowledge with global perspectives and theories,

- Differences in perceived roles of tutors, and

- Engaging with international colleagues in technology-enhanced collaborations.

In agreement with survey results, most of the interview respondents stressed the importance of enhancing own professional skills and performance as the key outcome of their management studies. Although the respondents might have been self-selecting in terms of their preference for independent learning, enrollment on the online course presented mature learners with an opportunity to improve their knowledge of functional areas of business and communication and IT skills while remaining in their countries of residence. Consequently, many interviewees preferred the learning materials to be relevant to their local contexts. Feng is a Chinese student who had lived in the United Kingdom for 14 years by the time he started the course. His account illustrated pragmatic orientations of the participants in this study:

> I've been managing for the past four years. I'm almost ready to move to the next
>
> level, hopefully to get into middle management level in a company … now I want to
>
> expand my knowledge a little bit more around business. Overall in my job I get quite

a lot of opportunities to learn about managing people, managing resources, but I don't get much exposure around things like finance, marketing because of the limits of my role. So I feel like I need to expand my knowledge in those areas and then that's really the main reason to do this certificate.

In line with Thompson's (2002) account of learning orientations of Asian students studying on MBA programs in Hong Kong, the primary motivation behind international management studies for the interview respondents was the opportunity to consider business and management from a practical perspective. Coming from China, Feng did recognize the importance of taking other cultural perspectives on management into account, but his preference was for learning materials and experiences on the chosen course to reflect the context in which he was managing:

I think at the level I'm currently studying at … it's probably better to focus on the UK business. Because I think, looking at my fellow students, all of us are working for a UK employer. None of us actually have too much to do with international business, so all of our business is very much focused in the UK. So I think maybe at this level it should be mainly focused on the UK business, maybe with some element of international … at the moment I'm learning about marketing. I want to know the marketing in the UK to gain a basic understanding before you start explaining to me about, you know, this is how they do marketing in Japan or the United States or any other country.

Students studying the Russian version of the course shared this instrumental focus on own professional development but were more likely than their peers based in Europe to note the discrepancy between learning materials that covered theories originating in Western Europe and in North America and their local business contexts. Although the core learning material was deemed to be quite useful for improving performance in their context, the preference of

most of the Russian interviewees was for the theories and cases to be more closely related to their own management practice. In general, Russian participants emphasized the need to blend local and global perspectives in the curriculum to a different degree or in a different manner than was the case with the course they were studying. This perspective on international curriculum can be described as *the glocal view*, in which both international and local perspectives and examples are incorporated, but significant attention is given to local management knowledge. Victor is a manager with experience of working in different sectors of business in Russia, and his account exemplified this perspective:

> International cases are very good … but there should also be Russian examples adapted to our [Russian] mentality…. Because reading books on management and considering some case studies … and films you see how people relate to some things in Europe or in America. And you compare how our [Russian] employees relate to them. Well, they are completely different, very different.

A reason for more focus on local settings might be that Russian students were studying in tutor groups with students from the same part of the country, and, in contrast with students studying in the United Kingdom and in other European countries, most of the RP students represented the commercial sector. Therefore, it was not only the nature of their national or regional settings that they desired the international curriculum to reflect but also the type of organizations in which they were employed. For example, Andrey, a senior manager in a manufacturing company in the Urals region of Russia, noted that both he and other students in his tutor group expected learning materials to relate to the nature of managing in the Russian commercial sector to a greater degree:

> I wish there were more examples of Russian management. Of course it's great to know about social services in the UK, issues of ecology, and anti-discriminatory policies. However, in reality, it's not necessary. Firstly and foremostly, I'd like to

improve my own effectiveness as a manager who works in Russia. I think that most managers study to enhance their effectiveness in the Russian context and only a small proportion focus on the international labor market.

However, even among Russian students, some respondents favored a somewhat more universalist, "best-practice" (Grey, 2004, p. 182) perspective to management curriculum that focused on aspects and ideas that would apply to a wide range of contexts and therefore can be described as *the global approach* to curriculum design. Natallia, a manager working for a Russian company in the European part of the country, illustrated this perspective in her response to the open-ended survey question about international aspects of her studies:

I can't distinguish between management in one country and management in another one. When I was reading the change management material, I felt what I had intuitively understood… justifiable and normal human reactions ... I would not even say that we have very different practices in Russia, because manipulation and coercion are also described in the theoretical material as well as the reasons as to why these are used. I wouldn't say that some work can be done without identifying goals, planning, monitoring, and acting on the results of monitoring. There are few people in Russia who manage consciously, but lack of management from a group of people should not be considered as "managing in another culture."

Students studying in continental Europe tended to have a slightly broader focus in their view of international curriculum than those studying in the United Kingdom and in the FSU countries. Most of these students resided outside their home countries, and their choice of study with a UK university was driven by their intention to gain an international qualification that would give them a broader perspective of management than local universities would. The desired focus of the learning material for these respondents was somewhat less specific to a particular national context, and their preference was for more generic emphasis on European

business. For example, Pierre, a French manager residing in Norway and working for an international company, suggested that the course should cover topics and examples that were familiar to European students:

> Question: What sort of examples or case studies would you like to see in your course?
>
> Pierre: It would be good if [case studies] were in Europe, because this is the area I'm working with and also because … we have students from various countries within Europe. Because we discuss among us what's going on and the different case studies, it would beneficial if they related to the things we can hear in the news or something that is accessible to us on a daily basis…. Therefore, the geographic choice for the case study will be interesting if it stays within Europe.

Another important distinction derived from the interview analysis was that tutor activity and input into course delivery was a more salient theme in the interviews of students studying the Russian version of the course. In general, Russian students expressed more preference for synchronous interaction with their tutors, be it in the form of telephone or face-to-face contact, and held higher expectations of their tutors' contributions to facilitating their learning. Looking back at his first face-to-face session of the course, Alexander, an operations manager working for a multinational company in the Urals region of Russia, believed that the tutor role was in both providing explanations of the theoretical material and contextualizing it with relevant practical examples from their professional practice:

> The tutor role is to get some theoretical part across during the tutorial and to render all kinds of support during the seminars.… That was the case with our tutor, who referred to [business] practice in specific companies quite a lot, how all of this is implemented…. She also provided a lot of detail in terms of what is required for each

task, described all the structure of teaching and learning and how this is going to be delivered.

Focus on own professional development did not preclude the respondents from showing an interest in cross-border collaborations with colleagues from other countries. Echoing arguments on the importance of cross-cultural and intercultural communication in academic literature (Gudykunst, 2003; Ting-Toomey, 1999), interviewees found that synchronous web-based tools in the form of audio- or videoconferencing can be used to aid in collaborative work and to overcome geographical separation with students, based in other countries. Although Feng was positive about how asynchronous online tools were used in the course, he indicated that some of the opportunities for cross-border collaboration available for students had not been fully employed:

> I mean, personally, I am quite comfortable with internet technology, because maybe some of the older generation of people might struggle a little bit, but for me the internet is really easy to use so I love it, I think it really works for me. I wish there could be more things like maybe using Skype to have some sort of near real-time interaction with the fellow students or with the tutor so that … we don't have to travel to one place but still have that interaction.

Monica, who was based in Switzerland and studied in a tutor group with students dispersed across Europe, agreed that there was a missed opportunity in enriching her learning experience of synchronous communication:

> I was thinking, especially maybe in Western Europe where most of the people have now good computers, good connection, it would make sense to at least try to organize some live classes, with webcams where people can see each other. I think that could

> help a lot to overcome … a sense of isolation … and that could make the forums a bit less mechanical.

Discussion

Implications for International Management Education

The findings of this study clarify the challenges of designing and delivering a global online course in Business or Management by drawing on accounts from a substantial sample of adult part-time learners studying in two languages in different countries of Europe and the FSU. This study incorporated cross-cultural and cross-contextual analysis to elucidate the generalizability of approaches and frameworks offered in online management education in North America to other cultural contexts (Arbaugh et al., 2010). This study also appears to be one of the first conducted in the context of Russian online education, especially in business and management disciplines, which is surprising given the long tradition of distance education in Russia (Zawacki-Richter & Kourotchkina, 2012) and considerable popularity and growth in the number of international MBA programs in Russia in the past few years (Chukhlomin & Chukhlomina, 2013). Incorporating comparisons between Russian and European management students into this study provided new insights into the nature of online management education globally, not simply because management contexts in Russia and in European countries differ significantly, as suggested in studies of Russian management (e.g., Fey, Björkman, Morgulis-Yakushev, & Park, 2009; Holden & Vaiman, 2013; Puffer & McCarthy, 2011), but also because of the common features that Russian education and culture share with some Western European countries. Thus, in contrast with more pervasive comparisons between Western and Asian students, both similarities and differences exist in the accounts of management students studying in Russia and the European countries.

The findings of this study partly concur with these conjectures, as patterns in responses to survey questions and, to some degree, the interview data confirmed the view that Western educational paradigms, at least in the form of independent online study in management supported by the local tutor and contextualized by infusion of local cases, can be transferable to other cultural and socioeconomic contexts. There were at least as many similarities in accounts of students studying English and Russian versions of the course as there were differences. In agreement with Sturdy and Gabriel's (2000) conclusions on the salience of students' instrumentalism in their choice of international management programs, Russian students generally agreed with their peers in other countries on the importance of a pragmatic and somewhat individualist focus in their studies. The respondents viewed their learning experience as one of the paths in career progression, and therefore the practice-based orientation of the curriculum dominated by Western theory (Lamb & Currie, 2012) did not cause the same degree of cultural dissonance as reported in other studies exploring perspectives of Asian and African (Mellahi, 2000) or Chinese (Van Auken et al., 2009) students studying in Western management courses. One explanation might be that the respondents in this study made a conscious choice of an internationally recognized qualification, and those wishing to obtain locally relevant qualifications might have chosen to study in an academic program without international recognition.

Nonetheless, there was also a degree of cultural specificity in responses of some groups of students, especially those based in Russia. Russian students favored both inclusion of locally relevant examples and perspectives in their studies and a greater degree of pedagogical contextualization, which was reflected in more demand for face-to-face teaching and, compared with their peers in Europe, for more input from their tutors. Thus, providing opportunities for contextualization of the learning material and approaches to delivery can be one of the principles behind designing the curriculum for an online management course that

involves sizable cohorts of international students residing outside Western Europe and North America.

In contrast with studies that explored the development of skills of intercultural communication (Bennett, 2004) or a global mind-set (e.g., Erez et al., 2013) in groups of students studying in mixed cultural groups, the student groups in this study were mostly culturally homogeneous, which reflects the nature of teaching and learning in management disciplines in many contexts across the globe today. Significant numbers of international students, especially those studying online, remain in their home countries, preserving close contact with their local cultures. Therefore, using Erez and Gati's (2004) distinction between local and global identity, it is plausible to suggest that, despite being exposed to international cases and perspectives on management, students in the context we studied were as likely to reinforce their local identities as to develop global identities. Further research should consider how exposure to international perspectives on different types of online courses, in different functional areas of business, and with different cultural, professional and demographic compositions of student groups shapes their global or local identities. Global or local identity development might also be explored in relation to effects of different online media (e.g., audio- or videoconferencing, online forums, or the mixture of these) on student experiences. The course in question mostly relied on asynchronous contact in online forums, which had some bearing on both the nature of interactions in these forums and the relationships in student groups and between tutors and students.

Implications for Delivering Management Programs

This study also underscored the critical role of the tutor as a facilitator of student learning and translator of predominantly Western management knowledge in an international online course in Management. Ideally, tutors teaching international online management courses should combine knowledge of concepts and models in their respective functional areas

covered in Western programs with awareness of the business contexts and cultures of their students. In addition to having sufficient technical and pedagogical skills to teach in the online environment, tutors should be aware of the differences between educational systems of the country where the course was designed and where their students come from to facilitate student transitions more effectively. In line with Arbaugh et al. (2013), further research might explore differences in assumptions, perceived tutor roles, and approaches to training online tutors across different institutions and cultural contexts. For example, how do various features of national culture (or history of a particular country, its socioeconomic context, educational system, etc.) shape approaches to online teaching? How significant is the impact and acceptance (or otherwise) of Western educational paradigms (e.g., constructivist, experiential learning), and what is the extent to which tutors blend them with other traditions in their practice?

The significance of tutor activity this study revealed casts doubt on whether open-access online courses with little or no tutorial support (as is the case with MOOCs, for example) can have the same degree of effectiveness, at least for mature international learners remaining in their home countries and with characteristics similar to participants of this study. Recent research on preferences of online MBA students in North America (Ayala, Dick, & Treadway, 2014; Smith & Flaherty, 2013) confirmed that, though students valued opportunities for independent online learning, they also preferred combining it with elements of more traditional instruction in the form of face-to-face classes and the residential component, which are typically not offered through open-learning platforms in the form of MOOCs.

One of the main conclusions that emerged from both quantitative and qualitative analyses was that students across both versions of the course expected some degree of curriculum

localization. According to the analysis of interviews, at least three perspectives on international curriculum were identified:

1. Global perspective, in which concepts and theories are addressed regardless of their local relevance;

2. Regional perspective, mostly focusing on global perspectives, but with some emphasis on views and cases from a particular region of the world (e.g., Europe); and

3. Glocal perspective, which represents a blend of international and local perspectives, but with a further shift in emphasis to locally relevant material.

This diversity of views can be attributed to a bewildering diversity of cultural and nationality groups that students represented—learners from 18 national groups studying in 14 countries took part in this study. On the one hand, such diversity poses challenges to educators in terms of attempting to address the needs of a diverse student body or even of finding any common ground. On the other hand, today, diversity of learners has become a reality in higher education classrooms—in the past decade or so, numbers of international students have doubled across the globe (OECD, 2014), and Business, Management, and associated social science disciplines have proved to be particularly popular. For example, in 2013, 55% of all international students in Australia, 44% of those studying in the United Kingdom, and 33% studying in the United States were enrolled in academic programs in business and administration or in related fields (Institute of International Education, 2013; OECD, 2014). Though posing significant challenges for delivering and administering online management courses, student diversity can also represent an opportunity to experiment with different approaches to designing online classrooms. While in some cases providing learners with the same set of learning materials and tutorial support might be appropriate, in other cases customizing the offering to particular groups of students (e.g., based in the same geographical country or region, working in similar business sectors or types of economy) by

offering additional or alternative pathways through their online learning could be feasible. For example, mature students, such as those involved in this study, are often capable of generating examples of management practice from their local context, which through the use of virtually ubiquitous online media today can be shared across the globe almost instantly.

Limitations

The limitations of this study derive mainly from the specificity of the distance teaching and learning model adopted by the higher educational institutions under study. The separation between central academic staff and regionally based tutors and the particular approach to designing and delivering online learning materials characteristic of both the UK university under study and its partner in Russia might have had an impact on students' learning experiences and, consequently, their views of international curriculum. Methodologically, the study also had significant limitations, in that, though the survey sample was largely representative of student populations enrolled in the course under study, the interview sample mostly relied on volunteer participants, especially with respect to the Russian participants, for whom only a few regional centers were available to be involved in the project. Despite showing relatively high international consistency scores, the questionnaire used for empirical data collection is not yet fully validated, owing to its first-time use in the current form and in the institutional contexts under study. Further empirical work is necessary to validate the instruments and ensure that the questionnaire scales measure constructs as intended.

Implications for Curriculum Internationalization

In the light of other typologies of international curriculum, the curriculum considered in this study can be described as additive (Clifford, 2013), and the degree of its internationalization was largely symbolic (Turner and Robson, 2007)—that is, it centered on infusing international cases and examples but preserving a largely domestic focus, which was

reflected in relatively little contextualization of learning materials. There also was limited evidence that the design of the course encouraged learners to critique the theories the course covered. This lack of critical approach to internationalization echoes the cultural pragmatist perspective suggested by Blasco (2009), in which culture is considered an add-on or a context of economic activity though exposure to culture-generic theoretical material (Earley & Peterson, 2004). One reason for the lack of critical perspectives might be the level of study, as the course in question was open-access and aimed to introduce students to Business and Management as a subject and to its key functional areas. However, despite possible tensions, the goal of developing practical skills is not always antagonistic to skills of critical thinking, which could be fostered at relatively early stages of management studies (Mingers, 2000).

The distance learning context of the study added to the complexity of the analysis, but also challenged some of the assumptions of the internationalization literature. Issues of acculturation were far less salient than in the context of more traditional universities, as international online learners remained in their home countries with little or no contact with UK education or culture, which blurred distinctions between internationalization at home and internationalization away perspectives. The *internationalization at a distance* metaphor seemed more appropriate, in that students studied an international course in parallel to their management practice in the local context. Today when opportunities for independent online study abound owing to freely available open-learning platforms, the potential for truly global provision through distance learning is quite significant. However, the findings of this study show that the process of designing a truly global course is fraught with difficulties, partially due to high expectations of international students, who viewed all three facets of the international curriculum this study aimed to explore (i.e., focus on enhancing own management skills and performance, focus on factual knowledge about international business and focus on cross-border communication and collaboration) as important. Regardless of

their demographic characteristics or version of the course, the respondents expected more focus on international content and collaborations with colleagues across borders than the present learning experience offered. The interview data added further insights by highlighting learner preferences for the use of synchronous web-based tools, especially in groups in which face-to-face classes with other students were infrequent or not available, and for more collaborative online activities in international groups. International students perceived technology not only as the medium or characteristic of the course context but also as the enabler of intercultural dialogue with colleagues across borders. Thus, it can be argued that by embedding affordances for online collaborative work, not only can student needs for developing their management skills and competencies be satisfied, but opportunities can also be created for incorporating content and learning activities that foster awareness of and sensitivity to intercultural differences (Bennett, 1993; Eisenberg et al., 2013). It appears that student instrumentalism and focus on development of own management capabilities might not conflict with interest in management practices beyond their immediate context, including those in other cultural settings. The design of a truly global online management course should reflect this interest.

In summary, the findings of this study highlight the salience and cross-cultural generalizability of student instrumentalism in online management education, which coupled with interest in cross-cultural collaborations, emerged as key facets of international curriculum. The results confirm the plausibility of transferring Western online management education practices to other contexts, at least in the form of a practice-based course of independent study for adult learners supported by the tutor and where local perspectives are incorporated. Despite the potentially global reach through online delivery, the web-based learning environment also poses challenges of its own, due to different preferences for media use across groups of students studying in different contexts and the need for contextualization

at the level of media use. This study calls for more international management education research from both cross-cultural and culture-specific perspectives to explore the nature of global and local identity formation, differing roles of teachers and learners in the learning processes, and successful instances of blending global and local perspectives in the design of online management curriculum.

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Table 1. Sample questionnaire items.

Sample item	Questionnaire scale
This course helps me to enhance my performance in my immediate work context without reference to other national cultures.	Focus on enhancing own management skills and performance (FOSP)
In future management courses, I would like to enhance my performance in my immediate work context without reference to other national cultures.	FOSP
I learn factual information about how organizations operate in cultural contexts other than my own.	Focus on factual knowledge about international business (FFK)
In future management courses, I would like to learn more about how managers work in other cultural contexts.	FFK
I learn how to collaborate successfully with managers/students from other cultures.	Focus on cross-border communication and collaboration (FCC)
In future management courses, I would like to use the experiences of colleagues working in other cultural contexts to inform my work.	FCC

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of survey participants.

	RP	DT
Male	96	39
Female	67	30
Age (mean)	34.4	40
Higher education or equivalent	163	38
A levels or lower	0	31
Total	163	69

Table 3. Students providing positive responses to items related to cross-cultural experiences (%).

	DT		RP	
	UK or Ireland (n = 54)	Other EU states (n = 15)	Russian (n = 133)	Ukrainian (n = 24)
Do you speak more than one language?	27.8	100	57.1	87.5
Does your work involve working with people from other cultures and/or nationalities?	87	86.7	60.9	70.8
Did you spend one year or more living or working abroad?	18.5	46.6	3.0	0

Note: Of the 163 respondents in the RP sample, 157 represented Russia or Ukraine and six were based in four other FSU countries (i.e., Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Latvia).

Table 4. Mean factor-based learning experience scale scores (5-point Likert scale).

	RP	DT
Present Learning Experience		
FOSP**	3.95	4.02
FFK**	3.91	3.36
FCC	3.22	3.21
Future Learning Experience		
FOSP	4.26	4.19
FFK*	4.30	4.18
FCC	4.19	4.22

Note. MANCOVA results on DT vs. RP group comparisons:

** $p < .001$.

* $p < .01$.

Table 5. Interviews by type and method.

	Telephone	Face-to-face	Follow-up Telephone	Total
RP		10	2	12
DT	12		2	14