Internationalization of the Curriculum for Italian and International Postgraduate Students

Ourania Katsara
University of Patras, Greece

ABSTRACT

Internationalization of the curriculum (IoC) has been widely discussed in the literature but there is little research regarding the link between internationalization and language policies in higher education institutions. This chapter offers a comprehensive literature review indicating there is a gap in systematic research on designing effective curricula which could be used to justify the need for IoC. In particular, the author discusses a preliminary questionnaire survey analysing students’ opinions on the usefulness of a short English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course within the context of Erasmus teaching in University of Basilicata, Italy. The main findings of the investigation indicated that Italian and International postgraduate students showed specific preferences towards academic writing skills that need to be taught in short seminars giving prominence to guided teaching activities. Finally, the author offers some implications emphasising the importance of a careful examination of the process of internationalization and its relationship to the implementation of language policies within the departmental curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Internationalization of the curriculum (IoC) refers to the structure of courses, programmes, and qualifications that focus on comparative and international themes, the emphasis of which is on the development of international/intercultural competencies (Knight, 2004, Leask, 2009, Qiang, 2003). There is evidence that researchers describe IoC from a different point of view. Olsson (2010) noted IoC is infusing international and intercultural learning in the curriculum of a higher education institution. Students attending such programmes are expected to display “intercultural knowledge, skills, attitudes and perspectives of
Internationalization of the Curriculum for Italian and International Postgraduate Students

a globally competent student” (Olsson, 2010, p.11). Rizvi (2013), however, argued that IoC should not only focus on the integration of a global dimension in curriculum design but it should aim to prepare students to be able to make use of this knowledge and these skills within global working conditions.

Knight (2011) explains that implicit assumptions about internationalization have developed myths; Knight stressed a common element in many of these myths is that a quantitative measure of the benefits of the internationalization or the degree of internationality seems to be enough. Knight argues the number of international students, foreign staff, institutional agreements, cross-border education programs, research projects, foreign accreditations, and branch campuses may be useful in serving accountability requirements. However, human intangible performances, which bring valuable benefits of internationalization, are not captured and need to be explored. One of those myths, which Knight discussed, is the one referring to the fact that institutions in response to internationalization have designed their curriculum in the English language. She highlighted that one of the misconceptions relates to the fact that a curriculum will be characterised as IoC if the medium of instruction for its content is English.

This misconception is reflected in a survey undertaken in Portugal, a non-English speaking country in the University of Aveiro (UA), where the curriculum was internationalised by delivering courses in English to both home and incoming international students in order to attract international candidates in the institution (Kerklaan, Moreira, & Boesma, 2008). However, in their qualitative survey, it was found that in the Portuguese University of Aveiro (UA), policy makers and staff identified the role of the English language as an obstacle in the process of the UA in becoming an international university since members of staff were not confident teaching in English. This finding corresponds to the myth explored by Knight (2011). In addition, Mumin (2013) criticised the results of the survey stating that the transferability of the findings of the study was affected by the lack of details of the research design, sampling strategy, ethical issues, and information on the process of constructing the interview questions.

This chapter discusses the importance of planning the incorporation of a short academic language course within the context of internationalization of the curriculum (IoC) in an Italian university. A study discussing the results of a preliminary survey carried out in University of Basilicata, Italy is presented. Based on the results, identification of certain parameters that need to be further investigated will be identified. Furthermore, suggestions on how the information gathered from the survey could help to redesign this course for the benefit of Italian and International postgraduate students when taking part in international and intercultural activities will be offered. In line of these suggestions, some implications in relation to possible linking between language policies and internationalization in the International PhD School of Science of the University will be noted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Knight and de Wit (1995) state there are four approaches to internationalization, namely: activity, competency, ethos, and process, recognising they are not mutually exclusive. The researchers explain that in activity approach, internationalization is described in terms of types of academic and extra curricular activities. This approach promotes activities such as curriculum, student exchange, and issues with international students. In competency approach, the focus is on the human dimension and issues related to the development of new skills, attitudes, knowledge in students, faculty, and members of staff placing emphasis on the development of the individual. In this approach, the development of internationalised curricula is the means towards the development of appropriate competencies of staff and students. In