

Internationalisation of the Curriculum in Action

Case Study: Public Relations

This case study was developed as part of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council National Teaching Fellowship, *Internationalisation of the Curriculum in Action* in 2010-2011. One of the outputs of the fellowship was a process model of internationalisation of the curriculum. The model identifies five-stages of internationalisation of the curriculum:

- Review and Reflect
- Imagine
- Revise and Plan
- Act
- Evaluate

More details of the process model and supporting resources are available from www.ioc.net.au or from the Fellow, Associate Professor Betty Leask betty.leask@unisa.edu.au .

As you read through this case study think about the following questions:

1. What are the enabling factors within the institutional context?
2. What does the case study tell you about the process of IoC?
3. What does it tell you about the product, an internationalised curriculum?
4. What questions does it raise for you?

Introduction

The teaching team of this Public Relations program already had significant experience in implementing the objectives of curriculum internationalisation. This had occurred in the context of teaching significant numbers of international students as well as teaching offshore in a number of locations. On this occasion the team used the QIC as a catalyst for change and as a result conducted a series of interviews with major employers of their graduates both in Australia as well as offshore. They then used these data to further interrogate their program, and make decisions about change and innovation.

Institutional context

The university is a research intensive university of 18,000 students, including around 2000 international students. The university offers a number of programs offshore, predominantly in Asia. It has recently established a broad-ranging internationalisation policy. This policy emphasises that internationalisation is for all staff and students, recognizing that the university itself functions in a complex local, international and global environment, and that all graduates are being prepared to live and work in a globalizing world. The policy makes reference to nurturing a 'culture of internationalisation' as well as promoting, supporting and recognising efforts to internationalise the curriculum. The policy also recognises the highly discipline-specific nature of internationalisation of

the curriculum. Although the policy aims to ‘encourage and facilitate formal and informal “student engagement” in the classroom context’, it is less concrete on what this involves, i.e. the valuing of alternative points of view, and the building of this into assessment tasks that still achieve academic goals. The policy is also not specific about how staff will be rewarded for actively seeking to further the internationalisation of their courses and indeed their own understandings of their discipline and their professional selves. Finally, the policy contains provisions for quality assurance monitoring of its internationalisation policy through ‘surveys and external benchmarking audits that include measures of internationalisation at the informal and formal curriculum level.’ The nominated performance indicators focus on measures of student and staff exchange, and the retention of international students.

The university has a set of nine graduate attributes which are further broken down into sub-attributes. Individual schools interpret these sub-attributes to show what they mean in particular disciplines and professions. The nine attributes include one called global perspectives and the sub-attributes of this and other attributes include social and civic responsibility, the ability to collaborate and negotiate and to work in teams, knowledge of other cultures and awareness of the interconnectedness of life and work in a globalised world. The website states that students should have the chance to develop the attributes no matter which course of study they complete.

The process of IoC

Reviewing and Reflecting

The teaching context for this team was complex: they taught several offshore programmes in very diverse locations and issues of consistency in delivery and assessment across onshore and offshore programmes were prominent. The core team of three staff involved in the project had previously engaged in internationalisation of the curriculum, focused mainly on adapting the curriculum to suit the needs of international students.

A paper co-authored by a senior lecturer in 2006 mapped out the issues as they were perceived at that time, as well as the responses to them by the teaching team. Reflection on this paper formed part of the process of *Reviewing and Reflecting* as part of the IoC process in 2010. Issues raised in the paper included how teaching academics grapple with the implications of globalisation, both from a professional point of view (aiming to be ‘globally competent’ academics), as well from the perspective of dealing with the practical implications of the student mix in courses taught in Australia and offshore. In a course taken as the case study for the paper, over half the students were international students, including a significant number enrolled as offshore students. The authors present themselves with the challenge of engaging in a meaningful way with students with such diverse backgrounds some of which they know very little about, despite the best of intentions.

In this 2006 paper the authors noted that they were continually challenged by concerns of being complicit in Western cultural imperialism. They noted in particular that the Western educational paradigm of so-called deep learning was usually associated with a list of descriptors that closely matches the sought-after qualities of public relations graduates, including the ability to communicate effectively, think critically and solve problems creatively. Their response to this and other issues of ‘Western educational imperialism’, in particular as mediated by academic literacies, was the practice, as advocated in curriculum internationalisation literature, of making explicit not

only assessment expectations, but also the implicit assumptions of Western education. This was complemented by using the students themselves to provide specific cultural context, as well as providing assessment options which allowed international students to write about non-Western examples of public relations practice.

The paper also noted that an issue of particular relevance for the public relations profession is the use of non-standard forms of English, especially when this is the variant of English with which the target audience of public relations output is most familiar. The authors acknowledged that they were still grappling with this issue and what it might mean for their program.

In 2010 the team engaged again in the process of internationalisation of the curriculum as part of their ongoing commitment to continuous quality improvement. They began by using an early version of the Questionnaire on Internationalisation of the Curriculum (QIC) and reflecting on their previous engagement in the process of IoC (as outlined above), the range of international activities they were already engaged in and the pressure this put them under. On the positive side, team members noted that involvement in transnational teaching had broadened their intellectual horizons, stimulated research, and enriched the onshore curriculum. In particular, it had heightened awareness of the need for ensuring that all students are engaged in an internationalised curriculum, as typically envisaged by statements of graduate attributes. Above all, internationalisation of the curriculum was seen as an ongoing process of self-development for staff and students.

At the beginning of the process in 2010 it was clear that core members of the teaching team felt that they had already taken large strides towards internationalisation in their courses and teaching, and were wondering what else they could do. Many also felt constrained by lack of time and the awareness that other team members felt similarly constrained. Some observed that a great deal of work had been devoted to the topic in the past, with very little to show for it. Nevertheless the team, and in particular the team leader, were open to new ideas and new ways to improve existing approaches to internationalisation of the curriculum. At the first meeting in November, 2010, the teaching team made use of the QIC as a way of obtaining an overview of the depth of internationalisation across the program, and as a means of stimulating discussion, encouraging understanding and clarification of the concepts involved, as well as generating ideas for specific initiatives to further the internationalisation of the program curriculum.

They identified a number of opportunities in the current institutional environment. Firstly, internationalisation of the curriculum resonated with the University's 'global citizenship' graduate attribute. Secondly, a project had started to measure course quality across a number of measures; internationalisation of the curriculum could possibly be incorporated into this process. Thirdly, the team recognized that the experience garnered from their involvement in transnational teaching, coupled with their commitment to the continuous improvement in the quality of teaching and learning provided a wealth of resources for further work in internationalisation of the curriculum.

In relation to the development of graduate attributes they commented that they had 'worked with the generic graduate attributes of global perspectives and social justice'. They were not sure 'how we assess these things' but wanted to 'embed intercultural competence as a specific learning outcome in the public relations degree' (testimony of a public relations academic, 2011).

A number of possibilities for further internationalisation initiatives in the PR Program were identified:

1. More detailed and thorough interpretation of the global citizenship graduate attribute in a specific Public Relations discipline context and exploration of what that might mean for the PR curriculum.
2. While it was acknowledged that intercultural and cross-cultural competences were being developed in a number of courses in the program, it was also recognised that this was mainly implicit and not implemented in a strategic way across the program. Taking a program level view and making the development of these competences explicit in course documentation and implementation (bearing in mind that it need not be every course that is affected) was identified as possibility.
3. From QIC ratings it emerged that all team members gave a low rating to 'students are encouraged/supported to work in cross-cultural groups'. This was identified as one possible area for improvement.
4. The team noted that public relations professionals would be expected to deal with cultural issues at an interpersonal level when working with clients, but that little was known about how to assess students' ability to do this effectively. It was felt that this needed to be explored.

Imagine

Key members of the team came together again the day after going through the QIC process. Reflecting on the discussion of the previous day, the team realized they had identified an information gap. What they needed was a clear statement from industry of what intercultural skills, knowledge and attitudes they expected in Public Relations graduates. Confronted with a dearth of literature on that specific topic, the team decided to instigate a small research project, to obtain data related to this question and of specific relevance to their graduates. A research project was designed with the aim of interviewing key Public Relations industry representatives. The key questions to be investigated would be:

1. What intercultural skills, knowledge and attitudes are employers of PR graduates in the Australasian region looking for in their employees?
2. How can we develop and assure these in our program, i.e. what are the implications for our curriculum?

The term 'Australasian region' was chosen to reflect the likely geographic range of graduates' employment opportunities, and was refined to two key locations, one onshore and one offshore, for the purposes of the study. With the program team as the steering group, funding sources both within and outside the institution were sought and obtained, and the research project commenced.

Revise and plan

The aim of the research project was to gain input into curriculum internationalisation from employers of graduates of the public relations program, both domestically and overseas. Employers were asked to formulate what intercultural competence and international awareness meant for them when seeking new staff. The study aimed to fill a gap in the literature, which quite often cites such skills, knowledge and attitudes as contributing to employability, but rarely provides concrete support for this, especially not in discipline-specific contexts.

Among the generic qualities identified by the industry representatives as sought-after was something identified variously as 'openness', 'open-mindedness', 'innate curiosity' or the ability to question things. This quality is potentially a key deliverable of curriculum internationalisation, which above all seeks to instil an understanding of the paradigmatic and culturally centric nature of discipline knowledge, as well as foster a sense that the exchange of information and views between cultural 'others' has inherent value.

For overseas placements, industry stakeholders also clearly identified an understanding of local culture and the local political situation as essential to the effective practice of public relations. For all graduates, knowledge of international affairs and how the local situation fits into it was seen as valuable.

Communication skills were, unsurprisingly, a key attribute sought in graduates. While speech-writing and copy-drafting remain invaluable skills, communication was rather couched in more generic terms as the ability to consult and engage. In this respect intercultural competence was seen as a key asset. This was understood as including both a general sense for avoiding cross-cultural pitfalls, but also the ability to provide detailed guidelines on social or business protocols, in particular with respect to Chinese business people or bureaucrats. However, the full implications of the intercultural for professional practice are perhaps best summarized by one of the respondents:

Really you could not possibly manage or be a corporate affairs team member on that project unless you had the capacity to move a lot of your thinking that's based on living and working in Australia into the head space of that community and that culture with that interesting and complex history.

It should also be noted that with respect to intercultural competence, a universal deficit observed among graduates concerned communicating with Indigenous people (whether in Australia or abroad).

One area where views diverged was the usefulness of other languages. For some industry representatives this was of generic value as it tended to be associated with greater cultural awareness, or even better English writing skills; for others (particularly overseas companies) knowledge of another language was a consideration from the point of view of 'language coverage' across the public relations team, depending on the location of major international clients.

Finally, the interviewees were encouraged to suggest activities which could lead to the provision of a more internationalised curriculum of specific benefit for public relations graduates. Suggestions included:

- including a multi-country campaign case study
- international field trips and internships, or internships with multinational corporations
- a comparative unit studying professional practice in other countries, say Singapore, Japan, China, the USA and Australia
- developing knowledge of Aboriginal culture
- a unit on community (in particular Indigenous) consultation, which includes the involvement of NGOs
- a unit on Chinese business and social protocols

- units on international affairs
- exploit the international nature of universities, e.g. exchange between onshore and offshore campuses
- encourage/exploit a culturally diverse staff
- support better interaction between local and international students
- a unit on equity and human rights (global citizenship)
- encourage language study

Act

On reflection, a number of key outcomes of the research were identified. The first reflected on the changing nature of the practice of Public Relations: whereas curricula tended to continue to conceive of public relations from a national perspective, public relations on a regional scope, incorporating a number of countries, is now a standard feature of the industry. In university curricula, the transnational and transcultural do not receive enough recognition. Even PR professionals who do not work directly across borders will require quite sophisticated understandings of intercultural competence, which they will draw upon on an everyday basis.

Another key outcome of the research was the need for graduates to be familiar with ‘procedural knowledge’ for two specific cultural areas: Chinese culture and indigenous cultures.

The team also had to acknowledge that certain aspects of the Western paradigm of Public Relations are valued more universally than those with a sensitivity for educational cultural imperialism might have thought. These include the willingness to put forward one’s own opinion, and being prepared to challenge authority.

Despite being initially resistant to the idea of unit specifically addressing global perspectives, and still preferring to embed these across the degree in every unit, the value of focussing on one unit was acknowledged. A unit was written for 2012, looking at the impact of globalization and picking up on the concept of public relations as a cultural construct. This unit was infused with recent scholarship on the impact of globalization on the practice of public relations, as well as critical studies in the field. It included specific cultural knowledge necessary for working in China in a business context, and working with Indigenous communities. The other outcome of the research project is the intention of formalizing international work-integrated learning opportunities into an existing professional placement program. This is likely to include a week-long overseas fieldtrip as part of a four-week program including preparation, briefing on an international assignment to be undertaken, the field trip itself, and debriefing and reflection afterwards.

Two papers, one co-written by teaching team members, the other by an individual member were written investigating the disciplinary implications of the research undertaken, as well as the curriculum implications.

This process took around 12 months and is ongoing.