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Strengthening the Intercultural Competence continuum: interventions to enhance staff engagement

Abstract

This article outlines a series of interventions aimed at strengthening the intercultural competence continuum of the European Studies programme of The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS), in the Netherlands. It involved an analysis of all intended learning outcomes (ILOs) and a process to support lecturers in reformulating and internationalising these learning outcomes. The interventions resulted in a truly international degree programme but more importantly, and simultaneously, they contributed to the commitment to and engagement in internationalisation among lecturers. Thus, the case of THUAS demonstrates that increasing the skills of lecturers can also result in addressing another key blocker: their lack of engagement in internationalisation.

Keywords

Staff engagement, internationalising learning outcomes, intercultural competence

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1 Introduction

This article presents a series of interventions undertaken by the European Studies bachelor degree programme of The Hague University of Applied Sciences from 2013 to 2016 in an attempt to strengthen the international and intercultural dimension of the degree programme including its subsequent assessment. The context is that of a Dutch university of applied sciences where lecturers are primarily involved in teaching duties and are much less active in research. In the Dutch binary system, as DE HAAN (2014, p. 255) observes, research universities have a longer history, and therefore also a longer history of internationalisation than universities of applied sciences. Moreover, as research is considered to be the lifeline of research universities, it is through research that staff mobility activities are far more firmly embedded, such as having international contacts, participating in international conferences and collaborating in international research projects (DE HAAN, 2014, pp. 243, 251). Consequently, internationalisation at Dutch universities of applied sciences may require a different approach.

As a point of departure, the article takes the perspectives of LI & TU (2016) and CHILDRESS (2010) that lecturers who perceive themselves as highly competent in international communication and learning are more actively engaged in internationalisation. In universities of applied sciences where internationalisation has not had as long a history as in research universities, and given the fact that the focus of internationalisation is shifting from international office to lecturers (BEELEN, 2015, p. 48), careful attention needs to be paid to professional development of lecturers so that they are equipped to teach internationalised curricula and perform in international classrooms. Lack of skills of academics has been identified to be a prominent blocker to today's internationalisation context where the discourse increasingly centres around outcomes of international and intercultural competences and their assessment (BEELEN, 2015, p. 50).

Even though a universal definition of an internationalised curriculum is lacking (BREWER & LEASK, 2012, p. 246), Leask's definition of internationalisation of the curriculum was chosen as this case study's theoretical framework, since it is

commonly cited: “Internationalisation of the curriculum is the incorporation of international, intercultural and global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods and support services of a program of study” (LEASK, 2015, p. 9).

The interventions presented in this article were aimed at strengthening the intercultural competence continuum across the curriculum of European Studies by creating awareness of how all staff contribute to internationalising the curriculum, and by equipping lecturers with the tools to articulate internationalised learning outcomes (henceforth LOs). In describing the interventions, the authors seek to contribute to the growing body of literature on engagement of lecturers and their role in internationalisation of higher education (e.g. BREWER & LEASK, 2012). Whereas many studies focus on engagement of academics in international mobility and research collaboration, and exploring the role of financial and organisational structures (e.g. CHILDRESS, 2009; FINKELSTEIN, WALKER & CHEN 2013), this article explores how engagement of lecturers in internationalisation of the curriculum can be enhanced through collegial dialogue.

2 Reflections on staff engagement

If internationalisation is to be a purposeful and meaningful process leading up to the achievement of defined international and intercultural competences, internationalising the content, delivery and learning environment of a programme of studies is of paramount importance to its success. This requires that the academic staff are mobilised as key stakeholders in internationalisation. STOHL’s observation (2007, p. 367) that if we want to internationalise a university, we have to internationalise the academics, is still as valid today as it was ten years ago and this issue remains relevant. In addition, FINKELSTEIN, WALKER & CHEN (2013, p. 326) acknowledge the central role of academics in internationalisation as “catalyst and initiators of international programs and collaborations and as the day-to-day implementers of new developments”.

Others too have mentioned the critical role that academic staff play in internationalisation (e.g. CHILDRESS, 2010; FRIESEN, 2013; LI & TU, 2016). Academic staff are involved both in cross-border activities such as research and conference papers, and embedding international perspectives and content in their subjects (LI & TU, 2016) and studies have centred around describing the nature and scale of such internationalisation involvement as well as identifying motivating factors that would positively influence the engagement of lecturers with internationalisation activities (FRIESEN, 2013; FINKELSTEIN, WALKER & CHEN, 2013).

In practice, international officers and administrators struggle to engage academics and thus advance internationalisation of the institution, as they often lack understanding of the disciplinary cultures and contexts that lecturers work in (STOHL, 2007, p. 369). Studies by Finkelstein et al. and Proctor found that institutionally channelled processes and pressures are not effective in motivating academics to engage with internationalisation (FINKELSTEIN et al., 2013, p. 338; PROCTOR, n.d., p. 20). In the Dutch context, the fact that most universities have an internationalisation policy but no strategies to support its implementation (VAN GAALLEN et al., 2014, pp. 7, 56) suggests that the same could apply to Dutch higher education.

Moreover, it has been observed that lack of financial resources stalls the implementation process of institutional internationalisation plans and is detrimental to engaging lecturers in international activities (CHILDRESS, 2009, p. 32). In another article, Childress also comments on the fact that faculty in general resist change and that internationalisation of the curriculum is in essence a change process (CHILDRESS, 2010, p. 72). This process of change can be impeded by institutional barriers, disciplinary orientations, and individual barriers such as attitudes of lecturers towards international learning, their own knowledge and skills and their cognitive competence (CHILDRESS, 2010, pp. 72-76). As regards individual barriers, Childress notes that institutions can encourage the involvement of lecturers through offering support in developing international knowledge and skills related to their discipline (CHILDRESS, 2010, p. 76), especially to those who have not interacted significantly with other cultures, either abroad or at home. Besides this, offering

guidance and training in pedagogy and assessment can enable academics to embed an international or intercultural dimension in their teaching and research.

Focusing on actively engaging academic staff across different disciplines and institutions, LEASK (2012) has provided a conceptual framework on internationalisation of the curriculum that considers the complexity and multifacetedness of the different contextual layers that academics are faced with. Considering that the core of internationalisation needs to be carried out by academics in disciplinary teams, she contends that team discussions of the rationales for internationalisation of the curriculum, joint goal setting and evaluation of performance is part of a reiterative process (LEASK, 2013, p. 110). Many universities fail in achieving their internationalisation goals as there is confusion over what internationalisation and internationalisation of the curriculum mean in practice. One of the strongest blockers that emerged from Leask's research was "the lack of guidance in connecting institutional policy and the curriculum" in addition to disciplinary ways of thinking (LEASK, 2013, p. 114). The most important enabler was found to be "the internationalized academic self" (LEASK, 2013, p. 114).

Another important enabler is interdisciplinarity. Leask mentions that "knowledge in and across disciplines is at the heart of internationalization of the curriculum" (LEASK, 2013, p. 111) and Childress states that an international mindset can be aided through an interdisciplinary mindset since it allows "faculty to synthesize, connect, and integrate knowledge from diverse settings" (CHILDRESS, 2009, p. 90). Indeed, disciplinary focus impacts the degree to which lecturers have been exposed to international perspectives and how they have been trained to integrate them in their fields. Some disciplines have been constructed more on the basis of domestic knowledge, whereas others appear to be "more international, global or comparative in nature" (CHILDRESS, 2009, p. 73).

The main lessons that can be drawn from the studies referred to above are that if lecturers are to play a meaningful role in internationalising curricula, academic ownership, professional development and collaboration across disciplines need to be fostered.

3 Background of the case: description of European Studies

This case study involves the European Studies degree programme, an interdisciplinary and international bachelor degree programme fully taught in English that imparts 21st century competences to international professionals. It combines the knowledge offered in a business and/or public management programme with communication, critical thinking and research skills with an international, intercultural and multi-lingual approach. This interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum makes European Studies a particularly receptive environment for internationalisation as interdisciplinarity has been identified as an enabler of internationalisation by both LEASK (2013) and CHILDRESS (2009).

Intercultural competence development in students and staff is the main driver for the programme's internationalisation activities; based on the work of DEARDORFF (2006) and BENNETT (2011), European Studies has defined intercultural competence as follows: "a lifelong intrinsic developmental process that transforms one's attitudes, knowledge and skills to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of different cultural backgrounds" (BULNES SÁNCHEZ & DE LOUW, 2017, p. 255). The manner in which intercultural competence has been embedded as a continuum in the curriculum is marked by integrating both discipline-specific international dimensions and aspects of appropriate and effective intercultural and linguistic skills in the modules. As a consequence, the learning outcomes of individual modules can show international or intercultural dimensions or both.

The diversity and relevant international experiences of the lecturers at European Studies together constitute another potential enabler for internationalisation. As a degree programme with a clear international dimension and focus, it is essential that lecturers embody this characteristic. In the selection process, careful attention is paid to the international experiences and skills of potential employees; the result is a team composition with the following profile:

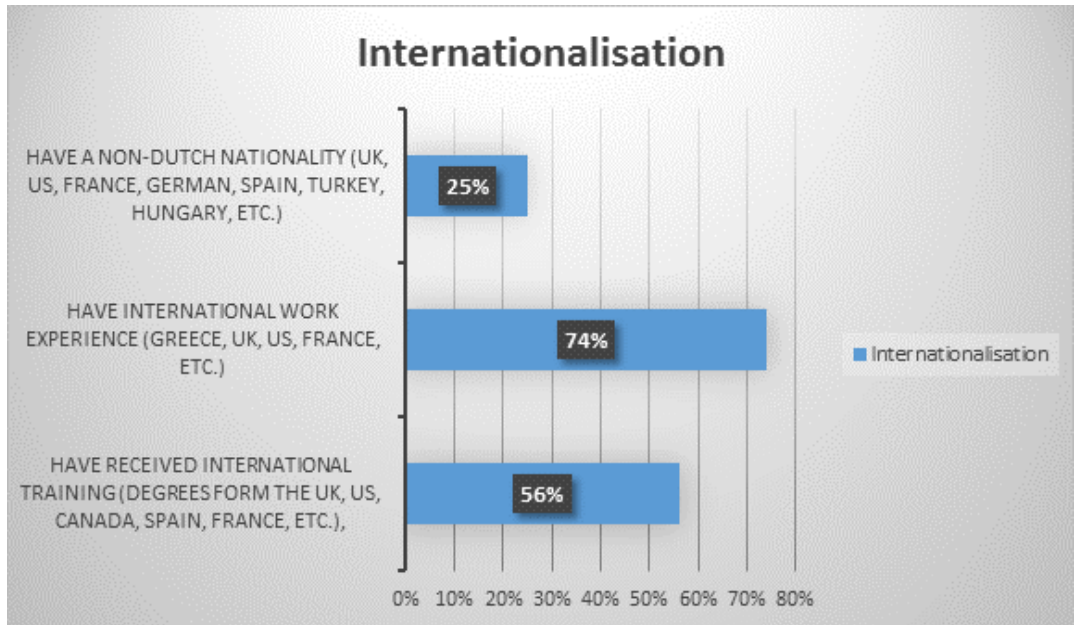


Figure 1. Team composition European Studies

The process of the interventions described in the following section was motivated by two main drivers in parallel. Firstly, in an attempt to delineate the intercultural competence continuum of the programme, the authors of the article initiated a project that involved an analysis of the LOs of all components of the programme with special attention to the explicit international/intercultural dimension and the alignment of such components in the programme. As two senior lecturers with extensive responsibilities in internationalisation and curriculum design as well as past management experience, it was easy for us to take a leadership role in this since there was already a relationship of trust with the lecturers.

Simultaneously, the programme was undergoing accreditation proceedings, which required an alignment of the LOs of the different units of the programme with a new national competency profile. Additionally, European Studies applied for a

distinctive quality feature in internationalisation by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). This involved meeting a number of requirements, including a clearly defined and embedded intercultural competence continuum which should be reflected at both programme and module levels aligned with a newly adopted national competency profile.

4 The process of interventions

As mentioned in the introduction, Dutch universities of applied sciences have less experience with internationalisation of the discipline and hence a contextualised approach is called for. This approach requires supporting lecturers in understanding the international dimension of their discipline and in explicitly formulating international LOs, thus enabling programmes to demonstrate students' international learning through assessment.

The need to document and strengthen the intercultural competence continuum on the basis of explicitly formulated international LOs led us to initiate a project in our roles of coordinators of internationalisation at European Studies. This resulted in a sequence of interventions which can be described in the following phases:

1. In the first instance, the project attempted to scrutinise the alignment of evident elements of internationalisation within the curriculum. The main purpose was to identify the international and intercultural dimension and its components. To that end, first an inventory of LOs was generated, which consisted of module LOs with explicit mention of the words 'global', 'international' and/or 'intercultural'. The inventory showed that 65% of the modules included those features. Although this was a reasonable percentage, it was still not optimal in a degree programme where the great majority of staff were claiming they incorporated international elements in their modules. In addition, the inventory revealed that LOs had been confused with learning objectives and that the actual wording of LOs left much to be desired for. We therefore concluded that there was an apparent lack of

skills in adequately formulating LOs. Further analysis caused the interventions to shift from compiling an inventory of LOs to reformulating them.

2. In order to achieve this, the services of an educational expert from a central university unit were employed to train lecturers in the double purpose of refining LOs as well as disclosing the international dimension of the components of the programme. This triggered a general sense of threat and rejection as lecturers claimed their area of expertise in what they experienced as the interference of a party from outside their discipline.
3. Consequently, an alternative approach was adopted. We considered it essential to give lecturers ownership of the process and empower them as experts in their disciplines. After consideration, we decided to work with a team of selected lecturers who had shown a better understanding of (internationalised) LOs than their peers, and who could act as ambassadors in their teams. Additionally, as project leaders we took on the role of *primi inter pares* and supported the team of ambassadors in this phase by providing them with the necessary tools to reformulate LOs for their modules. Their assignment also involved making suggestions for LOs of other modules in their disciplinary departments and formulate improved (internationalised) LOs in joint consultation with their colleagues. The use of ambassadors proved to be an effective manoeuvre in terms of ownership and empowerment. Lecturers were given ownership of the process, with the notion that they remained in charge of their disciplines with appropriate collegial support and without interference in the content of their subject areas. Moreover, the interdisciplinarity present in the team was beneficial to the process as, for instance, a Political Sciences lecturer would work together with a language teacher and provide suggestions to include the aspect of 'criticality'. This process of reframing LOs on the basis of different disciplinary lenses gave discussions fresh energy and generated new ideas.
4. The intervention resulted in a new overview of LOs in which each module showed correctly formulated LOs as well as explicit internation-

al/intercultural dimensions. With the newly formulated LOs, it was time again to redirect the process towards the analysis of the intercultural competence continuum. By means of semi-structured one-to-one interviews with module developers, we went on to establish the relation of the different modules of the programme. The instrument used during the interviews was a predefined list of knowledge, skills and attitudes for intercultural competence, which had been compiled for the European Studies programme on the basis of different resources, such as the VALUE rubrics of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2010). The focus of the interviews was to identify which elements of intercultural competence were assessed in which modules as it is fundamentally through assessment that student development in intercultural competence can be demonstrated.

5. The outcomes of the interviews resulted in a transparent overview of where and how intercultural competence is embedded in the programme. Moreover, another result of the whole process was an engaged team of lecturers with a clear understanding of how their disciplinary units contribute to an internationalised curriculum and primarily to the intercultural development of students. The exercise of mapping the intercultural competence continuum made the role of every component of the curriculum visible within the larger context of European Studies. This definitely enhanced engagement and turned lecturers into enablers.

The process described above can be summarised in the visual below:

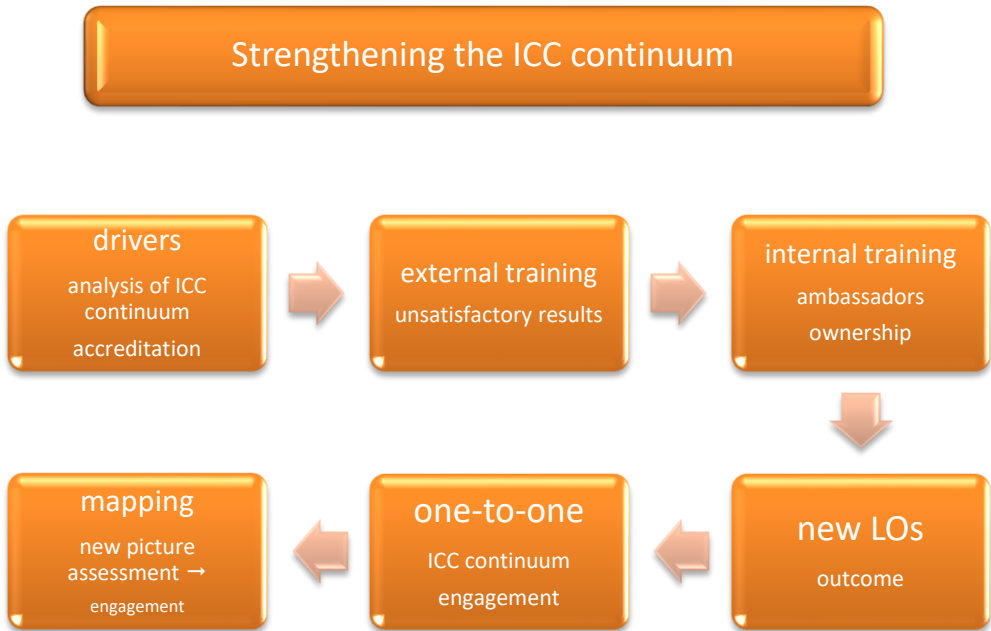


Figure 2. Strengthening the ICC continuum of the European Studies programme at THUAS.

Even though we believe that the interventions can be duplicated in other institutions, this study has certain limitations. The European Studies programme is an international and interdisciplinary programme and its lecturers may therefore have been receptive to internationalisation of the curriculum. The commitment of management in different levels of the institution in supporting global citizenship and internationalisation and the ambitions of the programme to excel in internationalisation provided us with a mandate. Moreover, our own positions within the organisation as recognised experts in internationalisation and trusted insiders for our col-

leagues allowed us to exercise considerable influence on the entire process. For a more purposeful application of the interventions, future research could take a wider process approach and consider other elements such as internal resources, planning and staff professionalisation.

5 Conclusion

The interventions above illustrate how clarification of concepts and objectives of internationalisation for a particular degree programme combined with targeted training have contributed to strengthening the international and intercultural dimension of a curriculum and have turned lecturers into true enablers of internationalisation of the curriculum. Moreover, the process of the interventions has shown that interdisciplinarity encourages an international mindset of faculty.

What started as a project and preparations for an accreditation cycle ended as a journey of discovery towards faculty engagement in internationalisation. Initially carried by two members of staff, in the end the endeavour had become a process of engagement where all lecturers were involved, contributed and shared in the ownership of an internationalised curriculum. In retrospect, the following ingredients proved to be pivotal in achieving the goals of the project:

- Conceptualising internationalisation: A clear definition of intercultural competence in the context of European Studies with a break down into specific knowledge areas, skills and attitudinal elements allowed lecturers to reflect on specific components of intercultural competence and define how their subject fits into the curriculum as a whole. Unclear conceptualisation of internationalisation has been identified as a main obstacle in internationalising curricula (BEELEN, 2015, p. 49).
- Equipping lecturers with the skills and tools to formulate internationalised LOs: BEELEN (2015) notes how critical it is to be able to formulate clear and specific LOs since they express the quality of an internationalised curriculum. Training a few key lecturers in formulating and internationalising

LOs built confidence and enabled them to help their peers. In addition, presenting module developers with an overview of the knowledge, skills and attitudes linked to intercultural competence for the European Studies curriculum made the task simpler and manageable. The language used in the defined subcategories of intercultural competence was more concrete and module developers found it easier to incorporate them in their modules.

- Before the series of interventions, two key enablers of the programme had neither been identified nor utilised intentionally: interdisciplinarity and the international team composition. This was reflected in the curriculum where the international and intercultural dimension was rather implicit and a sense of purpose was lacking. However, the interdisciplinarity and the diversity of views present in the team of lecturers who were trained in the process proved to be instrumental in generating ideas and input needed to internationalise LOs within a specific subject area.
- Lastly, the peer-to-peer dialogues discussing intercultural competence assessment within individual modules proved to be the ultimate catalyst of staff engagement. Not only did the process lead to enhanced understanding and support of intercultural competence of individual lecturers, it also showed ways in which assessment of student learning in specific modules could be improved. For instance, some lecturers realised that whilst certain elements of intercultural competence were addressed in class, intentionality was lacking as those aspects were not assessed at the end of the module.

In conclusion, the focus of the interventions was on the formulation of internationalised LOs of the formal curriculum. The outcomes, however, were not only a fully internationalised curriculum but also increased staff engagement with a clear understanding of how each module fits in the larger context of ICC development. Even though the interventions were not specifically aimed at staff engagement, it was this that eventually determined their success.

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