

INTERNATIONALISING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS IN BUSINESS GRADUATES: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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INTRODUCTION

- Push to develop & assure graduate capabilities
- LiWC approaches aim to optimise graduate capabilities
- Models & approaches to LiWC at VU include, but are not limited to, projects in & for a workplace, practical, co-operative & clinical placements, fieldwork, simulations, traineeships or internships & enterprise initiatives.
- Professional Development (PD) units at VU aim to develop graduate capabilities: team work, intercultural skills, problem solving, critical thinking & communication skills.
- PD units taught in Hong Kong (CUHK) & Malaysia (Sunway)
- Communicative pedagogies & industry engagement

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METHODOLOGY (1)

- VU's *Toolkit for Internationalising the Curriculum* (2007)
- *Professional Development 1: Critical Thinking & Problem Solving* (PD1)
- Literature review - employability skills in Australia & Malaysia
- Student perspectives
 - excerpts of students' reflective journals, Blackboard discussion, anonymous comments from SEUs
 - two focus groups - Melbourne in 2009 (12 students – 6 international & 6 local students) and in Kuala Lumpur in 2010 (10 students).

METHODOLOGY (2)

In focus groups, students were asked about:

- The skills students think employers are looking for
- Overall views of PD1, what they learnt, liked or disliked
- What they thought about the collaborative learning activities
 - Relevant to future employability?
 - Would they assist them in their future workplace?
 - Perceptions of teamwork – fair? how it could be improved? Did they feel more confident & prepared to work effectively in a team?
- The effect of the learning activities in PD1 on skills such as communication, collaboration & teamwork
- Did participation in PD1 help to become more aware of the working world and some of its challenges?

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

- Global push to improve graduates' employability skills
 - China (Patridge & Keng, nd)
 - Malaysia (Bakar et al, 2007; Singh & Singh, 2008).
- Discipline knowledge – however rigorous, however deep – not sufficient for professional roles in knowledge economies:
 - team projects are the norm
 - communication skills essential
 - the ability to work in settings of cultural diversity a given
 - change is the only constant.
- Graduate capabilities focus on *applying* theory, academic knowledge & technical skills in a professional context.
- VU Graduates Capabilities
 - problem solve; locate, critically evaluate, manage and use written, numerical and electronic information; communicate in a variety of contexts and modes; work...autonomously and collaboratively [and] in an environmentally, socially and culturally responsible manner; and manage learning and career development opportunities (VU, 2008).

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS IN MALAYSIA

- How relevant are Australian employability skills or VU's Graduate Capabilities to Malaysian students' professional aspirations?
- How relevant are such skills and attributes to Malaysian workplaces?
- Will PD1 give VU's graduates in Sunway Malaysia a better chance of finding a job on graduation as students reasonably expect?

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS IN MALAYSIA

- Singh & Singh's (2008) study of graduates' & employers' perceptions of employability skills in Malaysia: "current graduates do not match the needs of business"(15).
- **Technological & global** nature of Malaysian workplace: proficiency in technology is vital to compete: "a more flexible workforce with advanced technical skills coupled with well-developed generic skills such as creative thinking, problem solving & analytical skills, is greatly needed by employers in the industry" (Singh & Singh, 2008: 15).
- Shah (2008) notes a perceived lack of skills in Malaysian graduates, including presentation & English skills.
- Graduates are not work-ready (Shah 2008)
 - exam-oriented education system which produces graduates with theory and little practical experience. Interestingly, students in the focus groups repeatedly mentioned the lack of exams in PD as a positive but they wanted less assessment overall.

INTERNATIONALISING THE CURRICULUM

- Internationalising the curriculum often conflated with international activities or international cohorts (Appleton, *et al.* 2007; Arkoudis, 2009).
- Internationalising the curriculum - a curriculum intended for *all* students.
 - curriculum which develops international perspectives, fosters intercultural communication skills and increases a knowledge and awareness of a range of cultures and geographic regions, including indigenous cultures.
- An internationalised curriculum includes curriculum that prepares students "for defined international professions" (OECD cited in Rivzi & Walsh, 1998).
- PD units provided a timely opportunity to develop curriculum that was internationalised; that is, it did not bolt on a couple of "internationalised" activities as an afterthought.
- *Professional Development 1* foregrounds culture (readings & other resources, topics, assessment tasks & use of the student cohort).

PRINCIPLES FOR INTERNATIONALISING THE CURRICULUM AT VU

- is based on a respect for diversity
- aims to prepare students to perform professionally & socially in global & multicultural contexts
- is equally relevant to local and international students
- includes teaching methods that are diverse, inclusive & explicit & that do not disadvantage any student
- is broadened by an internationally comparative approach
- develops & assesses intercultural communications skills & critical thinking
- is embedded in curriculum but varies according to discipline & AQF
- is achieved through collaboration with a diverse group of stakeholders in the development of a relevant range of resources
- is based on a view of culture as complex, dynamic & evolving
- avoids stereotyping, generalisation & monolithic descriptions of cultures including our own (Woodley & Pearce, 2007).

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CONTEXTUALISING THE CURRICULUM

- With different student cohorts in Melbourne & Malaysia & with employability skills determined by Australian research & industry, how relevant are the content & aims of PD for students in Malaysia?
- How appropriate are the teaching approaches?
- Three broad areas contribute to internationalised curriculum:
 - an internationalised pedagogy
 - an internationalised content
 - internationalised activities.
- The 'what' of teaching is internationalised localised & contextualised.
- Other countries' internationalising agendas
- The "cultural assumptions inherent in some western curricula" (IEAA, 2008: 61) present a risk offshore
- Employability skills are culturally constituted & understood.

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CONTEXTUALISING THE CURRICULUM: “not...a ‘watering down’ of onshore programs” (IEAA, 2008)

- Contextualisation for Malaysia cosmetic but symbolic.
 - One very secular reading has quotations from a range of sources including Chinese philosophers, Martin Luther King, Western movies like *Babe*, self-help books and one line from the Bible (Frehse, 2003) – changed.
 - Australian issues changed (drought to oil)
 - In Hong Kong, readings on business implications of Islamic values deemed irrelevant to the students – the alternative article?
- Learning objective – business implications of religious values
- Employability skills need to be contextualised: how critical should students be? How should they communicate?
- Political and cultural questions that should be examined.

ENGLISH AS AN EMPLOYABILITY SKILL

- Unintended employability skill PD (International students identified it)
- In Malaysia, English proficiency an important employability skill
- Link between English language proficiency & employability (Yogeesvaran, 2005; Phang, 2006 cited in Kassim & Ali, 2009).
- “Language requirement is a big issue with regard to employment in Malaysia” (Bakar et al, 2007).
- English fluency vital to advancement in the global workplace & employment in the multinational workplace in Malaysia (Kassim & Ali, 2009).
- Negative connotations of privileging English in what is a post-colonial country with Bahasa Malaysia as its official language.
- Workers in many roles need to be proficient in oral English if not written English even in a predominantly Malay organisation (Ting, 2002) in the private sector & multinational companies (Phang, 2006).

WHAT STUDENTS SAID IN MELBOURNE

- Mix of local and international students in PD1 teams in Melbourne is a challenge for students: many problems, assumptions & prejudices
- Most students are positive overall (SEU) about both team work & English language practice
- Focus group: while it was easy to work in a team with people you already know, it was *“better and more interesting to be in a team with students you don’t know & who have different cultures & languages”*.
- It is ‘easy to forget that local students benefit from socialisation with their international counterparts’ (Arkoudis, 2009a).
- An international student from China said that PD1’s team-based activities *“provide me with a better environment to exercise my English skills than sitting in a big class with many other Chinese students”*.
- Overall, the unit was considered *“useful”* for the *“real world”*.

WHAT STUDENTS SAID IN MALAYSIA

- PD students in Malaysia did not mention improved English as an outcome of PD. One reflection notes that English is an official language in Malaysia and *“Malaysians are proud...because they have the opportunity to learn more languages to communicate with different races.”*
- Qualitative comments on SEUs (Sunway 2010) from 16 students to two open questions: *“What were the best aspects of this unit?”* & *“What were the worst aspects of this unit?”* Half of these responses included group work and interaction as the best aspects of the unit while others focussed positively on the professional skills *“much needed in the working world”* and *“practical work that is related to the business world”* (Class size of 298).

WHAT STUDENTS SAID IN MALAYSIA

- Focus group - what they thought of PD. Overall, “great!”
- Students claimed to have developed employability skills: teamwork, presentation & communication skills – esp. verbal communication, general knowledge to prepare for work.
- One respondent had learnt “*to be more professional*”.
- Several students said PD “*prepares students for the working world*”.
- Group work - not always fair & sometimes demanding but beneficial future employability: “*teaches cooperation & patience*”, “*helps...to learn to deal with different personality types*” & “*mirrors real life*”.
- Awareness of the real world? “*Not really*”, “*it still feels like school*”, “*subjects aren’t complex enough to be like the real world*”
- Wanted employability skills to be “*more real*”, the curriculum “*more practical*”, “*more hands on activities*” & to “*visit workplaces – perhaps have work placement or internships*”.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- Both cohorts valued focus on employability skills
- Qualitative comments in Student Evaluations & responses of Focus Group particularly **value team work & communication skills**: two of the employability skills the unit aims to develop.
- International students in Australia mentioned the importance of PD for the development of English language but this was not mentioned by students in Malaysia despite the issue featuring in much research (and assessment!)
- Negative comments about the fairness of team assessment has lead to a revision of assessment.
- Students will use Blackboard discussion for their team work to ensure a record of team communication & facilitator access

FINALLY – MORE INTERNATIONALISING THE CURRICULUM

- More students interacting online to develop intercultural awareness & skills, cultural knowledge & even geographic knowledge (currently underdeveloped yet potential to further internationalise the curriculum through student interaction and discussion).

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