INTERNATIONALISING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS IN BUSINESS GRADUATES: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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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. While conversations about internationalised curriculum often end up exclusively focusing on international student exchange and global mobility, at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia, an Internationalised Curriculum forms part of the university’s broader Internationalising agenda: “Making VU an International University”. At a student level, the aim of Internationalising the Curriculum at VU is to encourage international perspectives and intercultural competence in students. This paper’s purpose is to explore Internationalising the Curriculum in a first year core business subject at VU especially in relation to enhancing the employability of graduate global citizens who anticipate working in a global community. Using VU’s Toolkit for Internationalising the Curriculum, the business unit Professional Development 1: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving (PD1) is examined to illustrate the range of teaching approaches that have been adopted to develop students’ global awareness and to hone their intercultural communication skills especially when working in culturally diverse teams. Given that student cohorts on- and offshore are considerably different in terms of their cultural composition and the inherent diversity of each cohort, this paper compares student responses to the teaching methods, the unit’s purpose and the relevance of Australian employability skills in Malaysia and Hong Kong. Examples of student assessment, comments offered in student evaluations of the unit as well as responses from two focus group of PD 1 students at different sites of delivery are provided to demonstrate student views about the significance of “the cultural stuff” in this subject and its relevance to their employability and lives.
Introduction

Three Professional Development units (Professional Development 1: Critical Thinking & Problem Solving (PD1), Professional Development 2: Analysis & Strategy (PD2) and Professional Development 3: Challenge & Leadership (PD3)) were developed after a 2006 review of undergraduate Business programs at Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne. The units were designed to explicitly develop students’ graduate attributes and to enhance students’ overall employability. This paper uses PD1 to examine the issue of employability skills and to consider how, in an internationalised curriculum, employability skills are themselves internationalised: both through customisation and contextualisation of the curriculum. Of the three PD units, PD 1 most explicitly focuses on matters cultural - including awareness of other cultures, business implications of culture, intercultural communication and geographic knowledge – all requisites of the global marketplace. Delivery of PD units began in Melbourne in 2008, in Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru in Malaysia (Sunway) in 2009 and in Hong Kong in 2010. At each location, ideas about employability skills and an internationalised curriculum have different meanings and emphasis. This paper considers key aspects of PD in Melbourne and Malaysia in terms of internationalised employability skills, internationalised teaching approaches and what student think about “the cultural stuff” and employability skills.

Background

The need to prepare graduates for vocational and professional outcomes has been the subject of much industry-, government- and university-lead research. There is general agreement that “how Australian universities prepare their adult students and graduates for the world-of-work should be critically appraised” (Smith et al, 2009: 14). VU’s 2006 review of Business programs surveyed business practitioners, HR managers, VU Business alumni and VU Business academics (Papadopoulos et al., 2006). Over 700 respondents in Australia ranked the professional skills and knowledge required of the work-ready business graduate. The most desirable or essential personal attributes in graduates included such qualities as motivation, enthusiasm and initiative as well as cultural awareness and sensitivity. Respondents ranked professional skills such as capacity to work in teams and oral communication skills as essential. The Business Review recommended the development of PD units in Business degrees to teach these highly ranked and required skills. Given that VU is partner to many offshore universities and that many students undertake VU business degrees offshore, the relevance of Australian employability skills and the views of the Australian business community to students in Malaysia, Hong Kong or mainland China is a consideration for curriculum developers. Given, too, that many international students undertake VU’s degrees in Australia and intend to work globally, curriculum developers need to ensure that the employability skills or graduate attributes developed and assessed within a program are global and that they include intercultural skills and cultural knowledge.

Methodology

This paper will use VU’s Toolkit for Internationalising the Curriculum (2007) to examine the curriculum of the business unit Professional Development 1: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving (PD1) especially in relation to employability skills. A literature review considers employability skills in Australia and Malaysia to contextualise the study. Excerpts of students’ reflective journals, Blackboard discussion (all used with permission) and anonymous comments offered in student evaluations of the unit are used. Most student comments, however, are drawn from the two focus groups of PD 1 that provide student perspectives on the curriculum. Focus group responses provide a particular sense of what these student cohorts find worthwhile, challenging or useful in PD1. Focus groups in Melbourne in 2009 (12 students – 6 international and 6 local students) and in Kuala Lumpur in 2010 (10 students) were conducted and students were asked about:
• The skills students think employers are looking for
• Overall perceptions of PD1, what students learnt, what they liked or disliked about the subject
• What students thought about the collaborative learning activities in PD1, whether they are relevant to future employability, and if they thought they would assist students in their future workplace
• Perceptions of teamwork, whether it is fair, how it could be improved, whether they feel more confident and prepared to work effectively in a team
• The effect of the learning activities in PD1 on skills such as communication, collaboration, and teamwork
• Whether participation in PD1 helped them to become more aware of the realities of the working world and some of the challenges they may face.

Significantly, Chinese students were less talkative in the mixed focus group in Melbourne. A student said that it was hard to find the space to respond to questions quickly because she was “competing” with locals. Most student responses are generalised while verbatim student comments are italicised and in quotation marks. The lack of anonymity in some of the data could lead to a potential positive bias in the outcomes due perhaps to the desire of students to create acceptable responses.

**Employability Skills**

The idea that graduates’ employability skills are underdeveloped is common not just in Australia but also in China (Patridge & Keng, nd) and Malaysia (Bakar et al, 2007: Singh & Singh, 2008). The focus on graduates’ employability skills is in part emerging from the realisation that discipline knowledge – however rigorous, however deep – is not sufficient for professional roles in the changing work environment of knowledge economies: a work environment in which team projects are the norm communication skills essential and the ability to work in settings of cultural diversity a given. Graduate capabilities are professional skills that build on the academics skills and discipline-specific knowledge that students develop in their degrees with a focus on applying theory, academic knowledge and technical skills in a professional context. Employability skills are a subset of graduate attributes. Employability skills include communication skills, teamwork skills, problem solving skills, self-management skills, planning and organising skills, technology skills, life-long learning skills and enterprise skills (DEST, 2002). The DEST definition does not include intercultural skills – which are often regarded as a subset of communication skills. Communication skills include non-verbal communication skills such as body language as well as stylistic concerns such as pronunciation, intonation and volume. The prominence of employability skills or graduate capabilities in the Australian curriculum is due to a number of drivers including the students themselves, industry and professional bodies as well as policy directives of State and Federal governments. Most students enrol in business degrees at VU to improve their employability prospects and VU is keen that graduates’ transition to employment be supported by a range of preparatory initiatives both within the curriculum and through extra-curricular programs. All courses taught at VU must embed VU’s six Graduate Capabilities. As well as problem solve, VU graduates are expected to be able to

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).

How relevant are Australian employability skills or VU’s attributes 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?

Internationalising Employability Skills

Singh and Singh’s (2008) study of graduates’ and employers’ perceptions of employability skills in Malaysia admits the concern that “current graduates do not match the needs of business” (15). They note the technological and global nature of the Malaysian workplace and acknowledge that proficiency in technology is vital to compete in the global arena: “Hence, a more flexible workforce with advanced technical skills couple with well developed generic skills such as creative thinking, problem solving and analytical skills, is greatly needed by the employer in the industry” (Singh & Singh, 2008: 15). Shah (2008) comments on a perceived lack of skills in Malaysian graduates, including presentation and English skills and further suggests that graduates are not work-ready. In part, this lack of work readiness has been attributed to the 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.

Making VU an International University

The internationalisation of Australian universities has been achieved oftentimes in part due to the delivery of Australian educational programs offshore and increased numbers of international students onshore. An internationalised curriculum, however, aims to develop students with an international focus, an awareness of culture and an appreciation of their own cultural values. An internationalised curriculum involves a conceptual shift rather than a geographic movement and does not necessarily involve international students, global student exchanges or international study or work placements, although it might. Regional and local cultures also feature in an internationalised curriculum and, especially in a city as ethnically, linguistically and socially diverse as Melbourne, it must be recognised that as a densely multicultural society, the international is also local in many respects (VU, 2007).

Internationalisation in education includes global movements of teachers and students, offshore teaching programs, offshore campuses, international students onshore, study tours for students and teachers, student exchanges and international benchmarking of programs. An internationalised curriculum may result from these activities but there is no guarantee that international activities and access to global resources automatically contribute to an internationalised curriculum. It is important to distinguish between globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education and internationalising the curriculum of higher education programs.

Internationalising the Curriculum

An internationalised curriculum is internationally orientated in terms of content and resources. It aims to prepared students for work and life in a globalised world. A commonly cited OECD discussion of internationalised curriculum is comprehensive and includes curriculum that prepares students “for defined international professions” (cited in Rivzi & Walsh, 1998). Most Australian definitions of internationalising the curriculum emphasise that it is not only concerns international students but domestic students as well. Most approaches to an internationalised curriculum involve teachers and students engaging with a global and globalised world. An internationalised curriculum aims to prepare students with intercultural skills and international perspectives. VU’s Toolkit for Internationalising the Curriculum defines an internationalised curriculum as being clearly inclusive of local contexts and students: it has “an international and intercultural orientation in content and context, aimed at preparing students for performing (professionally/socially) in international and multicultural contexts, and designed for all students” (Bremer & van der Wende cited in
Importantly, the Principles for Internationalisation of the Curriculum at VU were developed in collaboration with offshore partner staff:

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

The *Internationalising the Curriculum Toolkit* was developed to support staff through the course review process at VU. Together with Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC) and other curriculum initiatives, academics had to evaluate their courses against the range of criteria in the toolkit to assess whether and to what extent their courses were internationalised. In particular, it was important to evaluate if students were assessed in relation to any of the internationalising themes: had students demonstrated any international awareness or perspectives? Had they developed intercultural communication skills? Had they reflected on their own cultural assumptions and values? Did they have an improved awareness of global geography? According to the Toolkit, three broad areas contribute to an internationalised curriculum: an internationalised pedagogy, an internationalised content and internationalised activities.

VU’s vision of an internationalised curriculum is that 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 pedagogy is one in which the teacher is aware of their own educational assumptions. They make their teaching practice explicit to students, explain how they think students learn and are explicit about what they expect from students and why. They provide models, samples of student assessment and ample formative assessment in the curriculum. The development of the PD units provided a timely opportunity to develop curriculum that was internationalised. *Professional Development 1* is especially rich in foregrounding culture – in its readings and other resources, topics, assessment tasks and its use of the student cohort to develop cultural awareness, global knowledge and cultural communication skills. VU’s approach to internationalising the curriculum is based on several principles that espouse inclusive curriculum and a respect for diversity; in fact, teaching methods should “not disadvantage any student” (Woodley & Pearce, 2007). That said, it is difficult to know and accommodate every students’ way of learning. PD1 - through having every activity available online, all assessment tasks with detailed criteria and multiple points and means of student support (for example, peer support and targeted learning support sessions) – does attempt to be as explicit as possible in what is expected of students. Furthermore, the range of assessment tasks (Readiness Assurance Tests, Reflective Journals, Essays, Oral presentations, Reports, Mind Maps, etc) means that students are not limited in one or two genres of assessment. However, the communicative teaching approach and the demands this approach makes on students’ English skills was overwhelmingly evident for International students and not just in the focus group discussion. Many of the teaching and learning activities and assessment tasks are about culture and are designed to develop other
employability skills. But with different student cohorts in Melbourne and Malaysia and with employability skills that were determined by Australian research and industry, how relevant are the content and aims of PD for students in Malaysia? How appropriate are the teaching approaches?

**Content: Contextualising the Curriculum**

PD1 uses a range of diverse teaching approaches to develop students' global awareness, hone their intercultural communication skills, critique their own cultural identities and develop their awareness for indigenous issues in Australia. The 'what' of teaching can be internationalised – but given that PD1 is being taught in a number of locations offshore, it also needs to be localised and contextualised. VU curriculum developers and teaching staff are mindful that VU’s educational programs are part of other countries’ internationalising agendas and that it is never appropriate to simply transplant an educational program offshore and teach it in the same way. The “cultural assumptions inherent in some western curricula” (IEAA, 2008: 61) present a risk and in the case of PD1, the very employability skills – critical thinking, communication skills, etc – are culturally constituted and understood. Australian workplace legislation – including Equal Opportunity Laws regarding recruitment – may not be relevant in Malaysia unless discussed comparatively. Some contextualisation for teaching offshore in Malaysia has been fairly cosmetic but nonetheless symbolic. One very secular reading used onshore 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). Partner staff requested that this reading be replaced by something equivalent. An important quality factor is that “contextualisation must not be a ‘watering down’ of onshore programs” (IEAA, 2008: 63). In Hong Kong, readings on the business implications of Islamic values were deemed irrelevant to students; an alternative article was offered. It still involved religious values and business decisions (McDonald's in Singapore who left the pig out of its Chinese zodiac collection in case it offended Muslims but ended up offending others in the predominantly ethnic Chinese nation) and the learning objective – to consider the business implications of religious values – is achieved. The value of employability skills more generally, however, is something that may also need to be contextualised: how critical should students be of texts? Of teachers? How confidently should they communicate? These are political and cultural questions that must be examined.

**Pedagogy: Communicative pedagogies and team-based learning**

“It is relatively easy at a superficial level to add international ‘content’. A greater challenge is for teachers to reconfigure how they teach” (IEAA 2008: 64). Ideally, the teaching of employability skills involves authentic learning contexts underpinned industry engagement. PD1 has required staff on- and offshore to reconfigure how they teach. Onshore, the unit is taught in 3-hour seminars of 40 students in purpose-built, wired learning spaces. Students have access to a range of technologies to support collaboration and communication. Many learning activities and assessment tasks are team based and require a mix of local and international students in each team. The curriculum of PD1 develops employability skills in a highly interactive way that is often team-based. The PD classroom is an active learning space that requires a paradigm shift in many students’ learning approaches. PD1 does represent a shift from transmissive teaching methods to an extreme communicative teaching approach. The belief that students learn by doing, by talking, by discussing, by practising, by getting feedback, by reflecting, by socialising and possible by having fun underpins the curriculum design and the teaching approach. But how student-centred is such an interactive, communicative approach? An internationalised pedagogy must recognise that the teaching approach of PD is not common in Confucian Heritage and the effectiveness of communicative pedagogies is culturally determined. Students in the focus group all mention the teaching approach and distinguish it from “traditional” classes. But the teaching in Malaysia has been contextualised in collaboration with local teaching staff: it is not “the
same" student experience as students studying in Melbourne. The teaching spaces used in the Malaysian delivery are not the same as in Melbourne and several changes have been made in regards to logistics (student numbers, teaching spaces, timetabling requirements) and curriculum.

Clearly, an internationalised pedagogy makes demands of teaching and support staff. Internationalised teaching methods are diverse so as not to disadvantage students from any one learning tradition. Assessment is also varied so that it does not favour any one type of learning style. Teaching methods are also explicit; that is, teachers are clear about what students are expected to do and why. In PD1, the curriculum is activity-packed and scripted although teachers have scope to customise some classroom activities for their own group. Every task is written and available to students in Blackboard so that they can prepare before and revise after class. But PD1 teaching methods are highly communicative and demand active participation from students. Focus groups in both Malaysia and Hong Kong (see Armatas & Lam, 2010 this conference) emphasise the difference in teaching approaches between PD and their ‘traditional’ classes. PD teachers know that discussion, debate or Socratic teaching approaches based on communicative philosophies of teaching and learning may be alien to students in Malaysia. Some international students may not have “proficient English language levels to successfully participate in …highly verbal activities” (Woodley & Wenjie, 2008) in English – and there is some evidence that some teams offshore do not communicate in English. It was notable that in a focus group in Melbourne, Chinese students noted that because of the many chances to practice speaking, PD1 is “very good for professional English”. These chances to practise English mentioned by international students in Melbourne are due largely to the team-based teaching approach and the prescriptive team formation which requires a mix of local and international students. This linguistic and cultural mix within teams and classes in Melbourne is not as evident in Hong Kong or Malaysia. In using the diversity of the student cohort to internationalise the curriculum through interactive engagement in team based assessment, the differences in the student cohorts demands a different internationalising approach.

**Internationalisation of the student cohort**

Victoria is an extremely diverse state based on ethnic, linguistic, national and other cultural differences. Victorians come from over 230 countries and speak more than 200 languages: “44% of Victorians at that time were either born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas” (Department of Immigration & Citizenship, 2008). VU’s Annual Report 2008 notes that in the higher education sector of the university over 40% of students self-identified as Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) – a category that recognises that not all international students are NESB and not all local students speak English at home. The cultural composition of the Malaysian population is also diverse though arguably less so than Australia. Malaysia is generally regarded as a "multi-racial" society: Muslim Malays make up just over 50% of the population; approximately 26% of the population are ethnic Chinese with Buddhist, Confucian or Taoist values; Malaysians of Indian descent – often Hindu but also Sikh and Christian - are a small group of about 7% and non-Malay indigenous groups comprise approximately 15% of the population (Peletz, 2003). One student in an online discussion of Malaysian culture described himself as “Tamil who is proud to be Malaysian” and that dense online discussion was rich in the class, linguistic religious, ethnic and other aspects of Malaysian identities: including the relatively new, digital identity of “Facebookers”. The cultural diversity of Malaysia is most often depicted in terms of ethnicity, religion language and, of course, food: one student commented that Malaysia was united “by our love of food”.

In Melbourne and in Malaysia, ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic diversities of the students can be employed to develop students’ awareness of other cultures, other countries and to increase their awareness of how their own cultural assumptions and prejudices might
influence their outlooks and behaviours in business – notably through team-based activities. More could be done to enhance this between campuses. One online activity highlights the capacity of the blended learning environment to construct and present social identities and to learn about other cultural identities. Called “My Multicultural Self” and based on an activity developed Critical Multicultural Pavilion (2010), the task requires each student to think about all of the cultures they belong to and then create a Discussion post. Students have to describe a time when they were proud to belong to one of the cultures they list and then to describe a time when they were ashamed to belong to that culture. Most students onshore describe national, ethnic and religious identities – although Australian Rules football teams often rate a mention as do other sporting identities. Postings of this activity from Malaysia in 2009 overwhelmingly mention Chinese, Indian (more specifically Tamil) and Malay ethnicities and languages, festivals, religions and food. While most students congratulate themselves for living in such a diverse and harmonious culture, some students also concede difficulties; “it is really tough to mix with the others who talk different language”. One Indonesian student studying in Malaysia writes of different gift giving etiquette. Many students commented on each others’ postings to clarify points on religion, food and language. The idea of students having multiple selves was not challenging and the online environment is one in which students are accustomed to present multiple selves. The next delivery of PD1 will ensure that students in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Australia are required to comment on each other’s Discussion Postings and to reflect on that activity. These are precisely the sorts of online mediated spaces that Pegrum says are vital to the development of students’ intercultural literacy which in turn enables intercultural interaction both online and face-to-face. (2009: 42). It will be an internationalised discussion. Teams and discussion provide the chance to experiment with the “societal aspects of internationalization” (Absalom & Vadura, 2006: 3) – in both face-to-face and online discussions. Student unit evaluations of PD1 in Australia and Malaysia state that the best aspect of PD1 is teamwork. It is the single theme that stands out in the evaluations which ask: What is the best aspect of this unit? Students in focus groups said that team work is motivating. It develops communication skills – including, specifically for International students in Melbourne, English language skills.

**English as an Employability Skill**

Interestingly, the enhancement of both written and oral English proficiency was an unintended employability skill that international students in PD in Melbourne have commented on. In Malaysia, English proficiency is regarded as an important employability skill and many commentators have stressed the link between English language proficiency and employability (Yogeesvaran, 2005; Phang, 2006 cited in Kassim & Ali, 2009). As Bakar et al (2007) succinctly note: “Language requirement is a big issue with regard to employment in Malaysia” (265). An examination (Kassim & Ali, 2009) of the “communicative events frequently faced” in the multinational workplace includes responses of industry surveys which suggest that fluency in English is vital to advancement towards the global workplace as well as employment in the multinational workplace in Malaysia. There are negative connotations of privileging English in what is a post-colonial country with Bahasa Malaysia as its official language. However, much research emphasises the need for workers in many roles to be proficient in oral English if not written English even in a predominantly Malay organisation (Ting, 2002) especially in the private sector and multinational companies (Phang, 2006 ibid).

From an internationalising the curriculum perspective, comments from both international and Australian students are illuminating about the development of English and communication skills more broadly through team based activities. The mix of local and international students in PD1 teams in Melbourne is a challenge for all students and journal postings mention many problems, assumptions and prejudices; however, most students are positive and certainly students in the focus group said that, 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 and who have different cultures and languages”. It is ‘easy to forget that local students
benefit from socialisation with their international counterparts’ (Arkoudis, 2009a). An Australian student writing his week one reflection agrees:

“I enjoyed this session as it gave me a chance to socialize with other people…Thankfully, the…group I ended up being in were all nice people. And I especially like the fact we had basically ‘non-english’ speaking people in our group…I like this because, it’s not every day you spend a lot of time with people who come from a different culture and background…[one of the students is] already… teaching me how to speak Chinese (Mandarin).

An international student from China said in a focus group that PD 1’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”. English proficiency is the single biggest concern of Chinese students who express real frustration when they cannot make themselves understood. Usually, however, English emerges as a positive aspect of PD1 for Chinese students in Melbourne. One student writes in her reflection that she was “very nervous” but when her English improved and “team members ask, ‘What do you think?’…I became confident to give my opinion.” English language proficiency is one aspect of China’s internationalising agenda, it is reasonable that VU’s curriculum should nurture that goal. PD students in Malaysia, in comparison, did not mention improved English as an outcome of PD, no doubt due, as 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.”

**Student responses Melbourne**

Comments from the student evaluations of Semester 2, 2009 provide some insight into what students think of the teamwork aspect of PD1, including the assessment completed in teams. Of the 311 students who completed surveys, 191 provided qualitative feedback in response to two open questions: “What were the best aspects of this unit?” and “What were the worst aspects of this unit?” 63 positive comments out of a total of 172 positive comments related to team work, group work or class interaction. There were 27 negative comments relating to team work / group work or interaction out of a total of 140 negative comments. On balance, students made more positive comments related to their experience with team work than they made negative comments.

Positive comments related to the benefits team work provided for networking and meeting new people, as well as for learning and experiencing team building. In the 14 comments that mentioned networking as a positive aspect of PD1, meeting new people and interacting with other students, particularly ones from “other countries” figured prominently. A number of comments focussed on the difficulties associated with working in a group with people for whom English is a second language, reflecting concerns about making the workload fair and team members being able to make a contribution to an appropriate level. There were also calls for more individual assessment by some students was accompanied by the observation that “team work at this learning level is very hard”. Interestingly, students in the Malaysian focus group also asked for more individual accountability in assessment – and less of it.

In a focus group conducted with 12 PD1 students at the end of Semester 2, 2009 similar comments about the team work aspect of PD1 were made. Twelve students – 6 international and 6 local students – said that working with students of different backgrounds and language capabilities was difficult. The international students (from Malaysia, China and Sri Lanka) stayed on for a separate focus group with a particular focus on English language and cultural issues in PD1 from their point of view. All students in this group said that they found the unit’s topics, such as climate change, interesting and relevant that they liked “the cultural
These students said that, because of PD1, they know “how to communicate” and, expressly, “how to communicate with locals”.

Importantly, from the perspective of employability skills, students generally recognised the importance of intercultural knowledge and employability skills for business graduates: the unit provides a “useful” educational experience. The number of oral presentations was “terrifying” but “good practice”. They said that team based activities gave them confidence and helped them learn skills that would help them work in teams in the future. Overall, the comments from both the focus group/s and the student evaluations show that for a large number of students in this cohort, team work is a positive and beneficial experience and one that is clearly linked to skills and behaviours expected of a workplace including intercultural skills. However, it was also an issue that the extreme diversity of language levels and cultural diversity can create problems for teams.

Students from China studying in Melbourne describe the challenges of the unit in their ejournals. PD is “fantastic but also makes me very tired and crazy” and “a meaningful yet difficult experience”. Concerns over English language levels are a common theme in ejournals. One student’s comments typify concerns, self-consciousness and anxiety over English oral communication: “When we [were] asked to do the group tasks, I found it was quite difficult to communicate and catch up with the local students though I had learned English for nearly 10 years. What a big joke! I always remained mute when the group members spoke to me with perfect LOCAL accent….”. By the end of unit, however, many students notice an improvement: “after plenty of teamwork and some meetings, I can express my own views when members are discussing and that is really a big step for me”. The benefit to English language development is summarised by one student who is adamant that the interactive seminar with multiple activities “provides me with a better environment to exercise my English skills than sitting in a big class with many other Chinese students - definitely drives me to study harder”.

**Student responses in Kuala Lumpur**

The qualitative comments on SEUs from Sunway in 2010 included 16 students who provided qualitative feedback in response to two open questions: “What were the best aspects of this unit?” and “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”. This is a small sample and hardly useful to extrapolate representative views; however, the validity of the qualitative remarks remains. It is reasonable to postulate that the sample of was large enough given the class size of 298.

The focus group of 10 PD students in Sunway was asked what they thought of PD. Overall, respondents described the unit as “great!” Students claimed to have developed the following employability skills in PD: teamwork, presentation skills, communication skills - especially verbal communication, general knowledge to prepare for work. One respondent said that they had learnt “to be more professional”. Several students agreed that PD “prepares students for the working world”. Most focus group participants expressed that group work, while not always fair and sometimes demanding, was beneficial to them in regards to future employability, that it “teaches cooperation and patience”, “helps them to learn to deal with different personality types” and “mirrors real life”. Like their Melbourne counterparts, however, the fairness of team assessment, rather than just team activities, was of concern to many students and is a significant negative factor in the unit.

Asked if their participation and experience on the PD unit(s) helped them become more aware of the realities of the working world and some of the challenges you may face, the students commented “Not really”, “the subjects aren’t complex enough to be like the real
world” and “it still feels like school”. They commented that for employability skills to be more real, the curriculum needed more practical tasks, “more hands on activities” and to “visit workplaces – perhaps have work placement or internships”.

Comparing results and implications

For both cohorts of PD students in Malaysia and Melbourne, employability skills were a valued feature of the PD teaching approach and curriculum with a particular, although problematic, acknowledgement of the value of learning to work in teams. Qualitative comments in Student Evaluations and responses of Focus Group participants in both groups particularly value team work and communication skills: two of the employability skills the unit aims to develop. Notable, however, is that while international students in Australia mentioned the importance of PD for the development of English language, this was not mentioned by students in Malaysia despite the issue featuring in much research there.

Negative comments about the fairness of team assessment will lead to more work being undertaken so that students use the peer review process to better reflect individual effort in the team process. Furthermore, students will be encouraged to use Blackboard discussion for their team work to ensure that there is both a record of team communication and that the facilitator can intervene to deal with social loafing in teams – one notable concern both on- and offshore.

More will be done to exploit the opportunity to have students at various locations interacting online to develop intercultural awareness and skills, cultural knowledge and even geographic knowledge as this area is currently underdeveloped in the curriculum and have the potential to further internationalise the curriculum through student interaction and discussion.

Conclusions

Units of study like Professional Development 1: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving that foreground employability skills are crucial for the development of critical thinking, problem solving, communication and team working skills. The pedagogical approach adopted in these units is fundamental to the development of globally competitive skills that all graduates need. Workplace values and behaviours are not universal and do not all transfer and translate in every cultural and national setting and intercultural competence must be developed as a necessary employability skill in itself. An unintended outcome of the PD1 unit for international students in Melbourne has been an emphasis on English language development – especially oral communication – while an intended outcome for both international and local students in Melbourne and Malaysia has been an emphasis on culture and intercultural skills. The aims of the unit – that is, the development of employability skills more broadly – is something that seems to be valued not only by employers but also, according to focus groups and student online discussion, the students themselves. It would seem that they are mindful of the need to be able to demonstrate globally competitive skills and the employability skills developed in PD1, for the most part, seem to translate.
References


