Reconciling the Personal and the Political? Critical Reflections on 'Internationalising Higher Education in Israel'

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Background

NB The terms used throughout this paper to signify ethnic and faith groups are those used by people within those groups to refer to themselves.

In January 2012, I was invited to be named on a project proposal to the EU that focused on internationalisation of higher education in Israel. The writers of the proposal considered that, because of my research and teaching activities, I would be able to support the Israeli partners to develop internationalised curricula - including the development of intercultural skills and cultural capability - and to initiate and support practitioner research in learning and teaching in international higher education (Author, 2011). I hesitated before agreeing to be named on the proposal. Politically, my sympathies are with the Palestinian cause and I was, therefore, unsure about whether to become involved. I did some careful research into the participating colleges and inferred, from their websites, that they were institutions where students of all faiths and ethnicities were taught together. In addition, one was a Palestinian Arab college. I concluded that my participation in a project that was striving to 'internationalise' higher education in this context would be an opportunity to influence that process in a small but positive way – and agreed to be named on the proposal.

The proposal – Fostering International Cooperation with Higher Education Colleges in Israel (IRIS) - was successful and is a 3-year project that began in 2012. The project's overall aim is to develop academic international relations in seven Israeli higher education colleges. Specific goals of the project are to:

- Develop strategic plans for internationalisation processes
- Encourage international activities – including research and teaching - among academic and administrative staff and students
- Create international liaison departments
- Create a network among the Israeli and European partners.

My role is as the leader of the Work Package on Internationalisation of the Curriculum.

Internationalisation and Internationalisation of the Curriculum

Much of my research on international higher education has explored how our learning, teaching and assessment practices can be reconceptualised and reframed to ensure a learning environment that is vibrant, reciprocal, celebratory of diversity and thus inclusive (e.g. Author, 2011). 'Internationalisation of higher education' is often criticised, however for its 'Western' perspectives (Maringe, 2010, Clifford & Montgomery, 2014), although these dominant conceptualisations are now being retheorised through definitions that are more congruent with 'non-Western' contexts (see for example Cheung, 2012, Aziz & Abdulla, 2013). Conceptualising internationalisation in Israel is especially complex because of its 'heterogenic, segregated populations' and because the 'international dimension can be complicated as the "other" or 'foreigner" can refer to those who are not of the country's majority population or to other nationalities from outside the country'

(Cohen, Yemeni & Sadeh, 2014, p.26). One could apply similar logic to many contexts, including the UK; a key difference is that our UK state education system is not divided. In Israel not only are Palestinian Arabs and Jewish Israelis educated separately at primary and secondary level, but there are four distinct and separate school systems - secular Jewish, religious Jewish, Palestinian Arab and ultra-orthodox Jewish. This divided system of schooling leads to a lack of understanding and respect for the 'other' (Wolff & Breit, 2012). At the level of higher education, although students are brought together, the extent to which they are taught together varies from institution to institution.

In addition, having worked on internationalising curricula both in the UK and in Hong Kong and advised on it in other contexts, I was aware that academics can feel uncertain about the concept and may consider that it has nothing to do with them (Leask, 2013). In Israel, however, there are added complications. The first question that I was asked – after offering several meanings of the term - was 'Why should we internationalise our curricula'? And the second one was 'How can we consider internationalising our curricula to enable understanding of global perspectives when we struggle to understand our own, local ones'?

Critical Reflections

On an intellectual level, I have been immensely impressed with the progress that the Israeli partners have made in establishing what internationalisation means for them, in their context, and in internationalising their curricula. They have moved from resistance – as displayed in their early questions - to developing programmes that are embedding internationalisation of the curricula elements. Motivated by our sessions on the cultural mediation of learning, teaching and assessment and encouraging intercultural communication in multicultural learning environments, several of the partner colleges are establishing programmes similar to the 'Difference and Diversity in Israeli Society' programme at David Yelta College of Academic Education in Jerusalem (Bar-Shalom, Diab & Rousseau, 2008), programmes that aim to facilitate all students and academics to challenge their perceptions of each other and to integrate global perspectives into the learning, teaching and assessment processes.

On a personal level, I have not resolved the tensions that I experienced at the beginning of the project; they have, however, changed. I have learned more about the complexities of the 'political situation' - as it is referred to. This learning has not changed my allegiance to the Palestinian struggle, but I have become aware that there are many Israelis and Palestinian Arabs – of all faiths and ethnicities – working together to effect a peaceful solution in the region. I believe that it is important to experience situations for oneself, rather than rely on others' perceptions and interpretations of them. In addition, I consider that dialogue is crucial in helping me to understand, not only why others hold the values and beliefs that they do, but also what informs my own values and beliefs. This postcolonial concept of 'unhomeliness' (Manathunga, 2007) speaks to the Israeli and Palestinian Arab partners and has enabled them to engage in uncomfortable but important dialogues in our workshop sessions.

In my presentation, I will share the complexities of internationalising higher education in Israel and the tensions that I have experienced in being a small part of this important process.

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