





Internationalisation of the curriculum



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Theme: Pedagogic development

Graduate School organised an “internationalisation café” during the Global Week that connects to the LU jubilee events. Our friends at External Relations had invited Jos Beelen to talk about internationalisation of the curriculum, and how many different things that can actually mean.

We then picked up the baton, and some 30 guests – most international – visited our little café to discuss, workshop-style, a range of challenges and opportunities, and to take inventory of many of the great ideas out there.

The formation of Graduate School was a result of long discussions and reflections about how the Faculty of Social Sciences could develop and run its own international programs. The topic of internationalisation is by no means a new one, and it continues to feed our thinking at every level – in the classroom, in the administration, and in our interaction with each other outside the classroom. It is sometimes easy to forget that this was one of the main missions of Graduate School at the beginning, and during this year when we turn 10, it seems quite relevant to think back on this theme, and reflect on what we have achieved and where we wish to go in the next years. Global Week gave us some impetus to start these wheels churning.

Jos Beelen's talk

Jos Beelen is one of the leading figures in Europe when it comes to the topic of internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC). In short, curriculum can be understood in the formal sense, but also in the informal sense – the surrounding structures, department, university, larger community - as well as in the hidden sense – all the unwritten rules and norms. This is a complex term, and curious readers are urged to look more closely at some of the references provided at the end of this piece.



Jos Beelen
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When discussing IoC, many focus on mobility, offering courses in English, and hiring international staff. These can be seen as tools for internationalisation, but are not the ends, and they do not necessarily lead to internationalisation. We can further break down IoC into mobility and internationalisation at home. In reality, most students are not mobile in the formal sense, and many programs that offer mobility neither require this nor integrate this experience back into the curriculum. Therefore, the largest area of potential IoC is “internationalisation at home.” Beelen defines this as “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments.” The key words here are *purposeful* and *all*, meaning that there is a larger and conscious intention with the international aspects, and that all students within a certain curriculum are included.

There are no shortcuts or checklists to how this is achieved. Some of the main challenges that Beelen identifies are lack of resources as well as lack of knowledge and training among academic staff in this field. He suggests a reflection and clarification of the vision, bringing the stakeholders together, providing structured professional development, and engaging academics in the discussion as the next steps. We look forward to the possibility of rekindling this discussion!

The Internationalisation Café

During Global Week, Graduate School was invited to organise an event around the theme of “internationalisation of the classroom.” Thirty participants from partner universities – mostly international coordinators, but also some teachers and a student representative – attended and shared their experiences on the following five topics:

- Marketing, recruitment, admissions (nominations)
- Soft landing: Practical aspects (housing, bank), welcoming, introductions
- Internationalisation in the classroom
- “Homemaking” for international students and programs
- Formalising the internationalisation of the curriculum

The workshop was organised using a *dialogue café* format whereby participants could freely choose which table they wished to attend. There were four 15 minute passes for discussions, and participants could either remain at their table or move to another one to discuss another topic. There was a host at each table taking notes on the inventory of initiatives/activities, the main challenges, and the best practices. At the end, each host made a short presentation to share with all participants the main discussions at their table.

Café cookies

The following is an overview of the finding at each table, summarising the main challenges and best practices.

Table 1: Marketing, recruitment, admissions (nominations)

Here, participants examined issues surrounding marketing, recruitment, and admission, identifying commonalities as well as differences in both purpose and practice of recruiting and admitting international students. The purpose of recruiting international students varied from practical to aspirational, with some universities admitting international students to increase revenue, meet the need of national quotas, or to fill vacant places in underproducing programmes, while others sought to improve student body diversity, bring international perspectives home to local students, or bolster the prospects of building international research teams by admitting international bachelor and master students. Post-matriculation student retention challenges as well as issues regarding admission of refugee and undocumented students were also discussed in addition to the main topics.



Challenges

- EU universities that have introduced tuition fees have noticed a negative effect on the diversity of applicants.
- Increasing much needed revenue from international students while still maintaining academic standards is a challenge.
- Universities open to admitting refugees often experience difficulty in verifying degrees and merits and have also reported a disparity between applicant’s skills in academic writing and university requirements in language and writing skills.
- Different expectations for academic structure can lead to disappointment or confusion for international students.
- Tuition fees can be a deterrent for luring bachelor level exchange students back to return for master level studies.
- Retention difficulties with students who leave on exchange and don’t return to complete the programme cause a “brain drain.”
- Differences in international grading systems create challenges in fairly assessing and admitting applicants.

Best Practices

- Potential candidates for admission are invited to an interview in the final round of the selection process.
- Using video interviews as part of the application process provides a more complete profile of the applicant and indicates which applicants are truly committed to applying to your university.
- When references are used, actively contact the referees named and inquire about the applicant.
- In marketing, purposefully select target market countries and tailor marketing content to those markets.
- Summer mini-courses for international students can increase international student body while attracting some students who might not be able to participate in a full programme or can provide a taste of the student experience, creating potential interest in applying for full time studies.
- Universities that have a high number of international students can adjust their academic calendar to accommodate international students. For example, a university with many American exchange students may want to adjust their academic calendar for exchange students around the Christmas holiday so that students can travel home for the holiday.
- Create placement tests for refugee students to determine their skill level in a field of study.
- Fees for free-mover exchanges keep international participation high while adding to revenue.
- Create cooperations with private organisations that can help international students improve their language skills and connect with universities to which student may apply later.
- Institute a refugee fund to collect donations to provide scholarships for refugee students.

Table 2: Soft landing: Practical aspects (housing, bank), welcoming, introductions



Participants shared and discussed the various types of support services they currently offer at their respective institutions and, in so doing, tried to identify some of the most prominent challenges, as well as pinpoint several best practices.

Challenges

- Implementing/encouraging collaboration between national and international students, in order to mutually benefit both student groups.
- Distribution of information; specifically, successfully providing information surrounding the “formal”, “informal” and “hidden” components of the curriculum.

Best Practices

- Collaboration between national and international students: providing initiatives for national students in order to encourage an involvement with newly arrived international students (i.e. additional financial initiative for renting out their flats to incoming students); shared accommodation between national and international students; forming buddy/mentor system by coupling national students who have previously been abroad with newly arrived international students
- Information: providing clear and concise information that is well proportioned out over time so as not to overwhelm or be overlooked by students; providing information and support that is available and VISIBLE throughout the entire exchange/program; offering clear instructions/policies surrounding the adding/dropping of courses and other formal aspects of the curriculum
- Offering added support services, i.e. access to accommodation agencies/databases; presence of relevant businesses-bank, transportation, home supply, etc.-at arrival in order to help students through these processes.

Table 3: Internationalisation in the classroom



At this table participants discussed how “hands-on” approaches such as incorporating personal experiences of the students into the classroom experience, language, as well as integrating the surrounding international research environment can contribute to the internationalisation of the classroom.

Challenges

- Not all teachers want to teach in English, and in order to have international students it is of course necessary to have a sufficient supply of courses in English.
- A perceived fear of lower quality in teaching – how to attract good international students?
- Different academic cultures, for example, when it comes to how to behave in the classroom, academic honesty and how to work in groups, which is important to introduce to international students.
- An implication of having few courses in English is that they tend to be filled up by international students, which means that local and international students take more or less separate courses – apparently a negative thing for integrating international and local students and for internationalisation in the classroom in a “natural way”.
- Another challenge is to better make use of local students coming back from an international exchange.
- The lack of resources, time as well as money, was seen as an important challenge in order to work with internationalisation in the classroom, such as developing courses in English.
- Teachers have very different backgrounds and work in different ways – flexibility was mentioned as a positive thing, but the diverse backgrounds and approaches to internationalisation at the individual level also makes it difficult to formulate a coherent approach.

Best practices

- Flexibility – to some extent – was regarded as important in this work, however, some also argued that at least some guidelines for teachers involved would be a good thing.
- Crash courses for incoming international students, one or a few weeks prior to the actual courses, in order to have all students on somewhat the same level when the courses start. An example was non-European law students coming to the UK: here introduction to European law was necessary in order for them to be able to follow the courses. It was emphasised that some subjects by their nature is more prone to “internationalisation”.
- Some mentioned the importance of mixing local and international students in classes as well as group work, as a “natural” way of internationalisation in the classroom.
- Having student mentors for international students was also a positive experience.
- “Hands-on experience” can be a good way to integrate international students, with examples from diverse topics such as design and medicine.
- Making sure to mix students (international and local) in group assignments, as well as using the fact that there are students from different places in a class when discussing different topics, can contribute to internationalisation in the classroom.
- Some subjects per definition are more international, such as for example international business, which makes it easier to have an international perspective in teaching.
- An international research environment was also seen as positive for internationalisation, for example by making it easier to use English when teaching – many had experiences of teachers being reluctant to have courses in English.

Table 4: “Homemaking” for international students and programs



Most universities/departments/programmes seem to have central-level activities during the initial welcoming period when international students arrive (mentioned also at other tables). Some programs, faculties and departments continue with social activities, mentorship programs and other strategies make international students feel more integrated and secure throughout the programmes, but most seem to focus primarily on the initial welcoming period.

Challenges

- Supporting students in the “informal” curriculum are related to the diversity of the student body (academic background, knowledge, skills, culture, language, etc)
- Tendency for students to stick to their own kind throughout the programs
- Difficulty in attracting students to events, information overload, and lack of interest on the part of local students to integrate the international students.
- While some participants mentioned the importance of including students (student associations or informal groups of students) in arranging and taking charge of social activities, it was also mentioned that this was often difficult as there is such a high turnaround and lack of knowledge transfer between the batches

Best practices

- Ongoing buddy/mentor system: One way to incentivise the senior students was to develop mentoring into a leadership opportunity whereby they were able to provide a set number of hours (in this case 20) during a period, and would be able to include this position on their CV.
- Language café, where departments host events allowing students to practice or speak various languages at different tables in a café setting.
- Physical space for students to meet, socialise and use during evenings and even weekends.
- Building bridges to the local community through offering free language classes and local internships.
- Creating possibilities for students to build linkages to the local labour market. One example was the introduction of a mandatory language requirement to ensure that students would be able to stay on after their studies and obtain work in their field.
- Job fairs that allow international students to meet local companies and organisations.

Table 5: Formalising the internationalisation of the curriculum



At this table participants discussed the universities’ regulatory documents, such as strategic plans etc, as well as other formal documents (syllabi, diploma, exchange agreements).

Challenges

- How to put the strategic documents into practice and also who can act on the strategic documents.
- Administrators can sometimes feel they have their hands tied since they are not in a decision making position.
- Need to broaden the idea of internationalisation, since it often stays at the level of providing more courses in English and offering courses in English language to members of staff.
- The perspective of internationalisation comes in much too late in the process of changing for example a programme.
- The fear of an even heavier workload was discussed. If a teacher would like to implement the perspective of internationalisation in a course it might require reworking the syllabus and schedule as well as reading in on new literature. This kind of developing work takes both time and effort. More resources are needed when (re-)creating courses and programmes in order to fully integrate the perspective of internationalisation.
- On the student side one challenge seems to be integration of international experience in the study programme. Although several participants had examples of how they try to do this, it seems the full value of an international experience is evident to the students only after the programme is finished. Perhaps that amount of time is needed to be able to fully reflect on the experience?
- The political situation in the world today (Brexit, Donald Trump as the American president, war in Syria) was also brought up as a challenge to internationalisation.
- Erasmus is a big contribution to internationalisation but is described in both positive and negative terms. The bureaucracy around it is a negative but the requirement of a report after the exchange is considered a positive.

Best Practices

Participants discussed several good ideas in progress at different departments and/or already part of the routine. Generally, the activities were related to students or staff actually going abroad – but not all of them. From these examples it is clear that there are ways to do internationalisation at home. The activities mentioned could be divided into activities for students and activities for teaching staff.

Some examples of student related activities were

- Having one year abroad as part of all programmes
- A mandatory, interactive course for all outgoing students
- An electronic portfolio for students containing their international experience
- Making international experience visible in the diploma supplement
- Reflection assignment and "welcome home meeting" for students coming back from exchange or internship abroad
- Kent University has a "Global Passport" – a fake passport in which the student gets a stamp for participating in an international activity
- Rewarding ECTS credits for participation in international activities on campus
- Double degree programmes with universities abroad

Examples of formalised activities related to staff were

- Exchange for staff
- Reflection assignment for staff coming back from exchange
- Including internationalisation in quality assurance of new programmes or courses, or similar
- Having requirement of motivation of how a new course takes internationalisation into consideration
- International research teams

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Additional reading

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