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# International business education: Selling knowledge to grow wisdom?

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***Abstract:** This paper examines issues related to the provision of 'international' business education by Australian universities. In this context, the paper raises questions about the role of universities, the sort of education they currently provide and whether issues related to 'growing wisdom' are in fact being tackled. In particular, Australian universities seem to be under-utilising opportunities to teach about cultural diversity and intercultural communication provided by their highly diverse student populations. While claims are easily made about preparing graduates for 'international' or 'global' workplaces, the reality is that knowledge about cultural and linguistic diversity, so necessary in today's business environments, does not seem to be actively pursued. This paper suggests a number of strategies that could be implemented to build upon the opportunities provided by the cultural and linguistic diversity of the student body in Australian tertiary institutions.*

***Keywords:** International education; English as a global language; internationalization.*

## **Introduction**

Many Australian universities and Business Schools claim to be preparing students for "international business" or business in the global arena. For example, the Curtin Business School states as its strategic vision "to provide students with a superb international education through the discovery and application of knowledge" (Curtin Business School, 2001). In one sense this should not be difficult, since the greatest numbers of international student enrolments are in the business/commerce faculties, so that these faculties are already very "international". For example in 2003 there were 25,571 business enrolments, representing almost 41% of all international enrolments in Australian universities (DEST, 2004). Such numbers of international students in our universities provide a wealth of cultural and linguistic knowledge that, unfortunately, seems to remain largely untapped (Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000; Hawthorne 1997; Nesdale & Todd, 1997). This paper explores ways of catering to the needs of both international and local students in ways that develop intercultural understanding and communication in all students.

## **International education in Australian universities**

International education in Australia has expanded rapidly since the 1980s, showing an increase not only in the number of international fee-paying students coming to Australian universities but diversification in the ways tertiary education is provided to international students. International education now includes different forms of "transnational education" provisions for international students including those for: onshore fee paying students who come to Australia either to undertake a full degree or to complete a degree which they have

begun in their own country; offshore students taught in collaboration with offshore partners in countries such as Malaysia; and students in offshore campuses such as Curtin's Miri campus in Sarawak or Monash's South African campus and Prato Centre in Italy. Curtin is amongst the four largest Australian providers of tertiary education to international students, with numbers having shown a steady growth in recent years. Curtin University statistics for August 1999 showed that it had 3531 onshore and 3297 offshore students, making a total of 6,828 international students. By 2002 this number had almost doubled to 11,313 and reflected similar increases in other Australian universities, with 10,330 at the University of New South Wales, 14,500 at Monash University and 13,371 at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (DEST, 2002). Curtin's international enrolments for 2003 numbered 13,935 and statistics for 2004 indicate an increase of 14% in onshore international enrolments (Curtin University Planning Office, 2004).

International education in Australia is inextricably bound up with issues surrounding the role of the university and particularly its future role in the twenty-first century. The debate seems to move between two major orientations: an instrumental/economic one, which argues that university education should prepare graduates for the workforce; and a more liberal one, which posits that undergraduates need to be prepared to contribute more broadly to cultural and social development, including their own personal development. Candy (1994), in his study of lifelong learning, takes the view that not only are these orientations not mutually exclusive, but indeed both are necessary for continuing learning throughout life. Reid (1996) also supports Candy's view, arguing that while we cannot ignore the economic rationalist agenda altogether, we cannot let it alone shape the content and thrust of university courses. In his aptly titled "Higher education or education for hire?" (Reid, 1996, p.142) states that the duty of universities is "to be responsive, but not subordinate, to current socio-economic needs".

Massification of tertiary education and the growth in international education in Australia have, in more recent years, brought with them concerns about maintaining standards and quality, with universities being held to account for "student outcomes". The policy dilemma is that we want more, and more diverse people to have access, while at the same time maintaining the quality of what is provided with shrinking public funds (Clanchy & Ballard, 1995; McNair, 1997). This situation has tended to make universities more assiduous in their marketing of tertiary education to international students, while at the same time increasing general concerns in the debate about standards. With mounting pressure to raise funds from sources other than Federal funding, Australian universities need to be wary lest they fall into the trap of "selling knowledge" and overlook the wonderful opportunities that internationalisation presents for students (and indeed staff) to "develop wisdom".

Among the benefits that internationalisation can bring are intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication skills, arguably among the most important skills needed to equip business students for successful interaction in the global arena. In this context, this paper seeks to probe what sort of skills might be required in global business interactions and asks if the necessary skills are being developed in our business courses. It also asks how we can turn what is often seen as narrow transferral of knowledge in the education of international students, bought at a price, to something closer to "wisdom".

## **"Global" business skills for intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication**

The language of instruction in many of the provider countries (US, UK, Australia, Canada, NZ) in international and transnational education is English. Indeed many international students access tertiary education from these countries because they want an English language degree. Crystal (1997) estimates that nearly one quarter of the world's population, or between 1.2 and 1.5 billion people, are already fluent or competent in English, with Graddol and Meinhof (1999) indicating that the number of second language speakers continues to grow. Not everyone is happy with the march of English (see for example, Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999; Pennycook, 1994); however, all the indications are that the importance of English as a global language is likely to continue to grow in the foreseeable future (Crystal, 1997) and in the field of business, arguably even more so than in other areas. As Julian Amey says (in Graddol & Meinhof, 1999, p. 17):

"Although there are some concerns about American imperialism, there is a belief that young people need English to be internationally competitive. That's the trend in places like Malaysia and the one emerging also in South America".

So while monolithic English might indeed pose a threat to some smaller languages and other cultures (some decry the "McDonaldisation" of culture), its march, at least in the foreseeable future, would seem to be unstoppable. Given this probability, it seems likely that many, if not most, future business interactions in the global arena will take place between English speakers from different national/cultural backgrounds, only some of whom will be first language speakers (L1) of English. In this sort of scenario, "native speakers" will not necessarily be advantaged. Indeed they might well be disadvantaged, lulled into a false sense of security by the belief that "everyone speaks English", so no extra effort is required. Developing English for global competence then becomes an issue not only for international students, who may have English as a second language, but for **all** students.

What sorts of skills, then, should we be developing in business students to equip them for successful interaction in a global context? Successful communication in future scenarios, where many interactions will take place between non-native speakers of English, is likely to require:

- A certain level of competence with English at the linguistic level;
- Sensitivity to other cultures;
- Sensitivity to other *Englishes*; and, most importantly,
- Competence in cross-cultural/intercultural communication.

Each of these skills areas is described more fully below, while strategies to develop these competencies are elaborated in the last section of the paper.

### ***Competence with English at the linguistic level***

The English language teaching (ELT) business is a huge industry worldwide, with the British Council estimating that students learning English would reach 1,000 million in the year 2000 (Crystal, 1997). Large providers of international tertiary education, such as Australia, require minimum English language levels, often measured with international tests such as IELTS, for entry. Many also provide pre-entry English language courses and bridging courses as well as support programs of various types for international students. Even with minimum English language requirements, the fact is that most ELT courses all over the world, according to Ronowicz and Yallop (1999) teach only first level (literal) meanings and correct grammar and

only a limited amount of what the authors call "second level meanings", i.e. culture specific meanings essential for effective intercultural communication. It is possible, therefore, that even high levels of linguistic competence would not necessarily make it easy for an international student to understand a lecture with numerous local references and assumed (local) knowledge. There is ongoing debate among academics on the issue of just how much English linguistic competence can and should be expected of international students undertaking tertiary studies with an Australian tertiary institution.

### ***Sensitivity to other cultures***

This goes beyond learning about the surface aspects and artefacts of a particular culture to learning about how people think, interact and solve problems in culturally specific ways. It means going beyond what Varner (2001) calls "front stage" cultural behaviour (the evident things that we can see) and beyond the sophisticated stereotyping presented in many texts, perhaps wrongly based on the work of Hofstede (1980) and Trompenars (1998), so often quoted in business literature. Much of the literature in business texts is also from an American or "western" perspective, so that intercultural analysis is often presented as simplistic comparison between "western" and other ways of "doing business". As Jack (2002, p.5) indicates:

"Such approaches all too easily enhance stereotypes rather than promote genuine intercultural awareness and [they] reinforce an oversimplified, even imperialistic view of cultural difference".

### ***Sensitivity to other "Englishes"***

There exist tangible differences in the way English is used in different countries/regions. There is no standard model that can be offered internationally, although the American model is perhaps prevailing due to America's super power status and its dominance in the world media. However, the balance between L1 and L2 speakers of English is set to change critically in future with L2 speakers eventually overtaking L1 speakers:

"In future English will be a language used mainly in multilingual settings as a second language and for communication between non-native speakers" (Graddol & Meinhof, 1999, p. 57).

Knowledge of the different ways English is used in different countries will therefore be advantageous. David Flack, Senior Director of MTV Asia says:

"I sometimes have to re-write a memo in Singlish [ie Singapore English] to make it suitable for an international audience. In one way it shows people in this region are quite secure in who they are" (Graddol & Meinhof 1999, p. 57).

### ***Competence in cross-cultural/ intercultural communication***

This is perhaps the most crucial area and the one in which different approaches are suggested. Ideally, this competence would be embraced as part of a broader thrust towards internationalisation of curriculum in universities for, as Whalley (1997, p.15) says:

A successfully internationalised curriculum provides students with the skills and knowledge to perform competently (professionally and socially) in an international environment. Students' intercultural competence develops out of both an awareness of other cultures and perspectives and awareness of their own culture and perspectives.

Roberts, Davies and Jupp (1992) suggest that what is required is that we teach an "expanded view of language" which includes knowledge of "schemata" (the cultural and social

knowledge brought to an interaction) and “frames” (strategies and assumptions which allow for an interpretation of the interaction) as well as language uses and forms. The authors call this a “grammar of discourse”, which is much more difficult to learn than a grammar of linguistic forms. Highly formalised situations such as job interviews, for example, depend on the interviewee being familiar with the schema and frame for this interaction in a particular cultural context in order to be judged positively.

Scollon and Scollon (1995) suggest a discourse approach to intercultural communication. They maintain that most miscommunication in business contexts arises not out of poor use of grammar or mispronunciations but because of differences in patterns of discourse. They see the discourse of cultural groups as one of a series of discourse systems including corporate, professional, generational and gender systems. None of the discourse systems is static (just as culture is not static) and professional communication usually involves communication across, as well as within, discourse systems. For such communication to be successful, a shared knowledge of context is required. The issue becomes more complicated because we are all simultaneously members of multiple groups or discourse systems and we cannot be defined simply by our membership of any one. It should be clear, then, that being an L1 speaker of English will not, of itself, suffice in the future. Intercultural communication skills will be needed and should be developed by **all** students.

### **The current situation in Australian business faculties**

Given the above considerations, are we doing enough in Australian universities to equip students (both local and international) to operate confidently in a global context? If university Mission and Vision statements and Teaching and Learning policies are to be believed, we would seem to be aiming to do just this. Many Australian universities have “internationalisation” goals spelt out in such documents.

The following are some examples:

- The Queensland University of Technology aims to: “provide an educational environment which will enable [students to develop the skills to] be able to work effectively and sensitively within the Australian and international community” (Watters, 1997).
- A University of South Australia graduate will be expected to demonstrate “an international perspective as a professional and as a citizen” (University of South Australia, 2001).
- Curtin University of Technology aims for the development of students and staff as “citizens of the world, emphasising an international outlook, cultural diversity and informed respect for indigenous peoples” (Curtin University of Technology, 1998).

These are the aims at the policy level; implementation is usually more difficult. In the narrowest sense, internationalisation is still seen by some as no more than taking Australian education offshore or attracting international students to Australian campuses – i.e. as having an international student population. This factor could contribute to internationalisation, but as Hawthorne (1997) and others (Volet & Ang, 1998; Briguglio, 2000; Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000) have commented, there is unfortunately very little mixing between international and local students on Australian campuses and very little use is made in Australian classrooms of the rich cultural diversity within them. Moreover, as Sadiki (2001, p 2) states:

The internationalisation of the student body, which is likely to intensify even further in the twenty-first century, calls not only for inclusive curriculum but also, and more importantly, for cross-cultural rethinking of curriculum as well as of teaching and learning practices.

Also rarely has the issue of internationalisation been associated with the question of English for global communication. Universities must begin to consider themselves international in fact and not just in rhetoric, so that there is a greater understanding by staff, and indeed by local students, of the need for support (not remediation) for international students who are L2 speakers of English. In a truly global/international university it should be accepted that L2 (as well as L1) speakers in the language of instruction will need to continue to develop their linguistic proficiency to the highest levels. Moreover, as Whalley et al. (1997, p. 1) state:

"[In future] most [graduates] will need to function competently in social and work environments which are international and intercultural in nature. A new literacy, an intercultural/international literacy, is crucial to meeting this challenge successfully"

### **Increasing intercultural understanding and developing intercultural communication skills**

What are we doing in business education, an area where students will, of necessity, be thrown into the global arena? Here often internationalisation is seen as having students complete units in "International Management", "International Business Law" and so on. This might help students to acquire global perspectives but it will not necessarily equip them to operate effectively in a global context. As indicated above, acquiring sensitivity about cultural diversity and the intercultural communication skills to do this is a much more complex process. It also should be clear that this is as much an issue for L1 as for L2 speakers of English.

How, then, can we impart the required knowledge and develop the necessary skills in students, particularly business students? Some possible strategies include:

- Teaching a special unit, such as "English for global competence";
- Ensuring there is input across the curriculum to raise student awareness of cross-cultural issues, for example through intensive use of international case studies;
- Introducing learning processes which can enhance student understanding and awareness of cultural and linguistic issues (for example through more structured group processes).

Ideally, all of the above strategies should be implemented.

#### ***A unit in "English for global competence"***

Teaching a compulsory foundation unit to all students would be the easiest option, in that a single unit is far easier to implement than some of the other strategies suggested. However, a unit by itself has its limitations, nor is it a simple matter to determine the sort of content and processes that such a unit might embrace. Nevertheless, such a unit might cover at least some of the following areas:

- Expectations for oral and written communication in Australian tertiary contexts;
- Aspects of university discourse;
- Aspects of business discourse;
- Varieties of English or world Englishes;

- A “grammar of discourse” for Australian English;
- The rise of English as a global language;
- The concept of culture;
- Cultural, organisational, gender, professional, generational and other discourses;
- Issues in cross-cultural communication;
- Business negotiations in cross-cultural contexts.

Most importantly, such a unit would make extensive use of seminars (rather than lectures), class and small group discussion, group work in mixed cultural groups, case studies based on cross-cultural issues and tasks which would require students to probe each other’s cultural perspectives (see section on learning processes, below). Issues to address would be: Whether such a unit should be credit-bearing, whether it would be a “core” or “elective” unit and who would teach it - staff with business qualifications or those with linguistic expertise?

***Input across the curriculum to raise student awareness***

Thus far, what has been interpreted as internationalisation of curriculum in many Australian universities has been the inclusion of content relating to other countries/cultures. However, as Smart, Volet and Ang (2000, p. 37) state:

“While such content reform at program level is beneficial [...] it is likely to be in the area of instructional methods and classroom intercultural interaction that the most promising innovations will emerge”

Nor has there been consistency across courses, which, according to Nesdale and Todd (1997) is likely to be the most successful approach.

A broader cross-cultural input into the curriculum can also come from students themselves. Some international students have complained that in Australian classrooms they are not presented with opportunities to discuss previous experiences and knowledge that relate to their own country (Briguglio, 2000, 2001). Others have indicated cases of where they lacked the local (Australian) knowledge to be able to complete assignments or understand questions (Mulligan & Kirkpatrick, 2000).

In business studies, the “case study” is a very common teaching and learning tool and presents a good opportunity for designing appropriate teaching and learning tasks. Many commercially produced materials already exist (see for example, Mendenhall & Oddou, 2000). However, care should be taken to avoid merely tinkering with exotic names and overseas locations. Effective cross-cultural case studies should highlight cultural dilemmas and require serious interrogation. Case studies should be carefully developed to ensure they raise student awareness of more than just superficial cultural aspects.

***Learning processes which enhance student understanding and appreciation of cultural and linguistic issues***

As indicated above, there is very little mixing between local and international students on Australian campuses. This “separation” seems to continue to a large extent within university classrooms. Smart, Volet and Ang (2000), and Volet and Ang (1998) found that, if students were left to their own devices, very little would change. They advocate a deliberate interventionist approach to encourage both local and international students to learn from the rich cultural diversity that exists on Australian campuses.

Many group or team projects and assignments are undertaken in business studies. Often students are asked to form their own teams and are not given much preparation for working in

groups. With staff intervention to form structured groups, careful selection of team members, judicious preparation of case studies, the development of challenging tasks and processes that allow the students to learn from each other's cultural perspectives, case study work can produce wonderful results and prepare students for working in real multicultural settings. A team at the University of WA has been researching this issue and is preparing materials for staff to help students make the most of team-work learning experiences (Caspersz, Wu & Skene, 2002 and Caspersz, Skene & Wu, 2002).

The Curtin School of Design has used group and pair work in this way with a series of very structured activities, and the results have been truly impressive (Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000). In one assignment, for example, students from different cultural backgrounds work in pairs and each in turn acts as a "client". Over a semester, students must probe each other's cultural background to design a poster for a particular event that will please the other client. Apart from the poster, the assessment also includes diary entries describing what each student has learned about the other's culture. What is particularly valuable about this sort of task is the fact that it: carries over a whole semester, involves students exploring each other's cultural values and tastes, has students reflecting on what they have learned, allows students to adapt their design product to please the other "client", and channels them into developing a design that is a blend of their own ideas and the cultural perspective of the "other". Another example in the CBS School of Information Systems has students plan all aspects of a wedding, as it would be carried out in their country of origin. This highlights all sorts of cultural dilemmas and differences and students learn much more than abstract theory from this project. Similar tasks could be developed and adapted for business students.

## Conclusion

It can be seen from the above that there is a need to develop both the communicative abilities and the cultural understandings and sensitivity, which impact upon intercultural communication in global business. The strategies and approaches described above should not be seen as alternatives, but as different elements of a multi-dimensional approach, which would reach the greatest number of students and be most effective. No doubt, some aspects of the strategies described above are already being implemented in some universities. However, the approach has not been consistent, nor have these sorts of strategies been embedded and integrated fully into the formal curriculum. If we are serious about preparing business graduates for operation in the international sphere, and if we want to take them beyond a narrow acquisition of knowledge to a broader "acquisition of wisdom" then a much more consistent and deliberate approach is needed.

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