

Converging cultures in international higher education: An end to the Danish model? (0034)

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Background and theory

To educational scholars Richard Edwards and Robin Usher (2008, p. 11) globalisation leads to convergence in the form of a “space through which to challenge and disrupt certain established assumptions and binaries, most powerfully those of the international and the national, the universal and particular”. Edwards and Usher see this as a positive development, motivating scholars to a global sharing of issues common to educational cultures around the world. Marginson (2011, p. 29) is more ambivalent, insisting that “national practices have begun to combine, converge and synthesize”, which suggests structural change and the possible emergence of one global educational culture. According to Marginson, institutional thinking has become globalised, causing a radical change of policy, infrastructure, recruitment procedures and program design. An obvious example is the Bologna Process, which in European higher education has promoted convergence in the form of a common BA-MA degree structure, a shared credit transfer system, growing student and staff mobility, plus incentives promoting the European dimension in course curricula and educational programs (Välilmaa 2011, Enders/Westerheijden 2011). In its extreme form, this second form of convergence implies a dramatic transformation of European educational systems, furthering the processes of cultural homogenisation and standardisation proposed by globalisation theorist Arjun Appadurai (1996).

Drawing on empirical data from four Danish international Master programs this paper suggests that convergence, deriving from an increased harmonisation of degree structures and course contents, is currently manifest within Danish higher education. Ignoring the growing use of English as a medium of instruction, which is already well-documented (e.g. Mortensen/Haberland 2012), the discussion will center on the themes of BA-MA progression, course curricula and the (re-)contextualization of knowledge. This leads to a reflection on the question: Does internationalisation represent the end to Danish educational culture?

Research design and data

The data used in this paper has been collected as part of a Bourdieu-inspired research project examining the implications of internationalisation for social practice within the field of Danish higher education. The research focuses on four international Master programs located at one particular university known for its strategic commitment to international research and education. The programs examined share the following characteristics: 1) they are designed as international programs, aiming to recruit international students, 2) they are interdisciplinary, involving cooperation across disciplines and faculties, and 3) their student cohort generally includes a high number of international students (fifty per cent or more).

The empirical foundation for the analysis is 25 qualitative research interviews collected with lecturers from the four programs. The sample includes international as well as Danish members of staff, representing different disciplines and career positions. In addition to interviews, written documentation in the form of course descriptions, reading lists, study guides and lecturer CVs has been collected. The written material is used to supplement the interview data, enabling a comparison between lecturers' perception of course contents and actual class reading.

Analysis

The first analytical theme of BA-MA progression reflects an important structural change within Danish higher education. Traditionally, Danish universities provided five-year degrees within one or two disciplines, enabling Master students to specialise within their chosen field of study (cf. Wilken/Tange 2014). With Bologna, a two-cycle BA-MA structure became the norm within European higher education, which challenged the Danish tradition for a disciplinary connection between students' undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. The four programs examined follow the Bologna model rather than the Danish one, which means that they are designed in a way that enables the recruitment of students from a variety of disciplines. In consequence, lecturers can no longer identify a single disciplinary knowledge base on which to build their Master class. Instead the contents of the international Master programs become more reminiscent of the Anglo-American postgraduate programs, which do not require the same degree of subject specialisation and progression.

Regarding the second theme of course curricula, the Danish data suggests that 'internationalised' curricula, as proposed by Haigh (2002), involves the choice of English-medium texts originating in the US/UK over any indigenous sources. This we have recently documented in a quantitative study of reading lists from one Master program, which showed a clear tendency to select Anglo-American literature (Tange/Millar, n.d.). Comparing these findings to interview statements by lecturers from other programs, we see a general willingness to accept American textbooks as the 'standard' in international education, which the lecturers motivate partly by referring to research traditions, partly by their students' need for models that are "recognizable" within a global labour market. Yet respondents identify problems related to this reliance on Anglo-American literature, highlighting, for instance, students' need for literature that furthers their understanding of the situation in their home country (Denmark) and region (Europe).

In relation to the theme of geographical and socio-cultural context the interview data shows an awareness that the framing of the course as 'international' demands that knowledge be de-contextualised. This means that references to local or national circumstances are avoided and replaced by a frame of reference that lecturers characterise as "global" or "international". In other words, they deliberately opt for case material or examples that they consider well-known to students from many parts of the world. The lecturers' attempts to establish common ground supports convergence in the sense that knowledge geography mainly becomes centred on the US and UK. Respondents from Media Studies, for instance, report that they will use CNN or BBC as their principal examples because these media are recognised by all students. Rather than a genuine globalisation of knowledge, the empirical evidence thus suggests that Anglo-America replaces Denmark or Europe as the default reference points in classroom discussions and assignments.

Conclusion

The data indicates that convergence challenges Danish educational culture, imposing a BA-MA structure and motivating lecturers to privilege Anglo-American literature and cases. The practical implementation of 'internationalisation' differs between lecturers, courses, and disciplines, suggesting that it may yet be possible to realize international education in a distinctively Danish way. This suggests a reality of divergence as well as convergence.

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