

**Internationalisation of the marketing curriculum:
Desired in theory but what about practice?**

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Abstract

It is generally accepted within marketing and wider higher education circles that internationalisation of the undergraduate curriculum is desired if not mandatory for universities to compete in the globalised economy. This is despite the fact that there is still no clear accepted definition or widely accepted understanding of exactly what internationalisation means. This paper reflects on the effectiveness of a major international project undertaken by marketing undergraduate students within an Australian university, working in virtual global teams. The results suggest that while students often find the experience of an attempt at real internationalisation challenging, to say the least, the learning outcomes are strengthened. This paper offers new insights into the reality of internationalisation for marketing education at curriculum level.

Keywords: Curriculum, marketing education, employers, internationalisation, curriculum, experiential learning, graduate attributes, undergraduate

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Introduction

Current education philosophy views internationalisation of curriculums as imperative for universities and many Australian universities have been working towards the goal of internationalisation of higher education (Harman, 2004). The term internationalisation has become something of a buzzword and is used not only by universities but by governments and other organisations, including UNESCO, the World Bank and the European Union (Harman, 2004). However, although many universities agree that internationalisation is an important factor in curriculums, there is no widely accepted definition of internationalisation (Peel and Frank, 2008), even though it is “one of the most significant drivers of change facing the modern university” (Taylor, 2004, 168).

Internationalisation has been described as a “sweeping agenda” (Peel and Frank, 2008) and can be understood as requiring universities to adapt better to a complex set of challenges emanating from globalisation, advances in information and communication technology and the demands of the knowledge society (de Jong and Teekens, 2003). This paper takes a critical studies approach, using results from research into students’ experiences to question this “sweeping agenda”.

Internationalisation – what industry wants?

If universities are pursuing internationalisation, is it because industry is seeking students with international skills? The answer is not as clear cut as a simple yes or no. The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia together identified eight key employability skills: communication, teamwork, problem solving, self-management, planning and organising, technology, life-long learning and initiative and enterprise (DEST, 2002). Clearly, cultural and international awareness are not mentioned but presumably could be found in someone with communication, teamwork and problem solving skills. However, a US study found that multinational employers believe that business schools do not graduate an adequate supply of graduates who are capable of handling entry and mid-level international business responsibilities (Webb *et al*, 1999).

The Global Communications (GlobCom) Project

As has been discussed, notwithstanding what business wants, many universities strive to have internationalisation as part of their curriculum and philosophy. For disciplines as diverse as marketing, geography (Hirsch and Lloyd, 2005) or social work (Johnson 2004), at a practical level internationalisation has vast reaching implications for undergraduate courses. Within schools of marketing “international marketing” is often taught as a separate unit. This paper looks in-depth at a student project undertaken by public relations students in 2009 within the School of Marketing at Curtin University of Technology, in Perth, Western Australia. The

students were studying Public Relations 340 International. Curtin University was invited to be part of an international Global Communications (GlobCom) project where students from 12 different universities, 11 countries (USA, Russia, South Africa, Germany, England, Spain, India, Australia, Portugal, Italy, United Arab Emirates) and 5 continents had to compete in global virtual teams to produce a public relations (or marketing communications) “pitch” document. For the GlobCom project, the students of the universities study public relations, marketing or communications at least in the third semester. There were eight international student e-teams formed. Each international e-team received the same public relations brief and had to develop and submit a public relations solution as a PowerPoint presentation like in a real pitch. The students of the e-teams communicated and co-operated with each other in the chatrooms of the GlobCom project website or by e-mail and phone.

The GlobCom Foundation was an initiative of a German Professor, Dr Volker Stoltz. Dr Stoltz, a former owner and operator of a major international marketing and public relations agency, began the GlobCom project because of the dearth of skills he found from practitioners working internationally and the increasing demand of global companies and agencies for professionals with international/intercultural experiences. The GlobCom project was designed to train students as part of a multicultural team in real international situations. Dr Stoltz’s concerns and aims are echoed in the literature where it is acknowledged that a major challenge for multinational employers is hiring people who can function effectively and efficiently across national boundaries (Webb *et al*, 1999). As a result of a much smaller but similar co-operative pilot project between the UK and Curtin in 2007, Curtin University had been invited by Averill Gordon, a lecturer at the University of Gloucestershire, to be a part of the GlobCom project.

The GlobCom project in Semester 1, 2009, was the first time that Curtin, and indeed any Australian university, had competed. The Australian students had to register on-line, meet up virtually with their team members from the 11 other international universities, and start to work on a “pitch” PowerPoint document in late February 2009 in order to meet the May 18 deadline where the same project was to be sent to all lecturers across the globe for marking. The marks were then collated and calculated to decide upon a “winning team”. These marks also formed the major assessment (30%) for the local unit at Curtin University. This year the brief was to produce a public relations/marketing communications strategy for the Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation (ADMAF) to promote the culture of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates – a real client, with real expectations as the client was sponsoring the project. Those students who had the time and resources were invited to travel to Abu Dhabi to deliver a live “pitch” to the client as part of a three day conference and for the chance to meet up with their international student colleagues.

Clearly this project “ticks all the boxes” when it comes to internationalisations of the curriculum, with the Australian students expected to tackle the challenges of communication, the issues of technology, different expectations of students and time zones while working to a tight deadline producing a document to a high standard without ever meeting the client face to face. Given this was also the Australian lecturer’s first attempt at such a project, there was also a learning experience on the part of the lecturer.

Experiential Learning

The lecturer aimed to offer the students experiential learning of an international project. Experiential learning has at its core an activity that puts students in a situation that part of, or

relevant to, the subject matter about which they are developing knowledge and understanding (Hirsch and Lloyd, 2005, p. 322). However, the learning goes beyond the set task and follows a learning cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation (Kolb, 1984).

As part of this learning cycle, students were asked to reflect and feedback on their participation in GlobCom. In particular, it was important to discover what the students felt they had learned from the experience, what challenges they experienced and their satisfaction with the process. It was felt that these insights could not be captured from the university's on-line evaluation of the entire unit (which also had many other components). This would also enable students to reflect on the experience and then use the knowledge they had gained throughout the course – the “conceptualisation” component of the learning cycle.

Methodology

This study took a critical studies approach, using a mixed methodology to ascertain students' reactions to involvement in an internationalised curriculum. Students who had participated in the GlobCom project were distributed a written feedback survey in class and ask to complete the sheet. A total of 27 students who competed internationally completed the survey which was a mixture of scales and qualitative feedback. It was interesting to note that 92.5 per cent of the students rated the GlobCom project as challenging, that is, with 1 being not challenging at all and 10 being “extremely challenging”, 25 out of 27 students rated the project above a six.

Table 1

Students' view of the challenging nature of the project, on a scale of 1-10 where 1 is not challenging at all and 10 is extremely challenging.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not challenging at all									Extremely challenging
No of students			1	1	4	7	8	4	2
Percentage			3.7%	3.7%	14.8%	25.9%	29.6%	14.8%	7.4%

Number of students=27

Table 2

Students' view of satisfaction of the experience, on a scale of 1-10 where 1 is not satisfied at all and 10 is extremely satisfied.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all satisfying									Extremely satisfying
No of students		4	5	3	6	6	2	1	
Percentage		14.8%	18.5%	11%	22.2%	22.2%	7.4%	3.7%	

Number of students=27

Results and discussion

It is interesting to note that a significant number of students (33.3%) were not “satisfied” with their experience of the project, or at least rated it below 5/10. The majority also, as has been noted, found it challenging and more than 50% were on the upper end of “challenging” (that is, they rated it at or above 8/10). From a lecturers’ point of view, if students are not all satisfied and find the project too hard, should we be bothered with truly international projects, when clearly the workload for the lecturer is greater? Themes that emerged from the written feedback showed the students were indeed challenged by the project, in particular with the different standards of English, the time zones, the organisational issues, the constraints of on-line meetings over face-to-face, and the cultural differences. One student summed up her frustrations with this comment: *“NEVER work with an international team – it’s too difficult to organise, you are constantly let down by others after hours of work locally.”* However, another student saw the project in a more positive light. *“It’s a fantastic opportunity to experience cross-cultural communication in the real world rather than just take notes about it in a lecture”.*

And yet another student described the challenges. *“I learnt a lot about Abu Dhabi but I also learnt that international public relations is extremely difficult especially when people from around the world don’t have someone on their back making sure they’re getting it done. Also relying on others that you don’t know, never will meet to do sections which affect your grade is VERY hard.”*

On-line versus Face to Face

For many students, the difficulties associated with only communicating on-line were brought home, even though this generation is seen as completely comfortable with social networking via the web. For example, one student commented: *“I learnt a lot of skills for dealing with on-line groups”.* Another student said that it was only when she had talked with her team-mates via Skype that she felt much more comfortable working with them and that phoning her team mates was important to establish relationships. A student summed it up by saying *“working internationally is a hassle – social media can be aggravating when concerning team work!”*

Lessons Learnt: Internationalisation in Practice

Of the 25 students who responded to the survey, 59% said that Curtin University should be involved in GlobCom again 14.8% said Curtin should not and 25.9% were unsure. As has been discussed, internationalisation is a priority for many universities across the world. At the author’s own university a “triple-I” curriculum model has been introduced which focuses on industry links, intercultural and Indigenous awareness, and interdisciplinary study. Curtin University’s graduate outcomes also expect students to be able to “recognize and apply international perspectives” and “demonstrate cultural awareness and understanding”. While these are seen as lofty goals, lecturers at the coalface have a difficult task to engender enthusiasm for internationalisation among some students. Students experience tremendous difficulties on a truly internationalised project, such as GlobCom, and it appears that some don’t like to be challenged – even if such a project may stand them in good stead for the workplace. However, just because something is not easy doesn’t mean it is not worthwhile.

Indeed, most learning comes in overcoming obstacles. Perhaps universities need to better resource lecturers if they are to truly internationalise their institutions.

Limitations

This study was constructed from feedback gained during an international project involving school of marketing students at an Australian university. The author is an Australian female lecturer and as such will have inherent Australian bias. The study did not differentiate opinions of local (Australian born) students and those from international backgrounds. The sample size of 27 is clearly small and therefore the results are difficult to generalise. A further study could focus on differences and similarities among the different international and local students at Curtin and compare them with feedback from students in other countries. However, feedback from a pilot project conducted in 2007 (involving only an Australian and English university), showed similar experiential learning from students as well as similar frustrations and challenges, including differing problems with technology and time zones and the limitations of social networking technology as opposed to face-to-face communication.

Conclusion

This paper is intended as a basis for discussion on issues surrounding internationalisation. It also intends to generate questions on the trend for universities to pay considerable attention to student “satisfaction” rather than student learning and outcomes. Further research would be useful to ascertain students’ reflection on such a project as GlobCom once students have graduated and actually worked on international marketing projects within their workplace. Six of the students were able to travel to Abu Dhabi in May this year, meeting up with their colleagues from around the globe, and for those students it was a “once in a lifetime” experience. This final quote shows the positives gained from internationalisation of the curriculum.

“I have learnt so much from this unit. The benefits of working with a cross cultural team include gaining fresh new perspectives, learning about PR practices in different cultures, and making fantastic global contacts. There were also challenges of course, mostly due to the time differences – we were waking at 3am to participate in online meetings! Also as it was such a large team, everyone having a chance to talk and get their ideas included was tricky, but this could happen with any large group...The most enjoyable aspect was definitely getting a taste of how all the different cultures work, both professionally whilst we were working on the project, and personally whilst we got to know each other socially.”

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