Internationalization of the Curriculum and the “New Normal”: An Australian Perspective

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The adjective “normal” is often used to describe the present state of conditions, in colloquial terms, as being acceptable or okay. However, “the trouble with normal is it always gets worse”—or so wrote the Canadian folk singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn in 1993, reflecting on the social and political conditions of the period, which coincides with the beginnings of the modern era of internationalization of higher education.

The Need to Problematize the Normal

In the context of higher education and the internationalization of the curriculum, perhaps it is less a case of the normal getting worse, and more a case of needing to problematize the normal in new and potentially challenging ways.
If international education is to remain relevant, it must be critically reflective, as we will elaborate.

Over the past three decades, the world has witnessed seismic shifts in technology, communications, scientific advancement, and sociopolitical structures. Paradoxically, globalization has simultaneously narrowed and widened, captured and liberated, constrained and afforded the social imaginary and accompanying opportunities at the national and individual level. During this time, globalization has influenced and shaped the world in new and often unpredictable ways; this is no less evident than in the higher education sector.

This disruptive force, as some have termed globalization, challenges us to reconsider the assumptions that have come to underpin the normal in the rationales, approaches, and practices for learning and teaching in universities. As globalization's transformative processes assert greater influence, it is important to reflect more critically and purposefully on what has come to be the “new normal.” One definition, which suggests what the “new normal” refers to, comes from the Urban Dictionary: “The current state of being after some dramatic change has transpired. What replaces the expected, usual, typical state after an event occurs. The new normal encourages one to deal with current situations....”

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Learning and Teaching for a Globalized World
The world is globalized—this is a 21st century reality. Yet, there is little understanding of how the processes and products of globalization are shaping, and can potentially shape, university teaching and learning.

As one response to the changing global reality, the International Education Association of Australia’s Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC) Special Interest Group hosted a forum in Melbourne (July 2, 2015), entitled Learning and Teaching for a Globalised World: Internationalisation of the Curriculum. In his keynote, “Internationalization of the Curriculum: The Challenges of the New Normal,” Fazal Rizvi, Professor in Global Education Studies at Melbourne University, invited the audience to reconsider the dominant and enduring assumptions, which have framed understandings about international students, international engagement, and approaches to internationalization of the curriculum during the past three decades. According to Rizvi, these hegemonic assumptions of the world—grounded in what was once normal—shaped the early ideas about the role, function, and purpose of international education, and about international students and how they should best be taught and integrated into the university system and structures. In the Australian context, where an economic rationale has driven the recruitment of incoming international students, much of this focus has been remedial. Institutions and academics recognized the diverse learning styles of international students and moved to ensure that they were accommodated, supported, and ultimately assimilated. While the widespread development of “internationalization of the curriculum” policies in Australian universities has supported the inclusion of international content into course material and the recognition of cultural diversity, it has also supported the dissemination of the dominant (heavily Anglo-Europeized) knowledge and skills for participation in the global knowledge economy, on the assumption that this is what international students desired and lacked. As a consequence, there has been a tendency to problematize international students in Australian universities.

Rizvi argues that while these assumptions continue to dominate internationalization discourses, strategies, and practices prevalent in Australian universities, it is now time to problematize and challenge the assumptions about what is considered “normal.”

Problematising Normalized Assumptions
Globalization—with its disruptive shifts in technologies, coupled with the growth of an aspirational middle class in the “global South” and increasingly porous national borders world-wide—should prompt us to reconsider the dominant “international student” construct. Rizvi asserts the normal framing of international students, reflected across government and university policy and in empirical research, propagates assumptions of international students as “national beings” who need to be made into “international beings.” In other words, he says, these students are viewed as a kind of cultural tabula rasa. Early approaches to internationalization of the curriculum, which largely cast international students in deficit terms, are challenged by the realities of the globalized new normal, where even the remotest village in India (or Australia) is made “local,” and prospective students can build connections with, and knowledge about, universities and their locales long before their arrival.

Responding to the New Normal
Since Hans de Wit and Jane Knight wrote Strategies for In-
ternationalization of Higher Education: Historical and Conceptual Perspectives in 1995, Rizvi observes that new realities have emerged, which demand a response within the curriculum. These new realities include increasingly diversified communities; increased cultural exchange; hybridization of peoples, cultures, and practices; new patterns of interconnectivity; “place polygamy;” increased capability to remain connected transnationally; and shifting notions of citizenship. Globalization and digitization have influenced the world in profound and subtle ways, but as yet universities have moved slowly to responds. Today’s international students are not the same as the early pioneers that came before them. Technologies such as Skype are instantly and constantly connecting them with their parents and friends in their homes, villages, and towns. Some have experienced travel or study abroad prior to commencing their university education, but all have had virtual encounters with the broader world. Twitter, Weibo, and Whatsapp, for example, are bringing our world to them in new, exciting, and often perplexing ways.

INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE CURRICULUM: IMAGINING NEW POSSIBILITIES

In her 2009 article, “Using Formal and Informal Curricula to Improve Interactions Between Home and International Students,” Betty Leask defined “internationalization of the curriculum” as the “incorporation of an international and intercultural dimension into the preparation, delivery and outcomes of a program of study.” Importantly, this definition frames IoC as an ongoing process, which involves and changes all students through strategies that enable them “to become more aware of their own and others’ cultures.” As such, it represents an open invitation to engage in the domain of the transformative, i.e., the potential of becoming. Moreover, in our 2015 publication, Critical Reflections on the Internationalisation of the Curriculum: Reflective Narrative Accounts from Business, Education and Health, we argue that in order for the transformative potential of IoC to be realized, it must involve and change individual faculty (academics), their disciplines, and their institutions. It is now time, we hope, for a new “imagining [of] as yet unrealized possibilities” across all levels of the university as they engage with their curricula.

In the context of the internationalization of the contemporary curriculum it is not so much that normal is becoming worse, as it is in danger of losing relevance. In the new normal, each teacher and each student is both knowledgeable and “ignorant,” and has much to learn from the other. According to Michael Singh, knowledge and ignorance can intermingle productively in our “new normal” classrooms: by acknowledging ignorance, we can stimulate the production of knowledge through intercultural dialogue and debate, and in turn, create new fields of ignorance. To remain relevant, we need to imagine the rich potential that the new, highly mobile, highly interconnected “normal” affords and respond reflexively, with minds open to ignorance and knowledge.

Faculty and International Engagement: Has Internationalization Changed Academic Work?

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Scholars, practitioners, and professional bodies in international education might not agree on what internationalization is, but they all concur that the involvement of faculty is crucial to its success. Certainly at an institutional level, with the adoption of comprehensive strategies for internationalization, faculty are now actively encouraged to reconsider their work in a new light. However, it remains unclear to what extent the internationalization of higher education has influenced or transformed the work undertaken by academic staff.

CHANGES TO THE ACADEMIC PROFESSION

Internationalization is considered to be one of the most transformative contemporary influences on higher education, its institutions, and communities, including teaching and research faculty. With faculty lying at the heart of the generation, application, and dissemination of knowledge, it is therefore reasonable to expect that internationalization has influenced the patterns of faculty work in higher education.

Over the last quarter century, two major international surveys of the academic profession—the 1992 Carnegie study and the 2007 Changing Academic Profession (CAP) survey—have sought to collect data on the attitudes of faculty toward their work, including some of its international dimensions. By virtue of methodology, these two studies have focused on aspects of internationalization that can be read-