Internationalisation and Excellence in Higher Education—the need for a Multidimensional Approach

Anne SEITZ
Swinburne University of Technology, Lilydale, Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper examines two of the major conceptual and empirical aspects of internationalisation in the higher education area from contemporary and collaborative perspectives. It also explores a number of factors---academic and non-academic ---which influence both the provision of outstanding academic programs by tertiary institutions and the educational achievements of students. The paper draws on high-level expertise in intercultural understanding and practice and on longstanding involvement in cross-cultural curriculum development, teaching and research. It provides examples of principles and practices that contribute to, and sometimes determine, the success or failure of internationalising educational services and the achievement of excellence in the higher education sector.

INTRODUCTION

Internationalisation in education, the role and function of higher education and the pursuit, measurement and achievement of excellence on organisational and individual levels are highly complex and challenging issues both nationally and internationally. While the terms “international” and “inter-cultural” are often used interchangeably is worthwhile to be alert to the different meanings of these terms. International usually refers to relationships between and among nation-states and inter-cultural (or cross-cultural) refers to relationships between and among cultural groups. The internationalisation of higher education clearly encompasses both relationships simultaneously, regardless of whether on-shore, off-shore programs or a combination of these are involved.

A range of issues characterise and influence the internationalisation of higher education. One of the important aspects that impact on internationalisation in this sector are the motivational factors of the parties involved. That is, why countries market their education services internationally and why students seek an overseas qualification. It should be acknowledged that currently internationalisation in the education and training sector basically refers to a particular form of exchange between countries of the Asia Pacific region and various Western nations, such as Australia, Canada and the USA.

Other factors that complicate the issues include the national differences in the nature and distribution of educational services and access to them. Essentially the major distinction is between systems of wide-spread or mass-education and those whose people receive little or no formal education. Other aspects to consider are the differences in the nature and emphasis of education in particular countries. Three broad categories of educational emphasis have been identified:

- Humanistic education

Which is broad-based, generalist in approach, and emphasises the humanities and knowledge and education as an end in itself. Education is not seen as being primarily and directly a means to facilitate the economic development of a country or to improve the social mobility of individuals—although no doubt it does both. These systems tend to encourage innovativeness, leadership and interpersonal skills.
• **Technical education**
  Which focuses on training and the provision of specific skills and applied learning to students produces specialists and experts with knowledge in narrow fields. Such specialist and narrow training often results in an inability to adopt a holistic approach, that is, an inability to see the “big picture”.

• **Apprenticeship education**
  Which focuses on providing a combination of on-the-job skills in the workplace and theoretical instructions in classrooms. These worker-students become skilled workers and trained technicians at the same time. This system provides a highly skilled workforce with the appropriate attitude to work, a sound theoretical knowledge and an openness to change. (Victor, D. 1992:81,89,90,91).

Matching existing educational services with various overseas education systems and the perceived needs of international students is clearly a most complex and challenging endeavour, both in the practical, conceptual, motivational and attitudinal spheres.

In examining and exploring some of these complexities the paper will draw mainly on the Australian experience and practices in providing higher education services in the international market. The paper is divided into three sections. Section I provides some background information and a short overview of Australia’s participation in the globalisation of education services. Section II presents four dimensions of internationalisation and Section III deals with a number of factors affecting the achievement of excellence in higher education.

**SECTION I**

**INTERNATIONALISATION OF EDUCATION SERVICES.**

**History**

Internationalisation in the area of knowledge production and exchange is not a new phenomenon. There is evidence of longstanding scholarly exchanges in many countries. From the earliest recorded times, both in Asian and Western nations, scholarly endeavours have been driven mainly by ethical, moral, religious and philosophical interests and concerns and usually carried out on an individual basis. Intellectual exchange, and sometimes competition, was predominantly knowledge driven and often tied to cultural groupings, religion, ethnic/racial identities and national sentiments. Exchange of knowledge was encouraged and usually took place through scholars visiting, studying and teaching at different universities and other centres of learning.

The contemporary preoccupation with, and dominance of, economic considerations did not seem to have been a significant factor in formal education. Education was seen as a means and an end in itself. The impetus for excellence in scholarship and international exchange of knowledge was based on the recognition that this would simultaneously benefit both individuals and societies in the short and long term.

**Australia—pre World War II**

Australia’s educational history reflects its beginnings as a British colony both in regard to the structure of its education system, its educational philosophy and practice and its tendency to identify (and perhaps confuse) “overseas” and “European” with Great Britain. For many decades Australia’s focus and identity was predominantly British and Australian academic staff and students went to Britain to gain “overseas” qualifications and experience. However,
many British academics elected to come to the colonies and later the Australian States and Territories to teach and research at higher education institutions.

For the major part of Australia’s history since 1788 “internationalisation” in the higher education field was a predominantly one-way street from Australia to Great Britain with some minor diversions to the USA.

Australia---post World War II

After World War II a quite significant change took place in the education arena. Students for many different Asian countries began to attend Australian universities, mainly under the Colombo Plan. This Plan and other initiatives were seen as a means to contribute to the development of a Western educated elite in particular Asian Countries and as way to encourage greater cooperation among Commonwealth countries. Australia’s educational aid to Asian countries can therefore be viewed as part of the nations diplomatic and foreign aid policy, based largely on self-interest.

Some positive changes in attitudes, policies and practices towards Asia have occurred since the mid-1970s including that educational aid programs have remained relatively untouched by government budget cuts until the early 1990s. The proportion of students who are either sponsored or subsidised in some way are were about 25 per cent of the total overseas student population (National Report on Australia’s Higher Education Sector 1993:60).

Since the early to mid-1980s Australia, like many other countries, has put more stress on the practice of a free market economy in which education is viewed and treated as a as a culturally neutral commodity. But, as with all other commodities, there needs to be increased recognition of consumer demands, consumer rights and national and international competition. Some universities are more sensitive to, not only strictly commercial issues, but also to educational, pastoral care and ethical issues than others and establish appropriate processes and structures to accommodate these issues.

SECTION II

Australia---1990s--

In large measure Australia’s idea and practice of internationalisation is still very much a one-way, ethnocentric endeavour both intellectually and practically. It now is an umbrella term that covers a number of different dimensions of internationalisation and theoretically should include all regions of the globe. In practise however, Australia’s contemporary focus is on the Asia Pacific region for certain aspects of its internationalisation drive. Some of the major conceptual and practical dimensions and issues of current definitions of internationalisation are:

1. Student exchanges.

This should clearly involve Australian students attending overseas universities and colleges for specific courses and specified periods of time which attract suitable credits towards their degree. Likewise, overseas students attending an Australian university or college should receive equivalent benefits and credits towards their degree at their Alma Mater. Where formal Memoranda of Agreements (MOAs) between Australian and overseas universities have been signed credit transfer is usually included.
While many universities, including the Faculties of Higher Education of Swinburne University of Technology at Hawthorn and Lilydale, have encouraged students to pursue overseas studies, the lack of second language skills among the Australian student population (very few students are competent even in European languages, let alone any Asian ones) make it difficult for them to make use of these opportunities. The few Australian students who venture to undertake overseas studies tend to prefer countries such as Canada, the USA, the U.K and various European Union countries. While this may be understandable on linguistic and cultural grounds there is an obvious need to encourage and enable students to access the considerable offerings of higher education in the Asia Pacific region.

2. **Staff exchanges.**

This should include Australian academic staff participating in research and teaching programs in overseas tertiary institutions. At present there seem to be some difficulties in Australian academics either seeking or being accepted as other than short term “visiting lecturers/scholars” at overseas tertiary institutions. It would be to the benefit of individual scholars, their respective institutions and countries to set up a scheme for more substantial engagement in an Asia-Australia staff exchange program. A useful approach would be to co-teach/research with a colleague at a selected university during, say, a semester instead of the “normal” exchange arrangements in which the two staff members exchange jobs, houses etc. and are left much to their own devices and initiatives during their overseas duties. The proposed scheme would allow for greater professional interaction and collaboration and in some instances may even function as an informal mentor scheme. Currently, as with the student population academic staff members seem to have a strong preference for non-Asian countries and tertiary institutions for overseas engagements.

3. **Internationalisation of the curriculum**

While there is a strong rhetorical emphasis on internationalisation, and indeed Globalisation of the curriculum, in practice the dominant players are the UK, the USA and to a lesser extent some European countries. This approach operates to the detriment of both Australia and the marginalised cultures/countries. Plurality in educational content, processes and development needs to be acknowledged and incorporated in teaching and learning strategies and practices. Overcoming the dichotomy between the Natural and Social Sciences/Humanities characteristic of many Anglo-phone countries would also enhance educational outcomes. While a first and necessary step would be to increase the comparative content of curricula this is not sufficient in itself. There has to be genuine recognition and inclusion of culturally accurate and sensitive materials, demonstrating both knowledge, understanding and acceptance of different forms of perceiving and interacting with the physical and social world. To do this successfully requires not only the appropriate knowledge but also the abandonment of the prevailing overt and covert ethnocentrism evident in every culture’s educational approach. In the Australian context there is some evidence that universities attempt to avoid the homogenising influence of globalisation through the continuation of operating within the confines of an ethnocentric curriculum. But a number of tertiary institutions, including Swinburne university have been active in emphasising, and where possible, introducing the teaching of Asian languages as well as offering cross-cultural awareness training courses to staff and students. For example, Swinburne University has a well established and well regarded Japanese Department.

As both labour, as well as and product and services markets, are no longer exclusively confined to national settings and concerns there is an increasing need to
respond to international requirements in a more substantial manner. However, some universities still persist in operating within the narrow confines of a homogenous curriculum, providing the same range and type of subjects to all students regardless of their cultural backgrounds and needs, rather than adopting an innovative and creative approach in the delivery of higher education programs. A note of caution seems appropriate here. The successful internationalisation of the curriculum beyond an integrated and sensitive approach carries the danger of standardisation and homogenisation of knowledge - usually in favour of and in the direction of the more powerful nations.

4. Marketing education services internationally

This dimension of internationalisation has been the dominant and at times exclusive aspect of Australia’s opening of the education system to overseas students. It has received consistent and vigorous attention from both its critics and its proponents. Currently the overwhelming majority of full fee paying undergraduate and post graduate students in Australia are from the Asia Pacific region which is the recipient of Australia’s higher education industry’s concentrated marketing efforts. The growing economic development and strength of Asian countries, the opening of their economies to international competition and their increasing importance as global players make them both attractive partners as well as targets in the competitive setting of international markets. Australia’s increased recognition and awareness of the opportunities its geographical proximity to Asia offers and its changed and changing economic, social and cultural relationships with various Asian nations have made these countries the logical focus of marketing campaigns for Australia’s educational services. The success in attracting full fee paying Asian students to Australia may of course not be entirely due to superior marketing strategies but may reflect the willingness of these students to purchase an Australian education. This willingness can be due to a number of different but interrelated factors. These include:

- Geographical proximity
- Overall
- Public safety,
- Political stability
- Less expensive than studying in North America or Europe
- Lack of opportunities to study in home countries
- The desire to gain an overseas qualification
- The perception that a Western style education provides a more
- Advantageous entry into the Global Market.

While a number of Australian universities and Swinburne University in particular, are sensitive to the contradictory demands posed by the need to simultaneously provide a global education and a culturally sensitive and specific one, there is some urgency for all universities to re-examine and develop curricula and delivery modes that are sensitive to cultural pluralities. (See note 1).

If Australia is to remain successful in marketing its educational services to the diverse Asian countries it must continue to respond positively to the expressed needs and wishes of its customers and provide the appropriate education programs. Thus, the first principle of internationalising higher education must be a motivation to provide the best, most appropriate, most up-to-date, globally informed and culturally sensitive curriculum in a non-discriminatory setting and employing learning and student centred delivery modes.
SECTION III

Excellence in higher education

Examining the issue of excellence in higher education is intricate and involves addressing a number of issues. Inherent difficulties are compounded by the current preoccupation with a particular economic ideology, variously termed neo-liberal, economic rationalism or more accurately, economic fundamentalism, which has also infected the education sector. This has resulted, among other things, in increasingly commercialising higher education and in re-defining the role and purpose of education.

To facilitate the achievement of excellence in higher education Australian tertiary institutions need to carefully ascertain and assess how it can develop suitable “educational matches” with other countries. Some of the issues and factors influencing educational outcomes and the achievement of excellence are:

- Definitional problems
- Questions about types of knowledge
- The role and purpose of formal education
- Teaching and learning styles
- Tangible and intangible factors
- Student/teacher relationships

Definitional and measurement problems

Concepts such as knowledge, excellence, education and so on pose definitional problems in themselves and some of these will be explored under the appropriate headings.

However, a current very fundamental issue is the frequent conflation of the meaning of education and training. This trend has been encouraged by the demand to demonstrate the immediate usefulness of educational endeavours to commercial interests and needs, including short-term skills need planning. Not only has this led to an over-emphasis on training programs but also to a confusion of education with training. While training, that is, the acquisition of technical competencies and vocational skills is a necessary and vital part of a nation’s overall knowledge base it should not be confused with education. Training requires its own system of skills transmission and funding, as well as proper social recognition and an acknowledgment of its role and its limitations.

To confuse and equate training with education, which provides broad-based, generalist and generic knowledge is to diminish not only what each sector has to offer but in the long term to impoverish individuals as well as societies.

Another difficult issue is the definition and the measurement of excellence. These pose many questions. For example:

- How can excellence be defined?
- Is it an outstanding result in tests or assignments?
- How is this measured? By the level of scores? The comprehensiveness of answers? The preciseness of answers?
- Is there a set time-frame regarding performance assessment? Over what period of time?
- In how many subjects/areas?
- Does it only apply to intellectual work or does it include artistic and practical abilities?
• How is excellence assessed? By its useful to society? By its originality? By its level of difficulty and/or intricacy?
• Who sets the standards and determines the measuring instruments?
• How can cultural specificities find expression in defining and measuring excellence?
• Will a global standard apply? If so, on what basis and within what boundaries is this developed?

These are just a few preliminary questions associated with trying to examine excellence in higher education. They need however an answer of excellence in higher education in order to have any useful meaning.

Questions about types of knowledge—or what is knowledge?

Knowledge is always culturally specific, culturally produced and culturally evaluated. Different cultures prefer and operate with distinct types and forms of knowledge. Knowledge may be about the physical and non-physical worlds and forms of verification of these types of knowledge obviously vary. Knowledge is very different from ideology and ignorance; it is not to be confused with un-evidenced speculations or mere personal opinions and beliefs. Knowledge in the Western liberal tradition has been defined as having the following characteristics:

• Knowledge is always informed by reason.
• Knowledge is structured, that is, it is connecting discrete parts of information into logical systems and structures of knowledge
• Knowledge is comprehensive and broad, not narrowly specialist
• Knowledge is desirable and an end in itself—not just a means to something else.

In some cultures there is a recognition that spiritual, empirical, theoretical and philosophical knowledge are interconnected and are a means of making sense of the world and of human existence. Others again divide knowledge into the broad and competing categories of Science, the Humanities and Social Sciences. In this division scientific knowledge is always identified and evaluated as superior to all other forms of knowledge. This distinction is particularly pronounced the U.K and similar countries. However, a number of countries, Germany for example, do not operate with such almost absolute distinction in the type and value of knowledge. There is not much competition between Arts and Science subjects, both are of equal status. German higher educations as well as German management approaches generally seek to unify science (technical skills and knowledge) and human values (social science and humanities type of knowledge).

The cultural production of knowledge and the culturally specific emphasis placed on different types of knowledge is a particular challenge in international education and needs to be recognised and accommodated.

The role and purpose of formal education

Mass education is a historically relatively recent phenomenon and a feature of modern industrial societies. In these societies education is highly valued, it is compulsory for all members of the society, it is regarded as the key to prosperity, personal development and occupational success. The role of education is increasingly seen as centrally important for societal stability as well as ordered processes of change. Education involves not only the acquisition of knowledge and the learning of skills but also shapes individuals’ beliefs, values and personal identity.

In industrial societies formal education has three major consequences for individuals and society:
• It transmits cultural and social knowledge and creates a commitment to it
• It provides individuals with the cultural capital and the skills and capacities necessary to participate successfully in society
• It allocates persons to positions and roles in society according to educationally defined and perceived abilities.

According to Coady and Miller (1993:41,42) John Newman in Idea of a University outlined the central value of higher education is to produce:

• A capacity to think logically
• The ability to communicate effectively
• The skill to focus on the key points of any issue
• The facility to absorb new knowledge speedily.

These competencies are seen as beneficial for the individual, profitable for society and useful for the economic system. This is however a very Western and culture specific perspective about the role and function of formal education. Other cultural groups and nation-states have very successfully operated with quite different assumptions, definitions and practices over long periods of time.

Given that education is primarily geared to integrating individuals into their society it requires particular attention in international educational programs. Without due care global education may undermine culturally specific traditions, skills and practices and result in the McDonaldisation of education. That is, attitudes, behaviour patterns and consumption trends become globally standardised and tend to reflect those of the dominant economic players.

**Teaching and learning styles**

A major educational issue are how to best transmit knowledge and how to accommodate different learning styles. While this is an issue within many societies due to gender, class, age and other differences among learners and teachers, it is a particularly acute problem in inter-cultural education settings.

Educational achievements depend very significantly on being able to access, absorb and digest material and present assignments in the required format and style. This provides challenges both for academics who are used to and comfortable with one mode of delivery and for students who are trained and accustomed to their own particular learning and study style. Any set of strategies that are developed for internationalising Australian universities would have to be flexible and willing to develop specific strategies for particular groups of international students.

While international students will also have to exhibit a degree of flexibility in regard to preferred learning styles it is the Australian teaching staff that will also benefit from changing their teaching practices to accommodate the varying needs of overseas students.

Modes of delivery may still incorporate the established lecture/tutorial format but include the use of video tapes of lectures so that students can listen and access information at their own pace and repeatedly. Some students benefit from the provision of more printed materials. Learning guides, detailed lecture and tutorial materials etc could be provided in print form. Television delivery, interactive media and access to teachers via e-mail are other acceptable options of delivery.

For many overseas students traditional tutorial sessions do not work well. The requirement to be overtly competitive, to be subject to losing face, to seek help openly and to question the tutors statements in class are culturally unacceptable. Some of these issues can be ameliorated
by using group teaching methods of various kinds. This may include syndicate formation and syndicate assignments as well as peer assessment of each others work.

Overall, a serious commitment to changing teaching delivery modes to accommodate cultural differences in learning styles needs to be based on a real commitment and motivation to transmit knowledge in the most effective way possible and preceded by appropriate and comprehensive cultural awareness training and practice. The latter should, wherever possible, include at least a one semester overseas placement.

To achieve greater cultural awareness and appreciation among Australian staff and students overseas placement for teaching, research and study should become an integral and expected part of professional practice and higher education studies.

Tangible and intangible factors

Tangible factors that impinge on students ability to perform to their maximum capacity include not only the provision of counselling services, ongoing language assistance, financial assistance of various kinds, accommodation, the physical location and condition of university buildings, class rooms and laboratories, library holdings and access, photocopying facilities at affordable rates and ready access to computers, the internet and sporting and recreational facilities. Last, but not least there should be provision for culturally acceptable food and the provision of a prayer room when necessary.

Other tangible services include those provided by the Student Union for the general student population and those it tailors to the needs of overseas students. For example, the student union at the Swinburne University Lilydale campus operates a Mentor Scheme, provides how to study sessions as well as time and financial management classes.

Intangible factors include the student’s actual motivation and ability to learn, the attitude of not only academic staff but also of administrative and general staff. Particular care should be taken to make provision for religious based dietary and prayer needs, such as for example, lower levels of energy during the month of Ramadan. A usually unacknowledged factor is the university’s motivation for seeking overseas students. While for most universities in Australia overseas students are now financial necessity if monetary consideration are the prime motive there is likely to be less interest and emphasis on students needs both as learners and as human beings. The increasing commercialisation affects both local and overseas students there is however to my mind a particular responsibility of care for international students not only because many of them make a substantial financial contribution to this country but because they have chosen to study at our university, they are our students—not primarily clients, customers or consumers of our education services. They are also potential ambassadors for Australia on their return home and/or in the countries of their professional activities. It may also be well to remember that many of our overseas students are the potential political, business and intellectual leaders of the future.

CONCLUSION

The internationalisation of higher education presents both the receiving country and the overseas students with particular issues and problems ranging from definitional and measurement factors to the question of how to reconcile the contradictory demands of universal values and standardised global education with the religious and cultural specificities of a variety of nationalities and ethnicities. It needs to take note of and make provision for not only of the educational needs of overseas students but also of their social requirements and their needs as human beings. Participants in international/global educational arena need to be
able to understand cope and appreciate the vital importance of not only the concept of otherness but of being the “other”.

Excellence in higher education is a very difficult and challenging issue both conceptually and in practice and is also culturally specific in application and expectation.

Despite some of the real problems posed both by the internationalisation of education services and the desire and striving for excellence in higher education Australia, Australian universities and Australian students will benefit at least as much as overseas students who select to study here.

To achieve this does require however a serious commitment to providing first class educational facilities, dedicated staff at the cutting edge of their professional knowledge and expertise, demonstrating cultural diversity competence and the willingness and ability to change if Australia is to cope with and remain successful in the complex, changing and challenging international and global environment.

**REFERENCES**


Harvard Business School Press, USA

DEET, National Report on Australia’s Higher Education Sector, AGPS, Canberra


Robertson, R. 91992) Globalization, SAGE, London


Soros, G. (200) Open Society, Public Affairs, USA