

The necessity to empower students to challenge and reshape higher education curricula in a global age

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade the proportional decrease in public funding to the higher education sector in countries such as the UK, Australia and New Zealand have seen universities become increasingly entrepreneurial in raising revenue, especially in the international education market. This has dramatically increased the number of international students attending Western universities and the delivery of courses overseas. Despite rhetoric concerning internationalisation of the curriculum changes mainly focus on inducting international students into the Western educational system and little attention has been paid to developing curricula to meet the future needs of all students as global citizens. The views of students themselves on their futures and the education they require to live those futures has rarely been sought.

This paper introduces the voices of students from all campuses of a large Australian university with eight campuses, two of them 'offshore'. Interviews with students investigated their perceptions of their futures and their experience of internationalisation of curriculum at the university. Despite their diverse backgrounds and locations the students held similar visions of their futures and saw the need for their education to be relevant to those futures. However, what this meant in practice was complex and informed by identity and geographic location. While some students accepted uncritically what the university offered others experienced their education as a colonialist enterprise. This study highlights the need for universities to know their students and to involve them in curricular planning and in building a new critical pedagogy responsive to the rich diversity of needs of our current student cohorts.

INTRODUCTION

This paper considers the views of differently located students on internationalising the curriculum. Their views on their futures and the education they need to achieve those futures are juxtaposed to the education they are currently receiving and their critique, or reticence to critique that education. The first section considers the current higher education context and the slippage between the theoretical and practical literature in the area. The student voices are then introduced leading to a discussion of universities' current curriculum development practices and the need to revisit power relationships within these practices.

CONTEXT

In the last decade the proportional decrease in public funding to the higher education sector in countries such as the UK, Australia and New Zealand have seen universities become increasingly entrepreneurial in raising revenue, especially in the international education market. Extensive marketing has dramatically increased the number of international students entering Western universities and Western curricula is delivered throughout the world through myriad partnership arrangements and, more recently, through the establishment of campuses overseas. Throughout this expansion universities have focused on monitoring standards at delivery points and inducting international students into the Western education system, and have paid little attention to the development of curricula to meet the needs of the students in different contexts and locations, giving rise to perceptions that the education delivered constitutes a new wave of educational colonialism (Naidoo, 2007).

Naidoo and Jamieson (2005:46) argue that the movement of Western institutions into the global education market place has accelerated the focus on maximising revenue and led to the commodification of education into 'low quality standardised packages of information delivered at low cost with little interactivity or national relevance to many parts of developing world'. They go on to argue that the focus is placed on the learning resources to 'teacher proof delivery' so that 'less qualified, less experienced and thus cheaper staff' can be employed. This means that as well as a 'one size fits all' content, that teachers do not adjust activities to the needs of individual students, and group work, which develops social and interpersonal skills and fosters peer group learning, does not happen. Assessment is mostly summative and leans towards easy to mark standardised test formats. The concern of the exporting universities with quality assurance and standardisation ensures that the same education is delivered to all students (Schapper and Mayson, 2004).

At the same time countries such as China, Japan, Malaysia and India are rapidly expanding their higher education sector in response to their own needs and to keep their students at home, overseas education being a financial burden to these countries. Not only are these countries keeping their students at home, they are also moving to compete with Western providers in the global marketplace. Competition is further heightened by Western providers also now positioning themselves in other Western countries to attract local and international students. With this level of competition it is vital, if universities wish to survive, that they seriously review the education they are offering in the international marketplace.

The theoretical literature on international curricula invokes concepts of openness, mutual learning, border crossing and transformation. It focuses on students needing to develop global perspectives and intercultural sensitivities to become responsible global citizens (Knight, 2004; Rizvi, 2005). Giroux (1992) argues that to progress internationalisation of the curriculum universities need to invite, and support, academics and students to become 'border crossers', to view the world from different perspectives and to question long held views of knowledge and what those knowledges mean in practice, to engage in a critical pedagogy that encourages the exploration of one's own history and place to reach some understanding of self and of one's own culture in relation to others in the global

environment. Giroux (1992:15) argues for teachers to take on new roles as 'transformative intellectuals' who challenge themselves and their students to cross the borders of disciplines and of cultures. However, Giroux also warns that identity is very fragile and as we move into borderlands criss-crossed by a variety of languages, experiences and voices, that we need to provide a safe space for students to critically engage teachers and other students, to cross these ideological and critical borders. Similarly Gough (1999) writes of transnational spaces where the new and increasingly complex patterns of interconnectedness destabilises relationships.

Mestenhauser and Ellingboe (1998) challenge the assumption that knowledge is universal and portable and see educators themselves as a source of resistance to change.

Transnational campuses are particularly seen as being an intrusion into local cultures as their programmes have been developed for foreign conditions and are mostly in another language and targeted at more affluent students (Van Damme, 2002). A further literature addresses the exclusion, marginalisation and inferiorising of indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing by western suppliers of education and argues for higher education to be reclaimed to reflect local experience and needs (Reagan, 2005; Okolie, 2003; Boufoy-Bastick, 2003; Teasdale and Ma Rhea, 2000; Dei, 2000).

At a practical level there is little evidence of the engagement of universities in ideas of transformative pedagogy or adapting curricula to different contexts. In his review of Australian literature on internationalisation since 1990, Harman (2005) claims that transformative pedagogies are never mentioned and that there is a lack of material on the active involvement of academics in internationalisation and their perspectives on other cultures and people. Similarly a study of 133 higher education websites in the UK found only one that expressed a wish to learn from other pedagogic cultures and learning traditions and three planning to raise staff awareness of intercultural issues through staff development programmes (Koutsantoni, 2006). A review of Canadian literature found little evidence of internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC) or of staff development for IoC (Bond, 2003).

While early literature on IoC focused on institutional processes for implementing IoC (Bremer and van der Wende, 1995; Hudson and Todd, 2000), the International at Home movement moved the concept of IoC forward by focusing attention on developing curricula for all students to meet their future needs for living and working in a multicultural world where issues of sustainability and justice need to be addressed (Nilsson, 2003; Crowther, 2000).

The literature that appears to be most visible to teachers is that on the inducting of international students into 'How the West is done' (Doherty and Singh, 2005). This literature privileges Western pedagogy emphasising informal classrooms with student participation in discussion and the questioning of the teacher (Carroll and Ryan, 2006; University of Melbourne, 2004; Wallace and Hellmundt, 2003; Ryan, 2000). While efforts to assist international students to understand the education system to enhance their chances of success is laudable, some practitioners are now beginning to question how well the Western ways fit with the educational experiences and values held by students from other cultures. Work with international students in Australia and offshore is beginning to

recognise that Western classrooms can be very uncomfortable and confronting places for students from other cultures (Dunn and Wallace, 2004; Novera, 2004; Pyvis and Chapman, 2004) and that such approaches problematise the student rather than addressing wider issues of curricula and pedagogy (Crabtree and Sapp, 2004).

This review of the literature demonstrates a lack of connection between theories of transformative education and higher education practices and highlights the lack of attention to the views of students. While lip-service is paid to the development of student-centred learning at many universities and to listening to student voices, with token student participation in university committees, there are few formal avenues for student voices to be articulated and less formal mechanisms for ensuring that the voices are heard, credited as valid and incorporated into university decision making.

This paper forefronts some of those student voices, highlights the slippage between their imaginings, the curriculum they require to achieve their aims and the received curriculum, and explores possible university responses in terms of empowering students to influence curriculum development.

THE STUDENT VOICES

Diverse identities

The diversity of current student cohorts can be illustrated in a study of one university in Australia with six onshore campuses and two offshore campuses (one in Malaysia and one in South Africa). The university students consist of:

- In Australia
 - Local indigenous students (Aborigines)
 - Local non-indigenous students (Australia having large populations of different cultural groups such as Italians, British, Greeks, Chinese etc)
 - International students (the majority of which are ethnic Chinese from many different countries)

- In Malaysia
 - Local indigenous students (Malays)
 - Local non-indigenous students (predominantly Chinese and Indian)
 - International students (predominantly Indonesian, Singaporean and mainland Chinese)

- In South Africa
 - Local indigenous students (from many different ethnic groups)
 - Local (European descent) students (mainly British and Dutch)
 - International students (mainly Botswanan and other African nationals)

The university also has a myriad of other overseas ‘delivery’ arrangements in Hong Kong, Italy and many other countries. For the university the challenge is not only in the diversity of students’ educational experience and beliefs about knowledge but also the exigencies of the different geographic locations. It could be assumed that many different paths need to be trodden to arrive at the students’ imagined destinations.

The interviews

Interviews held with staff and students at all eight campuses sought to discover what an internationalised curriculum meant at the university. Two Masters students were employed as research assistants at the Australian campuses. They used snowballing techniques to obtain a cross faculty sample of students that were interviewed either in a focus group or individually. At the off-shore campuses staff known to the author were approached to carry out interviews with staff and students, and were asked to select a variety of participants. The semi-structured interviews were audio-taped and the resulting transcripts categorised using the questions as a base and adding categories as required. The emerging analysis was negotiated between the author, the student-researchers and the staff who conducted the interviews. Table 1 shows the demographic details of the students interviewed. The students were a mixture of local and international students and came from a range of disciplines. Eight of the students were under 25 and seven in the 25-34 age group, six were female and nine male.

Imagined futures

Quotes from interview transcripts are coded with the country of origin of the student and the campus e.g. [Russia, TSA]. The campuses are shown as: TA = Australia, TM = Malaysia, TSA = South Africa.

The students were asked how they saw their future selves and the knowledge, skills and attitudes that they would need to develop to function successfully in their future lives. All the students saw an international education as crucial to their future imagined selves as responsible, global citizens. They spoke of the excellent generic communication and research skills they would need for this and the need to be continually developing. They wanted to be ‘thinkers’, to be open-minded, flexible, adaptable, responsive, creative, original and to have perseverance. They also saw the need to be confident in themselves and to have leadership skills. Offshore and international students spoke of acquiring ‘ethical’ ways of living and of having the ability to apply what they learnt to the common good to ‘acquire something that may be of benefit to someone else and have the knowledge and skills to follow that vision’ [Serbia, TA].

The students also wanted intercultural knowledge and understanding and to be able to apply their knowledge in different environments. A South African campus student spoke about the misconceptions that students from different countries brought to the campus about each other, and the playing out of rivalries. They saw how working together in small multi-racial groups on tasks helped to breakdown those barriers, to build understanding and their confidence to cope in such groups.

One student emphasised that intercultural communication can involve 'discomfort or misunderstandings or miscommunications'. She did not see this as something to be 'fixed' but something to be aware of, that we need to realise the reality that we won't necessarily 'understand each other and we shouldn't pretend that we do, but we should find ways to acknowledge that'. [Australia, TA]

Staff-student relationships

These students had clear ideas of the future identities that they wished to achieve as responsible, global citizens and were very aware of the experiences and skills that they required to attain those identities. They were also clear that the university teaching staff were crucial to the quality of their education. They saw that without staff who, themselves, saw the world through global perspectives and had an understanding of other cultures, that they would not get exposed to an internationalised curriculum. The staff needed to be open-minded and flexible, to be accepting of different approaches and introducing the students to wider perspectives. The students held their relationships with staff as of primary importance for their own development. Above all the students wanted the lecturers to get to know them and to be caring, approachable and understanding of their students. The students in Malaysia and South Africa especially talked about staff taking time to talk to students, to build relationships with them and to be available outside of the classroom to discuss work. The international students emphasised how lonely they felt and how a short conversation could make them feel noticed and cared for. They emphasised that students are motivated through fear or through feeling cared for. Students sometimes felt stereotyped as 'lazy' when they were in fact having problems understanding the content of the course.

The students' descriptors of their ideal teachers fit with those offered by Teekens (2003) in her lists of attributes of 'internationalised' staff. How many staff can claim these attributes and how many aspire to do so is one of the challenges to IoC recognised by the students.

Teaching strategies

A second dimension of their learning was the teaching strategies employed in the classrooms and their relationships with their peers.

The students described experiencing not only culture shock but also 'study shock' on entering an Australian university. This included new ways of relating, reading, learning, studying, writing and participating, and also sometimes studying in a foreign language. Students at all campuses said that staff needed to be sensitive to their different educational experience and to assist them to understand the norms of the class and to interact within the class. There was a strong emphasis on adapting to their new location.

Some students came from cultures (e.g. Malaysia, Singapore) that held teachers and elders in high esteem and behaviour towards them was always reverentially. They found the way of relating to staff at the Australian universities and behaviours in the university classrooms difficult to accept. Calling out answers to questions, the informality of addressing staff by their first name and questioning staff were anathema to them.

Some students also experienced difficulty with the expectations to participate in classroom activities and group work. The need to be tutored in skills for classroom participation was discussed. A number of students recognised the value of working in groups to aid their intercultural understanding and build their confidence to work co-operatively, but acknowledged the lack of interaction between local and international student in and out of class. There was a plea that staff randomly assign students to racially mixed groups as it was very difficult for students to ask a group (of another race) if they could team up with them. They recognised that when they stayed with their own friends, who came from similar backgrounds, with similar experiences, that their learning was limited.

As well as all the difficulties associated with studying in a different language the African students described their difficulties with the emphasis in their courses on independent reading, having come from oral cultures where learning is achieved through listening, discussion and remembering. They found it hard to absorb information through reading. These comments were echoed by their lecturers, who found the students had little experience of independent study and one described taking the students page by page through the text book discussing each idea as it arose.

In order for students to succeed in their current situations induction into the pedagogy of the university, and into a specific discipline, is a necessity for them all, but of interest is the students' willingness to learn and adapt despite their discomforts with that pedagogy.

The curriculum

Interestingly despite vividly imagining their future needs the students did not appear to interrogate the suitability of the curriculum for an international education. The local and international students in Australia mostly were content with their curricula and saw it as 'already international'. An international student in Australia expressed the view that the '[university] is already an internationalised university . . . a lot of people here are from all over the world, that the curriculum . . . seems to me to be fairly diverse and decentred . . . we have a globalised understanding of our place in the world [Serbia, TA]. Another said, 'I'm not quite sure if the curriculum should be changed that much, I think it already accommodates everybody'. [Australian, TA]. The students also appeared to be starting from the premise that all knowledge is universal. However, as they continued to talk the students produced contradictory statements describing the context in which theoretical principles applied affecting the operation of those principles and the reaction to those principles. The students saw that the rules, regulations, laws, practices and ethics were different in all countries. Outcomes would, therefore, be different in different contexts. 'The theory just does not apply in practice' (Malaysia, TA). For international students living and studying in Australia the experience offered them a new perspective on every aspect of their lives and they would be very busy processing those experiences and negotiating their identities in their new location so may have little energy left to contemplate if these experiences were getting them where they wanted to go. Local students also often claimed to be living across different cultural environments as the culture and language of their homes may be different from that of the university.

However, despite the apparent satisfaction with the curriculum of Australian-based students, the students in Malaysia and South Africa were less content. These students expressed more concern over the relevance of the curriculum for their context and a student from the South African campus argued strongly that dealing with issues for developing countries was critical to the future work environments of the African students [Botswana, TSA] and that anything less would constitute further colonial education. This theme was picked up strongly by the staff at the offshore campuses.

THE POLITICS OF THE CURRICULUM

The students at the university were, in fact, receiving a 'packaged' Australian education. To ensure quality, students at all campuses received the same course, taught and assessed in the same way. The Business School especially decreed that only 20% of curricula content could be contributed locally and all exams were set and marked in Australia (Schapper and Mayson, 2004). This 'teacher proofing' of delivery gives little regard to the pedagogical experiences or preferences of the students and reduced the off-campus staff to the status of technicians with little say in their courses and little opportunity to negotiate change.

The high level of acceptance of their curriculum among the Australian-based students (local and international), and their willingness to adapt, could appear to indicate a lack of engagement with the politics of their own location or of a perceived need to ask for a curriculum that addresses important social, political and cultural issues in their lives, despite their espoused wishes to receive a higher education that equips them to become 'global citizens'. However, for some students (local and international) the Australian-based curriculum and pedagogy may already be introducing them to different perspectives and ways of doing things, and mean that they are actively engaged in re-evaluating their former knowledges and their identities. For other local students their lack of engagement with issues of the politics of cultural difference and how cultural difference is implicated in the construction and organisation of knowledge could reflect a lack of critical pedagogy being used to encourage students to reflect on their own position and their own learning. Developing an awareness of one's own culture and location is seen as an essential starting point to begin to question and understand the perspectives of others (Rizvi, 2002). Giroux (1998) also saw the need to get students beyond the world they already know in order to provoke their enquiry into, and challenge their existing views of, the way things are and should be. We appear to be caught in a contradiction here in that we need students to challenge their university education but we do not appear to be teaching them in a way that is empowering them to do so.

The predominantly ethnic-Chinese students on the Malaysian campus were well aware of the politics of their own country, where there was insufficient tertiary education places to meet demand, yet places were held vacant because of a quota system privileging ethnic-Malay students and refusing entry to other ethnic groups if the places were not filled. This meant that many students from the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups had to seek higher education overseas. The Australian campus in Malaysia offered a less expensive alternative to these students. Similarly the students on the South African campus were aware of the newness of multiracial campuses in South Africa. Despite the very diverse social, cultural

and political environments of the offshore campuses and the students querying the education they were receiving, the curriculum nor the university system appears to give the students a pathway to express their views or influence change.

If students are to fulfil their learning goals and become the responsible, global citizens they wish to become it is necessary that their voices are heard in higher education circles and for this to happen they need to become empowered. They need to be encouraged to question the education they are receiving in relation to their own educational aims. Student contribution to curriculum design needs to be moved from the current token student on relevant committees to a substantive number of students, from all campuses, fully participating on curriculum planning and review committees and university education committees that debate the path of the university. At the same time students need to learn how to engage meaningfully with committees and at some universities student union are beginning to offer such training to student leaders (Porter, 2008). With such fierce competition in the higher education sector currently students are in a strong position to demand inclusion in curriculum development. At the same time there needs to be a genuine desire among university staff and managers to seek out and listen to the perspectives of students.

CONCLUSION

Universities today are challenged by an increasingly diverse population of students seeking to forge futures in a fast changing, inter-dependent world continually fractured by demands for the recognition of difference. Students are in the process of forging new identities for their futures. They come from different social, cultural and economic locations and are engaged in their identity work in new locations in the presence of strangers. The students in this study looked to their teachers and their peers for support and guidance in this process as they faced the collision of the personal and local with the global. The students' clarity of vision about their future selves needs to be at the forefront of curriculum development at universities, informing the sort of academics that are recruited, the educational development offered academics and curricula and pedagogical developments. Without a willingness to take risks, to question the status quo, to become border crossers, universities will become anachronistic. With the expansion of higher education in many countries, especially in Asia, an expensive Western education that is irrelevant and 'uncomfortable' may no longer be as attractive as a local education that addresses the needs of their own society and is 'comfortable' for the student. The emerging literature on the discomfort with Western pedagogy and the testimony of the students in this study should prompt Western universities to research the preferences of their students, ask disciplines to explore different ways of teaching and address quality assurance issues differently. Universities are excellently positioned to listen to their local, international and transnational students and explore, imagine and act.

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