

A SURVEY TO ASSESS THE LEVEL OF INTERNATIONALISATION OF THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a survey instrument that was developed as part of a project to enhance the internationalisation of the student experience. The survey design was guided by a conceptual model that adopts an appreciative stance, recognising the rich diversity in the student and staff bodies and exploring this as a way of developing international/global perspectives. The survey thus sought to assess the current levels of internationalisation of the student and staff bodies and the extent to which activities in the curriculum are currently being used to enhance the international/global dimension of the student experience. The survey contributes to the literature in several ways, and key results are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Business schools around the world are seeking to meet the challenge of providing a substantive international experience for their students [1] [5] [3] [8]. While European schools can utilise the advantages of close proximity to other countries, this is not feasible for the majority of business schools in other regions, which need to develop other approaches to fill this need. This paper describes the approach being taken by our institution, in particular the first phase involving the development of a survey to assess the current level of internationalisation in the student experience. The rationale behind the survey is provided, along with some key findings. Fuller results are to be provided in a separate paper.

BACKGROUND TO PROBLEM AND RELEVANT LITERATURE

Business schools have taken a particular interest in developing global/multicultural perspectives, encouraged through the emergence of global standards and accreditation frameworks. Business schools are now striving to demonstrate that they provide students with a 'substantive international experience.' A review of management education reveals the opportunities and challenges inherent in such a goal [1]. The world's borders and physical barriers are disappearing due to the rapid development of advanced communication technologies and free trade agreements, and an understanding of the impact of this globalisation trend is increasingly important in business schools around the world. At the same time, the ability to work with people from other countries and cultures has become a key factor for such interactions to succeed. This is driving both the internationalisation and multi-cultural strands in curriculum developments [5]. This poses challenges for many institutions, where both these factors tend to be underdeveloped and poorly understood, despite the presence of pockets of good practice throughout programmes.

Harris, Moran et al [4] in its 6th edition, appears to provide ample advice on working with cultural differences. Prescott and Hellsten [9] are quoted in a Melbourne University-led project proposal [10], as indicating that all is not well in the international student experience. Further work in this area does indeed seem warranted. Marginson [7] points to the prevailing view of universities which treat international students as a cash cow to offset reducing government funding, and asserts that the problem of intermixing domestic and international students is still an unsolved problem internationally. A review of the literature, especially Australasian universities, found that the emphasis has often been on assimilating international students into their host countries, rather than one of developing interchanges between domestic and international students. Exceptions included the Excell approach [5], [6], and the Baruch College approach

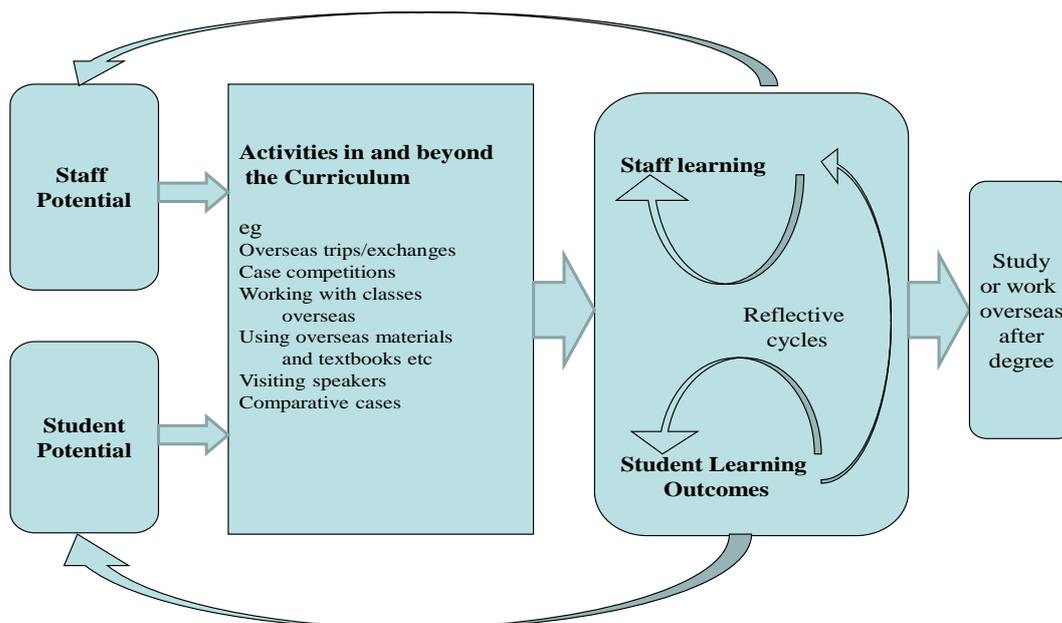
[11]. Since embarking on our project, others have come to light such as Sheffield Hallam, Leeds Metropolitan, and Oxford Brookes in the UK, and the project proposed in [10] has led to a rich resource, Finding Common Ground [2].

While the literature reviewed describes how individual universities are approaching the issue of enhancing internationalisation, it provided little comment on how they went about the process. Carlin [3] reviews best practice across many institutions in their approaches to ascertaining and increasing the level of internationalisation in the curriculum. Interestingly, her findings corroborated our thoughts on how to proceed, at least the first few steps, starting from an internationalisation goal in the mission, conduct a survey, hold a summit/workshop, followed by site visits, conferences, inter-campus collaborations; etc.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL BEHIND THE SURVEY DESIGN

In analysing our situation, we developed a conceptual model shown in Figure 1. The model is based on the observations that New Zealand society is actually very diverse: both in universities and generally, NZ is outward looking. In particular, staff at Victoria are ranked highly on international dimensions such as the proportion of staff with overseas PhD's. However, this probably underestimates the actual level of internationalisation, as most staff have significant connections with institutions and colleagues overseas. Our students also seemed very diverse. Even though the percentage of international students is around 25% overall, this figure represents just a fraction of those from overseas, as many students study here under Permanent Resident status. And even our local students seemed well-travelled and many have parents/close family from overseas. The potential from our students therefore seemed to be worth including as a base to work from. Our model postulates that if we could utilise this potential of both staff and student in activities within and beyond the curriculum, and if students and staff used such activities to reflect on their learning, then this in turn would increase the potential and allow continuous enhancement of the international experience in our university. Finally, this focus on building experiences in the curriculum and beyond by harnessing diversity in our midst would then help prepare our students for work or further study overseas after their degree, even if they do not travel during their studies. It is worth stating explicitly that students need to be multi-culturally aware here at home, in New Zealand, not just when overseas.

FIGURE 1. DEVELOPING A SUBSTANTIVE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE



With this conceptual model in mind, many questions spring to mind, including: What is the internationalisation potential of our staff and students? What are we doing in the classroom and is this effective? What reflective learning is taking place regarding developing international perspectives, and could this be enhanced? Both staff and students bring considerable diversity to class, but do we build on this diversity enough? What are we already doing in the classroom and how effective is it?

Because of the particular nature of our questions, and because we could find no articles in the literature that adopted a similar approach, we decided to conduct a survey of students and staff, to ascertain their backgrounds and experience, and seek their views on activities currently being used, and the effectiveness of such activities. Questions in the survey would be grouped into three sections:

1. the student's cultural background, experience and interest level
2. activities in the classroom – what activities are occurring and how effective are those activities
3. demographic profile statistics, major, contact details etc.

The project therefore had several aims: 1. to provide a way of meeting the need to develop internationalisation in the curriculum for institutions where overseas exchanges are not included in the curriculum; 2. to develop the international experience for both domestic and international students, meeting a gap in the literature which predominantly focuses on helping international students adjust to a host country; 3. as there are few studies that compare the perspectives of students and staff, this survey, with its student and staff versions developed in parallel, therefore contributes by providing both perspectives; and 4. the survey facilitates an evidence-based approach to enhancing provision of global/multi-cultural perspectives in educational programmes.

Surveys for staff and students were developed in parallel, and both administered near the end of term (end of year for students, end of first trimester for staff). The construction, administration and analysis of the survey was carried out by the author, assisted by the Dean's office staff. The survey development provided the project component for an academic paper for a post-graduate certificate in higher education learning and teaching, with due academic supervision and full compliance with the Commerce Faculty's ethics committee processes.

THE SURVEY

From the conceptual model, the list of questions was drafted, and put forward in the project proposal and Human Ethics Committee application. Colleagues and student representatives critiqued the questions directly, and a small independent sample tested a pilot of each survey. These pre-tests suggested the original survey was too long, and led to a reduced number of questions as well as the deletion of open-ended questions asking for a 'critical incident'. The definition of overseas was changed to cater for students born in countries other than NZ, for whom studying in NZ would be studying 'overseas'. The time periods given as options to questions on length of study etc were fine-tuned. Qualtrix was used for administering the survey. The questions for the surveys can be obtained from the author.

The revised student survey was first administered by email in November/December 2010 to all (2195) students enrolled in at least one 300-level Commerce course in 2010. Grocery vouchers were offered as a prize draw for those returning a completed survey, and drew 501 responses (25% response rate). The response rate is considered to be acceptable for an email survey, and the sample size of 500 valid entries was more than acceptable. The staff survey was revised in line with modifications made to student survey, and was administered in May 2011. This received a response of around 40 out of 135 academic staff, and analyses and comparison tables were constructed, as for the student survey.

The results generated by Qualtrix were extracted and analysed, and interesting facts about the student sample and staff sample were compiled. In addition the results were analysed to produce rankings of the most frequent and most useful activities, and comparison tables of usefulness versus frequency of use. Finally the data on student and staff views on the frequency and usefulness of activities were combined into one overall comparison table.

Qualtrix proved to be a very useful tool for conducting the survey although we found we could not rely on statistics calculated automatically by Qualtrix. Averages for any questions relating to time, such as length of study overseas, were incorrectly calculated by Qualtrix whenever the answer options provided were of unequal length or had an open-ended last option such as 5+ years. Similarly Qualtrix's average scores for Likert scale items such as frequency and effectiveness of activities, were no use, as they included "Don't Know" responses in the weighted average scores. The data was exported to an Excel spreadsheet and all averages were recalculated in Excel using custom formulae.

KEY SURVEY RESULTS

As noted earlier, only key results are provided in this paper, with fuller results to be provided in a separate paper. The results of the surveys provided confirmation of many of our presumptions, as well as some surprises, and will be outlined next. Of the 501 respondents to the student survey, 28% were born outside New Zealand, 51% have parents or close family from a country other than New Zealand, and 45% have at some time lived in a country other than New Zealand. Fewer than 5% had never travelled overseas. It is apparent from these data that most students come to the University having already been overseas and having been exposed to significant international influences. In addition, about a quarter of participating students have studied overseas. By way of comparison, 62.5% of staff were born overseas, more than 50% have studied in another country. Full results will be published in a later paper.

It is noteworthy that the students surveyed expressed a positive attitude to further development of their global, international and intercultural knowledge. A particularly interesting finding is that only three of the 500 participating students (0.6 %) said that they did not intend to travel overseas after finishing their studies - a confirmation of the widely acknowledged New Zealand diaspora. These statistics indicate that the Faculty's students do indeed have a diversity of international experiences and backgrounds.

Students were also invited to rate their perceptions of the usefulness of a list of learning-related activities which aim to add an international dimension to the student experience, along with their perceptions of how often these activities were encountered during their studies. Staff were also asked to rate the usefulness and frequency of use in their classrooms of such activities. A comparison of both staff and student views is provided in Table 1.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The surveys have provided much valuable data to inform future activities, and a repeat student survey with minor modifications was conducted in December 2011. The level of internationalisation potential did prove to be higher than had been appreciated, and the level of activity in the classroom is good. Overall, the level of effectiveness of all the activities listed is encouraging. The corroboration of student and staff views has provided confirmation of the effectiveness and prevalence of relatively simple strategies such as discussing how concepts apply in other countries, and using examples from a variety of countries. The perceived effectiveness coupled with the rareness of study, travel and living abroad were all as expected - students returning from such exchanges typically provide glowing accounts. However the response from students regarding some of the activities has been instructive. Table 1 reveals that student responses on a number of activities showed a sizable difference between perceived effectiveness and frequency of use, such as groupwork. The comparison of student and staff responses provides further insight into differences between staff and student views, with some examples being highlighted in Table 2. For example, there is a significant mismatch between staff and student views on the effectiveness of group work, and international textbooks. In both cases, staff felt the activities were very useful but students find them much less so. (Having said that, the difference in usefulness scores separating the bottom half of the activities is not large, and even the lowest mean scores rate closer to 'Useful' than to 'Limited' use.) The results for the second student survey appear to be very similar to those of the first survey.

TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF RESULTS FROM STAFF AND STUDENT SURVEYS

Activity	Student responses				Staff responses				Rank difference between student and staff view on usefulness
	Perceived usefulness of activity		Perceived frequency of use of activity		Perceived usefulness of activity		Perceived frequency of use of activity		
	Mean Score □	Rank	Mean Score □	Rank	Mean Score □	Rank	Mean Score □	Rank	
Work Overseas	3.66	1							
Travel overseas	3.60	2	2.01	11					
Study overseas	3.59	3	1.34	16					
Discuss how concepts apply in other countries	3.31	4	3.64	1	3.71	1	4.26	2	3
Discuss examples from outside NZ in class	3.28	5	3.60	2	3.69	2	4.25	3	3
Work with students/companies based overseas	3.24	6	1.52	13	2.98	12=	2.16	12	-6
Get to know international students	3.14	7	3.04	6					
Conduct research into overseas experience □	3.13	8			3.30	6	2.40	9	2
Hear visiting international academics or business people speak in class	3.07	9	2.53	7	3.02	11	2.34	10	-2
Undertake joint projects with students in overseas universities	2.99	10	1.50	14					
Take part in discussion groups comprising international and domestic students	2.98	11=	3.22	4=	3.52	4	3.87	4	7
Work with others in class to discuss international experiences	2.98	11=	2.18	10	3.17	8	2.80	7	3
Use international textbooks, materials, etc.	2.96	13=	3.54	3	3.35	5	4.30	1	8
Workshops with people from other countries	2.96	13=	2.24	9	3.10	9	2.26	11	4
Participate in international case competitions	2.93	15	1.29	17	2.51	16	1.49	14=	-1
Work with international students in class or on assignments/projects	2.91	16=	3.22	4=	3.23	7	3.83	5	9
Meet people from outside NZ through formal programmes related to VUW, e.g., ANZSOG or visiting scholars	2.91	16=	1.69	12	3.05	10	2.71	8	6
Hear presentations from international students	2.78	18	2.52	8	2.98	12=	3.17	6	6
Interact with overseas classes via web-based technologies	2.70	19	1.36	15	2.59	15	1.49	14=	4
Domestic and International students work together in class					3.57	3			
Work with visiting international academics					2.84	14	2.02	13	

Respondents rated the statements on a Likert scale from 'Not at all' (rated 1.0), 'Limited' (2.0), 'Useful' (3.0), 'Very useful' (4.0). Frequency was scored on a scale of 'Never' (1.0) through to 'Very Often' (5.0). Participants could choose 'Do not know' but these were not included in the weighted mean. Rank is the order of weighted means, with highest mean accorded the highest rank.

Blank cells denote questions not asked in that particular survey.

TABLE 2: NOTABLE COMPARISONS FROM STAFF AND STUDENT SURVEYS

Activity	Student view	Staff view
Work, travel, or study overseas	Most useful, but not often undertaken	(Not asked in staff survey)
Discuss how concepts apply in other countries Discuss examples from outside NZ, in class	Very useful, frequently done	Very useful, frequently done
Work with students/companies based overseas	Quite useful, not often done	Not very useful, not often done
Work in discussion groups, in class or on assignments/projects with domestic/international students Use of international textbooks	Least useful, frequently done	Very useful , and frequently done

In addition to the scored responses to the list of activities in Table 1, students also gave open-ended responses providing many suggestions, which can be broadly grouped into classroom activities, communication, and social/cultural. In the first category, using cooperative learning activities, interactions, and exercises, showcasing examples of good overseas student speakers, and using tutorial discussion groups, mentors and buddies were suggested. Social/cultural focused on helping students to get to know each other better, and there were calls for more social events, cultural events, trips and parties. Calls for social events were the main request from overseas-born students, but there were about an equal number of similarly enthusiastic comments from NZ-born students, who could see strong benefits in developing friendships and working relationships with international students to ‘open up many doors throughout the world as well as give an irreplaceable opportunity to have an understanding of foreign countries and how the global community works’. The biggest concern from NZ-born students was around language skills which were seen to be a barrier to groupwork, while this concern was absent from overseas-born students’ responses. The issue of groupwork is the subject of a current action research project, which is drawing on student and staff views on the issues together with possible directions for resolving the issues which we have collected as part of an in-course assignment. Other follow-up activities include a workshop for staff, ongoing development of intercultural activities, refinement of learning objectives and rubric development, and tutorial activities which aim at building a community of learners where diversity is relished. These developments will be reported in a separate paper.

The results of these surveys have provided a useful benchmark and will be used alongside direct observations of student learning outcomes as we explore ways of enhancing the student experience. Ongoing use of the survey is expected to provide one means of assessing how well we are developing multicultural awareness, which can be used alongside direct assessment of learning outcomes, to provide answers to the question of whether we can adequately provide a substantive international experience without sending students abroad.

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