

Internationalisation of the curriculum: A case study from Hungary

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Background

In recent decades the importance of building knowledge economies has led to a demand for highly skilled workforce which resulted in several developments and trends of the education and training sector in the Hungarian context and outside of it (e.g., globally, global-regionally). Knowledge economies that rely on »intellectual capital« pushed higher education institutions to put more emphasis on developing international and intercultural competence for students and academics as well; therefore internationalisation has become one of the most significant trends concerning higher education institutions (Hayes, 2020). Internationalisation of higher education refers to certain processes that enable the institutions to become more international meanwhile maintaining national features of the local higher education system, therefore the term often concerns mobility programmes, bilateral collaborations, international research networks and English-taught degree programmes for foreign students. On the other hand, recent scholarly research emphasizes that internationalisation requires a shift from quantity towards enhancing quality in higher education 'at home' and therefore place the focus more on the domestic learning environments instead of mobility indicators (Leask, 2015; Beelen, 2015; De Wit, 2010). According to the definition of Knight, internationalisation by definition is »the process of integrating international, intercultural and global dimensions into post-secondary education« however, it should not be the privilege of mobile

students and academics only (Knight, 2004: 11). The incorporation of such dimensions according to Leask, should also focus on the curriculum content as well as on the learning outcomes, teaching methods, and support services of a program of study (Leask, 2009: 209). So who is really responsible for internationalisation at a given higher education institution? Meanwhile the traditional approach according to Leask leads to international officers as the key stakeholders and mobility indicators, a recent, often unrecognized shift can be seen towards academics who create the curriculum content and teaching-learning approaches (Leask, 2013). In the Hungarian academic context, this so called traditional approach regarding internationalisation is still more relevant, with more emphasis on mobile teaching staff and on building up international research networks of academics. As a recent research project conducted with Hungarian teaching staff highlighted (Teach with Erasmus+ Research Report - Horváth, Hangyál, Kasza, & Czirfusz, 2020), international (short-term) teaching experiences rather lead to personal professional benefits in the field of research and new academic connections than to revised teaching methods and content.

Internationalised curriculum in practice

The broader idea of an internationalised curriculum is that it could and should be applied to any classroom in any learning environment, concerning students of any background and characteristics. Recent literature regarding implementing global and intercultural skills often emphasizes on the students' own learning process and on the individual interpretation of teaching content: the so-called transformational learning approach (Jones et al, 2016). Transformational learning is essential for curriculum internationalisation as it focuses on

exposing students to alternative perspectives and cultural contexts /.../ which can result in questioning of personal identity, values, beliefs and mindsets, and can offer significant results in terms of personal growth /.../ maturity and enhanced intercultural competence and transversal or employability skills (Jones et al, 2016:3).

In practice, transformational learning can be enhanced both at creating the teaching content and in respect of learning-teaching methodologies. As for creating enhanced teaching content, introducing local cultural, ethnic or religious groups, international organisations or volunteering agen-

cies into class topics, or even organizing field trips is a way to expose students to different cultural contexts and to global dimensions of the given subject. Transformational learning activities also aim at exploiting the diversity within the classroom: the diverse background of students can create different perspectives and a rich variety of possible teaching content (ibid). In means of teaching methods, transformational education rather expects teachers to act as facilitators who guide students through an inquiry-based process in order for them to craft their own interpretations of the topics presented and of the literature: in this way learning becomes more of a personal learning process. Therefore, the task of the teacher is to design learning activities that enable students to become proficient in self-assessment, inquiry, evidence evaluation and collaboration with peers.

Case study and methods

The initiative of creating university course focusing on the internationalisation of the curriculum comes from two university lecturers who mainly work in the fields of sociology, pedagogy, cultural and higher education studies at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, Hungary. The elective course shaped around the idea of merging non-formal teaching and learning methods, teaching content with intercultural and global dimensions with transformational learning experiences within a course whereas the majority of students are Erasmus incoming mobility students and the language of instruction is English. The course has been running for 5 semesters so far with increasing number of international students, and a rather scarce number of Hungarian participants (6 out of 68 in total). Through document analysis the following section the study presents how the lecturers introduced a more internationalised curriculum within the course (by implementing global and intercultural dimensions into the teaching content) merging with other teaching-learning methods such as transformational- nonformal learning or flexible curriculum design. The study also involved student evaluation survey analysis about the teaching content and teaching methods, thus classroom observation. The written student evaluation survey's questions focused on the knowledge gained about the classroom topics and the local cultural context, opinions about the classroom activities, and suggestions for improving the course in general. Participation in the written evaluation survey was voluntary and anonymous, and 65% of the students filled in the questionnaire from which 76% were female students. The age cohort of the participants of the evaluation survey is be-

tween 20-33 years. As the survey applied only open-ended questions, the study involved qualitative data analysis.

Curriculum design for an internationalised syllabus

In creating the course structure the lecturers emphasized on internationalisation of the curriculum by involving intercultural and global dimensions into the teaching content, methods and classroom activities. Therefore it was important to set the purpose of the course and the preferred learning outcomes in the syllabus:

The main purpose of the course is to better understand cultural diversity and the realities of culturally diverse societies. The course helps students understand the positions of people of different backgrounds through the toolkit of sociology and cultural anthropology. The involvement of non-formal teaching and learning methods helps to interpret and analyse concepts of stereotypes and to find possible solutions for multicultural challenges. Further aim is active student involvement in the class topics: each participant should reflect on his or her standpoint, experiences and cultural educational background throughout the semester, therefore active classroom participation is a must. (Extract from the syllabus)

In means of transformational learning, the aim of the course was to make students more interested in learning about the classroom topics and to motivate them to participate actively in the classroom activities. For this reason, the lecturers introduced a flexible curriculum design that allowed students to choose the topics of their interest at the beginning of each semester. The main course topics were cultural anthropology, cultures and subcultures, cultural diversity, ethnicity, the concept of nation, neo-nationalism, stereotypes, sexual and gender minorities, research methods. Furthermore, the lecturers' intention was also to involve the local (Hungarian) context into the teaching content, therefore concerning the topics of neo-nationalism case studies from Hungary were presented, for example a documentary reflecting Hungarian rock music subculture which also helped to reflect upon national symbols and concepts of collective memory. Throughout the semesters most voted topics were chosen to be the main classroom themes to discuss and plan around the classroom activities, thus shaped the directions towards the final individual/group assignments. The

main topics which are discussed during the lectures also give the basis for individual homework and reflection papers. According to the syllabus, the students' final grade consists of the quality of classroom participation, individual assignments on course topics, and of the final individual or group assignment. Based on the experiences of past semesters, the lecturers created a clear syllabus and framework for students that consist of expectations, requirements and continuous evaluation.

Teaching methods and transformational learning

Apart from the teaching content which revolves around diversity and culture, the heterogeneity of participating students coming from different countries was also in favour for creating global and intercultural dimensions within the class. This fact also helped in shaping the teaching methods towards interactive classroom activities that encouraged students to engage with others from diverse cultural and educational background and to create working relationships through group projects. Lecturing was minimized to introduce key concepts and definitions in order to make students understand the basic concepts and give background knowledge for discussion. Teaching methods involved playful activities (for example, reading Horace Miner's article on the 'Nacirema' culture to understand Cultural Anthropology narratives only to find out that the story is about American culture) whereas students' creative task was to create a similar riddle of a national custom from an outsider's perspective. Personalization of the teaching content also played an important role in planning out the activities: for example, in grasping the meanings of culture and identity, students' task was to bring an object to class that represents their identity. Another teaching method in favour of transformational learning aimed at aligning the classroom topics with non-formal activities, such as role-play and games that served to grasp the idea of diversity and among others, the differences between prejudice and discrimination. Practical application of the topics happened by organizing field trip to the local library and introducing the activity: Judge a book by its cover! - where the students have to apply their ideas about visual representation of discrimination and stereotypes.

Student evaluation survey - Findings

The first questions of the evaluation survey concerned the knowledge gained after the course about the classroom topics and the local, Hungarian

cultural context. Students emphasized on learning about classroom topics and deepening their understanding in certain aspects: “I knew stereotypes exist but I wasn’t able to look beyond them, nor giving a precise definition of it.” The term ‘intersectionality’ also got mentioned most of the times as a new concept for many students. As far as it concerns gaining knowledge about the Hungarian cultural context, the evaluation survey shows that although most of the students really enjoyed the topics related to the Hungarian culture (such as neonationalism), they haven’t felt the amount of classroom topics was satisfactory in this regard and that they would like to have a larger overview of such topics (20%). As an additional outcome result of the questionnaire more students (about 30%) mentioned that thanks to the final assignment project they gained knowledge in research methodology (DIVE method, approach of intersectionality).

The next questions of the survey concerned opinions about the classroom activities. Findings show that students enjoyed the most interactive classroom activities such as group work, nonformal creative exercises, energizers and icebreakers; thus practical activities such as the library fieldtrip. As students have expressed, “with these kinds of activities you learn more than studying from a book’ and ‘they make learning much more enjoyable’. Due to the nature of the Faculty, a great percentage of the students study for becoming pre-school teachers: therefore they mentioned that some of the activities (especially ice-breakers) were beneficial because they could implement them in their own teaching practice later on. Group activities were underlined by other students but rather for the sake of being confronted by different perspectives (“it is good to have a conversation with someone who doesn’t have the same point of view”) or because of “learning something by doing not just by sitting and listening”).

The last question also asked survey participants about suggestions for improving the course in general; and some of the students would appreciate making the course more dynamic and fill the course content with more interactive games and activities. As it was mentioned before, most of the students would like to learn more about Hungarian culture and even the political context. Due to the flexible curriculum design not all the topics could get involved in the final course structure which has led to some negative opinion/room for improvement from the students. Other suggestions for improvement mainly concerned technical issues and the lecturers’ abilities: time- management, having a clearer structure at times.

As a conclusion of the survey and classroom observations, most of the students gained new knowledge in diversity stereotypes, discrimination, local Hungarian culture, nonformal teaching-learning and research methods. Although the semesters did not give the opportunity to fully emerge in these topics, some of the students expressed a shift in their understandings ('Before this class, stereotypes were always negative for me, and I learned they don't have to be' or 'Now I am more aware of the bubbles I live in') which means that these student participants have questioned their interpretations of the classroom topics and somehow became more aware of their own learning process- that can be assumed as transformational learning. On the other hand, to make a more direct link of student experiences to transformational learning, an extended research needs to be done in the future by involving focus groups or semi-structured interviews. As far as the data concerning the syllabus and the teaching content shows, implementing a more internationalised curriculum got mostly positive feedbacks and evaluation, with some room for improvement (time management, more topics on local cultural context, better structure of the syllabus).

Discussion

The study aimed to show how a university course could apply a more internationalised curriculum with experimental design, intercultural and global dimensions in the teaching content and with approaches aiming at transformational learning. Although further research is needed to analyse the links between internationalised curriculums and transformational learning, the case study showed how such course initiatives could bring curricular and instructional changes into domestic institutional environments in the means of internationalisation.

Literature

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