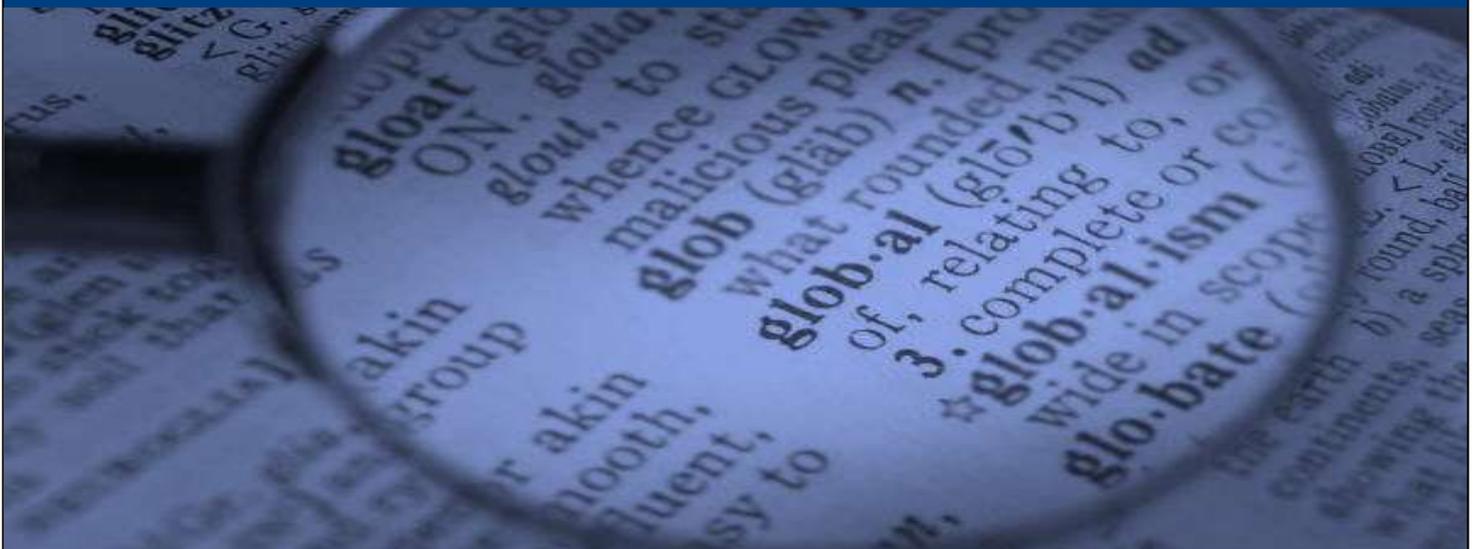


# Internationalisation

A Briefing Report from the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on  
Teaching and Learning in History



THE SUBJECT CENTRE FOR HISTORY, CLASSICS AND ARCHAEOLOGY  
HIGHER EDUCATION ACADEMY

2009

Authored by: M. H. Beals

*m.beals@warwick.ac.uk*

*<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/hca/history>*

## Introduction

This brief is the result of a session on internationalization at the 11th Annual Teaching and Learning in History Conference, held at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. It was led by Melodee Beals from the Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology, Alison Twells from Sheffield Hallam University, and Henrik Ågren from the University of Gävle.

## Concerns of Internationalisation as Inevitable Process

As the flow of information and commerce between nations becomes more universal, so too will the push for all institutions to globalise. However, because education has developed a fundamentally national, or even regional, character over the past 200 years, there are several concerns with this push for internationalisation. For example, as students, educators, and administrators become more familiar with each others' institutions, there may be a desire to harmonise practices, such as with the Bologna Process in the European Union. As certain regions and nations implement changes to their university and degree structures, there are fears that there will be a loss of cultural heritage and language diversity and a reduction of the academic variety and choice. There is also the anxiety that, with the rise of satellite or off-shore campus, internationalisation will become another form of imperialism with the British or American standard implemented globally. Lastly, there is the increasing worry that internationalisation is commercialising universities to the point that lecturers are expected to cater solely for high-fee paying international students, to the detriment of domestic students and their own research. The prevalence of these concerns indicates that a more in-depth debate between academics, administrators, and policy makers needs to be take place in order to capitalise and on the benefits of global knowledge sharing and minimise any negative impact on communities, academic staff and students.

## International Students in HE History

The most easily recognizable aspect of internationalization in HE is the presence of international students; in 2005, there were 240,390 full-time and 78,010 part-time international students in the United Kingdom—218,395 of which were from outside the European Union.

There are a variety of reasons why universities encourage international students to apply. On the one hand, academia has long been one of the West's most international institutions. The collaboration and dissemination of research within an international community had been a key priority of European universities long before the Grand Tour and the Republic of Letters and continues to be one today. On the other hand, in a increasingly commercial environment, the additional revenue brought in by international tuition fees are vital to the continued solvency of many universities. The latter especially has led to the aggressive recruitment of international students. However, while universities do offer certain support mechanisms, such as language courses, specialised student advisors and preferential assistance in finding accommodation or employment, there still remains a dearth of formal departmental support for either students or their instructors.



A need for guidance and support can be seen in several areas:

- Course construction – When organising courses on *domestic* history, there is a particular difficulty in making the course both accessible to international students, who lack a comprehensive grounding in the subject, and challenging to home students, who desire a more in-depth lecture series. One solution was to create a comparative course, which drew on domestic history as well as the history of the predominant international group. However, in the trial, which compared Australia and the United States, the Australian students already had a firm grounding in both American and Australian history, while the American students did not. Another suggestion was to run parallel versions of the course, but there was a fear this might lead to the division of international and domestic students.
- Language – Many international students find that despite passing TOEFL or similar English-language exams, they are unprepared to deal with both spoken and written academic English. This is compounded by the fact that the procedure for composing a university-level history essay in a British University may be radically different from history essays in other countries or from the standard English essays international students may be familiar with. Also, different methodological approaches, and the consequent divergence in technical language, can prevent students from understanding the lecturer’s instructions, leading to undeservedly poor marks. In seminars, the casual use of idioms and metaphors (close call, ten a penny, canary in a coal mine) often leaves international students unsure about the content of the discussion and can derail them from the argument at hand. Without comprehensive training to staff and specific assistance to students in the department, the success of an international student may well depend on factors such as the accent of the lecturer or the amount of time an individual tutor has to work on basic writing skills
- Integration – Students often have difficulty finding common ground with students whom they perceive as being from a “foreign” culture, and may therefore form monocultural groups within the class and department. Domestic students may also see those from abroad as a threat to their grade if asked to prepare a group project. On the other hand, if *positive* stereotypes exist, such as Asian students are naturally better at statistics, domestic students may unfairly lean on international students in group assignments.



A survey of university publications has highlighted three key suggestions for academics with international students:

- Be explicit – At the beginning of the course, explain the key words and concepts in the essay questions and course outlines. Students without experience of academic English may rely on dictionary definitions of terms such as *discuss*, and miss their specialised connotation in academic history. Students should also be made aware of the relative importance of expression, context and argument in an historical essay.
- Expose assumptions – Take the time to learn from your students what they believe is the appropriate level of respect and argument for their essays and in-class discussion. If it is different from your expectations, make this explicit. Allow your students time to develop academic relationships with the other students rather than allow a spoke-and-wheel structure to develop.
- Ease your students into academic life – Start with a high level of structure, which both domestic and international students often expect, and taper it down as they become more comfortable with expressing themselves and learning independently.

## Difficulties with Student Exchange

While many independent partnerships have developed between European institutions and with universities in the rest of the world, one of the most important study abroad programmes for European university students is ERASMUS, instituted in 1987. Over twenty-four thousand humanities and social science students took part in the programme in 2006-7, as did over three thousand instructors in the same fields. Ranging from one month to one year, this period abroad allows students to experience life at a foreign institution while still earning credit for their domestic degree.

While many view this as a valuable opportunity for personal growth and academic advancement, there are several issues which deter or prevent students from taking part.

- **Funding** – While exchange programmes usually transfer home tuition fees to the exchange institution, the student is still usually expected to pay for their own travel, accommodation, and subsistence while they are abroad. As these are often required up-front, many students are unable to afford the costs associated with studying in a foreign institution. Even when the students have been able to set aside savings, living in an unfamiliar environment is often much more costly. As most will not be able to obtain employment, time abroad can quickly drain their finances. Some financial aid is available from home institutions, and occasionally, as in France, from the host government. However, many universities fail to support students in discovering these bursaries and the fear of insolvency deters many from considering time abroad.
- **Home Obligations** – Exchange programmes are often designed with traditional students in mind; semi-independent students in their late teens and early twenties. Those with family obligations such as children, elderly parents, or other dependent family members cannot usually absent themselves for several weeks or months. Furthermore, those engaged in a part-time degree may have obligations to their employer that prevent them from taking a leave of absence.
- **Language** – Although many study abroad programmes offer English-speaking courses to American, British, and Commonwealth students, students from other language backgrounds are less likely to find similar accommodation. Even those who have a degree of fluency in a foreign language are fearful of living in a country which does not share their primary language. Academic language courses do not always prepare students for the discipline-specific language they will encounter abroad, nor for the cultural assumptions of foreign language textbooks and exercises. Because of this, many students will narrow their academic focus to those regions and periods which do not require the acquisition of a foreign language or significant periods of foreign research. Often, this leads to a preference for domestic or regional history over a more global and comparative view.
- **Employability** – The commercialisation of university education has also led to an increased demand for direct links between coursework and employability. Many students feel they cannot justify taking a class abroad which may or may not directly link to their career ambitions; the exchange university may not, for example, offer any classes in your field or even your specific discipline.
- **Diversity** – Students who come from particularly homogenous background—based on religion, race, or class—may find it difficult to adapt to an unfamiliar environment and may be unwilling to “step outside their comfort zone”. Furthermore, with the expansion of domestic opportunities, there is a less pressing need to study abroad in order to find a relevant programme or to ensure a high level of quality.



## Providing an International Experience to Home Students

With the difficulties facing international students in the United Kingdom and for British students studying abroad, a third approach to internationalisation is being used in some universities. In an attempt to bring an international experience to students, joint-courses are being developed between international institutions. These allow collaboration between students but will not require them to spend time at the partner university.



These courses may utilise:

- Electronic discussion groups: These allow students to discuss reading materials, work collaboratively on group assignments, and peer review writing assignments.
- Comparative local histories studies: In regions where common histories are evident, such as the traditional local industry, university students on both campuses can prepare local history studies and then work collaboratively to create comparative studies of these regions.
- Video conferencing: For those with the funding and technological ability, video conferencing suites allow students from both universities to attend a single seminar discussion.

However, there are many difficulties facing these programmes;

- Lack of institutional or governmental support: Although most universities and many governments have placed significant importance on internationalisation, few offer institutional support in terms of expertise or funding.
- Resource sharing: Many students are more comfortable with domestic reference books than with those written for an international audience. Because of this, students might encounter difficulties working with a common text.
- Few examples of good practice: There are few detailed reports or case studies available to those who are interested in created dual-campus courses. The creation of a repository of information on the creation and management of similar courses is necessary for such programmes to be implemented effectively.

## Conclusion

The discussion on internationalization at the conference has highlighted several difficulties in adapting to increased levels of internationalization in HE history. However, it was also clear that a lack of support has led to innovations being the result of the determination of particular academics and most solutions being developed in a reactionary manner. Furthermore, most of the support offered is based on the faculty or university level, with little discipline-specific provision to either staff or students. Detailed studies on the needs of history departments in the United Kingdom are required in order to recommend and implement higher levels of support, especially for the institution of dual or tri-campus courses.

### Websites of Interest:

University of Leicester:

<http://www.le.ac.uk/eltu/abouteltuweb/TeachingISGuides/index.html>

Oxford Brookes University:

[http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2\\_learnch/briefing\\_papers/international\\_students.pdf](http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2_learnch/briefing_papers/international_students.pdf)

University of Leeds:

[http://www.leeds.ac.uk/sddu/lt/teachtalk/j\\_carroll2.htm](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/sddu/lt/teachtalk/j_carroll2.htm)

The Changing Debate on Internationalisation of Higher Education:

<http://www.springerlink.com/content/w62716g2q2v5u384/fulltext.pdf>