

How Internationalised Is Your Curriculum? University Graduate Students Speak Out

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Abstract

Internationalisation of the curriculum has created changes to the traditional curriculum but little attention in research has been paid to the student perspective on these changes, and how they experience them. This paper aims to fill the gap by reporting on the findings of graduate students' perceptions of the internationalisation of the curriculum at Makerere University in Uganda. This study adopted a sequential explanatory survey study in which we collected both quantitative and qualitative data from a sample of 180 graduate students. The findings showed that the majority of the respondents agreed that their curricula had an international dimension. This was commonly seen by graduate students in terms of international academic staff, international students, travel abroad programmes for students, courses with an international focus, comparative studies and focus on ICTs. The participants voiced concerns about logistical constraints and the universality of knowledge. These findings reinforced the earlier research that proposed that the above aspects are critical in the IoC and can act as benchmarks to guide further work in the direction of the university's internationalisation agenda. No earlier works had similar results, at least in the context of the Global South where this study was conducted. Further studies need to involve other actors in higher education to explore more fully the notion of IoC to explain better the basis of students' perceptions and experiences of IoC reported in this study.

Keywords: *Higher education; Internationalisation of the curriculum; Graduate students*

Introduction

Today, a high-quality education must prepare students to live and work in a world characterised by growing multiculturalism and diminishing borders. Higher education institutions (HEIs)

across the world are rising to this challenge by embracing internationalisation in the provision of education. One of the strategies they have frequently used is infusing their curricula with global and international themes and perspectives (Gao, 2015; Green, 2005; Knight, 2004; 2008) – a notion that is widely known as the internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC). This paper, from a broader study that established the effect of internationalisation of higher education (IoHE) on the global citizenship (GC) of graduate students at Makerere University in Uganda, presents and discusses graduate students' perspectives on the extent to which their curricula are internationalised. Although the students belong to different disciplinary backgrounds, one of the key expectations of their university education is to churn out global citizens as highlighted in the Makerere University mission, which is “to provide innovative teaching, learning, research and services responsive to national and global needs” (Makerere University, 2008, p. 12). Despite declaring an internationalised curriculum as highlighted in the university mission above, the extent to which the university has embraced internationalisation within its graduate programmes curricula, at least from the students' perspective, is yet to be ascertained.

Historically, universities have been international, especially in the universality and borderless nature of their knowledge, staff and students (De Wit, Hunter, Howard, & Egron-Polak, 2015). However, the international activities of universities have generally been growing with time – particularly in the last two or three decades of the 20th century (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Jones & De Wit, 2012). At the same time, in the late last century, the International Association of Universities (IAU) advised that higher education must integrate an international and intercultural dimension into its teaching, research and service functions (IAU, 1998). Within this global context, the notion of IoC has emerged, and has now become prominent in the literature on internationalisation, with such activities as teaching and learning processes, extra-curricular activities, liaison with local cultural and ethnic groups, and research and scholarly activities (De Wit, 2011; Knight, 2004, 2012).

Whereas many publications offer literature on what IoC is or could be, little is known about the extent to which the curricula are internationalised, especially from the perspective of the students who receive them. The available literature on IoHE curricula has focused primarily on investigating the strategic directions (see, e.g., Bisaso and Nakamanya, 2021), outcomes (Ayebare, 2019; Zimitat, 2005) such as the skills, knowledge, attitudes, values of democracy, equality, sustainability and justice needed to make positive, ethical contributions as citizens and professionals to their global, national and local communities (Leask, 2011; Clifford, 2005). However, the mechanisms by which universities achieve their preparation of students for the sought-after international relevance and employment are not well elaborated in the literature, especially from the viewpoint of students. This could be because studies of the IoHE curriculum have been scarce (Barnett & Coate, 2005; Leask & Bridge, 2013), leading institutions to often rely on anecdotal evidence rather than actual data in the planning of and for IoC. It must not be forgotten that the real proof of the success of IoC lies in the students' experience of the curriculum. But just how are students experiencing the phenomena of IoC? The purpose of the study was to bring about the hitherto almost silent students' voices into the debate on IoC. The study sought to answer the question: How do the students experience the internationalisation of the curriculum? To answer this question, we explored the graduate students' experience with the curriculum at Makerere University in Uganda.

IoC has become a common strategic goal of the broader internationalisation strategy in modern higher education (HE) (Kirk, Newstead, Gann, & Raunsaville, 2018) albeit with varying interpretations. To some scholars, it remains a contested term that is elusive and unsatisfactory

(Turner & Robson, 2007) that demonstrates a nuanced and context-specific construct. However, in her typology of international curricula, Van der Wende (1996) suggests a variety of approaches that include curricula in which the traditional or original subject area is broadened by an internationally comparative approach and programmes, which prepare students for international professions, and can lead to joint degrees from different countries. While this typology reassures students of global competence, it does not provide specific ways in which it can be designed or implemented.

In 2004, Knight defined internationalisation as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (p. 11), a definition that is silent on the actual content of an internationalised curriculum. Against this deficiency, Clifford and Joseph (2005) argue that IoC is about students developing global perspectives and cross-cultural capability to be able to perform, professionally and socially, in a multicultural environment. This definition emphasises the outcome of IoC but does not answer the question of what an internationalised curriculum entails. Later in 2009, Leask postulated that IoC is the incorporation of an international and intercultural dimension into the content of the curriculum as well as the teaching and learning arrangements and support services of a programme of study. According to Leask, therefore, such a curriculum “will engage students with internationally informed research, cultural and linguistic diversity, and it will purposefully develop their international and inter-cultural perspectives as global professionals and citizens” (p.209). This understanding of IoC captures the nature and outcome of IoC and is adapted to guide this study. Hence, IoC in this study was characterised by the incorporation of an international perspective into the content of what must be taught and learnt (e.g. international languages, international courses and comparative studies) as well as conducting joint teaching with an international university, conducting compulsory international internships, as well as the involvement of international staff and students.

The Context

Ideally, an internationalised university curriculum is expected to contain methods and strategies that expose students to the world and its realities. However, in reality, this may not be true. Makerere University in Uganda may not be an exception. Yet, in the early 1990s, the university embarked on a deliberate internationalisation strategy that included, among others, the attraction of international staff and students, the integration of the international perspective into teaching and learning, the carrying out of collaborative research as well as the award of joint degrees. This move was well-received by many members of the university community, mainly because of the advantages that came with internationalisation, such as its expanded international visibility and access to the university, improved research funding prospects, networking and participation in international community activities – all of which would improve the visibility and global ranking of the university. These strategies were aimed at producing graduates who are exposed to global realities to enhance their relevance in the multicultural and interconnected world. However, despite these strategic decisions, little is known about the extent to which internationalisation – especially as regards the curricula – has taken root at the university. This is largely due to the lack of empirical studies in this area, leading to no evidence to demonstrate this; thus, the genesis of this study, which explored the nature of curriculum internationalisation at Makerere University.

Literature Review

There is little doubt about the need and benefits of internationalising the curriculum. No wonder, Turner and Robson (2008) advocate the incorporation of an international dimension into each degree programme to prepare all students for life in an increasingly interdependent world (Schuerhalz-Lehr, 2007). This universities do by ensuring that students graduate with the skills, knowledge, attitudes, values of democracy, equality, sustainability and justice needed to make positive and ethical contributions as citizens and professionals to their global, national and local communities (Leask, 2011; Clifford, 2005) by expanding the horizons of students beyond local, national and parochial concerns (Leask, 2011).

Lunn (2008) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2004) have advanced that IoC helps students cope in a world that is multicultural, environmentally vulnerable and interdependent, and is a vehicle through which the development of beliefs and values can be instilled into the life and learning of students, ensuring that they graduate ready and willing to make a positive contribution in the world. Leask and Bridge (2013) add that such learning prepares students to be ethical and responsible citizens and human beings in this globalised world. In fact, to Hudzik (2011), the core mission of higher education is the production of graduates who can live, work and contribute as productive citizens in an increasingly fluid and borderless global context.

There seems to be no one correct way of internationalising the curriculum (Ryan, 2012). Diverse descriptions in the literature and on institutional websites show what an internationalised curriculum might look like in theory and practice. According to Knight (2012) and Gao (2015), this concerns the inclusion in the curriculum of components of foreign language studies, international studies, internationally comparative perspectives, cross-cultural training, joint study programmes, and student and staff mobility. These, according to Knight, emphasise student learning outcomes which include international and intercultural knowledge, skills and values. These have given what IoC is and what it could contain.

Within an internationalised curriculum, international students are valuable contributors with their diverse cultural perspectives and experiences, and have the potential to transform the campus and the classroom into a vibrant microcosm of the world (Leask, 2009). Such an experience could ensure that both home and international students develop the skills and knowledge required to work in a global setting in their different professions (Leask, 2009). However, studies (see, e.g., Leask, 2009; Ayebare & Onen, 2021) indicate that the diversity of students is an untapped resource, with most universities struggling with ways to improve the quality and quantity of contact between home and international students. Other studies (see, e.g., Green, 2005; Harrison & Peacock, 2013; Killick, 2012) have pointed to cultural differences such as languages, bias and threats to the academic success and group identity of the different students in the university as critical factors for proximity to one another while at campus.

Other scholars have given a range of guidelines and frameworks on how best to go about the process of IoC (see, e.g., Leask & Bridge, 2013). Leask and Bridge's framework for internationalising the curriculum shows that disciplines play a central role in shaping academics' knowledge (ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies), assessment practices and the structure of the programme of study, yet disciplinary discourses and ways of working are nested within various contextual 'layers', including the global, regional, national and institutional.

In 1998, Josef Mestenhauser (cited in Leask, 2009) argued that to internationalise the curriculum, there was a need to challenge both the nature of the curriculum and the paradigms on which it is

based. According to him, IoC had been too focused on isolated projects and programmes designed to train a few students as future international affairs specialists, completely ignoring the fact that all graduates will work in a global setting as engineers, accountants, doctors and so on. Other analysts (see, e.g., Van der Wende, 2000) have called for the need to ensure that an internationalised curriculum develops the skills and knowledge required to prepare all students to live and work in a global setting.

More recent literature on internationalisation has been moving away from providing broad definitions and suggesting practical ways of putting IoC into practice (Leask & Carroll, 2011; Jones, 2010). Emphasis has now been focused on how important it is for institutions to engage the people who are in charge of designing and delivering the curriculum – the academic staff. Their role in the institution-wide process of internationalisation is vital (Dunne, 2011). Sanderson has referred to them as “a catalyst in assisting their institutions and their students to realize their internationalisation goals” (Sanderson, 2011, p. 662). This understanding that places academic staff at the centre of IoC is shared by other scholars who believe that their involvement in internationalisation directly impacts the teaching, research and service missions of HEIs (Childress, 2010) because they are the top researchers and the drivers of international consciousness, creating an international mindset in an institution (Altbach & Yudkevich, 2017; Page, 2003) and controlling the curriculum (Edwards, 2007) from which students are expected to acquire international awareness. However, faculty can also be the main obstacle to internationalisation (De Wit, 2013; Hudzik, 2011; Friesen, 2012). This understanding is, however, based on a deep appreciation of the need to empower academics to make necessary personal and collective changes for themselves within their disciplinary contexts but not the benefits to students. This framework from the planner’s point of view prompted scholars like Green (2005) to ask: “What about the demand side?” (p. vii) – referring to the receivers of the curriculum, the students. This scenario has also compelled us to investigate the IoC from the perspective of the receivers, that is, the graduate students in the case of this study.

More empirical studies have established how different players have perceived IoC in their different contexts. Zimitat (2005) conducted a survey study at an Australian university exploring students’ perception of the internationalisation of the undergraduate curriculum. IoC was conceptualised in terms of content, teaching methods, perceptions of teachers and campus environment, a self-assessment of personal skills development, and the extent to which their degree programme had prepared them for working in an international environment. Zimitat found that on all items that described IoC, a significant proportion of students did not perceive or experience international dimensions and a slightly larger proportion of students were not sure of the international dimensions of their experiences at university. It could be, as observed by Nagarajan and McAllister (2015 p.89), that “a major challenge to the internationalization of curricula in any discipline is the lack of clarity about what internationalization means”.

In their study that investigated empowerment and ownership in the IoHE curriculum in which they interviewed 24 course instructors across 15 subject areas, Kirk, Newstead and Gann (2018) found that there was a lack of inclusion of international aspects and content in the curriculum documentation. They also found that there was a general lack of understanding of IoC by instructors. This finding, which places the academic staff at the centre of the curriculum internationalisation process, re-echoes the view of Davies (2006) that, constrained by overwhelming workloads (the consequence of massification coupled with dwindling funding), academics have time only for teaching. This could probably suggest that the lack of inclusion of international aspects in the

curriculum is due to the instructors' obliviousness (Leask, 2011), i.e. they may often not be aware of how such a curriculum can be designed or implemented owing to lack of the skills required to add a meaningful international dimension to their courses.

However, a study conducted at Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland by McKinnon (2012) to understand the perceptions of IoC by academic staff identified students' attitudes towards IoC, which was described as "parochial" by the academics, as a barrier to IoC. According to this study, students often preferred to remain in their comfort zones, restricted their own choices, and did not always give themselves the chance to fulfil their full potential because of the fear of leaving their home countries. Green (2005), in a survey study investigating internationalisation in US higher education from a student perspective, confirmed this claim with a finding that revealed generally low levels of interest and participation of students in on-campus international activities outside the classroom and other places. This might mean that students who are not interested in international activities may as well not have a 'feel' of what internationalisation is or could be. In this regard, Leask (2013) categorised the conditions that foster or limit IoC as cultural, institutional and personal 'blockers' and 'enablers'. Leask, however, maintains that by employing methods to identify blockers, these can be turned into 'enablers'. However, Leask also cautions that the solution is not simple since it is 'stubbornly difficult' because it involves personal values, beliefs and priorities by various players within and outside an institution.

In summary, several studies have attempted to provide a range of frameworks and ways in which educational institutions can have their curricula internationalised. However, most of these studies are from the side of the planners, leaving out the receivers of the curriculum. Even those studies in which the students' perspectives were incorporated have emerged from the Global North (see, e.g., Green, 2005; Zimitat, 2005) and were majorly surveys that could not possibly capture individual students' unique experiences with IoC. Within these contradictions, this study attempts to bridge this gap by bringing some students' voices from Makerere University in Uganda to the ongoing conversation on IoC in practice.

Methodology

We believe that reality is not absolute unity, but rather there is an external reality independent of the mind as well as that logged in the mind. Building on this pragmatism philosophy, we adopted a mixed-methods approach employing a sequential explanatory research design. This enabled us to gain a deeper insight into the issue of IoC, especially from the perspective of students. Based on Biglan's (1973) classification of disciplinary fields, we stratified colleges into four disciplinary strata – namely, hard-pure, hard-applied, soft-pure and soft-applied – and two department strata, namely life-systems and non-life departments. A sample of 180 graduate students selected by the use of the stratified random sampling technique was determined a priori, ensuring representation from all disciplinary fields. A unanimous and voluntary partially adapted self-administered questionnaire which had earlier been tested for its validity and reliability was employed to collect data. Curriculum internationalisation was measured using 12 items presented with accompanying alternative response categories on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Only graduate students who were in their second year of study completed the questionnaire. The IBM SPSS version 21 was used for data entry, cleaning and analysis with the use of carefully determined descriptive and inferential statistics.

Qualitatively, we selected one participant from each of the eight departments selected from the four colleges that we sampled. As such, eight purposively selected participants took part in this study. Interviews were preceded by a brief explanation of the nature of the study and the ethical concerns (confidentiality, consent and procedure). With their consent, interviews that lasted 40 to 60 minutes were conducted while being recorded. The participants were given codes based on the college/department disciplinary category and sex; hence, hard-pure, non-life systems male (HPNLSM); hard-pure, life systems male (HPLSM); hard-applied, non-life systems female (HANLSF); hard-applied, life systems male (HALSM); soft-pure, non-life systems female (SPNLSF); and soft-pure, life systems female (SPLSF). Inductively, we analysed the data using the thematic content analysis technique that enabled us to understand the meaning of the complex data through the development of summary codes from the raw data. Based on the similarity of the ideas, codes were merged to form themes. To complement these findings, assorted university documents were reviewed.

Findings

In this paper, the participants are shown by their disciplinary fields. Quantitative data was collected from a sample of 180 graduate students, who responded to most or all question items. These were all graduate students drawn from six of the nine colleges and the School of Law at Makerere University in Uganda.

Demographic characteristics

In terms of sex distribution, male respondents (109 or 60%) dominated the study. This was in tandem with the enrolment data, which showed that there were more male graduate students than female at the university – an inequality that needs to be separately addressed in another study. In terms of disciplinary fields, the majority of the participants were drawn from the soft-applied (59 or 32.8%), followed by those from the hard-applied (49 or 27.2%). These were followed by respondents from the soft-pure (41 or 22.8%) disciplines and then the hard-pure (25 or 17.2%) disciplines. This finding was also in line with the enrolment distribution of graduate students in the different colleges in the university – where more students were enrolled in the humanities and the social science programmes. Regarding the nationality of the study participants, the national students (154 or 85.6%) dominated the sample as compared to the international ones (26 or 14.4%). This was not strange because there are more local students than international ones. Finally, concerning travels abroad, the majority (62.3% or 112) of the study participants had never travelled abroad before enrolling in their current study programmes. This implies that students' prior exposure to international issues was likely to be limited and, therefore, did not influence their perceptions of IoC. On the other hand, of the seven participants, three were males, four were females, five were national and two were international students. The composition of our interviewees was dictated by our small sample size and the limited number of international students enrolled in the selected academic departments.

Summary of descriptive statistics on internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC) The respondents were asked to express their opinions on the 12 items that measured IoC using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1=Strongly Disagree (SD) to 5=Strongly Agree (SA). The summary of the responses of students regarding IoC is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics on internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC)

Questionnaire item on IoC	Mean	Std. dev	Interpretation
I have studied an additional internationally used language.	1.62	0.909	Disagree
My university has a graduate studies language proficiency requirement.	3.83	0.975	Agree
Instruction at my university is done through an internationally used language.	4.54	0.673	Agree
The content covered in my study programme covers global issues.	4.40	0.595	Agree
Some of the compulsory courses I take cover global issues.	4.33	0.616	Agree
The elective courses I take cover global issues.	4.30	0.693	Agree
I have studied a course that requires comparing world systems.	4.10	0.822	Agree
I am pursuing a jointly taught degree programme.	2.10	0.925	Disagree
International internship is a compulsory component of my programme.	1.92	1.01	Disagree
My study programme has equipped me with ICT skills.	4.30	0.652	Agree
Courses have exposed me to knowledge about different parts of the world.	4.30	0.776	Agree
Courses have exposed me to knowledge about different global issues.	4.30	0.622	Agree

Overall mean = 3.66 (Agree)

The results in Table 1 show a favourable rating of IoC by the university graduate students with an overall mean response rate of 3.66, which corresponds to “Agree” on the Likert scale used. The majority of the respondents agreed with all but three items (I have studied an internationally used language during my programme; I am pursuing a degree that is jointly taught with another university outside Uganda; and internship outside Uganda is a compulsory aspect of my study programme) measuring IoC with more or less similar standard deviations. This suggests that the respondents saw internationalisation in some but not all aspects of their curriculum at the university. This could suggest that despite the university’s thrust towards internationalisation, IoC has not yet fully taken root.

Student perceptions of IoC by disciplinary field

As earlier explained, in line with Biglan’s (1973) classification of disciplines, we stratified colleges into strata of disciplinary fields because of the belief that differences between the disciplines could influence the nature of IoC in each field. The four disciplinary categories that participated in this study were hard-pure, hard-applied, soft-pure and soft-applied. To establish if student perception of IoC varied between the respondents in different disciplinary fields, we conducted an ANOVA test, whose results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Students' ANOVA results on IoC by disciplinary field

Disciplinary category	Sample	Sample mean	Sample std. dev	Fisher's statistic (F)	Sig.
Hard-pure	31	3.569	0.3192	1.309	0.273
Hard-applied	49	3.722	0.3720		
Soft-pure	41	3.686	0.3285		
Soft-applied	59	3.644	0.3633		

Collectively, the respondents across disciplinary fields had similar perceptions of IoC, with more or less similar standard deviation and mean scores. Compared with other disciplinary fields, the hard-applied respondents rated IoC slightly higher than the soft- and hard-pure disciplines. However, the computed Fisher's statistic of 1.309, with the significance (p) level of 0.273 ($p = 0.273 > 0.05$), showed no significant difference in the perception of IoC between respondents from different disciplinary fields. This suggests that the respondents' perception of the curriculum was never influenced by the disciplinary category to which they subscribed.

Students' individual experiences with IoC

During the interviews, the study participants expressed their different individual opinions about IoC at their university. But most importantly, all the seven interviewees concurred that their curricula had aspects that contributed to their international learning and understanding. Specifically, the results on IoC produced five main sub-themes, namely: international academic staff; international students; travel abroad programmes; courses with an international focus; comparative studies; and focus on ICTs. Below, I present the different subthemes.

International academic staff. The importance of having academic staff from all over the world who can share first-hand international information was recognised by the participants in this study as an important aspect of IoC. Although no participant shared that they had had permanent international staff, evidence indicated that the university received visiting lecturers, guest speakers and online lecturers who addressed students about different aspects of global concerns. According to SPLSF, this was made possible by the partnerships between the university departments and universities abroad. HALSM had received guest lecturers from China and Japan, as well as attended a Skype lecture conducted by a lecturer in a South African university; while SPLSF had received professors from the University of Torino. Similarly, SALSF had received a facilitator (guest speaker) and two or three professors from universities abroad whom she described to be different from those who originated from the country by saying that "... those who have been here would provide us all the information, but those who have been from abroad want you to take a step and do your research from international journals" (SALSF).

Although the statistics on the status of international staff at Makerere University were not readily available, their recruitment as an internationalisation strategy is strongly upheld by the university documents (see, e.g., Makerere University, 2008, 2009). For example, the Human Resources Manual of Makerere University provides for the hiring of expatriate academic staff as well as according them privileged status. It postulates that "*non-citizens shall not be subjected to the age limits for appointment into university service, the ability for the applicant to serve shall be a major assessment factor*" (Makerere University, 2009, p. 16). This means that within an internationalised curriculum, international academic staff are valuable contributors to diverse cultural perspectives and experiences. They have

the potential to transform the campus and the classroom into a vibrant microcosm of the world. Such an experience could ensure that students – both home and international – develop the skills and knowledge required to work in a global setting in their chosen profession.

Presence of international students. From the interviews, it was discovered that the university had several international students – but that their numbers were dwindling. Study participants HALSM, HANLSF, SALSF, SPLSF and SPNLSF all reported that they had lived, studied or interacted with international students who mostly came from Rwanda, Kenya, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Japan and Norway, among others. This information cohered with the documentary evidence and that from the international office, showing that Makerere University supports internationalisation through the admission of international students.

Travel abroad programmes. In this study, travel abroad emerged as an apparent element of IoC. The study participants revealed that mobility programmes for students were common in some – but not all – the departments at the university studied. Some participants reported having travelled abroad as part of their study programme, yet others reported that their friends had travelled. For example, one participant revealed that “there is a project on which our students visit the outside university and their students also come to our university” (SPLSF). According to another participant (HANLSF), in projects that are funded by SIDA “students are allowed to participate in international mobility programmes in different countries like Kenya and Gabon”. Although student travel abroad was attested to in only a few departments, it remains an important aspect of IoC that exposes students to the global realities that cannot be experienced at home.

There were, however, some challenges associated with travel abroad. HANLSF noted that although, sometimes, there were opportunities for students to participate in foreign activities, participation depended on the individual student’s ability to provide logistics, a constraint that had earlier been recognised by Itaaga et al. in their 2013 study of internationalisation and regionalisation of higher education in Uganda. These constraints meant the majority of the students at the studied university might not be taking part in foreign activities, hence missing the international exposure that they desired for them to graduate as global professionals.

Courses with an international focus. This was another theme that emerged from the interviews. Almost all the participants reported having studied a course or several courses that focused on international issues and concerns. Some of the courses were about different regions of the world, others were international in nature, yet others were international in content – dealing with issues of international nature and concern. Concerning this finding, participant HPNLSM revealed that he had so far covered 12 courses which all had a focus on global perspectives. In a similar vein, all the 12 courses which SALSF had covered were perceived to have an international focus. SPNLSF, who had studied a course on international relations during her programme, observed:

We look at how world countries interact...you know it’s like geopolitics. Interaction is in terms of politics, economics, policies and cultural relations and when you are reporting, you need to be conscious of these factors that can cause clashes between countries and hence jeopardise world peace. (SPNLSF)

Another participant (HALSM) echoed a similar sentiment. He said:

I would say, in my programme, international issues on both the courses and content have been included. For example, in most of our courses, we examine different social contexts, different societies and their interactions, and different issues in society, e.g. AIDS, and their impact on human life...

In line with Brandenburg and Federkiel's views (2007), these are clear manifestations of internationality – a deliberate intervention by the various departments at the university to produce globally relevant graduates.

Although there was a general agreement among participants with regard to the international focus of courses, the epistemological concerns and questions about the concept of universality of knowledge in some disciplines were often expressed by participants. In this understanding, those, especially in the NLS departments (HANLSF, SPNLSF and HPNLSM), viewed their programmes as already international by their nature based on the universal theories, concepts and scientific principles they covered. These maintained that some programmes and courses have theories and principles that are not particular to any one part of the country, region, continent or world, but that are applied universally. This understanding is clearly manifested in the views of HANLSF:

The field I am in is global. All the programmes that we do have been introduced in other countries and they have an international focus... It means that what we cover applies in Uganda, South Africa, the UK and all over the world... If I am processing an image and all over the world they process images, it means the knowledge I have can be applied anywhere in the world...What I need is to keep updated with the innovations or developments in the discipline.

Another participant further expounded:

The content we study cuts across and it is the same irrespective of the country...when you go to Tanzania, the US or South Africa, it is the same ... there is no way it is differentiating between journalism here and that of Sudan, Ethiopia or Korea because we are learning the same theories, concepts ... (SPNLSF)

This understanding of the international focus of courses as an aspect of IoC points to the fact that students view their curriculum as internationalised if the courses and/or content go beyond their country. However, it would also suggest that whereas some disciplines intentionally integrate the international aspects into their curriculum, others may need not internationalise the curricula, since they are already viewed as international by nature.

Comparative studies. Comparative studies have generally been accepted as an important component of IoC. They involve comparing various aspects of different countries or using internationally recognised standards. As HALSM revealed, "In some courses, we consider the international standards, especially for the exports, and we compare them with our standards, then we realise that we are still far behind." As far as comparisons are concerned, SPLSF explained that they discussed the global, e.g. China and the US, and compared their systems. SPLSF further revealed that

...in the course of medical sociology, we looked at aspects of health in more and less developed countries, and then we realised that in less developed countries, there are epidemic diseases which are no longer experienced in countries that are already developed.

SANLSM had also done a course whose content was comparative, and SALSF had done a course that required comparing the economic policies of different countries and macroeconomics, which is essentially international by nature because it looks at the world-level analysis of economic systems. These voices point to the fact that the curricula to which the participants had been exposed enabled them to compare different world issues. When they made comparisons, they got to know what was beyond their countries and how developments in other countries could inform planning in their own countries. In turn, the participants were helped to acquire a broadened perspective of issues. This could help them to develop awareness of various global issues.

Focus on ICTs. The findings indicated that ICT was an important component of IoC. Participant HANLSF observed:

I think ICT is another important component of my programme. First of all, most courses focus on ICT. Secondly, most of our interactions are online, e.g. curriculum, courseworks, results ... but as graduate students, we are taught how to surf the internet for information, send emails etc. (HANLSF)

Even though IoC was manifested and acknowledged by most participants, a look through the programme structures, at least for HALSM, SPLSF and SALSF, did not show any clear documentation and concrete inclusion of internationalisation. Rather, IoC was mentioned in passing or in a flaccid way, suggesting that IoC has not yet fully taken root.

Discussion

In this study, Biglan's (1973) idea of disciplinary fields was initially used to attempt to categorise disciplines in the search for possible distinctive discourses about internationalising the curriculum (IoC) at Makerere University. While the concept of disciplinary fields with their associated epistemologies and beliefs is still relevant, in this study, variations were seen only as far as the international focus of courses was concerned. Otherwise, there appeared no major variation between the views of participants in the different disciplinary fields with regard to IoC. This finding coheres with those of Jacob (2009) and Bauer, Marton, Askling and Marton (1999), who affirm that within higher education, the conditions for stable disciplinary cultures and identities are transforming and that it is more difficult to conceive of academics sustaining bounded spaces of action.

The finding that the respondents judged the curriculum to be internationalised supports that of the earlier researchers (see, e.g., Zimitat, 2005) in which nearly half of all students agreed that their courses and their experiences on campus had an international dimension. Nonetheless, regardless of the noted internationalisation of the curriculum direction at Makerere University, this study found that international languages, joint teaching and international internships (see Table 1), proposed by scholars such as Gao (2015) and Knight (2004, 2008) as important elements of IoC, were not manifested at Makerere University. This could suggest that despite the current thrust towards internationalisation of the curriculum, higher education institutions have understood and embraced internationalisation differently, perhaps owing to their different rationales, stakeholders, providers and contexts, which have led to different activities and approaches.

Essentially, a section of participants recognised international academic staff as being vital in the processes of internationalisation of the curriculum. This finding of attraction of and support for international staff as an aspect of curriculum internationalisation agrees with that of Clifford (2005), in which students recognised that staff from overseas or with immigrant ethnic backgrounds demonstrated experience of different cultures and different value systems. Also, the finding supports Gao's 2015 framework for measuring internationalisation and the argument that the international profile of an academic team constitutes an important resource for internationalisation. It also re-echoes the widely agreed argument that the success of any internationalisation initiative in an education institution hinges on the engagement of the academic staff members (see, e.g., Childress, 2010). This is important because international academic staff represent the world and they are often expected to integrate international experiences and perspectives into their engagement with their students more than the domestic staff who have not travelled to imbue themselves with global knowledge.

This suggests that the important factor determining IoC is academics' attitude towards and how they understand and support the processes of internationalisation.

Generally, the participants concurred that there were several international students at their university and that their presence provided an international and intercultural dimension to the institution. Such a finding tends to agree with the views of Leask (2009) about international students as being valuable contributors to diverse cultural perspectives and experiences, hence transforming the campus and the classroom into a vibrant microcosm of the world.

Largely, a section of participants recognised travel abroad as an aspect of IoC. This finding corroborates those of other studies (e.g. Aktas, Pitts, Richards, & Silova, 2017; Lilley, Barker, & Harris, 2015; Morais & Ogden, 2011; Hanson, 2010) in which students had to travel abroad as part of their curriculum requirements. For instance, Aktas et al. report that travel to another country for service learning, internship and/or research was a common element of curricula that exposed students to the real-world setting. Similarly, in a study done by IAU (2005), outgoing mobility programmes for students were among the top-ranked internationalisation activities among participating institutions. This means that, travel abroad has increasingly gained acceptance among scholars as an important aspect of IoC. Nevertheless, what did stand out in this study was logistical constraints on students' participation in travel abroad programmes – a constraint that had earlier been advanced by scholars (e.g. Itaaga et al., 2013; Lunn, 2008) as a major hindrance to internationalisation in much of the literature highlighting that social-economic factors have constrained internationalisation in some countries.

Generally, the participants expressed the belief that their courses had an international focus, a finding that is in tandem with the views of other scholars on internationalisation (e.g. Green, 2005) that the international dimension of courses was an important aspect of IoC. Like in earlier studies, the international focus of courses in this study was intended to expose students to global and international realities and experiences. Nevertheless, what did stand out in this study was the strong belief by those participants in the non-life system (NLS) departments that their disciplines by nature were already international and that they did not need to internationalise, or that there was nothing more to add as in IoC. This suggests that their courses had universally accepted concepts and principles. Again, such a finding tends to agree with those of researchers like Clifford (2009), where students in some disciplines claimed that theories, principles and concepts of certain disciplines, such as chemistry and mathematics, are the same the world over, a belief that made the academics tend not to internationalise as they could not teach these concepts with their related theories differently in any particular part of the world.

Concerning comparative studies, the participants generally agreed that their curriculum had comparative dimensions of different aspects. Such a finding confirms Knight's (2012) argument that the integration of the comparative perspectives into the teaching and learning process and programme content has become a fundamental part of curriculum internationalisation. According to Knight, these would lead to international and intercultural knowledge, skills and values as student learning outcomes.

Regarding ICTs, the participants generally agreed that to be able to explore world realities, different ICTs needed to be utilised. This finding coheres with the argument by Knight (2008) that due to globalisation, new developments in ICTs which facilitate new HE delivery methods for domestic and cross-border education, especially online and satellite-based forms. The finding also

confirms Haigh's (2014) argument that internationalisation is about exploring and exploiting the opportunities of the connected world and the information age by utilising ICTs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explain the nature of curriculum internationalisation at Makerere University, Uganda's premier university, from the perspective of graduate students. The study is also the first of its kind to explore graduate students' perceptions of the international dimensions of their curriculum at Makerere University. Although the pragmatic nature of the study cannot fully allow for generalisation, what we can affirm is that there is IoC at Makerere University, especially in the graduate programmes, and that different dimensions of internationalisation of the curriculum could be identified by students. Considering the nature of responses to most questions, graduate students across all disciplinary fields were certain about various international dimensions in their programmes. The findings revealed that IoC is not narrowed down to Gao's (2015) dimensions, but it goes beyond students, academic staff and even the modes of instruction. Therefore, to plan IoC, a university needs not to confine itself to what is taught in class but may need to consider the students – because they receive the curriculum – and the staff – who deliver it. As such, this study adds to the current international research literature on the understanding of IoC in different programmes.

In the light of the findings, we call upon university managers at Makerere and other universities to play a critical role in ensuring that international perspectives such as those brought by international staff, travel abroad programmes for students, courses with an international focus, comparative studies, and focus on ICT are integrated into the curriculum. This would help students not only to acquire knowledge of their local environment, but also of the global world at large. Since the results of this study were largely based on the views and opinions of graduate students, we recommend further examination of the international dimension of the curriculum from the perspective of a broad range of other actors, such as undergraduate students, academics and administrators, for a broader understanding of the phenomenon.

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