

Educating for Intercultural Working Life: A Case Study

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Abstract: *The working life has become more and more intercultural. In intercultural working life international contacts are commonplace, foreign languages are constantly needed, people from different cultural backgrounds are connected and the world has become smaller because of the globalization of the economy. Ministry of education has also identified globalization as one of the trends that requires to be answered with educational actions. The education system must open up possibilities to answer to the changes brought by globalization. In particular higher education needs to respond to these changes and challenges and ensure that students have necessary skills to enter into global and intercultural working life.*

This paper is a case study at the School of Telecommunication and e-Business in Turku University of Applied Sciences. We present how we have tried to answer to the challenges of globalization and how we prepare our students for intercultural working life. Our international activities are based on our internationalization strategy. Some of our solutions are simple and common throughout the field of higher education like student and teacher exchange. In addition, we have introduced solutions like home-internationalization, curriculum structures, triple degrees and international projects. We will discuss and analyze our efforts and provide ideas to promote internationalization at Higher Education Institutes.

Introduction

The latest development plan of education and research emphasizes globalization as a possibility for national and international wellness (Ministry of Education Finland, 2007). The working life has become more and more intercultural, international contacts are commonplace, foreign languages are constantly needed, people from different cultural backgrounds are connected and the world has become smaller. We are required to learn to have respect for others, to know others cultures and to improve versatile interpersonal skills to promote a genuine dialogue and argumentation (Confederation of Finnish Industries, 2006). Globalization and modern technologies are expected to continue blurring natural and social barriers that earlier separated different nations and cultures (Kambutu and Nganga, 2007). In today's world education and international cooperation in education and R&D are essential success factors in global competition (Ministry of Education Finland, 2007). The basic idea is that higher education institutes have to make sure education really match the needs of economy (Department for education and skills, 2003). Higher education institutes are expected to be self active in international relations and they should select their focus areas (Ministry of Education, 2005).

The modern employee is required to understand different cultures and be able to work with people from different cultural backgrounds. He should have a sound sense of himself and positive curiosity about new people and views to be successful in

international cooperation. (Confederation of Finnish Industries, 2006) It is not a simple event to develop cultural awareness, understanding and appreciation, rather it is a process that requires an encounter with many culturally related opportunities (Kambutu and Nganga, 2007). Therefore, HEIs should base their education on intercultural objectives so as to prepare students adequately for effective communication between cultures on a daily basis (Xiaoping, 2006). It is very important to prepare our students to deal effectively with people having cultural orientations that differ from their own (Anderson et al., 2006). It is preferable to have a curriculum that prepares citizens to respect humanity's differences and cultural wealth (Kambutu and Nganga, 2007). HEIs, their administrators and educators need to provide students opportunities to explore the characteristics and values of diverse cultural groups (Xiaoping, 2006). As defined in Finland, the focus areas in higher education are a) student, teacher and researcher mobility, b) international research and development projects and c) development of common and double degree programs (Ministry of Education Finland, 2007).

One basic requirement for internationalization is skills in foreign languages. The Ministry of Education has defined the key challenges of languages teaching at HEIs as the following (Ministry of Education Finland, 2007):

- 1) The language skills of students and staff have to be sufficient for international cooperation in studies and in their working life.
- 2) The language skills of staff have to meet the case of constant teaching with foreign language.
- 3) The tray of foreign language courses has to be appropriate in relation with studies and the working life.

Altogether, higher education institutes are encouraged to increase language and cultural competence teaching for practical needs. Special emphasis is proposed on the Chinese language and culture. (SITRA, 2005) In Finland a special attention must be paid to foreign students studying here. We must make sure that enough courses in Finnish and Swedish language are offered to support their employment in the Finnish labour market (Ministry of Education Finland, 2007). The importance of language studies is highlighted in research saying that interest in foreign languages together with intercultural contacts is a significant predictor of participation in international mobility programs as well (Marcotte et al., 2007).

International mobility programs are one means to support internationalization and intercultural growth. However, higher education institutes must remember that they provide sufficient human resources to support international mobility programs, because the likelihood of student participation increases significantly when there are adequate sources of information about these programs available (Marcotte et al., 2007). Typically students are interested in discovering another country; knowing another culture; experiencing life abroad; learning, practicing or improving a foreign language; being away from one's milieu (Marcotte et al., 2007). Actually, these programs that put students in face-to-face contact with people of different cultures seems to have the greatest likelihood of producing positive outcomes (Anderson et al., 2006). During these programs one learns self-respect through the respect for others' way of thinking, living, and doing business (Pesakovic, 2007). The significance of mobility programs is confirmed by alumnis who have taken part in study abroad programs. They say that an international mobility program helped them to understand their own cultural values and biases, it increased self-confidence and served as a catalyst for increased maturity among many other impacts (Dwyer and Peters 2004). Despite these positive expectations many barriers and challenges relating to international mobility has been identified (Fuller et al., 2005):

- 1) Personal barriers
 - (a) Getting students to go abroad

- (b) Money (fees, living costs, cost of transportation, opportunity costs, financing)
 - (c) Languages
- 2) Institutional barriers
- (a) Uneven bilateral flows
 - (b) Curriculum differences
 - (c) Calendar differences
 - (d) Credit transfer not a normal part of university life
 - (e) Lost credit - costs to the student
 - (f) Professional accreditation
 - (g) Quality assurance
 - (h) Cultural mismatches and misunderstandings.

Still, months-long periods abroad should become a norm for students and teachers (Ministry of Education, 2005).

Internationalization can also be seen as a matter of quality. The quality of education is improved when HEIs increase the number of foreign teachers and take care of the language skills of their teachers (Ministry of Education, 2005). The HEIs should also require language certificates from teachers providing teaching with foreign languages (Ministry of Education Finland, 2007).

This paper presents how we have tried to answer to the challenges of globalization and prepare our students for intercultural working life. After this introduction the paper continues as follows. First, we describe the case research this paper is all about. Second, we introduce the solutions we have used to educate our students for intercultural working life. Third, we introduce the internationalization efforts targeted to our teachers. Finally, we will discuss and analyze our efforts and provide ideas to promote internationalization at higher education institutes.

Research

This research used qualitative methods and is a descriptive case study. The study describes actions taken in the school of Telecommunication and e-Business at Turku University of Applied Sciences for preparing our students for intercultural working life. In general, a case study aims for in depth-understanding of the context of the phenomenon (Cavaye, 1996). Furthermore, a descriptive case study presents a complete description of a phenomenon within its context (Yin, 2002). A case study is well-suited to capturing the knowledge of practioners and to document the experiences of practice (Benbasat et al., 1987). This paper follows interpretative tradition of the case research. It means that there is no objective reality, which can be discovered by researchers and replicated by others (Walsham, 1993, Broadbent et al., 1998).

Turku University of Applied Sciences is one of the biggest of its kind in Finland. Our University is organized in six units of education that promote multidisciplinary learning. The school of Telecommunication and e-Business represent four different fields of education: technology, business, natural sciences and culture. Our main goal is to work in close co-operation with our region and to answer to the requirements of the working life. Our education and our research and development initiatives focus on applying knowledge rather than creating new ones.

The school of Telecommunication and e-Business operates in two cities and has six different degree programs (Table 1). We educate both Bachelors of Engineering and Bachelors of Business Administration. The Bachelor of Engineering is a four year degree with 240 ECTS and Bachelor of Business Administration is a three and half

year degree with 210 ECTS. The school has approximately 1500 students of which roughly 550 study in Salo campus and 950 in Turku campus.

Table 1: Degree programs in Telecommunication and e-Business.

Degree Program	Credits ECTS	Discipline	Students
Information Technology - English - Finnish	240	Information Technology	727
Electronics	240	Computer Engineering	259
Business Information Technology	210	Information Systems	196
Business and Administration	210	Business	176
Library and Information Services	210	Information Services	85

Internationalization is one of the focus areas in our mission statement: The school of Telecommunication and e-Business operates interactively with the working life educating future international experts, activating entrepreneurship and developing our region with applied research. Our international activities are based on our internationalization strategy. Some of our solutions are simple and common throughout the field of higher education like student and teacher exchange. In addition, we have introduced solutions like home-internationalization, curriculum structures, triple degrees and international projects. The strategy defines our main lines and gives guidance for more detailed yearly operational plan in internationalization. The strategy defines that

- Internationalization is part of our daily operations through teacher and student exchanges as well as through R&D-projects.
- Intercultural environment enriches our learning and motivates us to pay attention to courses offered in a foreign language.
- Our international activities are focused on India/China besides Europe.

The main research question answered in this paper was: How do we prepare our students for intercultural working life when globalization presents constant challenges?

Internationalization and students

Our international coordinator has a key role in promoting internationalization. Her main responsibilities are to arrange student and teacher exchanges as well as providing information about the internationalization possibilities. Still, our Degree Program Managers as well as our whole staff has a very important role in promoting internationalization. The attitudes we pass to the students are very important. In addition, we have used students who have already been abroad to share their experiences.

At the first place we have taken care of language studies. Besides traditional English and German languages we have offered courses for example in French, Spanish, Chinese, Russian languages. Everyone in Finland understands that language skills are a necessity to survive in intercultural working life. In addition to language courses we have a special course on Intercultural Communication. This course and some experiences of it are well documented in a Licentiate thesis of one our teachers (Lindgren, 2005).

The most typical way of educating for intercultural working life is the use of international mobility programs. Most of our outgoing and incoming students operate through Erasmus agreements. In addition, we also have the Nordplus mobility program which is focused on mobility within Nordic countries. At the moment we have Erasmus agreements with over 50 HEIs in Europe. We have most partners in Germany because we used to have a partly German degree program. However, Germany is still the country where most of our students go for exchange. Typically 60 to 80 students go yearly to an exchange period over 3-months. This represents 19 to 25 percent of our yearly intake of new students. Most of them study the whole period abroad, some study and do their work placement and others do just their work placement. The flow of outgoing and incoming students is well balanced. Surprisingly, there have been times when there are more students incoming than outgoing. The reason for this popularity was our three English degree programs. Nowadays we only have one English degree program. Therefore we have had to make sure that we have enough courses available for our incoming exchange students.

In addition to international mobility programs we have mobilized our students to different fairs. In some cases this has been part of a course and in some cases this has been part of a R&D-project. Every year our students take part in international practice enterprise fairs. Usually we have had internal fairs and the group/groups that have been most successful will win the trip to the international fairs. Basically it is a competition and the best ones are rewarded this way. Another typical solution is a R&D-project that aims to help local companies with their internationalization. As part of this project students take the company to either Cebit or Hannover fairs. Students are responsible for making the fair preparation, plan the department, take care of the goods and finally work as presenters during the fairs. There are many other examples of R&D-projects mobilizing students as well like Turku-Dakar library project and Broadcast for the 21st Century project. In both cases students are active participants of the projects. They accomplish the task described in the project plan and at the same time prepare themselves for intercultural working life. Another good example of learning for intercultural working life was a project where students at Kiel and at Salo worked together in a software development project. The basic idea was to learn distributed software engineering, but at the same time the intercultural aspects were adapted.

One way of supporting and encourage student mobility is double and triple degree programs. An example of a triple degree initiative is the European Computer Science course. It is a joint project of six HEIs: Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, University Paul Verlaine - Metz, Turku University of Applied Sciences, University of Huddersfield, Instituto Politécnico de Coimbra, Université Francois Rabelais de Tours/Blois and Universidad de Burgos. The program is a harmonized computer science course between the participating institutions, in which the students must study in three different countries, using three different languages, without extending the number of study years. The basic idea is to provide the knowledge and skills required by computer science graduates who will be working within a multilingual European context. There have not been many students who have done a triple degree, but there have been many students that have studied abroad based on this work. Nowadays the partners have spoken about signing double degree agreements and this way support the mobility. In addition, we have some double degree agreements with HEIs in Europe, for example with FH Kiel in Business studies.

As part of educating for intercultural working life we have a long tradition of degree programs taught totally in a foreign language. We used to have three foreign degree programs, but nowadays we have only one program in English i.e. Degree Program

in Information Technology. Every autumn 40 new students start their education leading to a Bachelor of Engineering. This degree program is a very good intercultural learning environment. There are normally one third of Finnish students and two third of foreign students all over the world. During last year most of the foreign students have come from China or Africa. Another foreign degree program that does not exist any more had a mandatory exchange year within the curriculum. This program focused on marketing in German spoken countries and therefore we still have a lot of German partner institutes. This program was merged with the Finnish business program. This Finnish program very strongly encourages students to continue the tradition of one year abroad. Since this is not mandatory any more the curriculum structures have to be flexible and they must allow different personal study plans for our students.

The English degree program - including the one partly German - have changed our learning environment quite substantially. The classes are nowadays truly intercultural. There are students from all over the world with different backgrounds. In addition to the exchange student, we have at the moment altogether 132 foreign students doing the full programs. These foreign students are an essential part of the so-called home-internationalization. Now our Finnish students are exposed to an intercultural environment without going abroad. Students who like to be more active with the foreign students can apply for an International student tutor position and widen their international perspective. These tutors arrange a lot of activities for foreign students like a weekend in a cottage, Erasmus Olympics, bowling, Finnish baseball, a trip to Tallinn and weekly meetings. Furthermore, a number of events are arranged to familiarize Finnish and foreign students with each other.

Our foreign degree program forms the basis for bilateral student flow too. However, there are a lot of courses taught in English in the Finnish degree programs as well. These courses used to spread out all over the timetables and it was quite difficult for the exchange student to build a workable timetable. Therefore we introduced a concept of international semester. This new idea is also informed to the international coordinators of our partner HEIs. The basic idea is to offer a package of English taught courses that we have tailored in the timetables. Now the exchange student can focus on studying rather than solving problems with the timetables. At the same time the exchange students are connected with a larger group of Finnish students, because the international semester is built from courses of different degree programs and study years. At the moment we have two versions of the international semester: one in Turku and one in Salo. These versions have slightly different focuses. In Turku the focus is clearly on information technology and networking. In Salo the focus is more on business and information systems.

Furthermore we have special mobility arrangements with Chinese Wuhan Institute of Technology. They accept 10 to 15 students yearly from our University and arrange for them a special program including courses on Chinese culture and language, besides normal courses.

Internationalization and teachers

Mobilizing teachers is as important as mobilizing students. While students' normal exchange period is at least half a year, a normal exchange period for our teachers is only one week. Still, it is important to get our teachers to know our partner HEIs and to deliver up-to-date information to the partner and to our own students. Altogether, we want to know our partners and their quality levels. Every year around 15-20 teachers go for a one week exchange period to our partner institutes. Most of our teachers use the Erasmus international mobility program, but some also use Nordplus and go to Nordic countries. These figures represent roughly 17 percent of

our personnel. Unfortunately, the group of teachers going to exchange does not vary much yearly meaning that we have a lot of teachers who haven't participated in any of the international mobility programs. During the exchange period our teacher receives a normal weekly salary (40 h) even though the new Erasmus requirement is only 5 hours of teaching within a week.

The number of incoming teachers is slightly smaller than the number of outgoing teachers. We have tried to connect the teaching of the incoming teachers to our normal courses, but we still have work to do there. We have also informed our international partners about possible slots for foreign teachers to fill in. Our goal is to have at least one foreign teacher every semester in every degree program.

Another important possibility to increase intercultural competences among our teachers is visiting international conferences. A basic requirement to be financed to a conference is that the teacher has some active role in the conference i.e. either a presentation or a chairing responsibility. The articles and the presentations relate mostly to our international research and development projects which also finance most costs relating traveling and accommodation.

Research and development is nowadays an important part of our operations. Teachers and students learn essential intercultural skills while working in these projects. Project meetings are often in different countries and cultures. Project tasks need to be accomplished with the project workers abroad. We have also tried to connect our partner network into our R&D projects. We have asked and distributed the contact information of R&D-related people from our partner universities to our R&D-manager. This was seen as a way to deepen our cooperation and also to ease the lookup of possible universities to join our projects. So far only few project proposals have been made this way.

Our school is part of the CDIO network (see www.cdio.org) that aims to develop education closer to the working life. The CDIO initiative does not directly speak about internationalization or intercultural issues, but emphasizing working life relations also contains this aspect. The understanding of the working life was also one goal of our teachers' 3-months long working life periods. We had altogether 13 teachers working for some companies and updating their knowledge of working life processes and environments. These periods supported also the intercultural aspects and helped us to provide real fresh experiences from the working life.

Discussion

Internationalization has been one of our focus areas for many years now. Thus, it is no surprise that many of the ideas and challenges presented earlier are not unknown. As we have described we have been quite active in internationalization and in educating our students for intercultural working life. However, we still have challenges and areas of development.

Earlier studies emphasized that HEIs should base their education on intercultural objectives, prepare their students to deal with people having different cultural orientations and provide their students opportunities to explore characteristics and values of different cultural groups. We must agree that our education has intercultural objectives, but our education is not based on that. On the other hand, we do have many ways to prepare our students for intercultural working life. A totally new way we are starting is a combination of learning, work placement and thesis together with the working life and an India focus. The reason for the India focus is that many Finnish ICT companies have started operations there and we want to prepare our students already during studies to that dimension.

We focus on student and teacher mobility as the Finnish Ministry of Education hopes. Still, we have the challenge to widen the group of teachers going abroad. The new Erasmus program has also given us new possibilities for mobilizing not only teachers but rather other personnel as well. Furthermore, we should take a step to a new level and have longer exchange periods besides the short one-week exchange periods. At the same time we hope to have incoming foreign teachers for longer periods and connect them in our teaching.

With students it is very important that our curriculum structures do not hinder any possible intercultural actions. For example the credits earned during the exchange period must be accepted as part of our degree program and at the same time some of our own courses have to make room for them. We have to make sure that students sense that the international activities are worthwhile! Another positive signal could be the increase of double degree possibilities.

We have increased language and cultural competence teaching like suggested. Our opinion is that languages are not a problem any more. Still, there is capacity for more students to study languages as part of their studies.

Conclusions

Our experiences show that creating a positive attitude towards international activities among personnel is really important. When teachers are self active in international projects and teacher exchanges they can easier convince the students to participate in international activities. Also peer-students are important informants for other students. Student can describe and give such information to their peers that a teacher or an international coordinator or any other source cannot provide. Altogether, there must be a positive atmosphere towards internationalization in all levels.

Another finding that we have made is that student and teacher mobility is the main tool for educating for intercultural working life. Mobility programs are well tested and funded. Especially for personnel the rules of the international mobility programs like Erasmus are light. The required workload is quite small; maybe intentionally to make the threshold into exchange period low. We have noticed that getting the teacher to the first exchange is most difficult. Therefore a special attention should be paid on the first-timers.

We have found it important that there are many different ways to educate for intercultural working life. The wider coverage among students and teachers you want to have, the wider selection of tools you need. We see that our selection is functioning well, but still we need to be proactive and creative - as any other HEIs - to find new ways to educate for intercultural working life.

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