Internationalisation of undergraduate curricula: The gap between ideas and practice in Japan

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The concept of the internationalisation of university curricula is being developed with more complex and critical views emphasising the cultural and social aspects of globalisation as well as its economic and political aspects. Putting these ideas into practice however, is a challenge to institutions, since that requires fundamental educational change. This study examines the internationalisation of undergraduate curricula from the viewpoint of institution-wide initiatives drawing on case studies of national and private universities in Japan that are active in this process. Particular attention will be paid to an exploration of the potential gap between the ideas and the practice, and the reasons behind the gap.

Keywords: globalisation; internationalisation; undergraduate curriculum; Japan; gap

Introduction

The internationalisation of curricula has been increasingly recognised as a key element of the internationalisation of universities (Paige 2005; Rudzki 2000; van der Wende 1995). These have particularly developed since the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) conducted case studies on curriculum development for internationalisation in six countries including Australia, Denmark, France, Germany, Japan and the Netherlands, and defined internationalised curricula as 'curricula with an international orientation in content, aimed at preparing students for performing (professionally/socially) in an international and multicultural context, and designed for domestic students and/or foreign students' (OECD 1996, 36).

While this definition has become the mainstream idea for curricula, there is a growing recognition that universities need to re-examine curricula to be more relevant to the emerging problems of globalisation (Rizvi and Walsh 1998). New ways of conceptualising ideas about curricula with a more complex and critical view emphasising social and cultural aspects of globalisation, such as global citizenship and intercultural experiences in the student's learning process, have been advocated. These challenge mainstream ideas that focus on preparation of students for international professions and global economy.

Complex ideas of the curricula have, however, not necessarily been reflected in practice. A number of curricula have been developed simply by adding international elements to existing content (Mestenhauser 1998; De Vita and Case 2003). Development of the curricula seems to vary depending on national and institutional contexts that sometimes hinder any realisation of aims (Bonfiglio 1999). This study examines the internationalisation of undergraduate curricula drawing on case studies of Japanese universities active in this process (Huang 2005) considering the gap between aspiration and realisation and the reasons for this.

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Internationalisation and aims of higher education curricula

Ideas about the internationalisation of undergraduate curricula can be ranked along a continuum from mainstream ideas towards more complex ideas, particularly with regard to aims, target student groups, learning objectives and components of the curricula. A mainstream view of internationalisation in the aims of the curriculum points to the changing environment of globalisation in higher education. Thus the aim is to improve the quality of higher education through enhancing the preparation of students for international professions. This might entail adopting new approaches to teaching and learning across cultures, and supporting a multicultural environment. Institutions are motivated to develop these curricula for strategic purposes to promote international exchange and cooperation with foreign partner institutions. This is generally undertaken to enhance national and international profiles and competitiveness (OECD 1996).

These limited aims of an international curriculum have been expanded by critical commentaries which emphasise building capacity for educational change, educational quality and an examination of values. Rizvi and Walsh (1998) suggest that the main aims of an international curriculum should be to value cultural and social diversity so as to respond to both the homogenising and differentiating forces of globalisation. They see such a curriculum as a framework for creating new learning spaces (Rizvi and Walsh 1998). Mestenhauser (1998) argues for seeing reforms for international education as a most complex field. Revising the aims of higher education curriculum in this way requires a radical rethinking of all aspects of institutional work (Brown and Jones 2007).

Leask (2001) and Haigh (2002) see the ideal internationalised curriculum as meeting the needs of international students as well as those of home students, providing learning goals and a relevant educational experience for all students in a supportive and inclusive environment. An internationalised curriculum values international students as a group of individuals with diverse knowledge, experiences and specific aims to pursue through their studies. Their presence provides an opportunity to raise the standard of teaching and learning. Ryan and Hellmundt (2005) also advocate the importance of international students. Interaction with them allows all learners to develop more complex understandings. Realising the potential of international students requires establishing opportunities for them to fully participate and succeed in any class in a university. These opportunities are necessary for all students to effectively learn together. In this regard Jones and Killick (2007) assert that the development of curricula for home and international student groups should not be seen as two agendas, but one.

The mainstream approach to internationalised curricula with the stress on the inclusion of some limited additional international content and foreign language learning has been challenged with questions posed as to whether students have sufficient opportunities to achieve social and professional learning objectives. Leask (2001) argues that a successfully internationalised curriculum focuses not only on content that develops students' international knowledge, but also on the learning processes of students. A wide range of teaching and learning strategies are used to promote intercultural experiences. These allow students to develop international skills and attitudes. Dobbert (1998) also emphasises the importance of intercultural experiences in the learning process. Culture is not just a set of facts to learn, but a process. It is seen only in continuous social interchanges. Intercultural learning requires curricula to be flexible in design for students to learn across disciplinary boundaries. Understanding of a single culture calls for learning of a number of disciplines (Mestenhauser 1998). But learning within a confined traditional discipline will no longer be sufficient to prepare for a global society that becomes increasingly diverse, complex and uncertain (Barnet 1992; Rizvi and Walsh 1998). Leask (2001) points out that curriculum content and the learning process cannot be separated. Key questions for an international

curriculum are how it is taught and how it is learned. These are as significant as what is taught and what is learned (Webb 2005).

Jones and Killick (2007) identify two phases for international curriculum development namely 'early and less developed models' and 'more complex models'. The former focuses on content reflecting a pragmatic rationale based on the need for global knowledge linked to professional work. The latter stresses a values based rationale for an international curriculum emphasising global citizenship and development of students' behaviour and attitudes. De Vita (2007) identifies the deficiencies and inconsistencies in the mainstream approach with its emphasis on a marketable or profitable commodity assisting with student recruitment. He proposes moving towards a culturally inclusive approach through the curriculum valuing cultural diversity and student experience. This, he agues, would provide an opportunity for all students to develop genuine internationalism.

International curricula in practice

A number of studies show how more complex ideas about an international curriculum in higher education have been difficult to realise in practice. Mestenhauser (1998), assessing internationalised curricula developed in American universities, pointed out that they had been positioned as subspecialties under traditional disciplines. Dominant disciplinary theories thus remained unexamined. Students' experiences and interactions were thus not expanded. De Vita and Case (2003) criticise some British universities which offer international components of the curriculum in a piecemeal way. Thus the curriculum is seen as a bag to be filled with some international bits, primarily to attract international students.

Bonfiglio (1999) argues the difficulties of internationalising American undergraduate curricula have largely been due to some external factors namely limited government funding. This constrains universities from providing holistic and long-term international curriculum development. Instead, they undertake a piecemeal approach which is easier to realise and is seen as an appropriate reaction to a competitive higher education market. He also discusses internal factors which limit internationalisation efforts. These include the nature of the institutional structure, particularly the character of faculties. Faculty led curriculum design privileges an emphasis on disciplinary knowledge with the assumption that knowledge is transmitted by experts. Student experiences are considered of secondary importance to the promotion of disciplinary knowledge. Much time, energy and resources have, thus, been spent on an internationalised curriculum structure rather than on learners. As a result, there is little space for students' input of their own visions, knowledge and experiences.

In order to examine whether these difficulties in implementing internationalisation of higher education were found outside the UK and US, case studies were conducted of the internationalisation of undergraduate curricula in Japan. A case of the active development of an international curriculum in a private university and a national university was selected.

Internationalisation of higher education in Japan

Concern about the internationalisation of Japanese universities was first voiced in the early 1970s, when OECD delegates to Japan produced a report that emphasised the urgent need for Japanese universities to open up to international students and scholars, in order to participate as world universities. International exchange in education and research for international understanding were promoted in response to the report. In the 1980s, the government enacted policy to increase the number of international students in higher education institutions aiming to reach 100,000 by the beginning of 2000. Universities were given enormous financial support to

improve their systems for receiving international students. Japanese language and culture programmes were established and scholarships were provided (Kitamura 1989; OECD 1996).

In 2003, the target number for international student enrolment was reached. Japan became the sixth largest host country for international students after the US, UK, Germany, France and Australia (UNESCO 2007). The ratio of international students however, remains insignificant in relation to the total number of students enrolled in Japanese universities – 3.2% in 2005–2006 (MEXT 2007). This compares 14.1% UK in 2005–2006 (HESA 2007). Moreover, more than 90% of international students in Japan came from Asian countries, namely China, Taiwan and Korea (MEXT 2007). These counties are close to Japan and familiar with the language and culture. Most degree programmes are taught in Japanese.

Several council reports of the internationalisation of undergraduate education have been made. The two main goals of government policy are enhancement of international competitiveness and international contribution (University Council 2007). These goals have been set partly in response to globalisation which threatens Japan's advantageous position in the world economy. They are also partly a response to global politics. Japan wishes to position itself as a leading country for world development. The key functions of undergraduate education in this context are to promote mutual understanding through international exchanges. These include receiving international students and sending Japanese students abroad. The internationalisation of undergraduate curricula or programmes has been identified as indispensable for contributing to the global economic and political aspirations. A widely held view is that reducing the distinction between general/liberal education[1] and specialised education would enable students to acquire not only international professional knowledge and skills for competing in the global economy, but also the appropriate culture and moral values for actively participating in a multicultural society.

The government expected further development of the curricula by relaxing university accreditation, promoting corporatisation of the national universities and providing strategic funds to promote a competitive environment and encourage universities to react independently to diverse social demands. Huang (2005) notes that individual institutions played an increasingly important role in developing the curricula. Competition between universities was seen to enhance mobility, creativity and sensitivity to the market.

Case study research

Case study research of experiences of internationalisation was conducted in a national and a private university in Japan. In each institution the following questions were examined.

(1) Why was an internationalisation of undergraduate curricula deemed necessary?
(2) Who were the internationalised curricula designed for?
(3) How were the learning objectives of the curricula set?
(4) How were the curricula developed to enable students to attain the objectives?

Data was collected through analysis of university documents, including brochures, international strategies and syllabi. Open-ended interviews were conducted with nine staff members involved in the curricula in each case. Observations were carried out on campuses. Interviewees were selected from management, faculty level deans and heads of departments and non-academic staff.

Data emerging from the case studies indicate the rationale behind the curriculum development is related to the external environment in which the universities find themselves and internal initiatives they have taken in response. The growing demand by Japanese society and government for international education and exchange derives from the view that this enables Japanese people

to acquire knowledge and skills to enhance Japan's international competitiveness and contribution in the global economy. Intensifying competition among universities nationally and internationally is another key factor. This is partly a response to the decrease in the number of university age people in Japan. The relaxation of government regulations which have allowed types of universities (corporate-funded institutions and foreign institutions) to enter the student market is another.

The private university appears to have been more positive and proactive in developing new curricula than the national university. The latter has been more reactive and dependent on the government. The private university is motivated by improving the quality of education and preparing students for a global society and economy through new curricula. It aims to attract excellent students in order to enhance its competitiveness in the higher education market. This is essential as it depends on income from students. Student recruitment has never been considered an aim of curriculum in the national university, which is supported by public funds, has high status, and relatively cheaper tuition fees.

After the government promoted moves for corporatisation, the national university gradually adopted concerns with marketing its offering. However, its long-term goals were different. While the private university aimed to become a force in global higher education, the national university wished to become a world-class research university, with the curricula developed at postgraduate level based on international research. By contrast, the private university has emphasised curricula aimed at undergraduates, who comprise the majority of its students.

The curricula for undergraduate degree programmes in both universities are aimed at home students. All applicants, regardless of their nationality, have to pass an entrance examination in Japanese. International applicants are required to be fluent in the Japanese language, since most courses are taught in Japanese and are designed without taking international students language needs into account. Both universities offer some short non-degree programmes in English to international students who do not have adequate Japanese language skills in order to promote intercultural exchange between home and international students. The ratio of international undergraduates in both cases is, however, still insignificant and the majority of them are Asian.

Most interviewees in both universities agreed that the presence of international students was indispensable for creating the multicultural environment required for promoting international exchange on campus. This in turn attracted excellent students from around the world. They did not, however, seem to be positive about an increase in the number of international students, partly because of the financial burden due to the additional cost of staff, facilities and scholarships for international students who are charged the same amount of tuition fees as home students. Further, no appreciable improvement in educational effectiveness has been identified, since home and international students often do not mix with each other.

In a situation where additional financial support from the government for further recruitment of international students can no longer be expected, it is necessary to foster a reciprocity that brings educational advantages to both home and international students without financial burden to the universities. This calls into questions the idea that international students are required to adapt to curricula aimed at home students and are expected to contribute to the promotion of intercultural exchange on campus in return for the abundant scholarships provided to them. It requires that curricula be designed taking the needs and benefits of both student groups into account.

Both universities have clear ideas of the type of graduate that they want to cultivate through their international strategies. The private university suggests two images of global citizens and active international leaders inferring that global citizens are more socially oriented, whereas international leaders are more professionally oriented. In the national university, the image proposed is of international talents and abilities that mix social and professional aspects.

Interviewees in both cases identified several common competences needed for becoming ideal graduates, such as foreign language skills, especially English, cross-cultural communication skills and international understanding. These competences are supposed to consist of international knowledge in the professional context, and multicultural understanding, skills and attitudes needed to act as global citizens in the wider social context.

However, the social aspect of these competences is not well identified as a learning objective at faculty level in either university. At the private university the objectives are set by individual faculties or departments on the basis of their own disciplines. The national university is also concerned that students achieve the specific objectives set by each specialised programme. These objectives focus exclusively on the professional aspects of study and neglect the social aspects. Most faculties in both universities assume social competences are learned through general/liberal education or extracurricular activities. However, there is no clear evidence that students acquire these competences. In the national university, no objectives have been set for general/liberal education, since it aims at fostering students' own sense of values and attitudes. In the private university, the traditional objectives of general/liberal education, including cultivation of broad knowledge, high culture and morals, are losing importance. Less able entrants in the mass higher education system tend to focus more directly on specialised subject content. Thus, although the learning objectives at institutional level require a balance between social and professional learning, in practice they are biased towards the professional.

Several common components of the curriculum were identified across faculties in both universities. The first is studying a foreign language, particularly English, which is compulsory. The second is enrolling in international programmes, for example, concerned with world peace or international development. The national university offers this to all students in cooperation with foreign partner institutions through WebCT. At the private university, a number of international programmes are provided by the Inter-faculty Institute for International Studies and departments of International Business Administration and International Economics. Both universities offer study abroad programmes including dual degree programmes and exchange programmes. The private university has a wider range of initiatives than the national university, partly because of the focus on development at postgraduate level.

The majority of students however, have neither participated in the study abroad programmes nor had contact with international students on campus. They lack language skills and motivation for intercultural exchange. Students in the mass higher education system tend to be not motivated to learn matters that are not much concerned with their daily lives or future careers.

The gap between the idea and the practice of the curricula

According to the case studies, there are several similarities and differences in the curricula between the private and national universities examined.

The curricula have been led either by a managerial or an elite education dynamic. Both approaches meet pragmatic/strategic purposes but do not develop the complex ideas about curriculum that emphasise fundamental change. Managerial purposes, such as attractiveness to students, generating income and enhancing reputation and competitiveness, are at odds with complex ideas which critically scrutinise approaches that focus on education for profit (De Vita 2007).

Complex ideas are sympathetic to the notion of cultural diversity and equal learning opportunities for home and international students (Leask 2001; Haigh 2002). This has not been realised in either case. The curricula are aimed exclusively at home students and the campus is dominated by Japanese people and language. The presence of international students does not

make much difference to teaching and learning, as the ratio is insignificant. Moreover curricula are usually designed without taking their cultural insights and differences into account. The curricula for international students, who are not fluent in Japanese, are designed separately as short non-degree programmes with opportunities to learn in the company of students on degree programmes limited to a few classes.

Complex ideas that emphasise the social and professional aspects of learning (Rizvi and Walsh 1998) are present in some courses' objectives. However, these two aspects are not equally treated at faculty level due to the stress on specialisation and the acquisition of professional knowledge that meets international or western standards. Multicultural understanding, skills and attitudes in broader social settings that are needed to form a holistic world view are not particularly set as the objectives, since these are neither necessarily related to one's speciality nor assessable as objectives.

The curricula of both universities have been composed taking into account not only foreign language and international subjects, but also intercultural experiences as emphasised in complex ideas to develop global citizenship (Leask 2001). But this is offered mainly through study abroad programmes. Many students do not have the experience of studying abroad nor any intercultural contact on campus. Teaching or learning strategies for encouraging interaction between home and international students is not particularly considered. English-taught subjects do not necessarily promote interaction as the content of the subjects are generally determined by what is taught rather than how it is learned.

Gaps at the institutional, national and global level account for these differences between complex ideas of international curriculum and the curricula evident in the two universities. Firstly, development of the curricula in both cases is largely affected by the external environment which has changed as a result of globalisation, neo-liberalism, competition in a single market and knowledge-based economy, managerialism and vocationalism (Currie 2004; Eggins 2003). The shift of government policies in Japan towards neo-liberal systems promoting a competitive environment has resulted in the aims of curricula pulled between educational and managerial purposes. Development of the curricula within the universities will not be promoted unless it brings managerial advantage as educational effectiveness. In this respect, universities are discouraged from designing the curricula for international students that are not cost efficient.

As Japan's superior position in the global economy and politics is endangered in the process of globalisation, both institutions, particularly the national university, are expected by Japanese society to train home students to be graduates who can contribute to the reinforcement of Japan's international competitiveness. The curricula are supposed to be aimed at home students as Japanese universities have traditionally educated Japanese people in Japanese for their own society (Hanami and Nishitani 1997). International students are primarily seen as the recipients of development assistance. For Japan to maintain its position, particularly in Asia, universities are expected to contribute to the continued training of Japanese nationals. Curricula based on this ethnocentric idea will neither promote intercultural exchange on campus nor attract non-ODA students.

Moreover, the spread of vocationalism for the world of work as a result of growing competition in the global knowledge economy and labour market influences the learning objectives of the curricula. They are thus more professionally oriented with emphasis on international knowledge as a key element of employability. This demotivates students, particularly less able or motivated entrants in the mass higher education system, to learn beyond their interests or needs for future professions.

Secondly, development of the curricula in both cases is restrained by internal factors such as institutional characteristics, strategies and structure, curriculum policy and people's awareness of internationalisation. While international strategies responding to external changes have

been planned, institutions selectively choose only certain elements that fit narrower goals. Specialist faculties that retain autonomy and discretion in their educational and research activities lead curriculum processes and insist that they are more professionally oriented. Specialist curricula rarely express wider institutional objectives linked to general/liberal education which might encourage intercultural learning experiences on and off campus. As a result, the curricula are content-based and opportunities for development are limited. Unless faculty staff and students identify the need for the curricula to offer greater international content, processes in support of change will not happen.

Thus, the main reasons behind the gap between the complex ideas and practice of the curricula in the universities appear to be not only the influence of different aspects of globalisation, but also a contradiction between the complexity of the ideas and diversity in practice. International curricula are differently interpreted and put it into practice in nations, institutions, faculties, departments and people. While complex ideas emphasise the social and cultural aspects of globalisation such as cultural interdependence, differentiation, social diversity, inclusion, global citizenship and the sustainable development of the whole living earth, practice primarily responds to the economic and political aspects of globalisation and aims to enhance international competitiveness and the contribution of individuals to political solidarity, knowledge economy, a single market and the world of work.

Thus, fundamental educational reform of institutional initiatives is needed with comprehensive and critical views challenging conventional curriculum frameworks. In this way all students would accumulate intercultural experiences through their own learning processes and develop towards becoming a global citizen. However, the nature of the internationalising curriculum that contains the complexity and diversity remains difficult to realise. Thus the gap between these ideas and practice are likely to continue to exist.

Note

1. General/liberal education was introduced from America after the Second World War. The time allotted for specialised education was decreased from three years to two years, and half of a four years university education was devoted to giving students a broader knowledge as a launching pad for subsequent specialisation. In 1991, the distinction between general/liberal and specialised education was abolished.

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