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Hosting Foreign Students in European Universities

International and Intercultural Perspectives

Establishing the European area of higher education through the Bologna process

As a response to globalization, internationalization is one of the most important and fast-growing driving forces for higher education in the new century. By integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of the institution (Knight 1993), the total institutional environment changes systematically so as to bring its profile in line with international standards and further strengthen its position at both national and international levels. In most cases, the first step of many universities toward internationalization has a numeric orientation, with the number of international students as the main indicator of success. Europe, in an attempt to occupy a larger chunk of the lucrative international student market, has started to catch up with the United States and Australia in recruiting foreign students in recent years. It intends to establish the “European area of

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higher education” by 2010 and further enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of its higher education in other parts of the world.

The Bologna process indicates the course of harmonization in the area of higher education throughout Europe. The core of this process at the European level is a series of intergovernmental conferences of European education ministers at which programmatic declarations and communiqués were passed. It begins with the Sorbonne declaration and proceeds through the conferences in Bologna (1999), Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), and London (2007). It is characterized by a “snowball effect” (Zgaga 2004, p. 105), involving the incremental enlargement from four initiators to forty-six signatory countries by 2007, increasing institutionalization and formalization, and the broadening of policy agenda with the subsequent addition of further goals.

The Bologna process emphasized the creation of the “European area of higher education” as a key way to promote citizens’ mobility and employability and overall development (Fredriksson 2003). Although the cultural objectives were strongly mentioned in the Bologna declaration, it cannot be denied that the economic objectives, especially the enhancement of international competitiveness, are of central importance. According to Lourtie,

international competitiveness may be analyzed from, at least, two different perspectives, although intertwined: the competitiveness of European diplomas in the international scene and the capacity to attract students from outside the European higher education area. Several factors impacting . . . international competitiveness may be identified, such as: readability of degrees by employers, institutions and individuals at large; acceptance of qualifications in academic and professional terms; clear information on the objectives and learning outcomes of the programmes; friendly student services, both educational and non-educational; dissemination of European knowledge production, including textbooks, specialised magazines and research results. (2001, pp. 8–9)

In line with this, the Bologna Declaration affirmed these intentions:

—the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, to promote European citizens’ employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system;

—the adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate. The second cycle should lead to the master’s and/or doctoral degree as in many European countries;

—the establishment of a system of credits, such as the European Credit Transfer System [ECTS], as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility;

- the promotion of student mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement for both students and teachers;
- promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies;
- promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regard to curricular development, interinstitutional cooperation, mobility schemes, and integrated program of study, training, and research;

The international dimension in higher education: insights from curricular development

In general, there are four rationales behind the trend of recruiting international students:

- competing for the best brains and building an international quality profile;
- generating revenue to benefit the institution's departments and members;
- establishing long-term international relations, business connections, and reciprocal exchange among international institutions;
- enhancing cross-cultural understanding and communication.

The restructuring of higher education system in Europe, in particular the introduction of the bachelor's–master's model, has facilitated the mobility of students in Europe from both European and non-European countries. The increasing number of international students has played an important role in policy making and corresponding activities of the university. For instance, recruiting international students has been stated in the mission of many European universities; and institutional services such as the international office, the study advisory center, housing, jobs, and social services, are aimed to assist international students to smoothly and successfully adapt to the new environment, in their academic study and daily life.

Among all these international dimensions, the most important and always the first response of many universities in regard to international students is about curricular development, that is, setting up program taught in English, especially designed to accommodate the heterogeneous population resulting from the inflow of foreign students (Van der Wende 1996, p. 20). It also attempts to prepare students with international qualifications and competitiveness in the labor market. Changes will take place in various aspects of the program, including its objective, content, course materials, assessment, instructional language, and methods.

In general, curricular development vis-à-vis international students depends

on various and interrelated factors. External factors such as supranational and governmental policies are mainly mentioned in terms of their role in providing financial support to both the curriculum itself and to participating staff and students from other countries (*ibid.*, p. 98). Besides, bilateral agreements and research networks with foreign partner institutions constitute another external factor; for example, student mobility propels the change of curriculum to accommodate the needs of foreign students, and staff expertise is enhanced by exchange and collaboration. Furthermore, market forces, such as the demands of the labor market or fiscal benefits brought by international students, may also influence the decision to improve the curriculum with international standards. On the other hand, internal factors relate to the institution as an organization. First, the commitment of top leadership plays a vital role in curricular development, by integrating the international initiative into the mission statement of the institution. Second, the actual development of curriculum will naturally involve academics at the level of faculty or department (*ibid.*). Enthusiastic innovators with a strong commitment and leading academic role are indispensable, and the commitment from a broader group of faculty staff is essential (*ibid.*, p. 85). Third, curricular effectiveness calls for strong alliances of academics and administrators (*ibid.*, p. 22). Staff from university support services and program coordinators and tutors from faculties would link students and teachers to the curriculum in an intensive and interactive way.

With a view to curricular implementation, questions about the quality of teaching and the outcome of learning come to the fore. Concerns are largely related to the curriculum's operational aspects: teaching and learning activities, working formats, type of students and staff, assessment and evaluation, and time and place of course delivery. All too frequently, problems reported by students are in relation to course clarity, due to the way of teaching and/or the lecturer's accuracy of expression in English; workload; assignments, perhaps exacerbated by language insufficiency (Mulligan and Kirkpatrick 2000); and lack of explanation about requirements and assessment criteria, a result of students' inadequate knowledge and experience. On the other side, teachers often cite language incompetency, inactiveness in class discussion, difficulties in comprehension, and inappropriate ways of learning as students' main problems (Caruana and Hanstock 2003). Therefore, mutual recognition of the difficulties and differences in teaching and learning is necessary. An understanding of how students learn and interact and what they expect to learn can help teachers tailor instruction to support understanding and participation. Conversely, an understanding of how teachers deliver the course and evaluate the mastery of knowledge can help students improve their ways of learning and enhance their learning efficiency and effectiveness in a foreign context.

Intercultural dimension in higher education: insights from diversity and interculturalization

Once international students enter the university, “gaps” between them and local students are likely to be highlighted. They are required to adjust (accommodate) to the academic standards and cultural assumptions of the mainstream groups in order to achieve success, while the institutional practices are not expected to change (Celis and Wildemeersch 2002). University strategies and activities concerning international students are largely about making up any deficits that might hinder their study and life in the host country, such as English insufficiency or unfamiliarity with the local environment and educational system. However, higher education is not only about transmitting knowledge, skills, and social values to students; it should provide opportunities for individuals to come into the world, to know who they are and where they stand, to have a better sense of who others are and how to respond to them. Students’ experience with those from diverse backgrounds (inside and outside the classroom) offers conditions that promote more complex and active thinking, providing opportunities to experiment and reconcile alternative points of view inherent in a pluralistic democracy (Hurtado 2006).

International students in cross-cultural settings

In practice, international students become gradually, perhaps even unconsciously, aware of the mainstream values, rules, and patterns of life of the host society. Changes may take place within themselves such as behavior in public. Differences between their home country and the local community are manifested in their daily life, from gastronomy to dressing styles, from architecture to transportation, from social conventions to laws, from rituals to religions. However, mere observation and description of these differences is not sufficient in a culturally diverse environment. The questions are: is there an active response of international students to diversity? Do they have the opportunity to get to know and understand people from different cultures? And will they proactively engage in communication?

First, the extent to which international students are able to adapt to different points of view and be flexible when confronted by cultural differences is strongly tied to their language capacity (Arthur 2004, p. 38). Many have suffered from “second-language anxiety.” The less they interact with others, the poorer their social and language skills become, and the more unconfirmed they feel, creating a negative cycle. Thus, language competency is considered one of the most influential factors in the cross-cultural experience of interna-

tional students (*ibid.*, p. 37), which may potentially influence their appraisal of ability to cope with situations involving challenges, during both academic study and social integration.

Second, in most cases, the programs in English provided for international students are paralleled from the mainstream programs offered to domestic students. There is little chance for cooperation, knowledge exchange, and intercultural dialogue between these two groups of students. Also, instructors and local students may unintentionally exclude international students by limiting their discussion to narrow examples deeply rooted in local cultural contexts (*ibid.*, p. 39). When a classroom or seminar discussion is closely connected to local cultural contexts, international students may find it difficult to contribute to the discussion (Huxur et al. 1996). If they believe that their basis of knowledge or experience is culturally irrelevant to the discussion, they will be reticent and limit their participation (Arthur 2004, p. 39). What is more, although most teachers announce that they value the intercultural cooperation of their students, in reality the degree of their tolerance for otherness may dwindle quickly when teaching and learning demand more time, energy, and commitment (Otten 2003). And the acceptance of multiple perspectives in the classroom may also decline when this endangers the achievement of what is supposed to be the “standard” of academic excellence (*ibid.*). Therefore, a feasible suggestion is that teachers should recognize diversity among students, duly adjust their teaching to the different groups, and enable usually silent people to express themselves by inviting and encouraging them to engage into the class.

Within the learning process, an optimal benefit of the presence of foreign students can be reached by working formats in which small groups of mixed nationalities work together (Van der Wende 1996, p. 197). “Cooperation by their very nature requires individuals to work together, thus providing the opportunity for them to come to know each other in ways they might not otherwise” (Schofield 2004, p. 805). It can lead to the discovery of unexpected similarities between oneself and out-group members, which plays a strong role in attraction to others (Berscheid and Reis 1998) and increases tolerance (Aboud and Doyle 1996; Aboud and Fenwick 1999). Moreover, the ongoing experience with the out-group may help to undermine the strong tendency to see out-group members as relatively similar to each other compared to in-group members, who are typically perceived to be more varied (Judd and Park 1988; Linville, Fischer, and Salovey 1989). This so-called personalization of out-group members would be helpful in weakening stereotypes and lessening their impact on interactions with members of the out-group (Schofield 2004, p. 805).

Third, international students often experience feelings of uncertainty and

anxiety about the way to integrate into the host society. The question is what constitutes socially appropriate behaviour in the new cultural context. There are mismatches in their life habits such as clothing, food, sports, entertainment; differences in their temperament, personality, and interests; and political, religious, and social conflicts, all of which can lead to incompatibility among students, intercultural conflicts, and social alienation.

The day-to-day experience of international students was found to be variable. Although many feel welcome and included in student life, some indicated that they felt excluded and not particularly welcome (Phillips et al. 2006). This may manifest itself in the exclusive nature of friendship networks or through boundaries erected through cultural differences. Moreover, some behavioral norms might exclude certain groups from participating in the everyday life of the institution—for example, the usual “pub-crawl” is one of the most popular socializing activities for European students, while it may exclude the students who dislike engaging in a pervasive culture of drinking.

At the same time, international students have been criticized for forming groups with others from a similar cultural background or from nations with geographical proximity. There are two reasons behind this. First, international students intend to create a conational subculture to support themselves emotional and socially in the host country. People are used to living with those who are alike as an effective way to relieve feelings of homesickness, insecurity, loneliness, and so on. Second, local students are rather passive and wait for the initiative of international students. Attempting to make friends with local students is a difficult and disappointing experience for many foreign students (Walker 1999). “People here ask how you are, but then keep on walking by!” (Arthur 2004, p. 41). Those who expect a high level of interdependence, that is, a strong and dependable friendship, may feel frustrated by the superficiality of interactions in the host culture. Therefore, relationship with conationals may be an essential source of support for international students. However, solely relying on conationals is insufficient for intercultural interaction. Language barriers and value differences require of international students more time, commitment, and personal confidence to reach a better understanding about each other.

Fourth, prejudice among groups of international students and alienation from the host culture are major influences on the acculturation of international students (Sodowsky and Plake 1992). International students who are members of racial and ethnic minorities are exposed to the attitudes and stereotypes held by members of the local community (Arthur 2004, p. 44). Negative stereotypes regarding particular countries and people around the world may be transferred to international students through subtle forms of bias or through blatant hostility (*ibid.*).

Racism and discrimination are also evident in the policies, practices, and curriculum of the institution. An example can be found in curricular practice: first, it may be based on ethnocentric views of academic subjects that insist to one “right way” of understanding the world (ibid., p. 45). Second, it is sometimes out of date about norms and practices of people from other countries, or highlights problems and “dark sides” reported in the media (ibid.). In general, inadequate information and distorted facts about source countries are the main cause of discrimination toward international students. Accordingly, university staff must continually increase their knowledge base and raise their intercultural awareness to avoid stereotyping and bias against students from particular countries, whether intentional or unintentional.

Higher education toward interculturalization

As discussed above, the increasing number and diversity of international students has brought the issue of interculturalization to the fore. After all, the institution is not simply about getting international students there, but also about committing, understanding, supporting, and changing. “If schools are a reflection of the cultural values of the dominant group responsible for its creation, then institutional cultures must be willing to acknowledge their role and responsibility in transforming themselves to also reflect the interests and address the needs of the newly included populations” (Lenease King 2001, p. 70).

Interculturalization is an approach that explores how to transform education systems to respond to the diversity of learners, enabling both educators and students to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment in the learning environment rather than as a problem (Booth and Lynch 2001). The prefix “inter-” implies a dynamic and transformative confrontation and intermixing of entities in dialogue where no one culture dominates either overtly or covertly (Jiang 2005). It entails an emphasis on acknowledging the positioning and context-relatedness of one’s own perspectives and knowledge; and at the same time, appreciating and equally valuing the diversity of other perspectives that will lead to a more tolerant, solidarity-oriented and inclusive way of thinking (Celis and Wildemeersch 2002).

Interculturalization of higher education is a time-consuming and ongoing process. On the institutional level, it is manifested in the university statement, policy making, and corresponding activities, all of which are aimed to create an intercultural ethos and chances for cross-cultural contact at the campus. For instance, student services play an important role in noticing and satisfying the needs of international students. Four strategies are presented below (Cunningham 1991):

- providing international students with accurate information and ongoing support in ways that consider their special status as international students;

- facilitating interactions and development of relationships between international and local students, as well as supporting relationships among diverse nationalities;

- supporting the development of relationships between international students and members of the local community;

- encouraging international students to have a voice in expressing their needs and in organizing as a group to form effective working relationships with campus personnel.

On the individual level, interculturalization calls for interests, initiatives, and efforts from all actors on campus—policymakers, administrators, academics, and students. As it emphasizes mutual understanding and interaction, it requires active engagement and longstanding commitment from both sides in a cross-cultural setting. People cannot be forced to talk and listen in a dialogue. The building and enhancement of intercultural competence is indispensable. This term refers to a long-term change in attitudes (the emotional aspect), knowledge/awareness (the cognitive aspect), and skills (the behavioral aspect) to enable positive and effective interaction with people of other cultures (Bennett 1993; Dignes and Baldwin 1996). Inspired by “the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity” (Bennett 1986, 1993), we described the improvement of intercultural competence in seven stages:

- (1) *Denial*: ignoring other cultures

- (2) *Defense*: judging and interpreting the behavior of those who are culturally different on the basis of one’s own value system and means of understanding

- (3) *Minimization*: burying differences under the weight of cultural similarities, assuming that a simple awareness of fundamental patterns of human interaction will be sufficient for successful communication

- (4) *Taking an interest*: perceiving differences and similarities; personal motives and environmental factors define the extent of interest

- (5) *Recognizing and acknowledging*: understanding the frame of reference of other cultures (cultural plurality) and acting accordingly (cultural empathy)

- (6) *Dialogue*: creating and engaging actively in communication with others, both verbal and nonverbal

- (7) *Integration*: broadening one’s patterns of cultural behavior, evaluating and behaving in a flexible way under particular circumstances.

Students on a culturally diverse campus often report that they are tolerant of people whose beliefs and behaviors may differ from what they have learned or expect. However, stereotypes and prejudices exist; and their pre-existing

attitude toward a particular country or group of people, always based on information and images from the media or from friends, whether positive or negative, may easily be reinforced through contact. Further, cross-cultural encounters among students tend to be casual rather than intimate. Common places for intercultural interaction are classes, work, and the neighborhood. Most students agree that their personalities influence their communication with others, and their initiatives promoting contact may not be strong.

University staff are not immune to biases about international students, such as the purported superiority of one cultural group over another; they must avoid imposing an ethnocentric attitude in their work, whether intentionally or unintentionally (Arthur 2004, p. 9). At the same time, the danger exists of labeling and overgeneralizing according to region and nationality. Cultural misunderstanding can exacerbate students' difficulties (*ibid.*). Staff should be sensitive to the need to adjust their counseling styles and instructional methods for students with diverse backgrounds. Cooperation and an exchange of knowledge between students and staff can enhance mutual understanding and facilitate development on both sides.

Conclusion

Universities throughout Europe are engaged in a process of harmonization through the Bologna process, which aimed to create a European area of higher education by 2010, making its higher education more compatible and comparable, competitive, and attractive for students and scholars within Europe and from other parts of the world. Given the increasing number and diversity of foreign students, we have explored two important developments in higher education today: the international and the intercultural dimension. The former focuses on strategies that attract students worldwide and enable them to study in a foreign context, such as programs taught in English; and activities that create a supportive campus environment, such as counseling on how to study or live in the host country. The latter stresses an open and dynamic interaction among different cultural groups—international students with domestic students, with university personnel, with the local community, and communication among international students themselves. After all, institutions are not only about getting students there and compensating for their “deficits” by asking them to accommodate to the mainstream values and “standards” to achieve success; but also about creating opportunities for cross-cultural communication, understanding the needs of international students, and transforming themselves as a response to a culturally diverse environment. In brief, the dynamics of internationalization and interculturalization are important driving forces in developing higher education.

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