CREATING CONDITIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

**Social justice
perspectives from a
South African university**

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THE POTENTIAL OF INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES

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SETTING THE SCENE: CONTEXTUAL POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Higher education has developed into a leading indicator of the wealth, development and ambition of nations (Altbach & Salmi 2011; Digital Marketing Institute 2018; Knight 2011). This phenomenon is demonstrated by the massive expansion of higher education worldwide that can be described as one of the biggest social transformations shaping the globe (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley 2009). In addition to massification, internationalisation of higher education is another integral part of a continuous process of change. Internationalisation has grown in importance in the context of globalisation (Egron-Polak & Hudson 2014) – it offers new opportunities but also poses new challenges. The internationalisation of higher education institutions can be interpreted as a strategic move to increase visibility, generate income and play a leading role in developing the knowledge economy (Altbach et al. 2009; Digital Marketing Institute 2018) in the realm of globalisation. The positioning of internationalisation of higher education as key to relevance and excellence in the 21st century assumes that there is a ‘value-add’ for higher education institutions to include international perspectives and initiatives in all aspects of higher education.

In South Africa, the White Paper for Post-school Education and Training (DHET 2013) posits the internationalisation of higher education as an opportunity for cross-cultural learning, developing global citizenship and better communication. All of these possibilities can contribute to national and international goals such as peace and cooperation, and even more significantly, to finding solutions to global challenges such as sustainable development, security, renewable energy and the HIV/Aids pandemic. The current Covid-19 global pandemic is another example that illustrates the importance of international cooperation. Utilising international partnerships and

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links to expand knowledge production, intellectual property and innovation in South Africa is seen as a strategic objective for the higher education sector.

These sentiments are echoed in the Draft Policy on Internationalisation of Higher Education that was gazetted in April 2017 (DHET 2017). The Draft Policy iterates the intentions of the White Paper that the international mobility of students and staff should add to the skill set needed for South Africa to actively take part in and contribute to the international community.

The internationalisation of higher education includes a broad range of activities such as the inward and outward mobility of students and staff, bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements, research collaboration, an internationalised curriculum, international staff as a component of the diversity profile of the institution, joint programming, joint degrees, and the establishment of overseas campuses (Beelen 2012; Beelen & Jones 2015; Clifford & Montgomery 2013; De Wit 2012; Knight 2011). The broad scope of activities requires that internationalisation efforts be approached and developed in such a way that they infiltrate all levels of the institution and involve the main role players, namely undergraduate and graduate students and staff. Tsigiliris (2014) argues that students should be at the heart of internationalisation.

One of the activities that is often deemed central to internationalisation is the mobility of students for short- and long-term periods. The White Paper (DHET 2013) highlights two potential benefits of student mobility, namely that the exchange of students can strengthen South African institutions through capacity building and that it provides a platform to share indigenous knowledge with the international community (DHET 2013).

By now, it has been well documented that students experience significant intellectual and personal development during university study (Patton, Renn, Guido & Quaye 2016). For those who also engage in international mobility opportunities during this period, even more significant developmental outcomes have been reported (Leask 2009; Minh Nguyen 2012; Tarrant 2010). A US study conducted in 2002 with participants who studied abroad between 1950 and 1999 identified four major areas of development that can be associated with international mobility experiences, namely personal development, intercultural development, academic commitment, and career development (Dwyer & Peters 2004). Although this is not a recent study, one can assume that these developmental benefits remain vital for university students in the 21st century.

The Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills (ATC21S) project (Binkley, Erstad, Herman, Raizen, Ripley & Rumble 2010) identified four broad categories of

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skills that should be instilled in students to prepare them for success in this globalised world characterised by technological advances, uncertainty and rapidly changing workplaces: ways of thinking (associated skills: creativity and innovation, critical thinking, problem-solving, decision making, learning to learn and metacognition); ways of working (associated skills: communication, collaboration or teamwork); tools for working (associated skills: information literacy and ICT literacy) and living in the world (associated skills: citizenship – local and global, life and career, personal and social responsibility – including cultural awareness and competence) (Binkley et al. 2010:1-2). The framing of skills within the context of the 21st century and the globalised world with which an international mobility experience equips students triggers questions about the types of internationalisation activities for which institutions create an enabling environment and opportunities. In many institutions these skill sets are incorporated in so-called 'graduate attributes'.

Graduate attributes are defined as the skills, knowledge, competencies and values a university community agrees its graduates should develop during their period of study at that particular institution (Griesel & Parker 2009; Jones & Killick 2013). Hence the graduates of a particular institution are not only a reflection of the quality of the institution, but also products of the institution that should reflect the ethos and institutional culture of that particular institution. Graduate attributes can thus be seen to reflect the responsiveness of higher education institutions to the demands of the 21st century – these have already been linked to the internationalisation of the curriculum (Jones & Caruana 2010). Graduates that will be effective role players and productive citizens in a global era require a skill set that transcends previous expectations of higher education.

At Stellenbosch University (SU), student success is defined not only as whether students have earned a degree, but also whether graduates are in fact achieving the level of preparation – in terms of knowledge, capabilities, and personal qualities – that will enable them to thrive in and contribute to a fast-changing economy and turbulent, highly demanding global, societal and often personal contexts (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek 2007).

The graduate attributes adopted by SU denote the skills and characteristics that are deemed important for graduates of the institution and for which it is then assumed development opportunities are created, both in the classroom and out-of-classroom experience. In institutions with an internationalisation agenda, it is assumed that internationalisation activities would contribute to the development of graduate attributes and student success (Jones & Caruana 2010).

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In this chapter, I analyse one international activity that can contribute to student success, namely international exchange semesters, and I consider the platform that the institution, in this case SU, does or does not create for such activities. This is done by first considering the scope and nature of the problem and then using a comparative approach to unpack the barriers at multiple levels within four faculties. The chapter concludes with recommendations on how the institution could broaden the scope of participation.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Rizvi and Lingard (2010) argue that higher education should equip students to live and work in the globalised world of the 21st century. International exposure through academic exchange provides a means to achieve this goal. Engaging students in a multicultural context and including perspectives from different cultures to discuss, analyse and make sense of complex issues is a valuable pedagogical tool and transcends regular approaches to teaching (Beelen 2007).

International exposure can be accomplished through an array of activities and initiatives. Student mobility can take place through a variety of activities that include summer school programmes, internships, or tailored short programmes (Leask 2009; Jones & Killick 2013). In this chapter the focus is on one specific activity, namely the mobility of undergraduate students through an exchange semester.

The international exchange semester is the only structured international activity for which students can receive academic credit. The study reported in this chapter investigated exchange semesters in terms of undergraduate programmes in selected faculties and focused particularly on general formative programmes.¹ The primary purpose of an exchange semester is to add value to the study programme and to the overall university experience of a student. The concept of value-add is key to the argument that more should be done by the institution to mitigate the barriers to this activity, particularly for the contribution it can make to the graduate attributes that the institution seeks to develop.

In the South African context, and specifically in the way that SU applies this type of experience, the exchange semester(s) must adhere to strict guidelines that support the national policy emphasis on completion of degrees within minimum time. This means that the exchange semester must be a substitute for a semester of the programme at the home university and must not add study time to the student's programme. The

¹ General formative programmes refer to academic programmes that would lead to a degree qualification without a specialisation and specifically exclude academic programmes that would lead to a professional qualification.

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exchange semester(s) must fit into the student's programme structure and adhere to the course and credit requirements of the programme to ensure credit transfer and graduation on condition that the exchange semester courses are completed successfully at the host university.

One of the principles of institutional exchange agreements is reciprocity; in other words, the expectation is that for international students enrolled at SU through an exchange agreement,² SU will reciprocate by sending more or less the same number of students to the partner university. In practice, however, this expectation is not being realised, as SU, while receiving between 300 and 400 international exchange students every year, sends only 60 to 70 students on exchange to partner universities per academic year (SU 2013a).

The imbalance in exchange numbers holds three principal disadvantages for SU. Firstly, the lack of participation by SU students in exchange semesters is indicative of missed opportunities for personal and academic development of students. The benefits of study abroad, such as employment opportunities and the development of cultural competence and understanding, are diminished by the lack of a more structured approach to engage SU students in international exchange semesters.

The second disadvantage can be linked to the terms and conditions of the agreement and has a financial implication. Exchange agreements are generally based on the exemption of tuition fees for participants, and an imbalance in numbers places a financial burden on SU. The tuition fees of the international exchange student from a partner institution are not charged to the individual student but calculated as an expense to the hosting institution. In addition to the tuition costs, the exchange agreement should also include other benefits for students, for example, the possibility of scholarships or support for living costs. These arrangements are negotiated per agreement and acknowledge the difference in living costs, particularly between South Africa and developed countries which remain the main destination countries.

Finally, the lack of participation relates to the partnership between SU and the partner institution and the terms and conditions stated in the partnership agreement. An exchange agreement is based on reciprocity, and a lack of mobility of SU students places the institution in breach of contract. In the long term this can also result in a partner not being able to send students to SU and in so doing the partnership can suffer. The student dimension is one of the pillars of the SU Internationalisation

2 An exchange agreement is an official document between two higher education institutions that details the process for exchanging students. The exchange of students is stated as a key activity of collaboration between institutions.

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Strategy (SU 2019) and explicitly refers to outbound student mobility. The lack of mobility is thus detrimental to performance in this area.

In South African higher education, the low uptake in student exchanges (IEASA 2013) is not unique to SU,³ therefore, an investigation into the causes of this low uptake can provide valuable insight into the factors that are hampering student exchange programmes as one of the efforts of internationalisation on which higher education institutions embark.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTUALISATION

SU has positioned itself as a higher education institution fit for the 21st century. The institutional vision (Vision 2040) states that “Stellenbosch University will be Africa’s leading research-intensive university, globally recognised as excellent, inclusive and innovative, where we advance knowledge in service of society” (SU 2018:37). The accompanying mission statement (Mission 2040) further refers to the environment that the institution aims to offer to students and staff and the aspiration for local and global relevance. Mission 2040 states that “Stellenbosch University is a research-intensive university where we attract outstanding students, employ talented staff and provide a world-class environment; a place connected to the world, while enriching and transforming local, continental and global communities” (SU 2018:37).

Given that the institution has nationally been at the forefront of international collaboration, receives some of the highest numbers of international students in the country, and has a well-established international office, Vision and Mission 2040 paved the way for the adoption of the first formal internationalisation policy and strategy at SU. The internationalisation policy of a higher education institution should provide a framework for developing and integrating internationalisation in the university’s strategy, organisation, culture, and governance (Jansen, McLellan & Greene 2008). The SU Internationalisation Strategy (SU 2019) asserts an institutional commitment to intentionally and comprehensively integrate an international, intercultural and global dimension into the purpose, functions and programmes for all SU students and staff in order to advance the quality and impact of learning and teaching, research and innovation in meaningful service of society.

The second institutional document that is significant in terms of the potential barriers to international exchange semesters is the SU Strategy for Teaching and Learning (SU 2013b). The strategy is articulated in five strategic priorities, namely

3 The University of Cape Town reported the mobility of 49 students in 2014 and 38 in 2015. The Nelson Mandela University reported 12 students in 2014 and 9 in 2015.

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the professionalisation of the scholarly teaching role, the realisation of the graduate attributes in the curriculum, an IT-enhanced learning model, proactive support for a diverse student cohort, and programme renewal. The key elements of the strategy include these five strategic priorities, the graduate attributes that the university aspires to inculcate in students (addressing the student perspective) and the total learning experience that should lead to the achievement of these attributes (encompassing the lecturer perspective).

The Strategy for Teaching and Learning refers to both the national and the international context in which the institution operates by highlighting, for example, the “socio-cultural, educational and economic challenges facing [the country]”, addressing the issues of transformation in the primary and secondary schooling system as well as noting the “changes in the nature of the student population” (SU 2013b:7). The Strategy for Teaching and Learning also takes cognisance of the influence of national and international contexts on the delivery of higher education. The emphasis on the national context does not negate the international dimension, but highlights the fine balance that a university, and particularly a university in a developing country, should maintain between being in touch with and attuned to the local context while also engaging the international dimension at all levels of the institution. The policy context created by the Strategy for Teaching and Learning is conducive to the principles of internationalisation and international student mobility and could thus support the implementation of international exchange semesters as an international experience.

The Strategy for Teaching and Learning has as its focus the realisation of student success. Such student success is incumbent on the provision of an enabling environment within which quality teaching and learning can take place.

The graduate attributes of SU are characterised by four main foci. These attributes align with the research of Spronken-Smit et al. (2015) who denote graduate attributes such as knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that cannot be explained as purely disciplinary expertise. Figure 14.1 below provides an overview of these four attributes.

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<p>An enquiring mind</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lifelong learner ▪ Critical and creative thinker ▪ Exercises responsibility for learning and using knowledge 	<p>An engaged citizen</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leader and collaborator ▪ Social entrepreneur ▪ Effective in a diverse environment
<p>A dynamic professional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Problem-solver ▪ Uses sustainable and effective technology ▪ Innovative 	<p>A well-rounded individual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Exposed to culture, intellectual and sporting life ▪ Takes responsibility for own development ▪ Takes informed and considered decisions

FIGURE 14.1 The graduate attributes of Stellenbosch University
(Source: SU 2013b)

Bhandari (2011) and Tsigiliris (2004) argue that the sets of skills and attitudes that can be inculcated by means of international mobility are strongly aligned with the concept of graduate attributes. Hill, Walkington and France (2016:2) state that: “Graduate attributes are broader and more encompassing than employability helping to develop academic, citizenship and career competences.” Congruent with the position of these authors, the graduate attributes of SU also indicate alignment with the principles of internationalisation. Specific phrases contained in the description of each of the graduate attributes have direct links to the set of skills to be achieved by means of internationalisation activities such as an international exchange semester, for example: “A Stellenbosch graduate will be aware of the value of interaction at a global level, and be open to influences from international settings”, which is encapsulated in the ‘engaged citizen’ attribute (SU 2013b:8).

The attribute of having an ‘enquiring mind’ refers to different knowledge sources and states that students will be able to “[take] the best from international and dominant ways of knowing, and in addition from indigenous, local, lay and underrepresented knowledge sources” (SU 2013b:9). The importance of the international dimension in what is taught is highlighted, while also acknowledging the significance of local knowledge. This relates to the principles of internationalisation of the curriculum, as defined by Leask (2011).

Secondly, the graduate attribute, namely being an ‘engaged citizen’, underlines the value and need for understanding how one functions within a community and, for example, also takes on a leadership role in such a community. Explicit reference to

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the international community is included: “the ability to take on a leadership role in social life and as a member of civil society at various levels, such as in the family, the workplace, at regional, national, continental as well as international level”. It can be assumed then that what is taught and how it is taught should speak to the international dimension. A further key statement in the attribute of an engaged citizen states “an SU graduate will be aware of the value of interaction at a global level and be open to participating in international settings”, again setting the scene for internationalisation (Jones & Killick 2013; SU 2013b:8).

In the third attribute, of being a ‘dynamic professional’, the skills needed to work and live in diverse environments are discussed. “A Stellenbosch University graduate should have benefitted from the opportunity to learn to apply and communicate knowledge in various community, business, professional and personal settings” (SU 2013b:8) can be interpreted in the context of an international exchange semester as being an encompassing experience of a different academic environment and ethos, creating a new support system and dealing with the diversity of a new society and country. The last aspect of the dynamic professional attribute also links with the rationale of an international exchange semester as it relates to the ability to adapt to the changes in the world of work, namely that “a dynamic professional has the flexibility to make career choices and decisions in relation to the changing nature of the world of work” (SU 2013b:8).

The last attribute, that of being a ‘well-rounded individual’, refers particularly to the role of the curriculum of the institution: “The value of a Stellenbosch University curriculum should be evident in its cultivation of the humanity of the graduate” (SU 2013b:8). Here, the internationalisation of the curriculum is relevant as the development of intercultural competences is a key outcome of an internationalised curriculum (Leask 2009).

The explicit references and implicit links to the international context and the ways in which graduates must obtain these skills strengthen the arguments put forward in the chapter thus far, namely that there should be international mobility activities as well as other internationalisation initiatives to cultivate the skills needed by university graduates to contribute to the 21st century at all levels. Although it would be presumptuous to claim that an international exchange semester is the only way in which to achieve the described set of skills and graduate attributes, there is merit in utilising an international exchange semester as a mechanism to contribute to this goal. Furthermore, it proves the importance of an international dimension in the curricular and co-curricular activities offered at the institution.

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The study (Boshoff 2015) used a pragmatist lens in a mixed-methods approach. The mixed-methods approach has gained ground amongst social science researchers as it provides a tool set to address the problem that is being researched and a focus on the consequences (Feilzer 2009) by using quantitative and qualitative research methods to investigate the research problem. The pragmatist paradigm offers flexibility to the research design and thus offers social scientists a more practical outlook on a research problem (Feilzer 2009). The mixed-methods approach allows the researcher to engage in the study from various viewpoints and to use a collection of both qualitative and quantitative data (Feilzer 2009).

The case study research design was applied to the study. This research design provided a mechanism to study the complex phenomenon of the potential barriers to international exchange semesters in four case studies (four faculties) embedded within the broader institutional context of SU (Baxter & Jack 2008). The use of a case study design was instrumental in ensuring the inclusion of perspectives from a variety of participants, while also creating nuanced perspectives on crucial aspects pertaining to international mobility by means of exchange semesters. Ethical clearance and institutional permission for the study were acquired from the appropriate authorities.

To gain the broadest range of data, various data collection methods were adopted to ensure a broad-based pool of data of qualitative and quantitative nature. The first level of data collection was the analysis of policy documents at faculty and institutional level to determine which aspects have a direct effect on international exchange semesters and to what extent policies create barriers to international exchange semesters. The next step in the data collection was at the academic level and consisted of a questionnaire that was sent to the programme coordinator(s) of each applicable programme. In addition, individual interviews were conducted with the deputy deans tasked with teaching and learning in each of the four faculties. These interviews focused particularly on the academic considerations, namely curriculum and programme outcomes regarding exchange semesters in their programmes and faculties. The third and final level of data was collected by means of a survey of all non-final-year and final-year students enrolled for general formative programmes in the selected faculties. The purpose of the survey was to gain broad insight into students' understanding of international exchange semesters and to gauge the level to which students would or would not engage in such opportunities. In the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) the survey was completed by 144 students (response rate of 8%); a more or less similar response rate was obtained in the Faculty of

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Science (FS) with 119 students completing the questionnaire (8.6%). The Faculty of AgriSciences (FAgri) had a somewhat lower response rate with 53 students (7%) completing the survey, and the lowest response rate was obtained in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences (FEMS) with only 6.1% (109 students) completing the questionnaire. Although the response rates were disappointingly low, the absolute numbers of respondents provided me with sufficient data to draw on.

The aim of the investigation was to identify faculty-specific and crosscutting barriers to international mobility. The role of curricula was included in the analysis of data and considered in the selection of programmes to be included in this study.

The case study design of this research resulted in four case studies with a multilevel analysis of data from a range of data sources. The outcome of the four case studies was a rich source for drawing comparative perspectives that were enlightening of the environment, and of perceived as well as actual barriers.

The reflection on the four faculties considered three dimensions: (1) the scope created by policy and vision of the faculty, (2) staff perspectives, and (3) student perspectives. The analysis also highlighted faculty-specific barriers and good practices that can be given further consideration or institutional prominence in expanding the opportunities of international exchange semesters.

THE SCOPE CREATED BY POLICY AND VISION OF THE FACULTY

The institutional context for exchange semesters has already been described. There is clear support in policy, strategy and intended graduate profile to support exchange semesters as a key international activity. Support at such a macro-level is, however, not sufficient. The support and enabling factors must also exist within the faculty where students are enrolled.

The analysis of the four vision and mission statements revealed that each of the faculties refers to skills that can be equated to the graduate attributes. Yet, linkages with research are much more explicit and can be translated to the impact that the faculty aims to have on postgraduate students. Furthermore, all four faculties refer to the international dimension, albeit not in direct relation to the graduate attributes.

The FEMS vision states that the faculty is regarded as the leading faculty of economic and management sciences in South Africa; one that is committed to the development of the rich human potential of the entire spectrum of the South African population, respected as a role player at the international level, and acknowledged as a centre of excellence within the university (FEMS 2014).

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The lack of a more explicit international focus by FEMS as a faculty that produces graduates (at all levels) who will enter the job market in sectors such as business, economics and finance that are inherently internationalised and heavily influenced by global forces is a first indication of one of the potential barriers to international exchange semesters in this faculty, namely the absence of an explicit focus on preparing students for working and living in an international context.

The FAgrri vision is to “achieve international excellence with wide acknowledgement of the depth and relevance of our research”. With regard to teaching, the vision refers to “the exceptional quality of our education” and finally, on community engagement and value to society, the vision relates to “the usefulness of our service to agriculture and forestry” (FAgrri 2014). The vision of the faculty is further detailed in its mission, which states that the faculty wishes “to be the preferred provider of world-class research, education and service to agriculture and forestry in southern Africa. We strive to use our knowledge, expertise and skills to the benefit of South Africa and the region, of its people and its industries, and of our clients in a manner that ensures the sustainable use of the region’s natural, physical and social resources and that gains the widest public recognition” (FAgrri 2014:8).

The vision and mission of FAgrri show clear links to areas of international education, which provide an ideal platform to establish a stronger directive for the international exposure of students. The vision of the faculty refers explicitly to the role envisioned for graduates in the international agricultural sector. Thus, the inclusion of an international mobility period in the academic programmes would be an explicit commitment to cultivate the graduate skills and attitudes required to fulfil these roles. Achieving the vision and mission of the faculty to deliver graduates with the required set of skills can make a significant contribution locally and internationally, but requires appropriate programme outcomes and co-curricular programmes that directly contribute to this vision.

The FASS indicates a clear focus on the contribution it wishes to make and thus an implicit reference to the graduate it wants to deliver. The FASS vision makes a distinct connection with the desired levels of impact by stating that “the Faculty wishes to be a dynamic and internationally acknowledged centre of academic leadership in the Western Cape, South Africa, and the rest of Africa” (FASS 2014). The vision is expanded by stating that “the discovery, transfer and application of knowledge for the promotion of the human sciences, and the enrichment and enhancement of the quality of life of the people of this region, country and continent” (FASS 2014) are of key importance.

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The FS is committed to “positioning the University as a research-focused academic institution of excellence and a respected knowledge partner. Through quality research outputs, the Faculty contributes towards building the scientific, technological, and intellectual capacity of Africa and plays an active role in South Africa’s development” (FS 2014). The faculty aims to create a teaching environment that “focuses on giving all students the opportunity to develop their full potential by using the most suitable methods of teaching and by cultivating a sound scientific attitude in students” (FS 2014). The faculty aspires to equipping students with the scientific, language and electronic communication skills needed to hold their own in challenging national and international environments. The stance of the faculty towards excellence and its teaching approach evidently links to the Institutional Intent and Strategy, but also refers to an international context for which students must be prepared. The reference to capacity building in Africa can be interpreted as a somewhat outward and international focus.

Although the vision and strategy of the faculty are elusive in terms of the set of skills to be developed in its graduates, references to the graduate profile can be linked to the institutional graduate attributes. For example, the Faculty Yearbook (2014) states, “The ideal [of the faculty] is to shape graduates who are competitive and much sought after in the work environment and who can also function as independent thinkers.” This, I believe, can in turn be linked to an international focus in graduate skills.

The inclusion of international references, particularly in relation to the graduate attributes within faculty vision and mission statements, provides a platform for the presence of international exchange semesters as an educational activity that can contribute to the graduate attributes of the institution. Rhetoric alone is however not sufficient to create an enabling environment and these high-level references should be entrenched within every faculty in administrative regulations, programme outcomes and staff attitudes towards international exposure. Student and staff perspectives were also explored in the study.

STAFF PERSPECTIVES

Two sets of data were obtained from staff in each faculty. The first was a survey of programme coordinators and the second were semi-structured interviews with the deputy dean(s) responsible for teaching and learning. The findings from these data sources provided important insights into the environment created by the leadership and academic staff as key drivers of internationalisation.

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What transpired from both the survey and the interviews was that staff at both leadership and teaching level were aware of the correlation between graduate attributes and an international exchange semester. One programme coordinator in FS believed that “it will contribute to all the attributes” (FS 2014). In FASS, this sentiment was echoed by programme coordinator 3, stating that an international exchange semester “would contribute to the required graduate attributes, since students will have an opportunity to grow both academically and culturally and increase interaction and networking opportunities”.

One of the most significant comments that illustrates the in-principle support for international exchange semesters as a manifestation of the graduate attributes but a lack of structural support, is that of the deputy dean of FEMS: “It is important to me [to achieve the graduate attributes through an exchange semester] but at the same time I must admit that the institution is not necessarily geared for undergraduate internationalisation or exchange semesters.”

A comparison of the barriers to international exchange semesters identified by staff in the four faculties highlights three groups of barriers: (1) the barriers created by the differences between higher education systems internationally and the administrative challenges attached to this; (2) the differences in programme structure and content, and (3) the financial implications of an international exchange semester. These barriers resonate with barriers indicated in other studies on the topic (Perna, Orosz, Jumakulov, Kishkentayeva & Ashirbekov 2015; Souto-Otero, Huisman, Beerkens, De Wit & Vujic 2013).

The lack of understanding of the process and mechanisms for student mobility was evident in all four faculties. One programme coordinator in FEMS stated that “to include a compulsory exchange semester would be fantastic but the administrative burden would simply be too big”.

In order to determine how staff members apply their own experience in their teaching practice, I considered the international experience and exposure of staff. The most evident conclusion is that there is a lack of international experience, particularly at the teaching level, and that academic staff focus their own international experience mostly on the research dimension through conference attendance and international research projects. The stronger focus on internationalisation in the research context also manifests in certain programme coordinators’ view that international mobility should be reserved for postgraduate students. “As the Internationalisation Strategy has specific indicators/outputs set for student mobility, more should be done to cultivate an international mindset amongst staff in order to enhance the ways in which international experience is built into all levels of the faculty” (FEMS 2014).

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

At student level, the questionnaire distributed to all final and pre-final year students in the general formative programmes in each of the four faculties investigated students' assumptions related to barriers to international exchange semesters. It also aimed at gaining a better understanding of how aware students are of the possibility and process of such an activity.

Awareness

A common assumption is that the low uptake of international exchange semesters can be ascribed to students being uninformed or ill-informed about the existence of such opportunities. This assumption was tested by an attempt to determine whether students were aware of the opportunity offered by SU. The results show that more than 50% of respondents were aware that SU offers international exchange semesters. Although this is a fair number of students, further awareness should be created to address the barriers.

Relating to the role of staff in creating awareness and fostering a culture of participating in international exchange semesters, the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate whether international exchange semesters were discussed in the classroom. The responses revealed that academic staff in certain faculties are more prone to sharing information on the topic. More than 80% of the respondents in the FASS indicated that a lecturer had mentioned the possibility and motivated them to take part in an international exchange semester, while only five respondents (4.2%) in the FS indicated that they had been informed (in the classroom) of such opportunities. This again raises the question as to the barrier created by staff's lack of knowledge and understanding of both the value and process of international exchange semesters.

Interest

The high level of awareness amongst students was proven through the positive response received on the question in the questionnaire asking students to indicate their interest in partaking in an international exchange semester. Awareness alone will, however, not lead to higher mobility numbers.

Students were also asked about their intent to take part in an international exchange semester. Consistently across the four faculties, more than 95%⁴ of respondents indicated that they would consider taking part in an international exchange semester.

4 The percentages across faculties were as follows: FEMS, 97%; FS, 96%; FAgri, 98% and FASS, 96%.

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The assumption that lack of awareness and lack of interest are the main reasons for the low uptake of international exchange semesters has been proven wrong by the data as explained in the preceding discussion, and a more nuanced approach to barriers at student level should be considered.

View on barriers

Students were requested to select the barriers to mobility from a set list of barriers that was derived from previous studies as well as observations made by the researcher.

The results show that the barriers listed in the questionnaire were mostly confirmed by the respondents as constraints to international exchange semesters. Even though respondents had the opportunity to raise further constraints to international exchange semesters, only three responses to the 'Other' category indicated other possible constraints to an international exchange semester. All these responses included references to academic standing required, namely 'Academic requirements', 'Only for students with all subjects at least above 60%' and 'My perception of my academic marks', and introduced an important additional perceived barrier to international exchange semesters. This response can be interpreted as a barrier of self-selection: one that students impose on themselves. It is consistent with results from other studies about barriers to mobility (Souto-Otero et al. 2013).

The top three barriers in the four faculties were consistent. They were (1) lack of information on opportunities, (2) financial constraints, and (3) lack of information on the process. These barriers resonate with those identified by academic staff. They can, however, be addressed through a pragmatic approach by the institution, including a review of academic programme structure to address the barriers identified by staff at both content and structural level, by making the information available to students in a way that more clearly explains the opportunities applicable to their specific study programme and the steps to be taken, and finally by communicating the financial support mechanisms available to students who want to take part in an international exchange semester.

INTERNATIONALISATION FOR ALL

Policy references to internationalisation at institutional level coupled with anecdotal support for international exchange semesters is a strong point of departure for expanding the participation of students in the specific international activity. These aspects are, however, not sufficient to pursue a large-scale implementation strategy that would require significant substantial financial and human resources. The barriers identified within the four faculties are wide-ranging and compounded by a lack of

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buy-in from staff. Furthermore, the lack of understanding at student and staff level of both the value of international exchange semesters and the process to be followed create major obstacles. The proposed recommendation is to enhance existing good practices at institutional and faculty level, but the scope will remain minimal if there is no clear strategic directive to engage students with the international dimension of higher education in both the formal and the informal curriculum.

At the institutional level, the plethora of bilateral partnerships all largely based on reciprocal student exchange, a team of dedicated support staff, and continued financial support already create a macro-institutional framework for an international exchange semester. However, the lack of entrenching an exchange semester in the programme outcomes, and other identified constraints such as the absence of clear policies on credit transfer, will continue to hamper the efforts of implementing international exchange semesters on a broader scale.

Considering structural factors and policy alone will not be sufficient to increase the participation of undergraduate students in international exchange semesters. The values embodied in internationalisation should be entrenched in all aspects of the institution, particularly in the mindset of staff and students. This can be done by reflecting on the profile of a lecturer contained in the Strategy for Teaching and Learning (2013) that particularly refers to professionalisation of the teaching role. Internationalisation should be included as part of the professional learning opportunities for teaching staff.

The institution also needs to consider to what extent exchange semesters as one of the few opportunities for international experience is accessible to only a small part of the student community. Further avenues for international mobility should be considered, particularly as it forms part of the internationalisation strategy. In this regard a few recommendations can be made based on developments within the global internationalisation community; for example, providing additional financial support for students from under-represented groups.

The outcome of this study prompts one to consider what alternative models could be implemented by the institution. The study has shown that certain faculties and disciplines are more disposed to the notion of international exchange semester than others. It has also shown that although certain faculties have engaged with the notion of graduate attributes and can articulate the link between graduate attributes and international exchange semesters, this link is not nuanced enough. Therefore, a varied approach should be investigated rather than using a 'one size fits all' approach. In creating a more diverse selection of international experiences, the institution can make international mobility more accessible within academic programmes. Pathways

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to consider include shorter mobility periods and a combination of actual and virtual mobility. Particularly virtual mobility through the introduction of collaborative online international learning (COIL) can create the desired international experience as described in this chapter, while not incurring the high costs associated with physical mobility. COIL can also be included in each year of the study programme and in multiple courses to promote diversity of knowledge through a diverse classroom of students and lecturers interacting and sharing knowledge perspectives, for example, partners from the rest of Africa, Asia and Europe, whereas an exchange semester would only bring one such perspective (Wimpenny 2020).

The next chapter further explores the impact of international student mobility on the development of skills as well as the learning opportunities entrenched in a shorter international experience.

The graduate attributes create sufficient traction for internationalisation at the level of programme outcomes and hence necessitate a review of the actual inclusion of these elements in programmes and consequently in the way international exchange semesters are optimised.

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