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Students' perspectives on curriculum internationalisation policies in transition: Insights from a master's degree programme in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Although many studies have investigated the overarching benefits of curriculum internationalisation in various forms, there have been few investigations of students' perspectives on changing university policies towards internationalisation. In this study, we considered master's students' perspectives on two changing internationalisation policies at a Dutch university: (1) the switch to English Medium Instruction (EMI) and (2) the increasing incorporation of internationally-minded materials into the curriculum. Through analysing 138 questionnaire responses, the relevancy of and comfort with internationalised content, the use of EMI, and overall teaching quality was explored. The findings suggested that, although most participants valued their overall internationalised learning experiences, factors such as students' educational backgrounds and perceived confidence using English influenced the degree to which curriculum internationalisation policies were deemed relevant to students' lives and careers. This article summarises with suggestions for university staff, programmes, and departments undergoing transition policies towards curriculum internationalisation.

KEYWORDS

Curriculum internationalisation; curriculum development; English medium instruction; student experience

Introduction

There has recently been an increased focus in higher education (HE) on curriculum internationalisation (Yemini & Sagie, 2016). Curriculum internationalisation is an umbrella term defined as the 'incorporation of international, intercultural and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum, as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of a program of study' (Leask, 2009, p. 209). Curriculum internationalisation can take on varied meanings for different stakeholders in HE (Takagi, 2015; Tangney, 2018) and has been described as a 'fuzzy' term (Kehm & Teichler, 2007). For example, internationalisation might include, among other things: diversifying the student/staff populations, incorporating international academic material, teaching intercultural competencies, opportunities abroad, or intercultural social events.

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One important element of curriculum internationalisation is the academic content used for learning (Luxon & Peelo, 2009). Harrison (2015, p. 423) stated internationalised academic content:

- ‘uses knowledge about other nations, and/or
- uses knowledge, perspectives or epistemologies derived in or from other nations, and/or
- is intended to act as a springboard to developing skills around intercultural interaction.’

Growing evidence has outlined internationalised academic content can benefit students’ overall HE experience by developing intercultural competencies (Trahar & Hyland, 2011), encouraging interaction between peers from different backgrounds (Arkoudis et al., 2013) and supporting engagement and participation (Mittelmeier, Rienties, Tempelaar, Hillaire, & Whitelock, 2018).

For many countries, another common internationalisation effort is moving towards English as the *lingua franca* for instruction, known as English Medium Instruction (EMI). The Netherlands, for example, has recently seen an exponential acceleration of EMI programmes (now numbering in the thousands) supported by national legislation (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012). One force driving universities to adopt EMI is developing competitive advantages for attracting international students/staff (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Students studying through EMI have also noted improved abilities to communicate and work using English (Tatzl, 2011), which is increasingly valued in international business and scholarly discourse.

When considering curriculum internationalisation, it is important to note the process is not simply an ‘on/off switch’ and that universities do not ‘become’ international or intercultural overnight. Rather, these changing agendas mean many universities are often in *transition* as new internationalisation initiatives and policies are put into place within existing structures and practices (see, for example, guidance by: Tangney, 2018). Internationalisation, in this regard, is a *process* rather than an outcome (Huang, 2017), which can lead to profound changes in teaching and learning practices.

Challenges related to internationalised academic content

Despite the outlined benefits, challenges related to curriculum internationalisation may limit its potential. For example, it has been argued that the rhetoric of ‘global citizenship’ might reinforce existing power imbalances between local and global issues (Andreotti & de Souza, 2012). Others have argued that curriculum internationalisation ignores local practices, communities, and languages (Sandström & Hudson, 2018).

A second challenge is the perceived relevance that internationalised academic content has for all students, particularly as much literature assumes that the student population is highly diverse (Leask, 2009). For instance, Brookes & Becket, (2011) described international students as ‘ready-made resource[s]’ for contextualising internationalised content through students’ personal experiences. However, not all universities or academic disciplines attract high numbers of international students, meaning internationalised

content might not always be made meaningful. Additionally, some career paths (e.g. education, social work) may require more in-depth understandings of *local* practices. Therefore, it is worth questioning whether, in light of increasing policy changes towards curriculum internationalisation, some students may find these efforts more relevant to their learning than others.

A third challenge is the increasing prevalence of EMI in non-native speaking contexts, as issues have been raised about English competency and comfort of existing students/staff (Kim, Choi, & Tatar, 2017). A systematic review of 83 EMI studies outlined concerns from students/staff and found inconclusive evidence on the overall benefits to language or content learning (Macaro, Curle, Pun, An, & Dearden, 2017). English's relevance in students' futures is also worth considering, particularly as many may remain within their local communities for employment. This issue is especially politicised in countries such as the Netherlands, where organisations like *Beter Onderwijs Nederland* have (unsuccessfully) sought legal action to cap EMI programmes and international student recruitment (Salomone, 2018). Indeed, concerns have been raised across the Netherlands that internationalisation might lead to the Dutch language becoming 'obsolete' and teaching quality becoming a 'race to the bottom' (Matthews, 2018).

As such, there is need to further unpack students' perspectives on changing policies towards curriculum internationalisation and its perceived impact on their learning experiences. Given the recent politicisation of curriculum internationalisation, we argue that it is especially important to consider the perceived impact on home students, who find themselves on the received end of changing policies within their own countries. Therefore, we consider in this research:

Research Question 1: What are students' perspectives towards changing curriculum internationalisation policies?

Research Question 2: How do students' backgrounds and prior experiences influence their views towards changing curriculum internationalisation policies?

By answering these questions, we contribute stronger engagement around how students perceive 'top-down' internationalisation efforts and whether they feel such policies are inclusive to their needs.

Materials and methods

Context and participants

This study took place in a Dutch university's education master's programme during the 2017–2018 academic year. As with many Dutch universities, this programme had recently enacted significant policy changes towards curriculum internationalisation: the department was in the middle of transitioning teaching practices towards EMI and more international academic content. The driving force behind this transition was the wider university's policy to offer curriculum internationalisation in all master's programmes in 2018–2019. Two primary reasons for this policy were attracting more international students and better preparing alumni for the international labour market. During the policy

transitions, the enrolled students were informed of ongoing changes through the course manual, e-mails from the programme director, and in the programme advisory committee.

At the time of data collection, several classes were already taught in English using internationalised academic content, while other classes (on the same degree programme) were provided primarily in Dutch. To analyse different stages of 'internationalisation in transition', we selected students from two classes to take part in a questionnaire about their experiences:

- (1) Class 1, which was already taught in English using internationalised academic content, and
- (2) Class 2, which was primarily taught in Dutch and did not explicitly discuss materials from international perspectives.

Table 1 outlines participants' demographic characteristics. In total, 138 responses were collected, which was a good response rate of 53%. Of the respondents, 55 students responded to the questionnaire in both classes. Quality check measures were undertaken using Cohen's kappa, which demonstrated that students responded to the questionnaire for each class in different ways and indicated that their responses were authentic to their experiences in that particular class.

In this programme, students typically came from either Bachelor's or pre-master's background. Bachelor's students often joined this master's programme directly after completing an undergraduate degree and had various intended career goals. Pre-master's students usually had fewer prior academic experiences (such as vocational college background) and already worked in an educational setting while studying (e.g. teacher, school leader, course material developer, etc.). These students often enrolled in the master's programme to acquire new scientific knowledge and skills with the main aim of applying this within their existing local work environment.

Procedure and instrument

An online questionnaire was developed and administered in class during Week 7 of the first semester, as outlined in **Table 2**. As nearly all students were Dutch native speakers in an English-speaking environment (see **Table 1**), the questions were presented to participants in both Dutch and English. In the first section of the questionnaire, students were asked to provide demographic information, including age, gender, educational

Table 1. Overview of participants' demographic characteristics.

	Class 1	Class 2
Number of students	60	86
Age	Average = 27.47, SD = 6.61	Average = 26.12, SD = 4.04
Gender	50 women, 10 men	71 women, 15 men
Educational background	22	32
-Bachelor	33	51
-Pre-master	5	3
-Other		
First language	Dutch = 59, Italian = 1	Dutch = 86
Study/Work Experience Outside NL	No = 50, Yes = 10	No = 73, Yes 13 students

Table 2. Overview constructs and associated items.

Item	Construct	Question
1	Content relevance	The content of this class should be internationally relevant
2	Language relevance	I [would – class 2] like to use English language materials in this class
3	Teaching quality	My teacher's explanations of class topics are clear
4	Comfort with internationalisation*	Discussing the class topics from different international perspectives makes me feel uncomfortable
5	Language relevance *	I do not wish to take this class in English
6	Content relevance	Incorporating international perspectives in this class improves my learning experience
7	Teaching quality	My teacher tries to make the class topics interesting
8	Language relevance	Taking this class in English [would be/is] beneficial to my learning experience
9	Comfort with internationalisation	I know how to approach international perspectives in this class with sensitivity
10	Teaching quality*	My teacher does not provide good feedback on my work
11	Content relevance	Incorporating international perspectives in this class improves my understanding of the topic
12	Comfort with internationalisation	I feel comfortable discussing international perspectives in this class
13	Language relevance	It [would be/is] good for this class to be taught in English
14	Teaching quality	My teacher is knowledgeable about class topics
15	Content relevance*	International perspectives are not relevant to the topics taught in this class
16	Comfort with internationalisation	I can approach international perspectives in this class with confidence

Note: * re-pooled before conducting the reliability analyses.

background, nationality, first language, prior experience living abroad, and ranked personal comfort with speaking English on a 1–5 scale. The second section consisted of 16 five-point Likert scale items (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree) with four items in each construct. These four questionnaire constructs were developed in consultation with major themes in the literature related to curriculum internationalisation and in light of our two research questions:

(Construct 1) Relevance of internationalised content: the degree to which students felt internationalise academic content was relevant to their learning and futures

(Construct 2) Relevance of English language teaching: the degree to which students felt learning in English was relevant to their learning and futures

(Construct 3) Comfort with internationalised content: the degree to which students felt comfortable learning from and discussing intercultural issues

(Construct 4) Overall teaching quality: the degree to which students felt their teacher and teaching materials were of high quality

Several steps were taken to assess the questionnaire's validity and reliability. Reliability analyses revealed that all scales had an acceptable internal consistency score ($\alpha > .65$) for reporting at group levels (Evers, Sijtsma, Wouter, & Meijer, 2010): content relevance ($\alpha = .776$), language relevance ($\alpha = .853$), comfort with internationalisation ($\alpha = .683$), and teaching quality ($\alpha = .652$). The scales were also validated using exploratory factor analysis, which indicated good fit for the intended constructs.

In the third section, two qualitative, open-end questions were asked to participants to gain more in-depth understandings of their views towards curriculum internationalisation: (1) What are the benefits of incorporating an internationally-oriented perspective in this class?, and (2) What are the challenges of incorporating an internationally-oriented perspective in this class? The term 'internationally-oriented perspective' was defined both in the text and verbally in the class. Participants could respond to these questions in either Dutch or English and the vast majority responded in Dutch.

Data analysis

For RQ1, averages and standard deviations of the four questionnaire scales provided macro-level pictures of students' perspectives. These were next explored in-depth through the qualitative open-ended responses, using Braun and Clarke's six-step reflective thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013) as a guide. The themes identified by the researchers are in Table 4 of the Results section, organised by perceived benefits and challenges.

For RQ2, we conducted bivariate analysis using Pearson's r to compare responses to the four scales with the demographic data collected. For the qualitative data, we also compared open-ended responses between students' key demographics, such as educational background (pre-master's or bachelor) or reflected English language proficiency. Considering the relatively unstructured nature of our open-ended questions, we also considered how often students from different groups brought up particular topics, as this provided broad understandings of what was most prevalent in their thinking. To aid the interpretation, we developed an indicator score (percentage) representing how frequently discussed themes were for students from specific backgrounds. This was computed by dividing the total number of coded comments in a theme by the total number of participants from that background. Higher indicator scores demonstrated that students from that background more frequently brought up the theme.

Results

Research question 1

RQ1 considered students' overarching perceptions about the internationalisation efforts being undertaken in their programme. The aggregated scores of the questionnaire scales are outlined in Table 3. On average, participants were neutral ($m = 3.09$, $SD = 0.837$) towards the relevance of internationalised content and English language teaching ($m = 2.64$, $SD = 1.033$), although the standard deviations suggested strong variation.

In our qualitative data, participants outlined many benefits and challenges of internationalisation (summarised in Table 4), which illuminated the quantitative findings.

Keeping in mind the relatively unstructured nature of our open-ended questions, the frequency of topics provided snapshots into participants' thought processes (Table 5).

The most frequently mentioned benefits were the broader theoretical and practical perspectives offered by learning from internationalised academic content. In particular, there was recognition that internationalisation provided new dimensions to students' learning. This was found in both classes, even though Class 1 had already

internationalised its learning materials while Class 2 still focused on more local dimensions. For example:

"It [this class] has the advantage that you get a broader picture of how organisations can develop ... the world is also globalizing, making an internationally oriented perspective more important." (Participant 11, female, Class 1, pre-master's background)

"[Internationalised materials could provide a] broader view on the field of instructional design and evaluation, such as better insights into the emergence of some phenomena within the field and what cultural aspects affect the instructional design field." (Participant 11, female, Class 2, Bachelor's background)

Also generally valued was the opportunity to learn about topics from other contexts and perspectives, making learning more interesting and engaging:

"I find it interesting to learn from students with different cultural and educational backgrounds" (Participant 73, female, Class 1, Bachelor background)

In terms of challenges, there were common concerns about the relevance of internationalised academic content for their futures. For instance, many students wondered

Table 3. Average scale scores by student category and t-test results.

	All Students		Class 1		Class 2		t-test	Bachelor background		Pre-master background		t-test
	Avg.	SD	Avg.	SD	Avg.	SD		Avg.	SD	Avg.	SD	
	Content Relevance	3.09	0.837	3.22	0.874	2.99		0.801	1.612	3.27	0.785	
Language Relevance	2.64	1.033	2.78	1.095	2.52	0.969	1.404	3.10	0.975	2.27	0.941	4.781**
Comfort Intercultural Exchange	3.13	0.809	3.14	0.810	3.13	0.814	0.003	3.38	0.706	3.00	0.865	2.518*
Teaching Quality	3.84	0.589	3.99	0.654	3.73	0.514	2.626**	3.88	0.486	3.78	0.649	0.873

** $p < 0.01$

* $p < 0.05$.

Table 4. Overview perceived benefits and challenges of an internationalised master's degree programme.

Category	Concepts	Example comment
Benefits	Broader theoretical perspective	'Comparing different educational systems.'
	Broader practical perspective	'An international perspective widened our understanding of education ... we have learned from various educational systems in different countries'
	Opportunity to learning English	'You are encouraged to develop an abundance of skills that concerns English [language].'
	Opportunity to learn from other contexts	'I would like to learn from students with different cultural backgrounds.'
	Opportunity to work (a broad)	'More possibilities to get a job.'
Challenges	Better match class language and materials	'Most literature is already in English, so it may be easier to relate it to the lectures/tutorials.'
	Focus curriculum	'It's too broad, it's too much to talk about. The risk is that the focus on comparison between countries will get most attention, although it is not the most interesting.'
	Quality teaching and learning environment	'I think communicating in English, like the assignments, tests and discussions, will increase the workload.'
	Validity assessment	'I think that the assessment also assesses my English communication skills.'
	Relevance	'I will probably work in a Dutch company, so I do not see the ree added value of internationalization.'

whether they actually would be able to use international perspectives in their future or current work settings in local Dutch contexts.

“As most of us will get a job in the Netherlands, the curriculum should address topics related to this context. An international perspective is not always relevant and does not always mean an added value. It does not have to overhaul the Dutch practice.”

(Participant 17, female, Class 1, Bachelor background)

Furthermore, changing policies towards EMI were questioned, as many students indicated that having all lectures, dialogues, and examinations in English might impede the quality of their learning and examination results. The main concerns focused on their own and others’ perceived lack of proficiency in speaking and writing in English. Indeed, most students did not rate their personal language proficiency highly, with variation ($m = 3.23$, $SD = 1.078$). It was frequently noted that, because students were primarily local Dutch students, being ‘forced’ to communicate in English during class was perceived unnatural.

“The challenge is that many Dutch students want to keep discussing things in Dutch, how do students and teachers cope with this?” (Participant 66, female, Class 1, pre-master’s background)

Altogether, these findings indicated that students viewed internationalisation from a relatively neutral perspective, as they reflected upon both enriching benefits and troubling challenges associated with learning from internationalised academic content in an EMI environment.

Research question 2

RQ2 considered whether students’ backgrounds and prior experiences influenced their feelings towards internationalisation. In our quantitative analysis, Table 3 depicts t-test results comparing students by educational background (pre-master’s versus bachelor students), whereby students with a bachelor background had significantly higher scores

Table 5. Comparison of perceived benefits and challenges between classes and students’ educational background*

		Class 1 (n = 55)		Class 2 (n = 83)	
		Bachelor (n = 22)	Pre-master (n = 33)	Bachelor (n = 32)	Pre-master (n = 51)
Benefits	Broader theoretical perspective	15 (.68)	14 (.42)	22 (.69)	27 (.53)
	Broader practical perspective	13 (.59)	12 (.36)	19 (.59)	29 (.57)
	Opportunity to learning English	2 (.09)	1 (.03)	5 (.16)	5 (.10)
	Opportunity to learn from other contexts	7 (.32)	6 (.18)	3 (.09)	5 (.10)
	Opportunity to work (a broad)	5 (.23)	7 (.21)	9 (.28)	9 (.18)
	Better match class language and materials	1 (.05)	2 (.06)	1 (.03)	4 (.08)
Challenges	Focus curriculum	5 (.23)	7 (.21)	7 (.22)	10 (.20)
	Quality teaching and learning environment	18 (.82)	21 (.64)	24 (.75)	36 (.71)
	Validity assessment	0 (.00)	0 (.00)	2 (.06)	2 (.04)
	Relevance	5 (.23)	9 (.27)	9 (.28)	6 (.28)

Note: * indicator score between brackets represents the percentage of comments by bachelor- or pre-master students within a class.

on the four scales than pre-master's students. As highlighted in our Methods section, this reflected the strong differences in career intentions and educational background between these groups.

We conducted bivariate analyses using Pearson's r to compare feelings towards internationalisation based on a range of demographic and background characteristics. These findings indicated that students' backgrounds impacted their perspectives towards curriculum internationalisation (see Table 6). Positive feelings towards internationalisation were more likely from students who felt more confident in their English language abilities, had previous experience studying or working in international contexts, and came from a Bachelor's educational background (i.e. less likely to currently work as an education practitioner).

These different perspectives were illuminated further in our qualitative analysis, where those from pre-master's backgrounds were less likely to highlight benefits of internationalised learning in their open-ended responses compared to Bachelor's students (see Table 5). For example, the broader theoretical perspective received a higher indicator score from Bachelor's students (Class 1: 68%, Class 2: 69%) than from pre-master's students (Class 1: 42%, Class 2: 53%). Those from a pre-master's background were also more likely to critique whether internationalised academic content had relevance for their current and future working practices

"International perspectives are not always relevant and not always an added value. It should not overshadow Dutch practice." (Participant 47, female, Class 2, pre-master's background)

Similarly, students who indicated a lower perceived personal English language ability highlighted perceived 'awkwardness' of speaking English with other Dutch students, concerns about their own understanding of class materials, and concerns about their teachers' ability to communicate using English. These students were also more likely to question whether using materials from international contexts could benefit their learning.

"I do not understand why Dutch students cannot take exams in Dutch. The Dutch education system is very different than some other countries. With this programme, I intend to gain more knowledge about the Dutch education system as this is my field of work." (Participant 133, male, Class 1, pre-master's student)

Altogether, these findings suggested that students' backgrounds, experiences, and future intentions impacted their perspectives on internationalised academic content and learning in English, meaning such efforts are not necessarily perceived equally relevant by all students.

Table 6. Bivariate analysis of questionnaire scales and demographic data.

	Content Relevance	Language Relevance	Comfort Intercultural Exchange	Teaching Quality
Pre-Master's Student (dummy variable)	-.158*	-.371**	-.179*	-.107
Class 1 (dummy variable)	.134	.123	.000	.216**
Age	-.020	-.171	-.207*	.167*
Gender	-.058	-.095	-.004	-.060
English Language Confidence	.296**	.396**	.413**	-.043
Study/Work Experience Outside NL	.193**	.114	.200**	-.108

Note: ** $p < 0.01$ /* $p < 0.05$.

Discussion

In this study, we compared and contrasted the lived experiences of 138 master's student respondents in the Netherlands, whose academic programme was undergoing transitions towards internationalised academic materials and EMI. Similar to findings in other contexts (Harrison, 2015), most (home) students in this study were rather lukewarm towards the strategic vision of internationalisation and expressed uncertainties about its relevance for their intended careers. On the one hand, this prompts criticality in decisions towards curriculum internationalisation processes, suggesting institutions should reflect on who such policies benefit and how these measures provide added value to students' learning. On the other hand, the findings suggest that, where benefits have been outlined, more work is needed by institutions to better communicate this to students by being more explicit about why curriculum internationalisation processes are being put in place and how its inclusion is relevant to their futures.

Our findings identified that, although students were positive about the broader theoretical and practical perspectives of internationalised academic content, there were concerns about the focus of the curriculum, the increased workload of communicating in English, and relevance to their future careers (RQ1). This highlights significant challenges for adopting a personally meaningful internationalised curriculum, particularly in light of the perceived benefits previously suggested (Leask, 2009; Trahar & Hyland, 2011). Further, we found several factors influenced students' perspectives towards curriculum internationalisation (including perceived personal English language proficiency, previous international experiences, and educational background) (RQ2), meaning internationalisation experiences are not 'one size fits all' and may be experienced differently by students from different backgrounds. For this reason, steps should be taken to make internationalisation relevant to students' own lives (Mittelmeier et al., 2018) and authentically engage with perspectives of home students (Harrison, 2015; Sandström & Hudson, 2018).

We further argue that much of the rhetoric around curriculum internationalisation assumes a nationally diverse student population to help contextualise and personalise learning from different contexts (Leask, 2009). However, our findings have raised important questions about how to appropriately develop evidence-based and meaningful intercultural learning opportunities in situations where the majority of students are from the same country. This area, we feel, is important for future research.

Implications for practice

This research corroborates arguments by Luxon and Peelo (2009, p. 58) that teaching and learning experiences should be 'at the heart of internationalisation, rather than peripheral to the policy and strategic choices made by institutions'. Our findings have suggested that policy decision-making needs to incorporate students' views on curriculum internationalisation, including whether they perceive curriculum changes to be relevant to their futures and how changing policies impacts their classroom experiences. In this way, a more purpose-driven curriculum design approach towards internationalisation can be valuable, such as the process outlined by Tangney (2018). Additionally, our research outlined that more focus is needed on how changes related to internationalisation policies are communicated with students. In particular, attention should be placed on

sharing the value and purpose of curriculum internationalisation to students from diverse backgrounds to better demonstrate its intended relevance to their lives and futures.

Limitations and conclusions

One limitation was that we have collected survey data from 138 respondents in one context, whereby known self-report and self-selection biases might be present. Second, we measured students' perspectives at only one time interval within a population of primary Dutch citizens. Future longitudinal research in other contexts will help illuminate how these perspectives change over time or in more nationally diverse settings. A third consideration is we have focused our work primarily on the inclusion of internationalised academic content and adoption of EMI. However, we recognise that curriculum internationalisation encompasses a broader range of dimensions across the formal, informal, and hidden curriculum (see Leask, 2009), which suggests research about other areas of the curriculum are still needed. Finally, we recognise the limitation that some of our respondents overlapped between the two classes we studied, which may have influenced the overall narrative. Nonetheless, their significantly different responses related to internationalisation efforts specific to their individual classes have provided important insights into experiences within and between different classrooms.

As highlighted in our study, curriculum internationalisation is not simply an 'on/off switch' and many universities are in a process of *transition*. Despite rising rhetoric about easy-to-implement curriculum internationalisation, universities do not suddenly 'become' international or intercultural overnight. Rather, institutions must develop a careful and long-term strategy about what internationalisation might mean for students' experiences and futures. As experienced in our own practices, this can be a long and challenging road, which takes strong strategic leadership, appropriate engagement with key stakeholders (which includes students), and a critical rationale for appropriately imbedding internationalisation in ways that improve the quality of education and is made relevant to all students' lives.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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