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The contribution of international humanitarian work to the internationalisation of the student experience (0115)

Abstract

Universities are increasingly aiming for 'deep internationalisation'. We explore the meaning of this for student experiences, including for students who study in their country of birth, but have exchanges of various kinds in other countries. We draw on data from a three year research project which examined the involvement of overseas universities in a country directed affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. The study used qualitative analysis of over semi-structured interviews with over 200 students, staff, community practitioners and residents of villages triangulated with focus groups and a survey. We found that the integration of humanitarian work with tailored academic partnerships can provide the basis for long-standing and multi-faceted processes of internationalisation within the wider university and beyond its boundaries. We conclude that engagement in humanitarian partnerships can deepen the internationalisation of higher education institutions, and that the value base on which such exchanges are predicated is crucial to their outcomes.

Outline

'Internationalisation' has expanded to encompass not only student recruitment and exchange, but also dimensions such as exchanges of curriculum materials, involvement in community development, sporting and cultural partnerships, cross-cultural competence and an 'international outlook' as goals of the student experience (Vita 2007; Robinson and Lee 2007; Teichler 2009). This paper explores the contribution of international humanitarian interventions to achieving these outcomes.

This draws on an ESRC-funded project, which focuses on two initiatives involving overseas universities in response to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. 'Initiative A' was initiated from within the office of the Vice Chancellor of a UK university (UnivUK1). It has included voluntary work in villages and partnerships with institutions including three South Asian

universities (UnivSA1, UnivSA2 and UnivSA3). In addition, we examined the role played by a civil society organisation, 'Initiative 2', that supports, networks and builds capacity in social work education at higher education institutions internationally. Following the 2004 tsunami, Initiative 2 members from universities including UnivUK1 in the UK and UnivCE1 in Central Europe have engaged with South Asian partners at the universities of UnivSA3 and UnivSA2 and a school of social work which is not part of a university, SSW1. In opposition to a persistent 'neo-colonial dimension to higher education' (Teichler 2009: 99), both initiatives aimed for reciprocal international relationships, moving beyond uni-directional conceptions of 'aid' and notions of internationalisation limited to the recruitment of international students.

This paper is based on interviews with over 80 staff and students from UnivUK1, UnivCE1, UnivSA1, UnivSA2 and UnivSA3 universities and interviews and focus groups with over 100 residents of the villages where they worked. The data was coded using a grounded approach to identify the outcomes of these initiatives defined by the participants themselves.

We found that where there is sufficient support and a sustained commitment of resources, there is potential for multi-faceted processes of internationalisation, taking as their starting point international humanitarian work, but evolving in new directions.

Initiative 1 brought positive benefits not only for students and staff but also for village communities, where pre-schools and community centres were built using funds raised by the students, and where students then spent their summers teaching English and sports and engaging in cultural exchanges. Otter (2007) argues that higher education has a major role to play in sustainable development, and that this is conceptually linked to the development of a global outlook. Initiative 1 formed the basis for rich new connections across borders organised around the aim of sustainable development, continued beyond the initial visit through a variety of mediums including letters, social media and further visits. The experience of the project and the relationships formed contributed to students' choices, with new directions which students reported including teaching, social work, international development and diplomatic careers. The impact of these experiences was not limited to students who directly participated, but was spread to other members of the institution,

through means such as presentations and themed dinners in colleges and 'report-back' talks at the beginning of lectures. This shows one way in which universities might respond to the challenge 'to equip all students, especially our local students, the 'stay-at-homes', to compete in an increasingly international world of work, which they will probably have to face whether they travel abroad to work or remain in their home nation.' (Haigh 2002: 51)

Initiative 2 has fostered a partnership between the school of social work at UnivCE1 and the Sociology Department at UnivSA3, which has included field placements by staff and students in each country, support with curriculum development, and regular exchanges of staff. Academic staff from other universities including UnivUK1 have also engaged in curriculum development including the creation of BSW, MSW and PhD programmes at several universities in South Asia and SSW1 and offered advice on quality assurance, accreditation and other vital issues. Initiative 2's interventions focused on the importance of building relationships for the long-term to both build capacity but also engage in long-term sustainable community development initiatives. That both initiatives are ongoing and change direction in their orientation as local people wish, suggests that local residents in South Asia are interested in sustained endeavours with overseas partners that offer them real influence over the work that is done with them.

Both Initiative 1 and Initiative 2 demonstrate the potential for sustained connections between university departments to build capacity and open up new opportunities, with important benefits for the student experience. For example, between the recently established Sport Department at the University of UnivSA2 and the Sport Science Department at UnivUK1, a partnership has developed aimed at building capacity in undergraduate teaching. Students and staff have travelled to South Asia each summer, taking equipment, teaching undergraduate students and offering workshops to teaching staff. As well as contributing to the development of the course at UnivSA2, this has enabled UnivUK1 students to gain valuable experience of coaching and teaching in a cross-cultural context. This is significant in the context of persistent pedagogical problems 'stemming from, or exacerbated by, cultural-diversity-related issues', relating to differences in learning and teaching traditions (Vita 2007: 158). Several students who were interviewed said the

experience had encouraged them to pursue a teaching or coaching role as a career, in some cases in international settings.

On the basis of our findings we can say that engagement by universities in sustained humanitarian work in another country, together with carefully chosen partners, can contribute significantly to deepening internationalisation of higher education institutions and the student experience. We found this to operate at the level of institutions, with staff and students reporting benefits in areas including curriculum development, research capacity and exchanging ideas on the future role of the university and its position in society, and in several instances staff were looking towards possibilities for joint accreditation; and also at the level of individual students, with involvement in humanitarian partnerships leading both to reflections on their cultural and material position in the world and to further international engagement, in some cases a longer-term engagement with South Asia in particular, and in some cases to international engagements more broadly.

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