

What's wrong with internationalisation of Higher Education? It's the language, stupid!

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It is needless to mention the popularity of internationalisation [1] in the contemporary higher education literature. Many scholars, like Hans De Wit and Jane Knight, have engaged with the definition of the term while others, like Elspeth Jones and Robin Middlehurst, have written about more applied elements.

Most, if not all, of the scholars who discuss internationalisation of higher education have admitted that higher education institutions have lost touch with the initial purpose of internationalisation.

In the recent Going Global 2012 conference there were many who argued for a 'back to basics' approach to future policies and activities in the internationalisation of higher education. Also, the International Association of Universities (IAU) has recently published a report [2] which summarises the findings of its expert group on 'Re-thinking Internationalisation'. In this report it is recognised that internationalisation is an evolving concept which is shaped by the dynamic nature of higher education. Globalisation is seen as the main contextual factor which affects higher education, and consequently, internationalisation.

Within the globalised economic environment internationalisation is pursued at different parts of the world in anticipation of a range of returns. The drivers for internationalisation are, according to IAU, many and include the boost of economic income, capacity building, and global reputation, to name a few.

According to the IAU (2012) and the outcomes of the recent Going Global 2012 conference [3], internationalisation has come to a point where it is considered as inevitable for higher education institutions. At the same time, the rapidly evolving global higher education market along with the developments at the macroeconomic level, affect the nature and intensity of higher education institutions' international activities (Tsiligiris, 2012).

Professor Jane Knight (2011), a pioneer academic on the issue, has recently argued that internationalisation has changed within a context of fast growth of cross-border developments.

Also, she argues that internationalisation is today increasingly linked with economic competitiveness, reputation, and human capital. Most important, she concludes, that the drivers for internationalisation are today primarily economic and political and less academic and cultural. In a similar vein, Brandenburg and De Wit (2012) argue that there seems to be a shift from substance to form something which leads to the devaluation of internationalisation. All the above scholars pose questions about the current universal model of internationalisation. Most of the scholars are sceptical about the true realisation of international and cross-cultural exposure of students which is necessary in the globalised employment market as well as the academic and research benefits for all the parties involved. Despite this increasing scepticism and the efforts to provide a list of proposals for getting internationalisation back on track, it seems that there is a gap between theory and practice.

Reflecting on my experience by attending the Going Global 2012 conference and by reading the relevant literature, including the recent report by IAU, I would not hesitate to argue that we are now at a stage where observations are made and a common consensus is emerging about the need to re-think and re-define internationalisation. This is encouraging taking into account the hyper-speed development of internationalisation over the past 20 years, as well as the popularity of the concept which has often acted as the driver for the pursuit by higher education institutions of a wide array of other non-academic objectives. I want to reflect on this growing scepticism about internationalisation by touching upon a more practical element. To my opinion, what is often neglected is the issue of language of communication and instruction in international higher education. So far, the use of English as the dominant language which drives internationalisation has been seen as inevitable. Despite the fact that most authorities recognise the dangers posed by the dominance of English as the language of instruction, communication, and publication of research,



there has been very little attempt to propose an alternative.

The issue of language of instruction within the context of globalised higher education has been considered a non-issue, thus not studied extensively (Kerklaan et al., 2008). Most of the authors, academics, and policy makers take for granted that English will be the medium of instruction and communication. This is assumed for a number of different reasons.

In the internationalised higher education context, higher education institutions in the so-called developed countries are both importing international students and exporting transnational higher education programmes to other countries for offshore delivery. In both facets of internationalisation, English is seen as the means to reassure equality of quality and standards for international delivery, either at "home" or "abroad".

English as single language of instruction at "home"

The use of English as the main language of instruction for programmes offered at "home" is considered as a very important factor for the recruitment of international students. Also, the use of English is often seen as a

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means to an end in the effort of higher education institutions to internationalise. Often the use of English as the main language of instruction is associated and confused with an indication of the degree of internationalisation of a higher education institution.

It is indicative of what De Wit (2011) refers to as the misconception among higher education institutions in the Netherlands and elsewhere of English being equivalent to internationalisation: "We have internationalised, because our education and research is carried out in English".

To my view, the use of English as the language of instruction has a number of problems for both Anglo-Saxon and non-Anglo-Saxon countries. In a relatively recent report the British Academy (2011) has dealt with the problem of languages and particularly within the context of internationalisation. The report mentions that in 2010, 57% of GCSE students were not studying any language and the significantly low number of students studying for a language other than English at secondary education level has affected the number of students studying languages in universities.

The British Academy argues that the value of languages is multi-fold and recommends that higher education institutions should take active steps to reduce the gap between supply and demand (2011, p.6).

Specifically on internationalisation, the British Academy (2011) argues that UK universities should adopt internationalisation in a wider context than the current focus on recruiting international students. Furthermore, UK universities should actively encourage the outbound mobility of home students. It should not be assumed that knowledge of English will be sufficient for students from Anglo-Saxon countries to compete in the globalised employment market. As the report outlines "75% of the world's population do not speak English as their first language" (British Academy, 2011, p.4); something which demonstrates the linguistic and cultural diversity of the global economy.

The above concerns are in line with the findings of the recent report by the House of Lords which concluded that:

The growing trend of using English as the dominant language in the academic world, as well as in the EU institutions, should not encourage the United Kingdom to be unconcerned about the opportunities and benefits presented by learning and working in another language (House of Lords, 2012, p.47).

The House of Lords argues that the reduced language-learning capability

of UK is negatively affecting the outbound student mobility which is necessary to foster individuals' employability and the competitiveness of the entire country (2012, p.48). Thus, there is the recommendation to UK higher education institutions to promote language learning.

In non-Anglo-Saxon countries the delivery of higher education programmes in English, mainly as an effort to attract international students, can be also problematic. Primarily, the dominance of English as the medium of instruction and communication contributes to the legitimisation of those in non-Anglo-Saxon countries who argue that internationalisation contributes to the loss of national identity and culture (Hughes, 2008). Also, on the more practical side, there are concerns about the quality of higher education programmes which are delivered in English from instructors whose first language is other than English (Kerklaan et al., 2008). If higher education is delivered by academics whose first language is not English to international students then the quality of teaching and learning is jeopardised, if not reduced (De Wit, 2011). It seems me therefore that in Anglo-Saxon countries the dominance of English reduces the ability of domestic students to move abroad and gather valuable cross-border experience and cross-cultural exposure.

At the same time, English as a means to increase the attractiveness of non-Anglo-Saxon countries as destinations for international students imposes serious risks for the quality of teaching and learning.

English as prerequisite for the establishment of transnational collaborations

For those, like me, who are actively engaged with the development and management of transnational higher education collaborations, it is known that awarding universities impose English as the language of instruction and communication on transnational collaborations for the offshore delivery of their programmes. This is seen as a way to assure quality and achieve comparability of students' learning experience while it complies with the requirements of Quality Assurance Agencies for collaborative provision.

For example, the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in its guidelines for collaborative provision argues that when

the language of provision in offshore programmes is other than the language in which the awarding university ordinarily operates, important questions are raised about the capacity of the awarding university to provide reassurances of the quality of these programmes (QAA, 2010, p.19).

It is my view the use of English as the principal medium of instruction in transnational partnerships and offshore delivery can be problematic for the real quality of education. By 'the real quality of education' I mean the ability of students to fulfil the learning outcomes and then carry them into their professional and personal lives over the long-term while developing an ability to constantly reflect and update them through their experience. Usually, neither the instructors nor the students at offshore locations have the ability to perform at their full capacity as teachers and learners respectively using English (Hughes, 2008; Kerklaan et al., 2008).

Thus, the imposition of English as the language of instruction and communication in transnational higher education partnerships may hinder teaching and learning and not reassure quality and comparability of teaching and learning experience as suggested by awarding universities and quality assurance bodies. Additionally, the use of English as the dominant language in transnational higher education increases the intensity of the arguments inside host countries that transnational education distorts national cultures and promotes homogenisation towards a globalised society.

Also, the use of English as the language of delivery in transnational partnerships hinders the opportunities of 'home' students who study at the awarding institution to spend a year abroad studying in a different language. It would be much easier for higher education institutions in 'home' countries, such as the UK, to promote the outbound mobility of their students by leveraging their existing network of transnational partnerships if their students were not confined to the English language. Nevertheless, since these partnerships currently replicate the teaching and learning experience of home campuses, they are not fulfilling either of the objectives for cross-border exposure and cross-cultural understanding of "home" students.

Recommendations & Conclusions

The role of English as the single and dominant language of instruction should be debated. As argued above, this is important for all the stakeholders in both exporting and importing countries.

Most of the scholars, practitioners, and policy makers today agree that our world is rapidly changing. Non-traditional players emerge in the world economy such as China, Russia, Brazil, and India – often termed the BRIC countries. These countries have a strong linguistic heritage and cultural bonds with their language. Also, their populations, which account for a great portion of the world's population, are less confident in the use of English. Within this changing global landscape the current inflexible internationalisation model which is primarily English-centred reduces the ability of higher education institutions to fully achieve and enjoy the positive elements of internationalisation. Quality is not assured, something which is a main objective of the awarding institutions, nor do students and academics experience true international and cross-cultural exposure as should be the case. One solution to the above challenges could be the adoption by higher education institutions of bilingual programmes which embed a real international dimension. The existing gap between the popularity of internationalisation and the lack of foreign languages in the curriculum of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes is a paradox. Again, reflecting on the consensus about the increasingly multi-cultural global economy, it is imperative that higher education institutions should focus on preparing global citizens who are able to communicate in languages other than English.

The need to include languages in the modern curriculum of higher education programmes is, to me, similar to the recognition that knowledge of new technologies and information systems is vital for any individual at any education level and in any discipline. Languages today should be introduced in a similar way that during the 1990s and 2000s information systems were embedded in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The existing networks, systems, and infrastructure of international higher education can facilitate the materi-

alisation of real internationalisation of higher education. Awarding universities should set up programmes which have a language element. This will allow their students to be able to seek cross-border employment or study opportunities. Additionally, awarding institutions should promote the delivery of transnational higher education programmes in the local language of the offshore location. This will increase the real quality of teaching and learning while it will boost study-abroad opportunities for “home” students. In conclusion, I think that the language element is far more important than the existing literature acknowledges. To highlight this neglected importance I have used in the title of this article a paraphrased version of the well-known slogan from the Clinton campaign. I think that we are failing to acknowledge the fact that internationalisation is neither an easy task to accomplish, nor a cheap alternative to “home” operations. The realisation of true internationalisation should equally involve people from different countries and requires long-term investment in building systems which provide a multi-cultural perspective within a bilingual context. Internationalisation is a difficult and demanding process. Internationalisation has tended to follow a similar pattern everywhere. In the initial phase, there is great interest by the majority of institutions, but as time elapses, only those who can sustain a true interest remain in line with the initial vision. I strongly believe that in the near future higher education institutions will have to choose either to take active steps to achieve a “back to basics” approach to real internationalisation, or go faster down the road of what is better described as “globalised higher education”.

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[1] According to Harvey (2012) Internationalisation is defined as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary higher education”.

[2] IAU (2012) Affirming Academic Values in Internationalization of Higher Education: A Call for Action. Available from: < http://www.iau-aiu.net/sites/all/files/Affirming_Academic_Values_in_Internationalization_of_Higher_Education.pdf> [Accessed 19 April 2012].

[3] <http://ihe.britishcouncil.org/going-global>

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