

The Challenges of International Education: A Reflective Study

Ahabab Chowdhury

Abstract--Australia has observed a significant growth in international student enrolments in recent years. Previous studies show that due to globalisation, the number of international students has grown quite rapidly since 1997, and most of these are undertaking vocational education and training (VET) (Nakar, 2013, p. 80). According to Australian Education International (AEI), by the end of 2009, there were approximately 73,100 international student enrolments, especially in the VET sector (2010). Chinese and Indian student enrolments comprised the largest group (AEI, 2013). In considering the increased number of students enrolled in Australian VET colleges since 1997, this paper examines international education in Australia from my personal experience. This study highlights a challenge that the VET college in which I worked faced in 2009, which arose as a consequence of internationalised education.

Index Terms— Australian Education International (AEI), International Education, Deep Learning, Rote Learning, International Pedagogy, Cultural Inclusivity, Cross-Cultural Training.

I. INTRODUCTION

Australia has observed a significant growth in international student enrolments in recent years. Previous studies show that due to globalisation, the number of international students has grown quite rapidly since 1997, and most of these are undertaking vocational education and training (VET) (Nakar, 2013, p. 80). According to Australian Education International (AEI), by the end of 2009, there were approximately 73,100 international student enrolments, especially in the VET sector (2010). Chinese and Indian student enrolments comprised the largest group (AEI, 2013).

In considering the increased number of students enrolled in Australian VET colleges since 2009, this paper examines international education in Australia from my personal experience. This study highlights a challenge that the VET college in which I worked faced in 2009, which arose as a consequence of internationalised education. I focus on the extant literature, which investigates why this challenge has been prominent. This paper discusses some strategies that were adopted as a response to the particular challenge, to benefit this VET institute's international students.

Ahabab Chowdhury, Department: Management, Schhol of Business, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia,

II. REFLECTION

My VET college was affected significantly by the growth in enrolments of international students in the Australian VET sector. Until 2008, this college delivered accredited courses only to around 600 local students. By the middle of 2009, around 85 per cent of students were international students. Among the international student cohort, more than 50 per cent were Indian. As one of the senior managers of this educational institute, I had observed the significant changes in the composition of the student body. Marginson and Eijkman (2007) argue that international students with diverse cultures require the implementation of curricula that acknowledges this diversity. Conversely, Nakar argues that VET teachers' efforts to teach internationalised curricula to students from diverse backgrounds are largely missing from studies (2013, p. 81). I became concerned for my educational institute for two reasons: a) our teachers were not well-trained to teach in an intercultural context, so b), our course curricula were not internationalised and did not provide a positive experience for the new international student body.

III. DEEP LEARNING VERSUS ROTE LEARNING

In explaining the learning process, Nayak and Venkatraman argue that surface-level processing does not enable a student to apply knowledge, especially in real-world situations, and that Australian academic culture emphasises deep learning and critical thinking rather than rote learning (2010, p. 5). Nayak and Venkatraman also suggest that teachers of international students should be clearer in their course delivery and the requirements for assignments, taking into consideration intercultural context.

IV. INTERNATIONAL PEDAGOGY AND CULTURAL INCLUSIVITY

Much scholarship focuses on the relationship between international pedagogy and principles of cultural inclusivity, and suggests that transnational connections should be made between international students' diverse experiences, through productive pedagogies (Singh, Han & Tran, cited in Tran 2013). This literature explores the approach that validates international students' past experiences, knowledge and skills in the international classroom, and thus contextualises learning materials through using these experiences, knowledge and skills to enhance the quality of teaching and learning (Tran 2013, p. 496).

V. IDENTIFICATION OF THE CHALLENGE

My institute had a significant number of Indian students in 2009. Primary research was conducted, with the aim of recognising the learning needs of these students, through a preliminary feedback session. The results showed that more than 90 per cent of Indian students lacked the skills necessary to adapt to my institute's Australian culture. The feedback session identified that these students had been taught through teacher-centred learning in their home country. Assessment was mostly conducted through verbatim assignments and rote memorisation. More than half of the students in the feedback session complained about the contents of the assessments. They suggested that it would be immensely helpful if the assessments, particularly role-playing activities and case studies, were designed in-line with their own culture.

Conversely, at my educational institute, analysis of the teachers' profiles indicated that more than three-quarters of teachers were native English speakers, while only a few were from diverse backgrounds. All were industry experts with no previous training or experience in classrooms full of international students. It is worth considering whether it is necessary to train college teachers differently, so that they could internationalise existing learning and assessment materials. Guthrie (2008) has warned that competency-based training and its associated auditing regime ultimately hinders international VET curricula from being able to accommodate the diverse learning needs of international students. What this means is that in a globalised context, my educational institute would be required to strike a balance between fulfilling the different learning needs of international students and developing culturally inclusive practices in the teaching staff. Ultimately, this would lead teachers to apply cooperative learning principles for the benefit of their Indian students.

VI. CRITICAL ANALYSIS: STEPS APPLIED IN RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGE

In practical terms, my college responded to the abovementioned challenge quite innovatively, but not at the expense of compliance pressure.

A. Step One: Conducting the Survey

To confront the challenge in a simple manner, first my college conducted a survey of its VET teachers, to identify teachers' attitudes towards cultural diversity. Garmon found that the features that led to a teacher's success with culturally diverse students are a disposition towards openness, appreciation of differences and eagerness to engage in new experiences (cited in Rehm, 2008, p. 47). Rehm (2008) points out that teachers with an open disposition are more likely to use diverse approaches to meet common goals, thus enabling students to flourish. The survey found that only five per cent of teachers considered cultural diversity a negative force. Although teachers at my educational institute did not have the necessary skills to manage international students' learning in an intercultural context, the survey indicated that they were quite open to professional development to enable them to overcome their shortcomings.

B. Step Two: Cross-Cultural Training

The next step was to conduct three-day cross-cultural training for our teachers. The main objectives were: a) to make the teachers familiar with the principles of culturally inclusive practices within an intercultural context; b) to make the teachers aware of cooperative learning, followed by international pedagogy; c) to teach them about the contextualisation of assessment, in light of international pedagogy regarding Indian students.

The next section will touch upon some of the specific activities that were undertaken in terms of the cross-cultural training.

C. Cross-Cultural Training Activities

Bean (2008) uses the term 'cross-cultural training' to refer to all modes of training aimed at developing cultural competence (p. 12). Research indicates that the effectiveness of cross-cultural training depends upon how well it achieves its intended objectives, active participation of the adult learners and the model or theory of culture that is linked to the objectives. Bean (2008, p. 14) states that cross-cultural trainers should be models for understanding culture, case studies, role play and intensive group activities. Consultants from the National Council for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER) and senior teachers at Technical and Further Education institutions (i.e., experts in teaching international students) facilitated the workshops.

The literature on methods of cross-cultural training highlights the superiority of the experiential and interactive approach over the didactic approach (Bean, 2008, p. 14). Therefore, our three-day cross-cultural training emphasised interactive activities, including role-playing, simulations and small-group activities in-line with cross-cultural perspectives. Resultantly, our teachers were able to apply cooperative strategies with international students. Assessment experts from Innovative Business Skills Australia (IBSA) were employed to train the teachers to prepare contextualised assessments within intercultural contexts. Patria (2012, p. 185) found that competencies are motivational, which means that when someone learns new skills, they want to apply them. As the survey results indicated, the teachers were disposed towards openness, so it was predicted that after finishing the training, they would be motivated to enable the Indian students to flourish in their learning.

VII. BENEFITS FOR INDIAN STUDENTS

By overcoming teachers' lack of skills regarding culturally inclusive practices and international pedagogy, my institute ensured that teachers adopted cooperative strategies. These included small group projects, role-playing and case studies that might have reflected the students' home culture. Nayak and Venkatraman (2010, p. 2) suggested that to minimise internal resistance to change, teachers should first encourage international students' to unlearn the academic culture of their home country, and then teach them the academic culture of their host country. The teachers at my institute learned this strategy from the training, and subsequently applied it on

their students. This gradually assisted our Indian students in coping with the academic culture of my educational institute.

VIII. CONCLUSION

International students' readiness to learn increases when they recognise that learning has great value, when the need to learn is clear and their ability to learn is supported within an intercultural context (Managing Business Communication, 2007, p. 252). The globalised context drove the teachers and the Indian students to be well-trained. Both entered into a cooperative learning culture, driven by culturally inclusive practices, and enabled each other to flourish.

organisational behaviour, human resource management. In regard to publication, Ahabab's one of the papers had been published in an international peer-reviewed journals entitled "*Learning and Assessment Practices of Doctoral Studies of Developing and Developed Countries: A Case Study of Doctoral Studies in Bangladesh*". It can be accessed directly at <http://iisit.org/Vol11/IISITv11p013-030Chowdhury0481.pdf>. As PhD candidate at University of Wollongong, Australia, Ahabab is currently investigating on the elements that distinguish high quality PhD programmes from low quality PhD programmes.

REFERENCES

- [1] (2007). Managing business communication. NSW: Pearson Education Australia.
- [2] AEI (2010). Retrieved from <https://www.aei.gov.au>
- [3] AEI (2013). Australia Education International. Retrieved from <https://www.aei.gov.au>
- [4] Bean, R. (2008). Cross-cultural training and workplace performance. Retrieved from <https://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2027.html>
- [5] Guthrie, H. (2008). Having your say: Views from the sector on enhancing vocational education and training provider capability. Adelaide: NCVER.
- [6] Marginson, S. & Eijkman, H. 2007, International education: Financial and organizational impacts in Australian universities, viewed 22 June 2014, <<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au>>.
- [7] Nakar, S. (2013). Understanding VET teachers' challenges in providing quality education to international students. International Journal of Training Research, 11(1), 79–88.
- [8] Nayak, R. & Venkatraman, S. (2010). A pilot study into international students' academic culture: The context of Indian business studies in an Australian university. E-Journal of Business Education & Scholarship of Teaching, 4(2), 1–12.
- [9] Patricia, B. (2012). Change management in the higher education context: A case of student-centred learning implementation. International Journal of Education, 4(4), 176–191. doi:10.5296/ije.v4i4.2515.
- [10] Rehm, M. L. (2008). Careers and technical education teachers' perceptions of culturally diverse classes: Rewards, difficulties, and useful teaching strategies. Career and Technical Education Research, 33(1), 45–64.
- [11] Tran, L. T. (2013). Internationalisation of vocational education and training: An adapting curve for teachers and learners. Journal of Studies in International Education, 17(4), 492–507. doi: 10.1177/1028315312469987.

Personal Profile

Ahabab Chowdhury is currently working as Sessional Academic at the University of Wollongong and as Adjunct Lecturer at International College of Management Sydney (ICMS). In addition, Ahabab is presently serving as Associate Editor for the International Journal of Doctoral Studies (IJDS). IJDS is among the highest ranking journals in the area of Doctoral Studies. Apart from Ahabab's identity as academia and researcher, he has possessed more than ten years of management as well as teaching experience in Australia and overseas performing a range of roles. While working in the education and training industry, Ahabab has held various senior management positions to demonstrate his pedagogical and instructional leadership practices—Principal of Central College (Group Colleges Australia), National Director of Studies of Martin College (Study Group Australia), Principal of Australian Nationwide College (Wentworth Institute), Director of Studies of Sydney College of Business and IT (collaborates with Southern Cross University), General Manager of The Education Group (TEG), Australia. Ahabab holds a Master of Business Administration (MBA), a Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA), a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. Ahabab has developed research interests in the areas including curriculum design and assessment, instructional leadership practices,