



Introduction to the International Classroom

The International Classroom

Thematic Text

Abstract

This text is a thematic introduction to the international classroom. It briefly introduces the conceptual underpinnings of the EQUIiP programme – *Designing and Teaching Inclusive International Programmes* – as well as the *Good Practice Principles for Learning and Teaching Across Cultures*.

The EQUIiP programme is based on the following widely recognised concepts: Comprehensive Internationalisation (Hudzik, 2011; 2015), Internationalisation of Higher Education (de Wit et al. 2015), Internationalisation of the Curriculum (Leask 2015), Internationalisation at Home (Beelen & Jones 2015), and Intercultural Competence Development (Gregersen-Hermans 2016).

The introduction is meant as preparation for participants in the first module of the EQUIiP Programme, *Introduction to the International Classroom*. It provides a common point of departure for the activities in the module, but it may also be used as background information for participants in any one of the other modules of the EQUIiP programme.

Keywords

Comprehensive internationalisation; internationalisation of higher education; internationalisation of the curriculum; internationalisation at home; intercultural competence; good practice principles for learning and teaching across cultures





The International Classroom

Introduction

The concept of the international classroom is multi-faceted. Different actors will relate different realities to the concept. For instance, for some people, the international classroom has a considerable volume of mobile, international students, is taught in English, has (comparative) international disciplinary content, has internationalised learning outcomes, or is taught in a specific way. And, as there is not one commonly agreed definition of an international classroom, one, more, or all of the above may be characteristics of a given higher education setting referred to as an international classroom.

In the EQUIiP programme, *Designing and Teaching Inclusive, International Programmes*, the concept of the international classroom is based on recent and widely accepted literature in the field. This thematic introduction will briefly introduce these conceptual underpinnings and outline how they are related to each other, to intercultural competence development, and to teaching and learning across cultures. Together they form the theoretical foundation of the modules in the programme and are briefly introduced and discussed in the module *Introduction to the International Classroom*.

The International Classroom: Conceptual underpinnings

The conceptual underpinnings of the EQUIiP programme comprise the following: Comprehensive Internationalisation (Hudzik, 2011; 2015), Internationalisation of Higher Education (de Wit et al. 2015), Internationalisation of the Curriculum (Leask 2015), Internationalisation at Home (Beelen & Jones 2015), and Intercultural Competence Development (Gregersen-Hermans 2016). It goes without saying that, by focusing on these concepts, quite specific choices have been made in the preparations of the EQUIiP programme, thereby also leaving out concepts and approaches that might have served similar purposes.

The scope of this thematic introduction is such that each of these concepts will only be listed with a brief introduction and definition. The interested reader is encouraged to consult the literature mentioned under References below.

Comprehensive Internationalisation

Hudzik (2011; 2015) takes a strategic and institutional perspective on the internationalisation of higher education, research, and service to the community. To him, Comprehensive Internationalisation is a

commitment confirmed through action to infuse international and comparative perspectives throughout the teaching, research and service missions of higher education. It shapes institutional ethos and values and touches the entire



higher education enterprise ... It is an institutional imperative, not just a desirable possibility ... [It] not only impacts all of campus life but the institution's external frames of reference, partnerships and relations. (Hudzik 2011:6)

Such a pervasive strategy, and the full implementation of it, may be a declared goal in a given higher education institution. However, in most cases it is – and may remain – a distant goal rather than the current reality. Even so, the modules in the EQUIiP programme would all support a strategy by means of which a given higher education institution is in fact seeking to live up to the full concept of Comprehensive Internationalisation.

Internationalisation of Higher Education

Zooming in on the educational mission, de Wit et al. (2015) further developed an already existing definition of the Internationalisation of Higher Education. Around Europe, this definition now seems to be widely accepted, and it is also a cornerstone in the conceptual underpinnings of the EQUIiP programme:

[Internationalisation of Higher Education is] the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society. (de Wit et al. 2015:29)

As in Hudzik's definition above, the Internationalisation of Higher Education is a pervasive concept, here also explicitly considered a driver for the quality of education and research.

At least in continental Europe, the Internationalisation of Higher Education is often understood as a rather limited concept referring to student (and staff) mobility and to teaching through English (English Medium Instruction or EMI). The de Wit et al. definition is much more comprehensive and ambitious than that. It is therefore noteworthy that neither mobility nor EMI is explicitly mentioned, but is rather considered two of several means to achieve internationalisation. In other words, an international programme is not necessarily targeted towards mobile (international) students, but may be taught in the local language to local students only, developing these local students' intercultural competences and preparing them for life and work in a globalised world.

Two other concepts are closely linked to this understanding of higher education internationalisation: Internationalisation of the Curriculum and Internationalisation at Home. They will be briefly outlined below.



Internationalisation of the Curriculum

Based on a large Australian project, Leask defined internationalisation of the curriculum as an international, intercultural and global dimension of the learning outcomes, content, and assessment as well as the teaching and learning activities:

Internationalization of the curriculum is the incorporation of international, intercultural and/or 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 2015:9)

Internationalisation of the curriculum is an intentional and purposeful process that is focused on assuring that all students are given the opportunity to achieve internationalised and intercultural learning outcomes and graduate attributes. When comparing the two, it is also obvious that this concept has informed de Wit et al.'s definition of internationalisation outlined above.

In the EQUiP programme, this is dealt with in the module on *Internationalising Course Design*.

Internationalisation at Home

Internationalisation has developed from focusing exclusively on the local (home) students to comprise all students:

Internationalization at Home is the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments. (Beelen & Jones 2015:69)

In the early days of the Erasmus programme, the ambition was that all students (at least 80 per cent) should have an international experience as, for instance, exchange students in another European country. Since then, it has become apparent that such a goal is unrealistic, and that even a goal of 20 per cent of all students with an international experience is ambitious. This reality has led to an increased focus on developing the international and intercultural dimension also for the non-mobile students, making the mobility schemes one of several ways to internationalise a curriculum and develop the students' intercultural competences. The modules of the EQUiP programme all support the development of Internationalisation at Home.

Intercultural Competence

The three concepts mentioned above – Internationalisation of Higher Education (de Wit et al. 2015), Internationalisation of the Curriculum (Leask 2015), and Internationalisation at Home (Beelen and Jones 2015) – all mention the international and intercultural dimension



of a programme of study. In doing so, they implicitly refer to the development of students' intercultural competences as an explicit learning outcome or graduate attribute.

In the EQUiIP programme, Gregersen-Herman's concept of the interculturally competent graduate is applied. An interculturally competent graduate is

able to understand, evaluate and relate to ambiguous and uncertain situations and to make culturally correct attributions. This is someone who realizes the relative validity of his or her own frame of reference, yet is firmly rooted in it. This individual is also able to select and use communication styles and behaviour that fit a specific local or intercultural context. An intercultural interaction is seen as successful when interactants (or the systems of interactants) are able to develop shared meaning, while acknowledging their own and others' sociocultural context. (Gregersen-Hermans 2016:111)

In the EQUiIP thematic introduction *Integrating Intercultural Competence in the Curriculum*, this concept of the interculturally competent graduate is introduced together with six key points about intercultural competence development.

In the EQUiIP programme, this is specifically dealt with in the module on *Intercultural Group Dynamics*.

The EQUiIP conceptual foundation: Take-away messages

As it appears from the above, these conceptual underpinnings form a coherent foundation for the five modules of the EQUiIP programme. The key take-away messages are that an international programme is targeted at all students, whether local or mobile, may be taught in any language that students and lecturers share, and seeks to develop students' international understanding and intercultural competence as part of their graduate attributes. This conceptual basis is the underlying ethos of all programme modules, recognising and respecting diversity as a given in international education.

The Good Practice Principles for Learning and Teaching Across Cultures

While it is important to establish such a conceptual foundation and underlying ethos, the concepts introduced above all belong on a meta-level of higher education internationalisation and do not offer any indication as to how these ideas should be realised in very concrete terms in the international classroom. In order to move a little bit closer to that, the first introduction to the international classroom therefore also introduces the *Good Practice Principles for Learning and Teaching Across Cultures* (Leask & Carroll 2013; Carroll 2015; Leask 2015).



These Good Practice Principles (GPP) are meant to be used when planning one's teaching in the international classroom, but they may also be applied when one tries to understand what might have gone wrong in an international classroom context:

- Treat all students as learners.
- Respect and adjust for diversity.
- Provide specific, explicit information that fits the context.
- Foster engagement and intercultural dialogue.
- Use reflection as a teacher: Be flexible, evaluate and use the results to make adjustments/changes.
- Prepare students for life in a globalising, diverse and interconnected world.

The GPP are closely linked to each other and overlap to a certain degree. Let us look at them in turn.

Treat all students as learners

Lecturers not used to a high level of diversity in their classrooms, will often focus on what some students are not able to do rather than the opposite. In order to avoid such a deficit discourse, this first principle encourages the lecturer to acknowledge that all students are still learners. They have different educational backgrounds, knowledge, skills, and competences, and therefore also different learning needs in order to achieve the learning goals defined for a given programme or module.

The challenge for the lecturer is obviously to identify these learning needs and find ways to scaffold the individual students' learning while staying on course with the disciplinary content of the module. For instance, some students have more experience with writing reports within the discipline, or in a specific language, while others come from an educational background where they have not been required to write such reports. Therefore, the latter group of students will need to develop that skill. Likewise, there may be differences among students in their ability to work with both quantitative and qualitative methods, or with specific statistical programmes. Or there may be considerable diversity regarding students' disciplinary knowledge or intercultural communication skills. But they are all learners with strengths – and some weaknesses as well.

Respect and adjust for diversity

Following from the first principle, lecturers should respect this diversity rather than playing some sort of blame game. Students and lecturers without previous international experience may mistakenly think that the way they have been used to doing things, is the only one



way to do it. When they realise that this is not the case, lecturers need to develop their respect for the diversity in the international classroom and adjust for it in the way they prepare and teach their classes.

Provide specific, explicit information that fits the context

Because of the diversity in the international classroom, it is important that no one takes anything for granted. Local students, and their lecturers, will typically share a lot of tacit knowledge about 'how we do this'. This knowledge is probably not shared by all students, and it is therefore important that lecturers make sure they provide specific and explicit information to all students. This may pertain to all rules and regulations, what is required in class, as preparation, or exactly what is required at the exams. For instance, there may be an exam format (oral or written) that some students have never tried before, so they must be given the opportunity to try the format before a final exam, e.g. in mock exams or as written assignments in the course of the academic term.

Foster engagement and intercultural dialogue

Students do not automatically learn from each other just by attending the same programme or being in the same classroom. If students are to develop their intercultural competences as part of an academic programme, they can only do so by working together in a meaningful way. It is not enough to take a course about cultural differences or intercultural communication.

Lecturers should therefore be advised to foster the engagement of all students through meaningful and purposeful teaching and learning activities where students work together, learn from each other and, not least, also learn to consider (potential) conflicts as learning moments in which they are able to develop their intercultural competences.

Use reflection as a teacher: Be flexible, evaluate and use the results to make adjustments/changes

The first four principles may be considered pieces of good advice for any lecturer. They are basically advice on how to teach in a way that is conducive to students' learning. It should be noted, however, that they become much more important when the student cohort becomes more diverse – and students have different linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds in addition to the demographic and social differences that will always be there (socio-economic background, age, gender, race, religious beliefs, etc.), cf. also Jones (2017).

This principle therefore encourages the lecturers to develop as reflective practitioners, always assessing the outcomes of their teaching, reflecting on what went well and perhaps not so well, and seek ways to constantly develop the quality of their teaching – also in the international classroom.



Prepare students for life in a globalising, diverse and interconnected world

The fact of the matter is, that with internationalised curricula, students are expected to develop knowledge, skills and competences that prepare them for life and work in a complex world – whether they stay in their local environments or move around the world. The lecturers have an important role to play here, supporting the students’ development of these competences in the course of their programmes of study.

The interested reader may read more on the GPP in Leask & Carroll (2013); Carroll (2015) addressed teaching in the international classroom.

Conclusion

This thematic introduction to the international classroom has briefly introduced the conceptual underpinnings of the EQUiIP programme – *Designing and Teaching Inclusive International Programmes* – as well as the *Good Practice Principles for Learning and Teaching Across Cultures*.

The introduction is meant as preparation for participants in the first module, Introduction to the International Classroom, in order to have a common point of departure for the activities in the module. It may also be used as background information for participants in any one of the other modules of the EQUiIP programme.

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