INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION: INTERCULTURAL DIMENSION

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The paper presents some aspects of the internationalization of higher education from the angle of intercultural dimension, namely willingness of host universities to create and maintain the multicultural environment, readiness of the incoming students to immerse into foreign cultural environment, their adaptation towards western educational practices, as well as the issues of the internationalization of the curriculum. The author also emphasizes that learning styles are diverse in different cultures, which should be taken into consideration by host institutions.

Key words: higher education, internationalization, intercultural dimension, curriculum, international students, diverse learning styles

The internationalization of higher education is an important aspect of learning in an increasingly globalized society. The professional and academic needs of graduating students are the reflection of the demands of a dynamic society, the economy, and labor markets. Expectedly, higher education should prepare students for these demands for them to cope up with emerging trends as well as realities. In part, learners should have appropriate multilingual, social attitudes, and intercultural skills to be able to be competent in a global labor market.

Specializations in research calls for collaborative efforts and intensified international cooperation to achieve set these goals. At present, institutions of higher education are increasingly admitting foreign students

to boost their institutional income while also improve their ratings/standings as the ideal learning institutions. At present, the advent of improved information and communication technologies gives institutions of higher education a chance to deliver learning in the most efficient way. It can also be argued that the process of making higher education standardized on a global platform is necessitated by an interest in international security, the desire to maintain economic competence, and the urge to foster better human relations across nations among the concerned countries.

In this case, internalization of higher education is to focus on the way of improving human understanding/relations across nations. Arguably, a country will allow its institutions of higher education to go global for various reasons, including realizing economic competence, achievement of environmental interdependence, augmenting ethnic and religious diversity, and to be able to influence local trade. Apart from seeking economic benefits, the internationalization of higher education would definitely lead to increased intercultural awareness among students and staff, as well as foster a cultural understanding between international partners. Internationalization is a term that is commonly used to discuss the international dimensions of higher education [6]. The practice of internationalization has been going on for a long time, and it has been labeled with different terminologies with different emphasis on varied activities.

The system of education, especially higher education, is presently undergoing transformation driven by globalization and the advent of information age. The increasing global connection of students is ensuring that learners access quality academic experiences as per their set goals and objectives, irrespective of their locations. A number of assumptions and imperatives drive the internationalization agenda. Many institutions of higher education adopt three common models in trying to achieve the status

of being global institutions [7]. Under the competitive model, institutions might introduce international content to their curricula, as well as other elements of university life to ensure the institutions, students, and country are competitive enough to attract as many people as possible. On the other hand, there is a liberal model which focuses on the identification of the primary goal of internationalization as a means to changing the global education. Lastly, there is a social transformation model which places more emphasis on student awareness on intercultural issues touching on equity and justice. The model ensures that students work dynamically and analytically towards social transformation. The universities in Great Britain, Australia, United States, France, Germany, and Nordic countries are trying to recruit many students from the developing countries as one way of selling their agenda. Unfortunately, the cultural understanding between international partners through education is less articulated in this regards. For the researchers worldwide the following urgent questions are on the agenda:

- to what extent do higher educational institutions promote cultural diversity among foreign students;
- what role does the faculty play in enhancing/impeding the achievement of foreign students in the European education system.

Apart from the economic goals of internationalization, the objective relates to increasing intercultural awareness of students and staff, cultural understanding between international partners between the international and the intercultural dimensions of higher education by highlighting the integral relationship between language and culture in learning, and the reality of the continuous presence of at least two languages and cultures within the academic community.

Students seeking to study abroad face a number challenges which are mainly socio-cultural. The academic standards applied in international

universities tend to favor only national academic policies and standards. Foreign students face problems in trying to adjust to their new environments yet the managements of the many higher education institutions are reluctant to formulate policies that ensure each student's needs that are to be addressed effectively. Many researchers suggest that an internationalized curriculum is important in actualizing the goal of a globalized education; the content learnt has to be internationally standardized to ensure students gain relevance in the modern world.

Notably, a curriculum, or the content which is discoursed to learners, is the mainstay of every learning process. In every model, it ought to provide a student-centered learning experience. In higher education, the curriculum plays a critical role in shaping the values of students. Based on this assumption, the curriculum should promote the cultural principles of every learning institution, in general. According to Khalideen [5], forcing international students to be assimilated into unfamiliar learning culture can be unsuccessful and might end up having a negative impact on their sense of identity. On the other hand, Mestenhauser [8, p. 23] observes that ethnocentric standards that underlie the curriculum and pedagogics in western post-secondary institutions tend to keep foreign students alienated which, eventually makes it very challenging for these learners to fully embrace western education and ethnocentric biases because of the abstract theoretic principles from culture-bound instructions.

According to Joseph [4, p. 34], Western universities mostly integrate didactic learning with tutorials and seminars which place more emphasis on debates, critical thinking, and dynamic learning. These learning strategies are common in post-secondary institutions in the West; they give undue advantage to western students and privilege those with western forms of knowledge while disregarding the diverse ways of knowledge, including those of international students. Banks [1 p. 243] is of the view that an ideal

setting for learning is the one that reflects the cultures, experiences, and perspectives of students without discriminating any group based on their race, religion, and language given the fact that the ways through which people ruminate or understand issues have some cultural biases. If western institutions of higher education force students to adopt their cultures, international students are likely to face difficulties trying to balance the beliefs propagated in western philosophy and the traditional or conservative approaches in other parts of the world. Social and cultural experiences of students influence their favored styles of learning. On the other hand, the ethnocentric values and cultural frameworks of faculty members, including lecturers and administrators, influence their perceptions towards students. They may end up misjudging the learning styles and strategies of foreign students because they use western cultures as a benchmark.

Students wishing to study in international universities face a number of challenges trying to adjust to the western cultures. In their writing, Carroll and Appleton [2, p. 72] observe that the academic adjustment challenge that students from oversee countries face in their transition is referred to as culture shock. The western universities and learning systems are designed in such a way that any student, irrespective of their cultural and language background, ought to cope up with the new didactic structure in their new learning environments. At times, the transition can be so smooth. However, in most cases, there are imminent hurdles that these students must overcome. When a foreign student enrolls in a western-based education system, one is bound to go through different cross-cultural adjustment issues. Unfortunately, westernized learners rarely experience these problems. Based on this, international students cannot be considered the same since they have to be given some form of assistance for them to adjust accordingly.

Foreign students are from different cultural and familial experiences which influences their social interactions. Therefore, there are some students who will definitely have problems adjusting to a new college environment. Again, these students have issues when it comes to proficiency in the English language, unfamiliarity with educational styles, and curricular content which is largely centered on the social and cultural dictates of the western world.

To ensure these learners enjoy their life in western universities, the incorporation of student-centered strategies is critical in encouraging student participation. The institutions of higher education should consider the introduction of activities such as group learning, debates, and activities that encourage teamwork. Some universities have introduced academic activities such as the presentation reflective papers which are relevant to the social and educational experiences of the students. However, teaching and non-teaching staff in a number of institutions are still unaware of how to incorporate international perspectives within their programs. This means that governments in western countries should also play an active role in professionally managing their institutions of higher learning. There are various ways through which this can implemented. For instance, governments can come up with trainings and teaching instructions targeting those in charge of foreign students. The faculty members should understand that their students come from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it is upon them to ensure their needs are catered for in the most efficient way rather than forcing them to adopt western cultures. The faculty team should be made to understand that other institutions of higher learning across the world are equally competent and whatever is reflected in their students ought to be respected and nurtured. It should be intended that multiculturalism is critical in ensuring the institution achieves its academic and financial needs.

Notably, western countries have various scholarship programs aimed at facilitating students from developed and developing countries to achieve their academic needs. However, the institutions of higher education are yet to embrace multiculturalism because their faculty members are reluctant to adjust their instructional plans to reflect the needs and desires of students from developing countries. The European intercultural education system is aimed at ensuring students from different countries achieve their academic needs uninterrupted [3]. However, the achievement of these legislations has never been actualized because the faculty members are ethnocentric in the sense that they have no confidence in the views and principles of others from different parts of the world. Through experience, it is established that much needs to be done to ensure foreign students achieve their goals. The internationalization of higher education pursues the ideals of academic universality and humanitarian objectives of social development. It seeks to bring about intercultural understanding among countries, but this cannot be realized because international partners have never worked together to improve the situation. The curricular, the faculty staff members, and the institutions of higher learning need to change their strategy towards the concept of internationalization, to propose various strategies that ought to be adopted to ensure international students enjoy their studies in foreign countries.

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