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Mobility equals internationalisation? Students' perceptions of quality of higher education in Denmark

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This paper examines how student and staff mobility relates to discourses and practices of internationalisation and 'good quality' higher education (HE). HE institutions in Europe are ascribing greater importance to internationalisation, whereby the most important benefit identified is improved quality of teaching and learning. However, student perceptions of quality of education, as associated with internationalisation, is under-explored. This paper addresses this gap by employing a digital ethno-methodological approach and critical discourse analysis, drawing on 126 hours of teaching/learning observation and 38 semi-structured interviews with Danish and international students of 8 MSc programmes in Denmark. Nuanced aspects of students' perceptions of quality, relevance and learning were related to diversity of students and staff. However, the digital ethnographic method has revealed a disconnect between discourses and actual practices of internationalisation. This research also has implications for policies and practices in broader internationalised HE contexts.

Full paper

Quality and Internationalisation of HE

In the past two decades, internationalisation has been seen as a

means to improve the quality of higher education (HE) (de Wit 2020). HE quality assurance has increasingly focused on two areas: accountability and academic quality, i.e., inputs and outputs. While in this approach to quality, accountability is achieved through specific quantitative targets and indicators (e.g., institutional internationalisation, recruitment of international staff and students, institutional reputation), the relationship between quality and internationalisation is complex, and the contribution of internationalisation to the quality of HE therefore needs further qualitative exploration.

In the context of this research, Denmark's role in internationalisation of HE predates the Bologna Agreement (1999), whereby English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has been normalised, aiding universities in meeting national objectives of international student recruitment, which is associated with Denmark's competitive agenda (Airey et al. 2017; Tange 2021). A common argument is about added value to HE systems, and as enhancing quality of teaching and learning. This paper therefore addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent is quality of education associated with internationalisation, according to students' perceptions?
2. Which instruments of internationalisation are identified by students as associated with quality and how?

Methodology

This research employed a digital ethno-methodological approach (Hine, 2000), and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1995). Fieldwork comprised two components: firstly, 126 hours of online teaching/ learning observation of three courses which are integral part of 8 MSc programmes using EMI; and secondly, semi-structured interviews with 38 full-time MSc students in the final third of their first MSc year. Fieldwork was conducted between March and June 2021 at a research-intensive Faculty of Science at a Danish university. Final sampling included 20 Danish students (15 male and 5 female) and 18 international students (6 male and 12 female).

International staff and the value of diverse pedagogy

I think it's a great opportunity to have different teachers from all over the world, because they bring together different knowledge, and they teach differently

The value of varied pedagogies was appreciated amongst participants who perceived themselves as citizens of an interconnected and globalised society. However, although most Danish staff in this Faculty of Science have international experience, they do not necessarily engage with international students through their pedagogical practices. This is reflected across ninety percent of international participants' accounts of Danish lecturers' pedagogy as being domestically-oriented. While not attempting to devalue local pedagogy, students did show a broader view of internationalisation going beyond the 'inter-national'. When probed about the value of diverse pedagogies, participants' responses challenged assumptions about universality of science. Thus, the value of international staff was intertwined with internationalisation of curriculum, as participants mentioned the importance of learning different theories and methods generated in other geographies of knowledge.

International students adding quality to educational experiences

There are many students from different countries and different backgrounds, and it's good to exchange ideas, for example, a student from a not very rich country may have a different perspective from another student from Sweden...

Most international participants expressed the importance of other foreign students as part of their educational and personal experiences. Yet, they found it challenging to engage with Danish students, 'there is a very obvious divide between international students and Danish students in the classroom.' Indeed,

observations confirmed, to some extent, international students' perceptions of such (dis)integration. Danish students tended to form breakout groups amongst themselves when they were given the option and often switched to Danish language. Furthermore, when students were given long-term assessments and were grouped randomly, domestic students commonly critiqued international students' level of commitment to the given task.

Conclusion

This research has shown that mobility in itself and EMI are not enough to promote internationalisation and to enhance the quality of HE. Pedagogical practices within multicultural classrooms play a pivotal role in fostering integration between international and domestic students, valuing students' diversity as a pedagogical resource; additionally, academic staff's proficiency in English does not translate pedagogical approaches into an international learning experience. This paper has further highlighted that the evidence of enhanced quality of HE, associated with internationalisation instruments, is challenged by participants' actual classroom social practices, i.e., there is a disconnect between discourses and experiences of internationalisation. For internationalisation practices to enhance the quality of HE, a realignment between institutional activities with humanistic values for potential common good is needed, rather than just '...educate graduates with competences enabling them to work in an internationalised labour market' (Anonymised University's statement 2022).

References

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