Reflecting on the Value of Resources for Internationalising the Curriculum: Exploring Academic Perspectives

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Abstract

Increased interest in internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC) has led to the development of a range of resources designed to support staff in translating theory into practice. Studies on how such resources are actually used and impact on academic practice are scarce. This paper aims to fill the gap by reporting on a cross-institutional study of academics' perceptions of the value of such resources, specifically two examples designed in-house in two UK universities. The study adopted a qualitative approach, conducting 18 semi-structured interviews with academics in two universities and analysing 20 scripts from participants on a postgraduate programme in learning and teaching in higher education in a third. It explores how such resources can be used to inform individual approaches to IoC and what their value might be for wider curriculum development. Results show that reflective engagement with the resources can lead academics to analyse and benchmark their own practice and critique entire programmes but that they still struggle with translating pedagogical concepts into practical innovations. Critical comments included objections to generic resources that are too abstract and too far removed from practice in the subject disciplines. Participants also voiced concerns about time pressures and suspicions that they might be used by senior management to exert unwelcome control over academic staff on the ground. The paper suggests that university policy makers need to adapt IoC resources to their institutional context and provide clear guidance on how to use them. Linking them to other staff development opportunities could ensure maximum benefits.

Introduction

Internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC) is an essential element of tertiary education in the twenty-first century, globalised world, evidenced by the regularity of conferences exploring the topic, institutional policies and publications in academic journals. Yet the translation from theory into practice, from conference to classroom, seems still to be problematic. Over the years much time and effort has been spent on the production of guidelines and resources to enable institutions and practitioners to deliver an internationalised curriculum, with some valuable results. The literature presents many examples of resources at national and international level (Jones and Killick, 2007; Leask and Bridge, 2013; Leask, 2015) that are aimed at assisting academics in developing a curriculum that improves their students' international and intercultural awareness. In addition to its comprehensive resource banks (HEA, 2009-2011) the Higher Education Academy has produced a framework for internationalising the curriculum that provides guidance and support for the sector (HEA, 2014).

Despite this wealth of material, relatively little is known about how resources that aid in the delivery of the curriculum, internationalised or other, are perceived and used. Within the context of enquiry into practice, Lyons, Halton and Freidus (2012) found that tools that promote reflection can be considered transformative and lead to real improvements in the classroom. On the other hand there is some evidence that practitioners resist generic development activities because they do not have sufficient time or would prefer to concentrate on discipline-specific practice (Houghton, 2015). Within the context of internationalisation it would appear that the 'gap between the announcement of loudly trumpeted schemes and actual change in education practice' (Reid, Stadler, Spencer-Oatey, and Ewington, 2010, 6) has yet to be closed. Academics still seem to struggle with the call for an internationalised curriculum, unsure how best to address this 'new frontier' (Ryan, 2012, 3) within their own university, their subject discipline and their daily practice.

This paper aims to contribute to the growing, critical discourse on the practice of internationalising the curriculum. It focuses on academics' perceptions of the value of resources that were specifically designed to assist them in the process of internationalisation. It seeks to answer two key questions:

(1) How can such resources be used to inform individual approaches to embedding internationalisation?

(2) What is their value for wider curriculum development?

Working on the premise that tools for internationalising the curriculum have the potential to impact upon professional practice and promote reflection in a variety of institutional contexts, the authors present cross-institutional findings.

Implementing an internationalised curriculum

The discourse about IoC frequently begins with disagreements as to terminology and scope. While many attempts at definitions have been made (for example Caruana and Hanstock, 2008; Clifford, Henderson and Montgomery, 2013; De Wit and Beelen, 2013; Hyland, Trahar, Anderson and Dickens, 2008), it remains a contested notion which can be perceived as 'elusive and unsatisfactory' by academic staff (Turner and Robson, 2007, 4). Whitsed and Green (2013, 1) point out that this phenomenon of frequent renaming of commonly used terms 'highlights a deep unease among scholars'. Leask's definition is amongst the most cited. 'Internationalisation of the curriculum is the incorporation of international, intercultural, and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of a program of study (Leask, 2015, 9).

Any activities to embed internationalisation rely on the successful interplay of people, organisation and the curriculum, as recognised in the Framework for Internationalising Higher Education (HEA, 2014). It requires a change at programme level in order to impact on the student experience and bring an intercultural experience into the classroom (Foster and Anderson, 2015). Recognising the importance of practical support for staff, Grimwood, Dunford, Teran and Muir (2015) recommend the development of an intercultural engagement toolkit for use at programme and individual level.

As Dunne (2011) and others (Bell, 2004; Turner and Robson, 2007; Friesen, 2012) point out, the genuine commitment of its staff to curricular change is essential if a university's strategic internationalisation ambitions are to be achieved. Green and Schoenberg (2006) and Sanderson (2011) emphasise the role of academics as instruments of institutional change. Given their importance they can have a positive

influence as 'primary agents in the internationalization process' (Friesen, 2012, 2) or they can inhibit it as 'fence-sitters or sceptics' (Green and Mertova, 2014, 670). Trahar et al (2016) refer to academics as a 'wicked problem' because of their often reported resistance to IoC.

While it may be recognised that academics play a crucial role in making internationalisation a reality, they often do not feel supported or prepared for implementing IoC (Leask and Belen, 2009). Caruana's research (2010) discovered that they lack confidence in their own ability to put their institutions' international strategies into practice. Leask and Carroll (2011, 656) suggest that uncertainty might be one of the reasons why academics continue to use 'largely ineffective strategies' in a multicultural classroom. In a similar vein, the findings of large-scale international studies such as the 3rd Global Survey of the International Association of Universities reveal that staff have limited experience and expertise in developing an internationalised curriculum and need tailor-made support to build up their knowledge and readiness (Egron-Polak and Hudson, 2010; Green and Whitsed, 2012).

Knight, Tait and Yorke (2006) recommend tools as instrumental to educational professional development (EPD), enabling an individual to make sense of aspects of their practice. They argue that professional learning is socially situated rather than achieved through formal training methods and hold successful EPD to be the marriage of personal understanding and a systematic approach to exploration of practice. Within the context of a scholarly approach to practice, Andresen (2000) argues for the scholarly teacher to be one who knows their own teaching well and takes a critical stance towards it at all times. That knowledge translates into benefits not just for their own development but for the community they live and work within.

The means through which the scholarly teacher acquires this knowledge and understanding can be developed in part through reflection, a process that lies at the heart of continuing professional development (Clegg, 2000; Lyons, 2010; HEA, 2011). While terms to describe reflection may vary (reflective enquiry, reflective practice, critical reflection), a unifying feature is the acknowledgement that it is a process of exploring, interpreting and analysing experiences in order to develop a fuller understanding of good practice. Coupled with critical thought, reflection becomes a

powerful means of transforming an individual's approach to designing and delivering curricula (Brookfield, 2010). Cranton and King (2003), who describe transformative learning as the opportunity to explore '….values, beliefs and assumptions about teaching and their ways of seeing the world' (33), also call for professional development to have 'activities that foster content, process and premise reflection' (34).

If one accepts the premise that academics need resources to help transform their teaching to deliver an internationalised curriculum, one way could be to engage in a conscious activity of reflection through the use of resources that provide structured support. They can potentially enable an individual to problem-solve and relate practice to theory, leading to positive thoughts about one's capabilities and acting as a catalyst for improvement and quality assurance.

The Study

The study set out to explore academics' perceptions of the value of resources for IoC, in particular how they can enhance academic practice through reflection. Three groups of academics in three different institutions were asked to assess their usefulness for their own practice. In universities 1 and 2 they were invited to comment on university 1's 10 'Principles of an Internationalised Curriculum' and a reflective audit tool which aims to assist programme teams in reviewing their portfolio for the provision of an internationalised curriculum, identify potential gaps in their current approach, build on existing good practice and identify areas for improvement. The 'Principles' are based on the outcomes of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council National Teaching Fellowship on IoC (Leask, 2012) and materials developed by Griffith University (Barker, 2011) They identify the essential features of an 'ideal' internationalised curriculum to set an explicit benchmark for good practice. They are designed to be generic so that they can be used in any subject and institutional context.

Principles of an internationalised curriculum

Audit tool

In university 3, staff used an in- house toolkit as part of their assessment for a PgCert programme in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. It enables them to diagnose and evaluate their teaching practice, take a considered look at their curriculum and reflect on the learning environments they provide. The toolkit can be mapped to the Higher Education Academy's Framework for Internationalising Higher

Education (HEA, 2014) with its emphasis on process and a holistic approach to internationalisation.

Curriculum Design Toolkit

Internationalisation strand

Both sets of resources are designed for internal use to support institutional strategy and policy regarding IoC.

Data Collection

A purposeful sampling procedure was used to select participants (Collingridge and Gannt, 2008). The participants in the study who came from Universities 1 and 3 were new lecturers, registered on postgraduate programmes (PgCert) in learning and teaching in Higher Education. The remaining participants in University 2 were experienced academics with more than five years' experience, from disciplines that have addressed internationalisation in their teaching for many years, including Marketing, Tourism and Hospitality.

The study adopted a qualitative approach, conducting 18 semi-structured interviews in universities 1 (11 interviewees) and 2 (7 interviewees) and analysing 20 anonymised scripts in University 3. During the face to face interviews, participants were asked to comment on the in-house materials from university 1, generating rich data that ensured the depth of the enquiry (Golafshani, 2003). Researchers took a semi-structured and collaborative approach to interviewing (Flick, 2014) which allowed them to be guided by their interviewees' responses. Answers of particular interest were followed up with further questions to gain an in-depth perspective. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data from the third university was in the form of written commentary. As part of formal assessment for their PgCert, participants carried out a diagnosis of their practice, using the in-house curriculum design toolkit, then wrote a 2,000 word critical reflection of their practice along with an analytical discussion concerning curriculum design.

All three institutions complied with ethics protocol for their research. After receiving ethics clearance to collect data researchers in two of the universities contacted potential participants and invited them to participate. The response rate for university 1 was 30%; in university 2 it was 70%.

The research in University 3 arose from ongoing enquiry into practice and as such adhered to internal regulations guaranteeing confidentiality in the event of public dissemination of data. Participants were invited to withdraw consent for their data to be used in the study, but no objections were made.

Data Analysis

Content analysis followed by thematic sampling was conducted on the data from the two sets of interviews and the written scripts (Ortlipp, 2008). Participant perspectives emerged through the interviews carried out in Universities 1 and 2 and the written reflections from University 3.These were triangulated with the researcher perspective and findings from the literature review. This approach provided an opportunity to look at the experience from different angles, both researcher and participant-led (Flick, 2014). Using qualitative, thematic analysis broad themes were established first, relating to the practicalities and implications of IoC. They consisted of the perceived tension between generic and subject-specific resources and general reflections on the role of the academic in any curriculum design process. More specific themes then emerged as each researcher read through and analysed in detail the transcripts of the interviews and the written commentaries. In a second step researchers compared their individually drawn themes with each other as well as with the literature findings to further sharpen the selection of themes for presentation in this paper. Eventually, a coherent set of themes was achieved as follows: reflection on individual practice; impact on curriculum development and challenges and potential resistance to change.

Findings and Discussion

Reflection on individual practice

The interviews revealed genuine interest in the tools presented to the participants. 90% of respondents appreciated them as a starting point for discussion and reflection. Positive comments related to their simplicity and usefulness as an endorsement and validation of one's own practice. Participants welcomed the chance to benchmark their own teaching against external standards:

'They made me think about aspects that I am currently involved in and therefore it was quite…what's the word? I don't know, positive, it was quite affirming shall we say that where I'm taking a particular approach this does seem to be within the

bounds of these particular principles. As well as suggesting other ways of working.' (Interview University 2)

It was clear from the comments that those participants who were able to see the tools as an opportunity for reflection on different aspects of the curriculum development process gained most from the exercise, as it led them to analyse their own practice rather than focus on the generic value of the resource. This approach is very often the starting point for professional learning that leads to change (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2015). Novice lecturers in particular appreciated the support such resources could provide. They saw them as crucial for developing the specific skills set required for working successfully in the internationalised classroom (Teekens, 2003).

The format of the IoC resource was considered important. The 'Principles' were praised for their simplicity and accessibility. Participants appeared to appreciate the objectivity the exercise afforded and the space to consider new and different aspects of internationalisation within their practice before implementing change.

'But I liked the idea that it would make me think about them (principles), it would give me a framework to think about and decide whether or not it was relevant or whether it wasn't relevant and then think, well I could incorporate that'. (Interview, University 2)

The ability to use the resource to benchmark one's own practice was acknowledged and on occasion resulted in specific action:

'Through this exercise, I was able to identify several aspects of my practice that were somehow incomplete when mirrored to the practices identified by the curriculum toolkit strands. As a result, an action plan has been devised to ensure these underdeveloped areas are tackled and improved.' (Reflective commentary, University 3)

Not everyone found the process comfortable as one reflective commentary from University 3 reveals. 'Initially I was resistant to the idea that I needed to improve on this aspect'. However, it led to the majority of respondents gaining a deeper awareness

of their own practice. It helped them understand where they were effective and where they could improve. Such an approach endorses reflection as an authentic method of constructing knowledge and improving practice (Clegg, 2000).

Impact on curriculum development

The toolkits demonstrated their ability to take respondents beyond a level of personal knowledge and understanding towards a wider context and consideration of the overall purpose of education. Kreber (2004) identifies a scholarship of teaching model that addresses three domains of teaching knowledge: instructional, pedagogical and curricular, all of which were evidenced by participants in the study.

Individuals appreciated the tools as benchmark statements, based on a body of knowledge that they would be hard-pressed to acquire themselves:

> '...it's very much a periphery priority (for me). So it does bring it into the main…so having it structured in such a way and giving you some ideas on how you might be able to incorporate a more international curriculum is very helpful for me.'(Interview, University 1)

Furthermore they saw the value of the resources as means of monitoring and evaluating entire programmes. It was felt that the use of tools could 'improve consistency across the board' (Interview, University 2) and lead to useful discussions of the teaching quality amongst members of programme teams.

The written reflections in particular allowed staff to evaluate and critique the curriculum itself, appreciating both positive and negative aspects. They were able to use narrative to bring together knowledge with the personal, the social and the cultural and afford 'a subtle perspective on being an academic' (Jones, 2011, 116).

> 'From my observations, I think that apart from this provision for adaptability for summative and formative tasks, the curriculum appears restricted in terms of providing adequate cross-cultural dimensions… apart from the issue of adaptability, the curriculum appears more westernised.'(Reflective commentary, University 3)

This is perhaps one of the most challenging of all uses of the resources, one where the practitioner is engaging with the curriculum with a view to developing and bringing about fundamental change in order to make it fit for purpose (Welikala, 2011). This then becomes a means of exploring and engaging with the literature on internationalisation itself, thereby answering the call for staff to be given 'opportunities to engage in pedagogical content research' (Luedekke, 2003, 224).

Challenges and potential resistance to change

While engagement with the tools led participants to a process of positive and productive reflection on their own practice, it also produced a few critical comments. These focused on three areas of concern relating to the format of the tools, their functionality in daily academic practice and the danger of them being used as an instrument of managerial control.

Approximately 20% of the respondents disliked the 'formulaic structure' of the principles, objecting to 'structured models' and 'a mechanical approach' that simplified the wide variety of potential learning and teaching approaches in any given field. Just over a quarter felt that the tools contained too much pedagogical theory rather than actual examples of real-life practice in different disciplines. All participants expressed a sense of loyalty to their subject-specific communities and the relevant professional bodies that approve and validate their degrees. In their view any priorities stipulated by the latter mattered more than findings from generic pedagogic research.

> 'It's the balance or the conflict with other criteria that you have to get into your modules as well, which is where the difficulty comes because again I do find it…I don't want to say less important, but I do find that in terms of professional body literature and all their very strict guidelines, that this (tool) would come second place to that.' (Interview, University 1)

Such an approach is perhaps not surprising and points to a missing link between generic research literature on innovating teaching practices and the priorities for academics on the ground (Hemer, 2014; Quinn 2012). Hemer refers to a 'level of disconnect' (493)

because universities' reward structures still prioritise subject specific research output over engagement with innovations in learning and teaching.

Concerns about finding time to use any tool for reflecting on teaching practice figured quite prominently, suggesting that academics consider it a luxury to reflect on new ideas because they are so preoccupied with essential activities demanded by students and management (Houghton, Ruutz, Green and Hibbins, 2015). 50% of the sample felt that colleagues are already very busy teaching and assessing large classes and keeping up to date with the research in their fields so that spending time applying a new tool 'would be immensely elaborate and tedious, annoying, frustrating'
(Interview, University 2).

Such comments reveal an underlying resistance to any kind of academic development activities. Quinn (2012) links it to a fear of losing autonomy and intellectual freedom which can only be overcome if activities are practical enough to help staff in addressing the challenges of their daily teaching practice.

A small number of interviewees raised concerns about a hidden purpose for the toolkit. They were unsure whether it was yet another initiative by senior university management wanting to exert more control over their staff or a genuine offer of support. When discussing the value of the resources just under 20% expressed suspicions as to their real intention and referred to their worries about a constantly changing university agenda which is often communicated to the teaching staff in the shape of new central strategies and initiatives. One individual was concerned that 'it becomes nearly a policing type of exercise' (Interview, University 1). Another objected to being told the obvious: '…common sense would tell you to do it anyway… there is a lot of stuff there that I am thinking: well, I do that anyway.' (Interview, University 1)

Such comments about the value of the resources revealed a certain scepticism of a managerialist culture in higher education, which demands that academics align their work to corporate goals (Collyer, 2015; Winter, 2009). The participants in this research did not occupy managerial positions. They represented the majority of 'managed academics' Winter refers to in his examination of academic identity. It would seem that if opportunities for academic development such as engagement with resources that are

meant to be supportive are misunderstood as an instrument of unwelcome control, their effectiveness is minimised.

Conclusions and recommendations

The study reported on here set out to answer two important questions related to internationalisation of the curriculum, one concerning individual practice, one concerning wider issues of curriculum development. As such, it helps to shed light on the relationship between central university resources for learning and teaching and daily academic practice in the classroom. In terms of the first of the questions (their value for individual practice), it is clear that academics still struggle with translating pedagogical concepts into practical innovations for their students but that the process of implementing change can be alleviated through the support provided by resources and frameworks. They can be a force for good, leading to enhanced practice and confidence in one's judgment.

In terms of the second question (wider curriculum development), resources such as the ones presented in this study have an additional value in their ability to engender change through reflection, critical analysis and positioning of the self within a wider perspective. They enable the practitioner to look outwards as well as inwards and understand more fully how their practice contributes to a fuller debate about developing new curricula, meeting pedagogical standards and implementing policy.

How such reflection impacts upon real-life practice remains to be seen. A limitation of this study is that participants had not yet used the resources in their own teaching. Further research would need to be carried out to review with the academics surveyed whether they had actually changed their practice in any way since they took part in this study.

The real proof of the tools' usefulness would obviously lie in part in the response of the students who are taught by the academics who used them in their teaching. Exploring their reaction would be part of a separate study which colleagues may wish to consider but what has been learnt from this current study is that resources can be the first step on the journey to bridge the gap between theory and practice. They can assist practitioners

in their professional development but care has to be taken that they are not misunderstood as unwelcome interference.

Based on the results of this study several recommendations can be made. University policy makers and a wider academic body need to consider that resources for IoC must fit the institutional context, in order to address negative perceptions. Institutions need to take care to introduce them carefully, with clear signposting as to how they may help achieve an internationalised curriculum, and foster a sense of ownership. Resources for academic development should be accompanied by clear guidance on how to use them and linked to other staff development opportunities to ensure maximum benefits. The views expressed in this study suggest that it would make sense to consider adjustments to institutional work load models to give staff the necessary time to engage with new tools. If universities are genuinely interested in embedding an internationalised curriculum within the institution they need to translate their often well-publicised ambitions into practical support.

At sector level, resources for IoC can play a role in linking national initiatives such as the HEA's Framework for Internationalising Higher Education (HEA, 2014) and the UK Professional Standards Framework (HEA, 2011) to the realities of daily teaching. They can assist the individual in understanding how their practice meets standards and consider how to develop it further. The Teaching Excellence Framework will no doubt make the value of such resources even greater.

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