

INTERNATIONALISING LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE AND COMMUNITY: STUDENTS-AS-STAFF ON GLOBAL EXCHANGE

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Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia, has a range of curriculum initiatives that aim to develop rounded students who have a solid discipline-specific knowledge, transferable graduate capabilities and who can demonstrate an overall career-readiness. VU also believes in the benefits of an internationalised curriculum which encourages students to demonstrate international perspectives, an awareness of culture and highly developed intercultural communication skills. The University of Texas at El Paso aims to educate students to be leaders who will make significant contributions to their chosen professions, their various communities and the world. Like VU, UTEP explicitly values diversity and encourages students to gain global experiences through international study opportunities—including through a combined study and students-as-staff exchange program with VU.

This paper focuses on the cultural aspects of VU/UTEP students-as-staff exchange program including international knowledge, intercultural competence and intercultural communication skills. Students from VU and UTEP responded to a series of online questions concerning cultural awareness, cultural differences and international perspectives and these will be used in a consideration of the VU/UTEP students-as-staff exchange as a model of internationalised curriculum that is effective in increasing cultural awareness and developing intercultural skills.

Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia, has a partnership with the University of Texas at El Paso, in the United States. This partnership, initiated in 2006, was predicated on the similar missions of the two institutions as well as notable comparable characteristics in the student cohorts: both institutions aim to provide excellent and accessible education to students from culturally and socially diverse communities who are often the first in their families to attend university. Both universities, too, take explicit responsibility for enhancing the employability of their students and have developed creative ways of developing students' confidence, employability skills and professional networks. The VU/UTEP partnership provides a model for internationalising education which is achieved through staff and student visits, technology-supported exchanges of ideas and programs, shared curriculum as well as collaborations in key research areas. This partnership has given rise to the VU/UTEP Student Employment and Exchange Program, an important initiative in this perhaps unlikely international relationship. This paper focuses on the cultural aspects of

VU/UTEP exchange program. Students from VU and UTEP responded to a series of online questions concerning cultural awareness, cultural differences and international perspectives and these will be used to consider the VU/UTEP Student Employment and Exchange Program as a model of internationalised curriculum that is effective in increasing cultural awareness and developing intercultural skills.

Amongst the collaborations between the two universities, the Exchange Program—most often called the Students-as-Staff Exchange Program—is particularly effective in achieving an internationalised learning experience for students. Participation in the program provides students with concrete evidence of what one student in a 2011 survey calls “proof” of their ability to relocate, adapt and be an excellent worker. The programme is culturally and emotionally rich as well as highly practical in its combined focus on work and learning through work in a discipline-related area that occurs in a cultural context that is different to the students' home culture. The Students-

as-Staff Exchange Programme provides an opportunity for work experience in a foreign context that emphasises developing students' intercultural skills as a part of a broader sweep of discipline-specific employability skills, professional networks and personal development. It is a widespread assumption underpinning student exchange programs that encountering the unfamiliar and establishing new networks enhances one's human capital in a manner not possible 'at home'; further, it is assumed that the resulting increase in human or cultural capital will positively impact on graduates during the recruitment process (Messer and Wolter, 2007). This discussion does not interrogate those assumptions. Rather, it seeks to capture student motivations for participating and student self-assessment about the cultural impact of the exchange.

Both VU and UTEP have diverse student cohorts. Students are already exposed to cultural diversities and differences—ethnic, religious, linguistic and educational. UTEP has 23,000 students approximately 75% of whom identify as Hispanic and who predominantly come from Spanish-speaking backgrounds. The UTEP student cohort is arguably more bicultural rather than Melbourne's multicultural one. Victorians come from more than 230 countries and speak more than 200 languages. VU's Annual Report 2008 notes that over 40% of students self-identified as Non-English Speaking Background (NESB)—a category used in Australia which recognises that not all international students are NESB and not all local students speak English at home. El Paso in Texas might be differently diverse—the ratio of UTEP student demographics based on ethnicity for 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 are fairly consistent, with Hispanic students comprising the single biggest cohort (77.45% in 2010) (UTEP, nd). Especially in combination, the cohorts of both universities offer a rich opportunity to explore culture and to learn how to work with difference.

BACKGROUND

The need for Australian universities to think creatively about providing learning opportunities for all students in order to develop the professional and personal capabilities that contribute to graduates' overall employability has intensified with the Global Economic Crisis and increased competition

for work placements and industry engagement from other universities and educational institutions. VU's approach to developing employability skills in undergraduate students is varied and is supported by its Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC) Policy which aims to increase interaction between students, industry and the professions with a view "to deepen[ing] students' knowledge of practice in realistic contexts" (VU, 2011: 3). LiWC includes educational activities that integrate theoretical learning with practical application in a workplace, profession or future employment. It involves "learning in and through the workplace and community" (VU, 2011: 3).

A popular LiWC activity at VU is work placement—which is increasingly seen as complex and challenging as competition for appropriate placements and suitable supervision heightens (O'Sullivan et al, 2006). While Universities Australia (2008) proposed a National Internship Scheme to enhance the work readiness of graduates, the issues raised in The WIL Report (Patrick et al., 2008) include questions of availability of appropriate roles as well as concerns about the exclusive nature of some work integrated learning (WIL) programs, varying levels of access to WIL experiences, the inconsistency of WIL learning experiences and the costs associated with undertaking unpaid WIL. While universities around the world are working to encourage engagement with industry and the professions to create professionally relevant opportunities for students, many universities are also considering how they might themselves provide 'learningful' work placements for students (McCormack, Pancini and Tout, 2010) in the various departments and roles within the university. Combining LiWC and employment opportunities on campus is not itself new, but VU has formalised it with the Students-as-Staff program model borrowed from UTEP.

STUDENTS-AS-STAFF AT VU

The Students-as-Staff programme is a noteworthy initiative that has successfully seen over 1,000 VU students involved in on-campus employment since 2009 in a range of roles—from research assistants to IT support, conference organisers and co-developers of leadership programs. The Students-as-Staff program at UTEP has been running for many years and

typically sees around 2,000 participants each year. UTEP's programme had clear synergies with VU's social justice mission, its LiWC Policy and its practical commitment to enhancing the employability of students. In keeping with well-established practice at UTEP, the aim of the Students-as-Staff program at VU is predominantly to enhance students' employability skills by providing meaningful work experience. The program also serves to more positively engage students with the university. While studies link high rates of off-campus employment of students with negative academic performance, it is conversely the case that on-campus employment, such as Students-as-Staff, can be positively related to enhanced student progress and completion (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Of course, it may also be the case that students motivated to apply for the Students-as-Staff programme are already engaged; any improvement in students' academic achievement is yet to be researched. What is known, is that student engagement in university life, whether in the form of sporting activities, club involvement or paid work, is positively associated with a greater engagement in learning and higher grades (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005) and that students who need to work could be the greatest beneficiaries of schemes such as Students-as-Staff.

METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on survey responses by students participating in the first two VU/UTEP Exchange Programs. Two online surveys were administered: one pre-departure survey and one post-placement survey. Student responses concerning cultural awareness, cultural differences and international perspectives are collated from both surveys and general themes are identified. A total of 24 students from both universities participated in two exchange programs in 2010 and 2011. They were sent pre-departure and post-program online surveys via student email and 21 participants responded with most respondents answering every question. The survey combined open-ended questions and some students were asked to rate statements relating to the exchange program using a four point response scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree and 4 = strongly agree). Student responses were anonymous and those anonymous responses have been generalised in this discussion. Of the eight general items in one section of the pre-departure

survey, four statements sought to rank participants' motives for undertaking the exchange and included items about learning about other countries and cultures and perceived benefits for future careers. In the post-placement survey, of the 20 items, seven asked about what students felt they gained from the experience from personal, academic and career perspectives. Only the responses to the four pre-departure survey items and seven post-placement survey items, together with generalised responses to the open questions are reported here. While the survey responses represent a small sample of students, given that the program is in its infancy, the findings are both encouraging and informative.

STUDENTS-AS-STAFF VU/UTEP EXCHANGE

The Student Employment and Exchange Program is an exchange version of the Students-as-Staff Program. Students from VU and UTEP spend a semester simultaneously studying and working at the partner institution. Both institutions employ students in a range of on-campus positions. The Exchange Program between VU and UTEP in semester two of 2010 and 2011 saw respectively five and seven students from each institution being placed in the other university. All 24 exchange students over the two semesters undertook 19 hours of paid employment each week on behalf of their own university at the other institution. The program enables students to essentially swap positions with peers at the other university. For example, an undergraduate providing library support at VU will swap with a UTEP student in a similar role. The paid nature of the work component of the exchange makes the venture affordable to students who may be from low socio economic backgrounds. VU's general student exchange program has similar aims to other universities: see the world, experience different cultures, develop a network of contacts, extend career opportunities, enhance communication skills, develop life experiences and self-confidence and receive credits towards a degree (VU, 2011a). The aims of the VU/UTEP Exchange include the simple aim of exchanging students for study and on-campus employment between VU and UTEP and to enhance the connection between students' on-campus employment and students' post-college career and/or graduate school preparation. The VU/UTEP exchange differs from

general exchange in its explicit focus on enabling students to both work and study with a view to enhancing career prospects.

INTERNATIONALISING THE CURRICULUM

Universities and colleges in Europe, North America and Australia typically describe internationalising as being about preparing students with the intercultural and international perspectives needed by professionals in a globalised environment. The 1994 OECD definition of internationalised curriculum points to a preparedness for work and life in a globalised world (OECD cited in Rizvi and Walsh, 1998). The ability to perform professionally in international contexts is exactly what the VU/UTEP exchange achieves. Essentially, a curriculum is internationalised through student perspectives and the evidence from the VU/UTEP Exchange Program suggests that students have already experienced a conceptual shift through this powerful learning experience. Simply travelling does not inherently achieve an internationalised experience; rather internationalisation requires participants to become aware of their own cultural assumptions and to reflect on previous unexamined practices to understand that what is 'normal' is cultural.

Internationalising the Curriculum assumes a different focus depending on the educational institution, its national and regional context as well as the cultural and linguistic diversity of students and staff. Internationalisation in education includes global movements of teachers and students, offshore teaching programs, offshore campuses, international students, study tours and student exchanges. The VU/UTEP Exchange Program provides an opportunity for students to develop international knowledge, intercultural competence and intercultural communication skills—all of which an internationalised curriculum encourages. During the exchange program, students might develop intercultural skills through considered comparisons between VU and UTEP systems, processes and cultures, by exposure to iconic and everyday cultural events and phenomenon and by participating in online reflections. Students can also develop international perspectives and knowledge and awareness of other cultures and geographic regions simply by planning, preparing for and participating in travel. The VU/UTEP

Exchange Programme provides a rich example of an internationalised learning experience. International travel might not automatically achieve an internationalised outlook in students but it is also true that, for many students, the opportunity to immerse themselves in cultures different from their own begins to address Whalley's basic query: "at a practical level...how do we actually internationalize the curriculum?" (Whalley, 1997: 2).

Study abroad—especially when combined with work—is a practical way that students can develop international knowledge and intercultural communication skills (Bauwens et al: 2009). International work placements are an ideal way for universities to equip students to be professionals in a global workplace (Page and Kupke, 2001; Woodley and Pearce, 2007) but the process is not without challenges including resourcing, bureaucracy and costs to students—especially given the distances between the US and Australia. The increased student mobility between VU and UTEP is achieved without the additional support offered via such supra-national alliances such as the European Union or ASEAN—both of which have substantial student exchange components as part of their respective briefs.

VU's vision of an internationalised curriculum is one which develops international perspectives, fosters intercultural communication skills and increases knowledge and awareness of a range of cultures and geographic regions, including indigenous cultures. Clearly, being relocated in a different institutional culture that is also in another country immediately foregrounds culture as an issue: it is evident in everything from language, accent, behaviours, food and sporting traditions. The extent to which geographic dislocation from the familiar enhances the cultural learning in the VU/UTEP Exchange Program is a vital consideration. Certainly, it is an expectation that travel to and especially employment in a different culture and country contributes to an internationalised outlook in students. Various writers suggest that international travel can change attitudes, promote understanding of difference and even achieve, if not world peace, then at least regional harmony (Page and Kupke, 2001). If an internationalised curriculum aims to prepare students for work and life in a globalised world, the then VU/UTEP Students-as-Staff exchange program is an excellent example of an internationalised program.

INTERCULTURAL SKILLS

There has been increasing attention to developing students' intercultural awareness and skills in Australian university curriculum. Intercultural communication skills feature strongly as part of many Australian universities' internationalising approaches (Crossman, 2011). Globally, the internationalisation of curriculum has resulted from and been informed by increased opportunities for people of diverse cultures to interact: whether through travel, technology, business, study or simply living in diverse communities. Being able to negotiate in and communicate with people and cohorts from different cultures is of particular value for the world of work (Chaney and Martin, 2011). Furthermore, students consider learning about other cultures and reflecting on their own cultures is interesting and relevant to their personal and professional lives (Woodley, Simmons and Licciardi, 2010).

FINDINGS/DISCUSSION

VU's internationalising principles include the aim "to prepare students to perform professionally and socially in global and multicultural contexts" and to "develop and assess intercultural communications skills" (Woodley and Pearce, 2007). These principles have particular resonance in the student comments. Student feedback on the program thus far suggests that exchange participants believe the experience has contributed to their abilities to operate in unfamiliar, international environments which have demanded that they cope with the unknown, deal with diverse and complex situations and work and study with people from different backgrounds who hold different values and beliefs. In fact, the challenge of the unknown and the chance to test themselves in a challenging situation seemed to be a major appeal of the program for many participants. The student exchange ensures that the very context of learning and working is altered and the surveys suggest that the impact of these geographic and cultural dislocations and relocations is profound.

Australian research suggests that exchange students are already experienced travellers (Daly, 2011). Whether this is true of the Students-as-Staff exchange

cohort is not known, although comments suggest that the Australian students were more likely to be experienced travellers than their UTEP counterparts. In fact, most respondents (VU and UTEP) were motivated by the prospect of travel and experiencing difference. Of the 13 respondents in a pre-departure survey addressing the question "Why did you decide to participate in the exchange?" 12 respondents mention experiencing different cultures and the chance to work overseas as the motivating factors. Only one respondent mentioned the opportunity to study a different subject. The eight respondents in a 2010 post-exchange survey rated "learn a new culture" (100%) as highly as "personal development" (100%) as the perceived benefits of the exchange. "Career benefits" were rated only slightly lower at 87.5%. See Tables 1 and 2 for figures rating statements in both surveys pertaining to culture and work. The combination of encountering new cultures while simultaneously working is of particular appeal. These views support a finding in the Erasmus exchange program that suggests that students who work in other countries spend more time with representatives of the local community than students who only study abroad and that interns have more opportunities to create local networks (Bauwens et al, 2009: 30). Exposure to different culture is intensified by working.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I will learn more about the differences between my country and other countries.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	38.5% (5)	61.5% (8)
The overseas employment experience will assist me in my future career.	0.0% (0)	7.7% (1)	42.4% (6)	42.4% (6)
I will gain experience in a different culture than my own.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	38.5% (5)	61.5% (8)
This experience will give me an opportunity to develop professional relationships	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	38.5% (5)	61.5% (8)

Table 1: Pre-departure Survey Responses 2011 from 13 respondents

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
This exchange improved my communication skills.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	25.00% (2)	75.0% (6)
This exchange gave me an opportunity to develop professional relationships.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	12.5% (1)	87.5% (7)
This exchange helped me feel comfortable in discussing cultural differences.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	50.0% (4)	50.0% (4)
This exchange enhanced my knowledge of another culture.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	12.5% (1)	87.5% (7)
This exchange enhanced my knowledge of cultural sensitivity.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	12.5% (1)	87.5% (7)
This exchange helped me feel comfortable in discussing cultural differences.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	25.00% (2)	75.0% (6)
I learned more about the differences between my country and other countries.	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	25.00% (2)	75.0% (6)

Table 2: Post Exchange Survey 2010 from 8 respondents

Survey responses see students self-reporting significant development across a range of graduate capabilities such as managing learning and career development opportunities. The theme of culture, however, dominates the surveys. Asked how the exchange experience has contributed to career goals, cultural factors dominate eight student responses. Students emphasise developing different perspectives, communication skills and their capacity to network with different people while working in another country. Students see cultural knowledge as career-enhancing. In Likert-type ratings to a set of statements (Table 2), all eight participants post-exchange anticipated that the exchange will enhance their future careers, that it provided opportunities to develop professional relationships, increased their confidence to discuss cultural difference, enhanced their knowledge of another culture and increased their awareness of cultural sensitivity. Most respondents regarded the ability to adapt to different cultural situations, to understand different systems and to work with people from different cultural backgrounds as beneficial to their career prospects. All respondents believe that the exchange provided them with opportunities to develop and demonstrate those abilities to adapt and work with difference.

CONCLUSION

The need to better measure the extent to which exchange students demonstrate improved international awareness or perspectives or intercultural communication skills as a result of the exchange is clear. Whether it is through blogs, emails, journals or vlogs, it is crucial to provide a forum for students to reflect on their own cultural assumptions and values—before, during and after the exchange. The value of the Students-as-Staff Exchange Program will be more accurately measured in the future. Students involved in European Erasmus exchanges claimed that their personality changed and that international exchange made them “more flexible, more self confident, open to dialogue and more tolerant towards others” (Bauwens et al, 2009: 30). The small sample of surveys used in this paper suggest that VU/UTEP students might be expected to make similar claims. The surveys provide a modicum of qualitative data on the VU/UTEP exchange with students positively self-assessing their personal growth (independence, cultural sensitivity, social

networks) and enhanced employability skills (communication skills, work experience, professional relationships). It will be interesting to confirm if, as students expect, that as well as being a psychologically and emotionally rich experience, the VU/UTEP Students-as-Staff Exchange is advantageous in the recruitment process. Will it, as one student hoped, provide an ‘edge’ when it comes to applying for jobs in a globalised future?

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