

# **Internationalizing the Curriculum in Canadian Universities: Considering the influence of Power, Politics and Ethics**

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The intent of internalization within universities should be the raising of global consciousness. This paper explores the notion of curriculum as a vehicle to achieve this goal. It suggests that a framework for internationalizing the curriculum must consider how power, politics and ethics within the university context impinge on curriculum reform.

## **Introduction**

Knight (1997) defines internationalization in higher education as a process of integrating an international perspective into the teaching/learning, research and service functions of colleges and universities. Ellingboe (1998) concurs that internationalization is a process of integrating a national perspective into a college or university system. However, how an international perspective is integrated within a university is dependent on individual interpretations. Internationalization activities range from conducting international research in different countries to developing an all encompassing internationalization policy for the campus. It would seem that the institution's rationale for becoming involved in internationalization will determine the kind of policy and activities in which the university engages depending on whether internationalization is seen as a fundamental responsibility of the institution to prepare students to be active global citizens, or, whether internationalization is seen simply as an economic venture.

## **Curriculum**

According to Knight (2000), the curriculum is deemed to be the most important element of internationalization. Mestenhauser (1998) notes that it is a requisite of universities to re-develop and reform their curricula if students are to have an international education. In fact, there are persuasive arguments made within the literature why internationalized curricula are integral to any process of internationalization in higher education (Bond, 2003; Burn, 2002; Ellingboe, 1998;

Harari, 1992). One of the major roles of institutions of higher learning is to prepare students for global citizenry so that they can gain an understanding and appreciation of the interdependence of peoples across social, political and cultural boundaries. In today's world, the continuous shrinking of national borders means that students have to be trained to live and work within a global context. The education they receive cannot be concerned only with national interests. Reality is, the world we live in exists both within and outside of our Canadian borders. Internationalized curricula would have a strong focus on international approaches to subject matter, and would allow for exploration of the economic, social, cultural and political lives of people and societies within a global framework.

Canadian universities have been including international components in their courses and programs and are seeking ways to add international content to curricula. Mestenhauser (1998) notes that universities have been talking about “infusing” the curriculum with international content. Again, what this means in practice is dependent on how “infusion” is translated. When universities make the decision to internationalize their campuses, there is a big rush to attract more international students. With this movement comes the push to add international content to existing courses as appropriate, or to introduce new courses with some degree of international content. Universities are cognizant that they should provide a global education to international students as articulated in their marketing plan. However, course offerings in these instances often end up being superfluous with a focus on giving students more or less a taste of the cultural artefacts and mores of groups outside of their own cultural identities. Such cultural knowledge is presented as exotic and entertaining, and is welcomed as a diversion from the tedious but **real** academic curricula. In a small study conducted by a colleague and I to identify and address the barriers international students face in their academic programs at the University of Regina, students made it clear that too many of their programs lacked meaningful interaction on real international issues. They claimed that professors tried to make them feel inclusive by “discussing some cultural stuff” but there is a reluctance to “get to the meat of integrating international and local content” of their courses. The students’

suggestion was that the “prescribed” curriculum needs to be restructured to respond to the needs of internationalization.

Superfluous infusion is an additive to curriculum requirements and a façade that allows the university to appear to have an internationalized campus. Mestenhauser (1998) suggests that adding pieces of international content on to courses does not alter their traditional disciplinary content neither does it make the educational institution intellectually international. Instead, he admonishes that these kinds of infusions “...merely add to the traditional structure of knowledge ...” (p. 17). He calls for curriculum reform that would challenge traditional paradigms on which higher education curricula are based. Burn (2002) agrees that internationalizing the curriculum is not about teaching a handful of token courses that reflect some degree of international content. Instead, she favours efforts towards a more pervasive and radical change of the traditional curriculum. In light of the work of Freire (1989), on education for empowerment, internationalizing curricula should engage educators in praxis, that is, ongoing critical reflection and action to engender changes to education for a more just world.

Internationalizing the curriculum in higher education requires new philosophical and ideological orientations that view traditional ways of thinking and being as outmoded. The curricula, policies, programs and practices of universities reflect the dominant society and are established to achieve the goals of that particular society. Even if those goals are not clearly articulated, they are reflected in the ‘hidden curriculum.’ A more progressive school of thought would entail breaking away from the traditional curriculum approach and promoting a more deliberate integration of international issues and perspectives into the teaching and learning process. An internationalized curriculum would mean exploring broad national and international perspectives of subject matter with opportunities to examine multiple realities to help students develop intercultural competence about people and situations outside of their own identities. The curriculum would view education as transformative, with the prospect of students having an understanding and appreciation of the interdependence of how countries of the world exist.

Curriculum objectives and activities will have to be changed to reflect a paradigm shift from the conventionalism on which traditional curriculum has been established. The University of Calgary suggests some learning outcomes for international curricula that may be useful for institutions to consider. The outcomes include the ability of students to view their discipline within a global framework; to develop an understanding of what being a world citizen means; understanding how national decisions can have global consequences; understanding world affairs and the recognition of standards and ethics that transcend political and geographical boundaries (University of Calgary Undergraduate Curriculum Redesign Team, 1998). Mayes and Moore (2000) note that in order to prepare students to succeed in today's interdependent world, universities will have to recognize the importance of curriculum reform and the ability of faculty to apply new approaches to learning and fully engage their learners in critical international discourse. Students need to view their world more openly, to see beyond their own cultural assumptions and to understand life through the experiences of others.

As a faculty member involved in internationalization at my own university, I would like to advocate a comprehensive curriculum restructuring that reforms practice. I am aware that Arnold (2004) cautions that setting lofty aims for curriculum reconstruction can lead to failure in achieving goals. Some people may want to start with incremental changes instead of a complete overhaul of the curriculum purpose and process. However, given the nature of curriculum and its entrenchment in traditional concepts and practices that are well defined and defended, change will have to mean transformation of philosophical beliefs and principles.

### **Power and Politics**

There is no denying that curriculum has its base in the socio-political systems of universities. Who decides curriculum in higher education institutions is politically motivated as undoubtedly the curriculum is a political product. Curriculum is the educational tool that determines what is real or unreal, whose truth is celebrated, whose values are mainstreamed, where the peripheries are located and who occupies spaces of marginalization in the world. Hill (2001) points out that universities are bureaucratic systems where different people enjoy different levels of status and power.

Those who have the power and authority to make decisions are able to exercise control over what gets written into curriculum and what remains excluded. Those without the power operate on the margins and do not have a real voice in curriculum change. A framework for developing an internationalized curriculum must consider the notion of how power and politics shape content and activities of courses and programs.

The University is a complex organization with many distinct characteristics and with responsibility to varied and numerous stakeholders, thus, the politics and organizational culture are multi-dimensional. Within this context, curriculum construction operates from competing interests which sometimes make it difficult to negotiate common ground. The people with more direct responsibility for developing curriculum are academics but this group of people do not necessarily enjoy collegial relationships and share similar perspectives. As Arnold (2004) points out, “The professorate is after all a fragmented group of specialists whose members sometimes have difficulty seeing things from the perspectives of others in their own disciplines, let alone, across disciplines” (p. 591). Faculty, for varying reasons, have their own parochial interests and the tendency to forward their own agendas. This is not to say there should not be genuine value differences and differences of opinions among people. But granted that the wisdom of curriculum reform is made clear, many faculty still find it difficult to relinquish “power” over what is taught because in some ways they benefit from the status quo. Others are opposed to change since they see change simply as a criticism of their current practice.

Within the university, the traditional values of autonomy and academic freedom strongly prevail. I am not advocating that these values should not be upheld. In fact, I strongly agree that they should, but from my own experience, I have found that some faculty use academic freedom as a political tool to challenge even well thought out changes in academic programs. Barnett and Coate (2005) are of the view that professors see academic freedom, as least so far as the content of curricula is concerned, as something that has been earned and do not allow a lot of room for negotiation. Faculty claim their freedom to develop their courses in ways they see as appropriate and are free to determine the amount of international content that should be included. Acting solely on the basis of academic freedom from a curriculum

standpoint can place limitations around the domain of academic knowledge in courses and programs, leaving new forms of knowledge construction to individuals who see themselves as “experts” with exclusive rights. I have seen cases where faculty have refused to make changes to their course content just because these changes were proposed by a senior administrator. In one instance, the faculty member felt that for someone else to tell him what his course should contain was an infringement on his “rights” as an academic. On the other hand, I have also witnessed senior administrators who have coerced academics into changing their courses and programs because of internal and external political pressures. Curricular reform processes that relate to internationalization should not fail to consider some of the forms of institutional power and the manner in which influence is exerted.

As internationalization takes a foothold on campuses, curriculum change can become challenged by those whose political will is mainly to support the status quo. Pressure groups and significant individuals are used to whip up support for the old order and strong coalitions among these ‘opponents’ can undermine progress towards internationalizing the curriculum. A concerted effort has to be made to influence those who champion the status quo. Changes have to be negotiated on all fronts and people co-opted and brought on side. I am not suggesting that this is an easy task, but it is a crucial one. The decisions that affect curriculum development are normally made by committees at different levels of the university structure and these committees are comprised of individuals with an interest or role in the curriculum. One familiar tactic that had been suggested is to ensure that there is representation of faculty members with strong internationalization interests on committees. It is important to note that political buy-in is also necessary from central university administration and other key administrators. Without support it will be difficult to leverage necessary curriculum resources vital to effecting change. A weak commitment to internationalizing the curriculum from administrators means a lot of *fluff* without substantial action. Ross (2005) notes that on the other hand, if the driving force for internationalization is senior administration, it is critical for administrators to develop ways to bring the faculty on side so that they can see the importance of internationalization and identify

with the process of the university's curricular reform. Involving faculty in all stages of the campus' internationalization strategy would lead to support and less resistance.

### **Ethics**

Ethics is another lens for examining internationalizing the university's curriculum. Ethics is normally bound up in politics but in this case, it warrants its own discussion. I do not see the need here to become involved in a philosophical debate on ethics. Instead, I suggest that the following searching ethical question be asked: Whose interest does internationalizing the university serve? Many internationalization initiatives are plagued by changes initiated primarily to serve the self-interests of individuals and institutions. Some unethical considerations for internationalization are those based on the primary objective of an increased international student body with differential fees to increase the finances of the university and reward the institution with a place of political prominence. Providing students an educational experience that would help them to adapt to an increasingly changing world is relegated to a secondary outcome.

As North American universities initiate relationships with other countries across the globe, the perception is that courses and programs are becoming more lucrative as products to be sold. Some feel this is where the intent of internationalization lies – to capitalize on niche markets in education. Programs are being packaged for different consumers and the commodification of education is on a big time boom. Universities are beginning to develop what Barnett and Coate (2005) refer to as a *supermarket* culture, providing a variety of products to be sold in the internal and external education marketplace. Universities have become economic institutions and are producers of commodities that offer choices to their customers. Their emphasis is less and less on the social purposes institutions of higher education were originally intended to fulfill. Social values are moving more and more towards the economics of education and curricula are being adapted and shaped by business demands.

A strategy for internationalization has to be more far reaching than the recruitment of more international students and the sale of educational products and services. At the heart of the internationalization process lies the fundamental values of an education that address the issues of a diverse world population. Internationalization

cannot realize its potential without critical reflection on the various ways in which universities conceptualize the world and the ways these conceptualizations serve to define their practices. Education is not a culturally neutral process. Values are learned, and the curriculum performs a fundamental role in shaping values.

Some may argue that values are problematic components of an internationalized curriculum but as mentioned before, education is never value free. Even if values are not specifically taught in courses and programs, they are implied by curriculum content and pedagogical practices. An internationalized curriculum and campus should espouse universal values such as those related to human rights, social justice and equity, respect for cultural pluralism and protection of the environment. Values, beliefs and principles that relate to understanding people and situations no matter their geographic location have to be realized. As Al Farra (2000) stresses, international education involves *internationalism* which is a combination of skills, attitudes and values that allow for:

... the freeing of oneself from prejudices, stereotyping and bigotry and understanding value systems different from one's own, and empathizing and sympathizing with them. It is moving beyond tolerance to commitment, respect and appreciation for humanity. It is the promotion of peace and prosperity in spite of borders, colours, creed or beliefs. (p. 59).

An internationalized curriculum has a role to help define an ethos for the future of the global population. It should provide students with knowledge on global concepts and the opportunity to discuss and debate comparative issues. In some instances, internationalization activities are confined to whatever limited knowledge professors may possess. This sets the parameters for the knowledge production around internationalization in courses and programs. There is always a strong concern from professors that academic knowledge is what should be paid attention rather than *stories* that pertain to the rest of the world. Barnett and Coate (2005) suggest that students have a responsibility to bring their wider international experiences to the classroom even if professors may not be fully aware of the ideas they would like to address. Student intervention would prevent professors from engaging curriculum from a more *technical* stance for the purpose of efficiency. Corson (1995) speaks to this efficiency noting that it limits the depth of interaction that should occur in

internationalization discourse. Curriculum needs to be viewed as spaces where students and professors can have the flexibility of movement to discover the emergent concepts of *education for the world*. The outcome of an internationalized curriculum should seek to develop a critical consciousness in students so that they become aware of the human problems that are inherent in present day society and are motivated to address these (Barnett & Coate, 2005).

Ethical stances also need to be taken with regard to those who resist internationalizing the curriculum. The university's task is not to impose curriculum change but to provide ways for people to see the need for change, embrace it, and share the vision of the rightness of moving towards a more comprehensive approach to internationalization. Ensuring compliance with curriculum change through coercion is definitely not an option. Some units within universities initiate internationalization strategies on the assumption that having come through traditional bureaucratic institutions, faculty will be more accepting of the power of the hierarchy. Curricula have to be conceptualized, discussed and debated by the key players involved. The relationship between those engineering an internationalized curriculum and those asked to support the effort should not be one of power but a sharing of mutual philosophies and values.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The issues raised here are in no way exhaustive to internationalizing the curriculum in Canadian universities. I have just been able to skim the surface of the internationalization landscape and provide what is a snap-shot view of the importance of exploring power, politics and ethics in international education reform. When curriculum plans are being made, these factors need to be taken into account so that change can be supported and the likelihood of educational improvement realized. Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry (1997) have found that effective changes in educational practices require more than positive aspirations, though these are very important for mobilizing support for change. More importantly, ideas have to be concretized and institutionalized in structures, in cultures and in practices. The above authors note that changes to structures are easier to make than are changes to attitudes

and behaviours but structures, attitudes and behaviours all combine to create barriers that impinge on internationalizing the curriculum.

Stark and Lattuca (1996) sum up the barriers to internationalization as: a lack of background by faculty members in the international aspects of their discipline; little or no incentives by the university to encourage faculty to give increased attention to international work including curriculum reconstruction; parochialism and a narrow view of education by the university. They suggest that it would seem that there is much to be done to make the educational environment ready for internationalization. Although these comments were made almost ten years ago, they still apply to the milieu of today's university. Universities have not made a concerted effort to examine philosophical and ideological orientations in their deliberations about the curriculum as a crucial aspect of internationalization and what this means for policy and practice. The "add-on" strategy still pervades many institutions. There is need for discussion and critical reflection with senior administrators, faculty, students and by all those who are affected and affect curriculum. There is a range of actors from whom the university will have to seek input and advice in a curriculum reform process. The challenges of internationalizing the curriculum should not prevent action in this direction. If there is not the will to persist, internationalization will be compromised by a practice that goes against the grain of preparing the future generation for an increasingly globalized world.

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