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# Internationalising the higher education curriculum – Do academics agree?

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**Abstract:** *Internationalising the curriculum is a strategy for the internationalisation of higher education. This paper describes a case study of an Australian university that explored the views of some academic staff regarding the relevance of internationalisation to their curricula. A wide range of views was found. The relationship between an academic's acceptance or rejection of an international curriculum, and their perception of learning and teaching within the discipline, is explored. The influence of international students within the learning environment and differing disciplinary approaches is discussed. A 'Spectrum of Acceptance of Internationalising Curriculum' is proposed as a framework for classifying academics' beliefs about teaching and their reasons for accepting or rejecting this innovation.*

**Key words:** *International curriculum; higher education; academic.*

## Background and context

The internationalisation of higher education is a process “of integrating an internationalisation/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution” (Knight & de Wit, 1997, p. 8). Four possible rationales for internationalisation are proposed: economic; political; socio-cultural; and academic (Knight & DeWit, 1995) however the economic rationale may be the most prevalent. In the UK, De Vita (2003, p. 384) explains, internationalisation is “driven largely by the marketisation discourse that has come to prevail in higher education over the past couple of decades.” In Europe institutions have “adapted curricula for a number of reasons, more because of ‘entrepreneurialism’ than of European ideals” (Van Damme, 1999, p. 9). In Australia the economic rationale is arguably also driving internationalisation of higher education, as can be seen from an IDP Education Australia (1995) study in which the key factor in promoting internationalisation in Australian higher education was economic. Kelly (1998) writing about the Australian higher education sector, reports the primacy of the economic rationale in that internationalisation is usually taken to mean “education for profit”. The increasing presence of fee paying international students, the proximity of the Asian educational market and the growth of offshore teaching on the Asia-Pacific rim are arguably the most significant influences moving the internationalisation agenda forward in Australia.

With the economic rationale as a backdrop to internationalising Australian higher education, the term “internationalising the curriculum” is being discussed and proposed as a strategy for

internationalisation (see for example, Gayle, 1997; Rizvi, 1999). International curricula may be defined as (*IDP, 1995, p. 1*):

“Curricula with an international orientation in content, aimed at preparing students for performing (professionally/socially) in an international and multicultural context, and designed for domestic students as well as foreign students.”

Support for those seeking to internationalise curricula is provided in the form of a useful nine category “Typology for Internationalising Curriculum” proposed by Bremer and Ven der Wende (1995). Other writers exploring internationalisation have discussed the relevance and importance of student outcomes, teaching strategies and knowledge content (for example, Leask, 2001) and inclusive curricula and pedagogy (Curro & McTaggart, 2003; Jones, 1998; Rizvi, 1999). Nevertheless Mestenhauser’s (1998, p. 28) conclusion still stands – the literature about international education “is generally silent about the nature of the international curriculum, and yet every field and discipline in international education makes assumptions about what to teach, how to teach it, when and to whom, in what sequence, and of what quality and quantity. None cite any research findings on which this form of the ‘curriculum’ is based”.

The means to “internationalise the curriculum” may still be unclear, partly because, as Curro & McTaggart (2003) indicate, internationalising the curriculum is a construct, not a clearly defined set of ideal or best practices. The concept “internationalising the curriculum” needs to be further explored and strategies defined such that the academic community is more able to consider implementing such a curriculum within the various disciplines. It seems fundamental that the stakeholder group most concerned with designing and implementing curriculum in higher education be widely consulted as to the relevance of internationalisation and what might be required of them within their teaching programs. Ellingboe’s (1998) extensive case study at the University of Minnesota provides a useful foundation for further research.

This paper, in reporting on some of the findings of a broader case study, aims to bring the voice of academics into the debate on internationalising the curriculum. An exploration of the perceptions of academics’ as to the relevance of internationalising the curriculum to teaching and learning within their own disciplines now follows.

## **The study**

The findings published here are from a broader case study that was conducted at an Australian university. The university has approximately 550 tenured or contracted academic staff and approximately 16,000 onshore students of which approximately 23% are international students.

The participants were academic staff comprising 11 males and 9 females of varying ages, 2-3 from each of the nine faculties and one from an academic support unit, with between two and twenty years of teaching experience. 10 participants had a teaching qualification such as a Diploma or Certificate, or had completed a foundation of university teaching course. 13 had lived and worked in another country and 9 were members of some type of international organization. Their countries of origin were Australia (12), UK (3), USA (2), Bosnia and Herzegovina (1), Sri Lanka (1), and Russia (1). The most commonly reported conceptions of the purpose of higher education were to develop students’ skills (18) and/or to pass on disciplinary knowledge (10).

Case study method was utilised with a view to identifying issues and themes and establishing discussion issues relating to the wider population of academic staff. A random sample of academic staff from each faculty was generated. Data was gathered by semi-structured interview and questionnaire. Interview data was analysed to identify issues, themes and patterns. Transcripts were analysed for themes and patterns, responses were summarised and participant quotes were extracted to illustrate themes. Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

### **The question – Should the curriculum be internationalised?**

“It is assumed that by enhancing the international dimension of teaching ... there is value added” (Knight, 1999, p. 20) yet Mestenhauser (1998, p. 4) writes “resistance to internationalisation is often the result of conceptual confusion about what international education means”. Case study participants were asked to discuss their thoughts on the purpose and relevance of ‘internationalising the curriculum’ within their discipline. For this study the IDP Education (1995, p. 1) definition of international curricula was used:

“curricula with an international orientation in content, aimed at preparing students for performing (professionally/socially) in an international and multicultural context.”

### **Discussion of findings – A “spectrum of acceptance” of internationalising the curriculum**

From the participant accounts a spectrum of views emerged which the writer has classified into a framework termed the “Spectrum of Acceptance of Internationalising Curriculum” (figure 1). Participant positions were classified and placed along the spectrum according to their agreement or disagreement that curricula within their discipline should be internationalised. Four clear positions emerged. It seems possible to separate these positions by what Ellingboe (1998, p. 214) refers to as the “Great Divide between attitudes of curricular and systemic change”. This is the dividing line between educators who evince (a) minimal interest and awareness and a perception of major obstacles; and (b) general acceptance with minor perceived obstacles. Ellingboe suggests that in order to accept internationalisation of curriculum academics need to cross this difficult divide. The writer has termed this divide *Ellingboe’s Great Divide* and incorporated it into the Spectrum of Acceptance of Internationalising Curriculum.

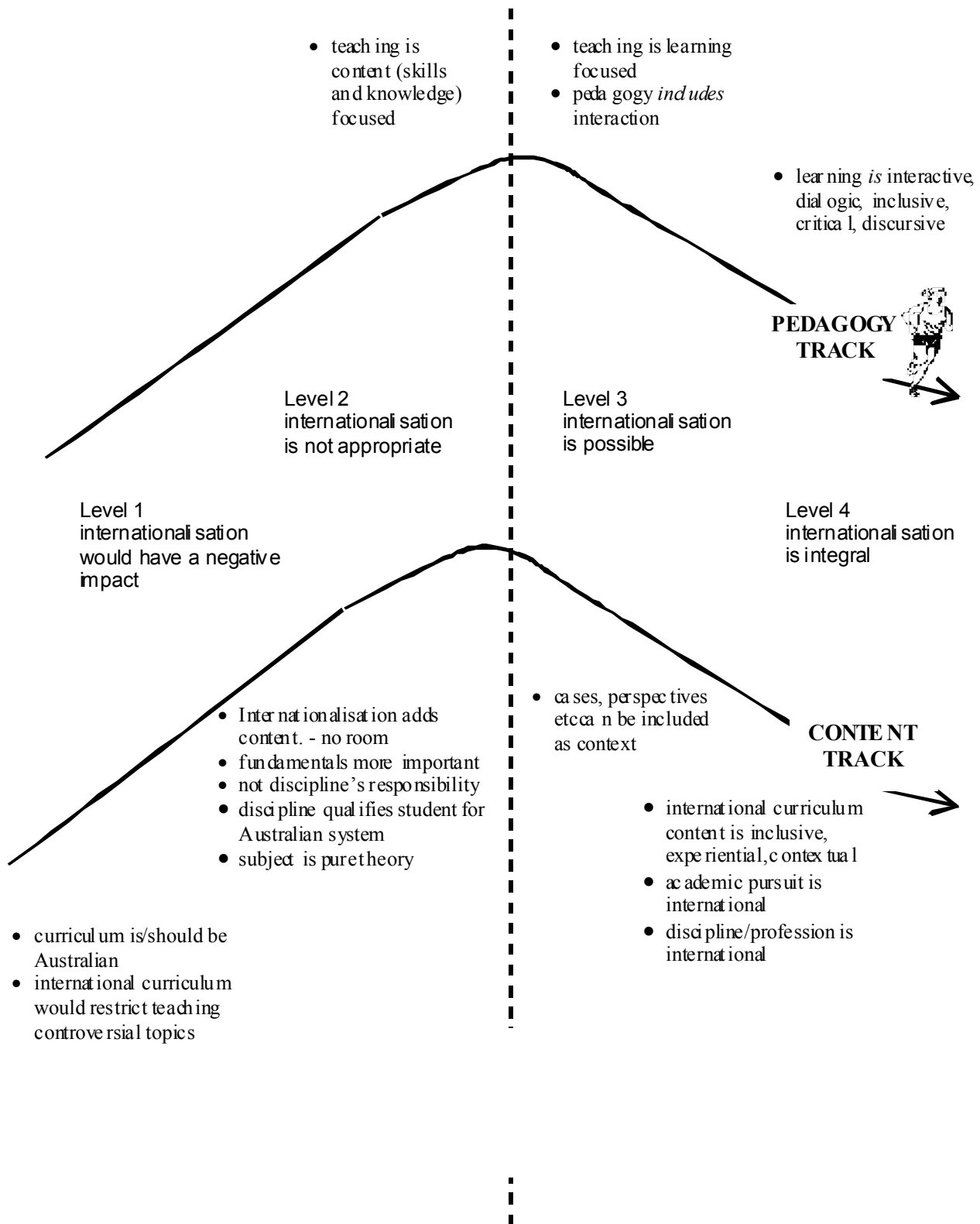


Figure 1: Spectrum of Acceptance of Internationalising Curriculum

The four levels on the spectrum are not mutually exclusive. Several participants occupy two levels on one side, but not across the “divide”. A small number indicated they might like to cross the divide but that this was not possible in the present higher education environment. The writer proposes that differences in academics’ perceptions of curriculum content and pedagogy may be one of keys to the existence of the Divide.

NB: It should be noted that one participant was unable to be placed anywhere on the divide. This was because responses to questions about international perspectives and curriculum were not forthcoming in the interview. Instead this participant’s responses continually focused on the presence of international students, standards, language, and class sizes.

### **Left of the ‘divide’**

Just under half of participants’ responses were placed on the left of the divide. Occupying the two levels are participants who expressed the view that internationalising the curriculum would not be appropriate or would have a negative effect. Reasons proposed were: the perceived theoretical nature of the subjects being taught; the nature of the discipline; or the lack of space in the curriculum for anything “extra”.

#### **Level 1 – Internationalisation would have a negative impact**

Only one participant in the study was placed at this level. This academic thought internationalising the curriculum might damage the integrity of the discipline in that it would restrict what could be taught, saying:

*... evolutionary psychology is not very well received in [some parts of the] world for example. It sort of goes contrary to the way I feel about of teaching to not be talking about some of the things that you firmly believe in - I think would be the end result of this. (Edward)*

Two participants did speak of colleagues who believed Australian universities should provide an Australian curriculum.

*I have heard colleagues say they should do things the Australian way. That’s a negative attitude to see yourself only in the context of your own country. (Sofia)*

*Some people might not like to value other people’s cultures. (Paul)*

#### **Level 2 – Internationalisation is not appropriate**

Seven participants were placed at this level where internationalisation was seen as inappropriate for a variety of reasons.

One participant perceived of the subjects taught as pure theory, removed from practice:

*The material I teach is stateless – it’s essentially theory and it’s the same theory basically everywhere. (Peter)*

Another spoke of basic skills and content, however these were somehow seen as unrelated to context:

*When I look at my discipline the basics cannot be changed because somebody comes from one place – because basics are basics no matter what. (Nadir)*

One participant believed that “facts” were “international” by definition, saying:

*... it's a body of knowledge that is fairly international anyway in terms of there are facts ... they are there already in a sense – examples of ideas that are fairly global. (Tina)*

One participant considered internationalisation was not the discipline's responsibility because:

*Our job is about training people to function within a discipline environment ... it is not the discipline's responsibility to produce culturally aware and sensitive graduates. (Jack)*

A few participants are training their students to practice within a specifically Australian system, such as the Australian legal system. International perspectives were considered to be of value, however they felt constrained in what they were able to teach. As one academic stated:

*We teach our students what they need to get through the New South Wales body which governs the practitioners admissions board. (Margaret)*

Some participants saw internationalisation as getting in the way of the syllabus. There was a focus on the importance of “covering the curriculum”. Incorporating international perspectives would mean less space and time to teach the fundamentals of the discipline. One participant said:

*What is really important is that your discipline and profession know what the fundamentals are and they must be taught so you are not going to throw the fundamentals out to satisfy some extraneous requests. (Nadir)*

*Cross-cultural and philosophical stuff ... is becoming more prevalent – but if you dwell on those and don't cover the [subject] I am not equipping the students. (Tim)*

This view of “available space” within the curriculum did not always imply a “transmission” model of teaching, rather that for academics there is a certain body of knowledge that students must learn to be effective graduates within their discipline - and that takes time. In the words of one academic:

*We have three years to prepare students - it's not that we have to give them x amount of information but it kind of constrains the scope of the subject. (Bob)*

### **Right of the ‘divide’**

The next two levels bring us over the divide to where there is a tendency for participants to talk about curriculum in terms of teaching methodology and learning activities rather than just curriculum content. A little over half of participants' responses were placed on the right of the divide.

### **Level 3 – Internationalisation of content is possible**

Six participants were placed at this level. At this level participants perceived of the subjects they taught as contextual. Because they also perceived of the context as international they saw the curriculum as needing to broaden students' global knowledge, skills and understandings. One academic stated:

*They need to survive in the global marketplace – so we need to understand the needs of the global marketplace. They have got to have appropriate examples that they can relate to ... [We need to graduate] students who are self-reliant, know how to study for themselves ... they have enough skills to say what they know and don't know – and apply the knowledge.*

International practice was already being utilised at times, to highlight, illustrate or contextualise theory and skills. The development of international perspectives was important, as the following quotes indicate.

*Most of our international teaching involves some cooperation with a local organisations so we can go out into the field – because it is an international subject we can immediately look at the sight and start interpreting from it ... it has been quite beneficial in terms of broadening the scope of teaching here ... the basic science doesn't change – when you get in the materials and start using that sort of information it becomes different. (Jim)*

*[I am interested in] how the students think globally... in the content of the subject I teach ... I look over the world education systems - not only in Australia ... We talk about inclusion and living together and should they be encouraged to grow their own cultures - internationalisation is looking out – not a culture of inclusion but co-existence. (Tanya)*

*There's an element of the cultural aspect that I interweave throughout the topics on the subjects - and there is a specific time when I draw out the trans-cultural aspects [of practice]. (Melanie)*

Ideas about curriculum were more likely to be expressed in terms of pedagogy than was the case on the left of the divide, as shown by some of the examples above and those below.

*What we want them to do is actually question things they have found in textbooks and other work. (Jim)*

*I want them to connect the ideas of psychology and sociology and draw on their own experiences ... their own personal view of it. (Tanya)*

*Group discussions ... it is up to the tutor to keep an eye on that because the purpose of groups is discussion. That can be very valuable because they bring their experience – and you need to assess individual abilities of students before you involve them in, for example, a debate. (Melanie)*

Some participants focused on the presence of international students and staff to develop international perspectives.

*I am really advocating the inclusion of their ideas, backgrounds, experience – in what I normally do which is to try and get group discussion – just having them in the room is not enough - to really utilise the strengths in front of them which is quite often the student body. (George)*

*The thrust of internationalisation happens in simple, everyday interaction between students and staff from different backgrounds – the idea would be to seamlessly incorporate these cross-cultural perspectives into subjects – so students get the chance to interact, learn a little more about each other, and international perspectives. (Sofia)*

#### **Level 4 – Internationalisation is integral**

Five participants were placed in this level. At this level participants had much in common with level 3 academics in that they perceived of the context of the discipline as international. Thinking about curriculum was again expressed in pedagogical terms and global perspectives. However these academics perceived of teaching and learning (and research) within their discipline as fundamentally an international pursuit. They went beyond placing their students in mixed discussion groups, or expecting students to explore multicultural perspectives. They took a global approach to the construction and critiquing of knowledge as the following quotes illustrate.

*Academic study – by definition it is the case – if you are doing tertiary studies in a particular field it is inherently an international discourse community ... a body of knowledge that is by definition moving around the world and is published at that level. (Jane)*

*In [the profession] you just can't be parochial - it's an international discipline. (Charles)*

*The purpose of higher education is critical thinking. The purpose of critical thinking is in my view emancipatory – that absolutely underlines my teaching and the way I structure courses ... I think it is impossible to have any sense of [the discipline] without looking globally to what's happening. (Narelle)*

*The reality of what we do is on a world-wide basis – we need to keep up with what's going on in the world so the only way you can keep up to date is by get out there and be part of it. (Simon)*

*To me its just part of making Australia part of the world – myself as a teacher if I am designing a curriculum I do now think of it in terms of what might be useful to students in this new world whereas I wouldn't have thought about that when I first started teaching. (Paul)*

#### **International students**

Hamilton (1998, p. 2) writes, “The more profound value of such large numbers of international students to Australia has in my view been their impact on teaching, curriculum development and Australian students - through exposure to different ideas and cultures”. Some researchers are investigating the effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies in mixed-culture groups (for example, Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Hellmundt, 1998; Volet & Ang, 1998; Wright & Lander, 2003).

Several level 3 and 4 participants saw international students as a key to international education through the development of a multicultural environment of directed student interaction. For these participants international students effectively become a curriculum resource, as the following quotes suggest.

*Student interaction within the learning activities is a key ... anytime you have group discussion you draw on individual or groups of students expertise and backgrounds you have the beautiful potential for sharing different experiences. (George)*

*... that to me is the best part of internationalisation - because I have these international students I want to internationalise my curriculum. I want to find out what's going on there. I can see some of the overseas students their eyes open up (as mine did) when we*

*need to look through different lenses. In masters program or tutorials you can do this.*  
(Charles)

For these academics, internationalisation might be difficult to achieve in a mono-cultural learning environment. One participant stated:

*In a course that had a homogenous cohort – I don't know how you would do that.* (Jane)

### **Disciplinary differences**

It may be that some disciplines are more amenable to internationalisation than others. Different disciplines may have differing perspectives on internationalising the curriculum, as this comment suggests:

*In science it is more difficult to teach a cultural perspective unless teaching evolution of science or philosophy of knowledge as a topic. We ... have subjects like philosophy of science but we seem to be getting more and more into a curriculum that is more defined.*  
(Bob)

In the IDP Education Australia (1995) study, most illustrative examples of internationalising curriculum initiatives were found in Business, Economics and Commerce; less frequently they were found in Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities. In this study academics from most disciplines were represented however the numbers are too small to consider responses representative of disciplines.

### **Crossing the 'divide'**

From the illustrative quotes it may be seen that on the left of the "divide" where internationalisation was seen as irrelevant or inappropriate, academics' perceptions were that the subjects they taught should be one or more of the following:

- highly theoretical
- specifically "western" or "Australian"
- teaching professional skills for a national system
- teaching disciplinary skills/knowledge that are the same the world over
- covering disciplinary content.

On the right side, where internationalisation was seen as possible or integral (and was be already being implemented to various degrees) were perceptions that the subjects being taught should provide a learning experience that is one or more of the following:

- contextual
- discursive
- experiential
- inclusive
- critical.

The results of this study raise a significant question for those proposing to internationalise curricula within higher education.

*How relevant are academics' conceptions of teaching and learning to their acceptance or rejection of the relevance of internationalising the curriculum?*

## Conclusion

This paper aims to bring the voices of academic staff into the discussion of internationalisation of the Australian higher education curriculum. The reported case study of academics at an Australian university indicates the broad range of views that exist amongst academic staff as to the relevance of “internationalising the curriculum” within their discipline. Not all agree that internationalisation adds value to education.

A “Spectrum of Acceptance of Internationalising Curriculum” is proposed by the writer to provide a framework for the four positions that emerged from participant accounts. It is proposed that these positions lie on either side of what Ellingboe refers to as the “Great Divide between attitudes of curricular and systemic change” (1998, p. 214). The writer proposes that differences in academics’ perceptions of curriculum content and pedagogy, and conceptions of teaching and learning, may cause the “Divide” to exist. On one side of the “Divide” academics believed internationalisation would have a negative impact or would be inappropriate. Their focus was on students learning curriculum content and basic disciplinary skills. On the other side of the divide academics believed internationalisation of content was possible, or integral to, the curriculum. Their perspectives included cultural inclusivity, critique, developing global perspectives, and discursive pedagogy.

Just over half of the academics in the study, whose responses were classified at levels 3 and 4, offered an encompassing educational perspective on the term *curriculum*. For them an international curriculum went beyond content (for example, the inclusion of international examples) in that the curriculum was conceived of as an inclusive, dialogic, teaching and learning environment for the development of students’ understanding of content. For these academics pedagogy was an integral aspect of curriculum. These findings support the view expressed by Curro and McTaggart (2003, p. 1) who, in discussing the pedagogy of internationalisation, “include teaching with curriculum”. They “see curriculum as a theoretical plan for learning” and propose that, amongst other things, “curriculum implies the educational relationships envisaged among teachers and learners.” As Kelly (1998, p. 741) points out, content expertise is not enough. Teachers need to engage students in critical thinking and develop a learning environment within which critical thinking can take place. This aspect of internationalising the curriculum might be included in any future additions to the Bremer and Ven der Wende (1995) Typology of Internationalised Curricula.

For some academics the presence of international students in their classrooms was a key to internationalisation of curriculum. International students became a kind of curriculum resource, supporting the development of cross-cultural knowledge and skills for all students through bringing their experiences to bear on classroom interactions.

The study raises significant questions for those who wish to implement an international curriculum at the faculty level.

- Is pedagogy equally as significant, or more significant, than content for those who wish to internationalise curriculum?
- How relevant is an academic’s conception of teaching and learning to their acceptance or rejection of an international curriculum?

- What is the role of international students in the international curriculum?
- Are their disciplinary differences in perceptions of, and strategies for, an international curriculum?

Further exploration is needed to determine the perceptions, motivations and concerns of academic staff and any disciplinary differences that might exist. It would be useful to consider levels of readiness and the means to address concerns related to these levels, and to further explore the relationship between academics' conceptions of teaching and their acceptance of the need to internationalise the curriculum. Those attempting to convince academic staff of the value of internationalising the higher education curriculum might consider these words from an academic in this study:

*We need to be very clear about what it means and how it might be relevant and incorporated and to demonstrate that resources are attached and that we are not expected to add training on top of everything else. (Margaret)*

The importance academic staff placed upon the issue of pedagogy suggests that what is taught should not be separated from how it is taught when considering internationalisation of the curriculum.

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