

Recommendation by the  
22nd General Assembly  
of the HRK  
on 9 May 2017  
in Bielefeld

## **On the Internationalisation of Curricula**

### **HRK German Rectors' Conference**

The Voice of the Universities

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### *Introduction*

Although universities have always regarded themselves as international institutions, internationality has become a hallmark of German universities in particular, over the past two decades. By understanding internationalisation as an integral component of their strategic development, universities are orienting their practices and endeavours towards everyday reality where a global dimension is just as important as national, regional and local points of reference.<sup>1</sup> In this context, internationalisation is increasingly being understood as a cross-sectional task that has an ongoing impact on all areas of the university. It is no longer limited to traditional core areas such as joint research with international partners or the mobility of students and academics. These fields remain highly relevant; however, a broad-based understanding of internationalisation necessarily also includes academic teaching content.

The key role of teaching is illustrated by a quick look at the figures on international student mobility. Although German university students are more mobile than the international average, by far the majority of the 2.8 million students currently enrolled do not have an overseas experience.<sup>2</sup> Despite all the efforts and achievements in the internationalisation of universities, this means that even in the future a significant percentage of graduates will still not have experienced a period of study abroad when they enter the world of work. These graduates are missing out on the intercultural and international experiences guaranteed in particular by longer periods in other countries. In many ways, consistently internationalising curricula in all subject areas can be an effective means of offering students who stay in Germany an international perspective.

Today's generation of students is confronted with the impacts of globalisation like no generation before them. It is therefore the task of universities to provide all students with the best possible preparation for the opportunities, risks and uncertainties of a globalised world. This ambitious goal cannot be achieved in the 21st century by resorting to curricula that, in their current form, and depending on disciplinary culture, are frequently more nationally than internationally oriented. In order to equip students to participate in an active, confident and (in the true sense of the word) self-aware manner in a world that is networked beyond national borders, curricula are needed that are intrinsically

<sup>1</sup> See also the HRK's international strategy "German Universities in the World and for the World" (2008). Reprinted in HRK, *Die deutschen Hochschulen internationalisieren!*, Beiträge zur Hochschulpolitik 2/2012, Bonn: HRK, 2012: 19-30.

<sup>2</sup> See German Academic Exchange Service and German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies (ed.), *Wissenschaft weltoffen 2016: Facts and Figures on the International Nature of Studies and Research in Germany*, Bielefeld: W. Bertelsmann Verlag, 2016: 46f. Around one quarter of university graduates in the 2013 cohort have completed at least one period of study abroad. Around a fifth of university graduates of that same cohort spent three or more months abroad.

international. Only those curricula that productively embrace the diversity of perspectives afforded by globalisation will equip students adequately to practise responsible global citizenship. The comprehensive internationalisation of study programmes thus complements existing instruments of internationalisation and offers the opportunity to locate international elements not merely at selected points in the course but to create scope for ongoing engagement with international and intercultural content as part of university study in Germany.

### *Definition*

With this recommendation, the HRK wishes to make a contribution to the internationalisation of curricula at German universities. In its analysis and recommendations, the HRK adopts a definition according to which curricula are understood as one element of a university education. It defines a curriculum in its broadest sense as the teaching plan or syllabus for a study programme as laid down in module handbooks and subject-specific provisions, along with the learning objectives of the individual modules of a study programme, the content and the teaching materials such as textbooks or digital materials.

Based on an academic definition of the internationalisation of curricula, the HRK understands internationalisation as the integration of an international, intercultural or global dimension into the curriculum.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, it is indisputable that internationalisation can encompass not only curricula but indeed university education as a whole. This can include not only curricula but the methodology and the organisation of teaching. Insofar as the internationalisation of curricula proffers points of connection with these areas, they will also be dealt with briefly in this recommendation – in the full knowledge that very few generalisations can be made in relation to the choice of methods or teaching and learning formats in view of the heterogeneity of disciplines and subjects.

<sup>3</sup> Australian educational researcher Betty Leask (La Trobe University, Melbourne) characterises the internationalisation of curricula as follows: "Internationalization of the curriculum is 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." Starting with this definition, Leask develops a complex model of the internationalisation of curricula which, along with the formal curriculum, also includes the informal curriculum and the hidden curriculum. As distinct from Leask's broad definition, the HRK recommendation largely concentrates on the core areas of objectives and content. Betty Leask. *Internationalizing the Curriculum*. Internationalization in Higher Education. London and New York: Routledge, 2015: 9.

### *Objectives*

A range of objectives is associated with the internationalisation of curricula:

- Students should be capable of communicating interculturally. The development of intercultural competencies gives students the ability to reflect critically on the positional bias of their own perspective and thus the inherent conditions affecting their own behaviours.
- Internationalisation of curricula makes an important contribution to students' personal development. Intercultural competence and the associated ability to communicate interculturally are also basic prerequisites, both for relating to other people and for acting together. It is difficult to imagine full participation in a multicultural, democratic society without them.
- The internationalisation of curricula gives students the ability to work in an interdisciplinary and contrastive fashion.
- The internationalisation of curricula enhances students' knowledge of foreign languages and promotes their ability to work in international teams.
- The internationalisation of curricula increases students' international employability by providing global perspectives on their field of study, their discipline and their future profession.

Universities are thus responding to the endeavours of a growing number of students to pursue international career paths. The internationalisation of curricula serves to link teaching with the students' own worlds and their future life plans.

### *Starting point*

Even though there is a long-held conviction in the academic community that the major and cross-border challenges of our century – such as climate change, poverty, malnutrition, migration, energy security – demand not only interdisciplinary, but also international approaches to a solution, individual disciplines all too frequently favour an understanding of university education which gives preference to national standpoints over international perspectives.

At present, the degree of internationality varies from discipline to discipline and from one study programme to another. This is shown by the results of independent and systematic internationalisation consultations, such as the HRK Audit "Internationalisation of Universities," which has been carried out at more than 80 German

universities to date. The various subject areas thus approach the internationalisation of curricula from very different starting points, each of which needs to be taken into account.

The overall goal of the internationalisation of curricula must be to significantly increase the degree of internationality in all disciplines without, however, ignoring the specific prerequisites and objectives of individual subject areas. As in other areas of university internationalisation, standardised approaches are not suited to achieving the desired changes. Rather, individual disciplines, in their professional associations for example, need to define their specific approaches to internationality and the development of intercultural competencies and to integrate them in the curriculum in a way that is meaningful to students.

### *Recommendations*

A steadily growing group of universities has already begun to successfully integrate international and intercultural elements into their curricula. Further development of curricula in this manner is not restricted to a limited number of disciplines, but extends from the humanities and social sciences, through the natural sciences and medicine, to the engineering sciences. There are also very promising approaches in teacher education, in courses for general vocational preparation and in general studies.

This HRK recommendation is based to a great extent on experiences from these projects. From such experiences a series of recommendations and observations can be derived that, despite the significant differences between subject areas, can be said to apply across the disciplines.

The present recommendation of the German Rector's Conference is supplemented by contributions from individual disciplines, in which the internationalisation of curricula is viewed from the specific perspective of the subjects in question ([www.hrk.de/themen/internationales/internationalisierung-in-lehre-und-forschung/internationalisierung-der-curricula/](http://www.hrk.de/themen/internationales/internationalisierung-in-lehre-und-forschung/internationalisierung-der-curricula/) – only available in German).

### *Teaching and learning content*

Those study programmes and lectures that are already internationally oriented in their current form provide obvious starting points for the internationalisation of curricula. Programmes such as International Relations in Political Science, Intercultural Theology in Religious Sciences as well as courses in the field of

Global Health in Medicine are examples of this. Likewise, study programmes in Area Studies are already characterised by their international subject matter.

However, International and intercultural aspects should also be taken into consideration in study programmes that do not approach the subject from a plurality of international perspectives as a matter of course, or those which may ensure the internationality of matters under consideration but not necessarily consciously reflect upon them.

At present, approaches to the internationalisation of teaching and learning are still all too often limited to including guest lectures by international academics and holding lectures in English. The internationalisation of curricula, however, presupposes the integration of an intercultural, international and global dimension in all curricula. The individual disciplines are responsible for redesigning curricula in such a way that long-standing national or even Eurocentric perspectives are transcended. For this purpose traditional curricula need to be analysed and redesigned accordingly with a view to accentuating relevant global content. Generally speaking, internationalised curricula are distinguished by a plurality of alternative points of view and a general appreciation of diversity. They provide students with comprehensive knowledge of the subject from a range of international perspectives and enable them to acquire a global understanding of their individual discipline and therefore also of their future profession. It will be important to make the value of international curricula clear to students in the process.

The recommendation that curricula be internationalised should by no means be misunderstood as a call to extend them in volume. Many study programmes are already characterised by high content density and are extremely demanding on student time. Instead, the internationalisation of curricula involves the inclusion of intercultural and international elements within existing curricula. Therefore, it is not simply a matter of adding learning content, but rather of realigning existing curricula.

#### Recommendations:

- We recommend that universities do not simply expand existing curricula with international components, but embed international and intercultural elements firmly into the core curricula.
- We recommend that universities make the value of international curricula clear to students.
- We recommend internationalisation through the redesign of existing curriculum. Simply expanding the scope of curricula should be avoided.

### *Instruments*

The internationalisation of curricula is not tied to any specific approach. International and intercultural approaches can be integrated into teaching in a variety of ways. Study programmes and modules should always be designed in such a way that they transcend purely national perspectives. In some subjects, several instruments are suited to this purpose such as the targeted use of foreign-language international materials and the inclusion and contextualisation of international research results, in which international theoretical approaches and schools of thought are reflected. Internationally varying conditions or fields of application, norms and standards can be used in engineering and the natural sciences.

Universities should also use existing international cooperation arrangements in a targeted way to internationalise curricula. The increasing diversification of the student body also offers starting points for curriculum internationalisation. International students can be more actively involved in the teaching and learning process than previously. This may happen through project work with German students, for example. They can make a major contribution to initiating a change of perspective and discourse in teaching.

Recommendations:

- The internationalisation of curricula should take place across the board in all individual disciplines.
- Along with the use of foreign-language international materials, the inclusion of international students' perspectives can initiate a change of perspective in teaching.

### *Language*

The internationalisation of curricula is in no way to be equated with a general departure from German as the language of instruction.<sup>4</sup> Teaching in a foreign language alone is no guarantee of the successful transmission of international and intercultural competences. However, the internationalisation of curricula will be accompanied by an expansion in the range of teaching formats in foreign languages. It will be necessary to ensure at all times that instruction in a foreign language does not lead to a drop in academic standards. Where appropriate, preference should be given to the German language; it will also be necessary to incorporate international content into lectures delivered in German.

<sup>4</sup> See also the HRK recommendation, "Language Policy at German Universities" (2011). Reprinted in HRK, *Die deutschen Hochschulen internationalisieren!*, Beiträge zur Hochschulpolitik 2/2012, Bonn: HRK, 2012: 51-67.

Detailed knowledge of one or ideally several foreign languages is the cornerstone of intercultural interaction. Learning a new language constitutes an important personal experience for students, while helping to broaden their international horizons considerably. No matter what their specific study programmes, all students should therefore be given the opportunity to take language courses and have their achievements recognised. Foreign language acquisition should therefore be integrated into curricula.

In addition to general language use, students' subject-related multilingualism should be specifically encouraged. Only in-depth, subject-specific knowledge of one or several foreign languages makes it possible for students to learn from international research findings. In this respect English, as the lingua franca of the academic world, is an important consideration. Beyond universities and research, subject-specific language skills increase graduate employability. While such skills are absolutely indispensable for working overseas, they are also a prerequisite for employment in a culturally diverse Germany.

Recommendation:

- The internationalisation of curricula and the promotion of the general as well as subject-specific multilingualism of students are interdependent. We recommend that universities provide all students with the option to learn general and subject-related aspects of foreign languages and that they establish them firmly in the curriculum.

#### *Certification and performance assessment*

In order to facilitate an international or intercultural student focus, interdisciplinary portfolio modules or certificate programmes on regional competencies in the field of professionalisation or key competencies can represent a good alternative especially for small study programmes.

The internationalisation of curricula and the focus associated with it could entail an unintended diminution of the learning objectives to declarative knowledge. Given the reality of the differentiated German competence- and personality-based maturation process, it is expected that assessment primarily aimed at the mere repetition of knowledge will be inappropriate here. Approaches to assessment that clearly demonstrate student ability to reflect more deeply and the development of intercultural competencies are far more appropriate. Interactive formats such as self-reflective discussions and oral examinations are a way of mapping the acquisition of competencies. Scientific papers jointly compiled in international teams or presentations of results are another

possibility, for example for experiments or project tasks. In the context of internationalisation of curricula, these should be given preference.

Recommendations:

- Particularly in smaller study programmes, interdisciplinary portfolio modules or certificates can provide an international or intercultural focus.
- The internationalisation of curricula entails combining German examination formats with international content. We recommend that teaching staff employ assessment formats suited to measuring the gain in competencies associated with the internationalisation of curricula.

### *International internships*

The internationalisation of curricula should not be considered in isolation from other internationalisation measures. International placements in particular are well suited as an effective complement to internationalised curricula. Placements in businesses, research institutions, clinics, schools and governmental and non-governmental organisations abroad offer students insights into international areas of employment and allow the acquisition of more in-depth intercultural competencies. In order to structure the period abroad successfully, the placement should be thoroughly prepared for, accompanied and followed up in the curriculum of the home institution. This involves not only preparation in terms of content and subject matter, but the transfer of intercultural competencies as practised as part of an internationalised curriculum.

Recommendation:

- We recommend that universities supplement the internationalisation of curricula with integrated measures for the expansion of international mobility. Internships abroad in particular are well suited to promoting the acquisition of intercultural competencies in a targeted manner.

### *Digitalisation*

Across all disciplines, the internationalisation of curricula is currently receiving additional impetus from digital transformation. Digitalisation enables universities to augment traditional forms of mobility with virtual mobility. On the one hand, using digital media can help to seamlessly integrate periods abroad into a course of study, supporting them better and ensuring targeted preparation

and follow-up. Secondly, digital education options considerably expand the range of possibilities for internationalisation at home.

The use of digital teaching and learning scenarios facilitates stronger international networking of teachers and students. The broad spectrum of these forms of cooperation ranges from digital guest lectures by international academics, through synchronous e-learning scenarios such as the virtual international classroom, to the use of digital learning materials designed together with international partners.

It is important to stress that real and virtual mobility should not be understood as opposites. A strategic expansion of digital education options must not come at the expense of support for traditional international mobility. On the contrary, the opportunities and possibilities offered by the digital shift should be used to strengthen the international cooperation of universities as a whole. It is expected that closer links between strategic internationalisation and digitalisation will be of crucial benefit to the internationalisation of curricula in particular.<sup>5</sup>

Recommendation:

- We recommend that universities systematically use the potential of digitalisation for the internationalisation of curricula.

#### *Staff development and resource planning*

In the context of curriculum internationalisation, academic staff are of particular significance. They are the people who largely design internationalised curricula and deliver international and intercultural content in lectures, seminars, exercises and other teaching formats. However, the internationalisation of curricula should not become an additional burden for teaching staff. Universities are urged to provide them with targeted support, particularly in the initial phase, to provide appropriate staff development measures and to relieve their workload in other areas. This is the only way to ensure that teaching staff can give the necessary attention to the internationalisation of curricula.

Recommendation:

- We recommend that universities provide targeted support to teaching staff for the design and implementation of international curricula.

<sup>5</sup> In relation to the role of digital media in the internationalisation of teaching, see also Higher Education Forum on Digitalisation. *The Digital Turn: Hochschulbildung im digitalen Zeitalter*. Working paper No. 27, Berlin: Higher Education Forum on Digitalisation, 2016: 71-82 and 92-94.

### *Concluding remarks*

The internationalisation of curricula needs to be seen as an ongoing process. In other words, it does not result in a clearly defined end point; rather it represents the continuing internationalisation of university education as described above, whether it be through the further development of existing study programmes or through the design of new programmes.

As part of internationalisation at home, the internationalisation of curricula is to be understood as a central element in a university's internationalisation strategy. In this context the internationalisation of curricula needs to be optimally integrated into the broader internationalisation strategy of the university. Hence the internationalisation of curricula should not be considered in isolation from other measures for the internationalisation of universities. In fact it interacts with these measures, playing a crucial role in strengthening the internationality of the university overall. International curricula not only increase the attractiveness of the university for international students and contribute to a welcome diversification of learning groups, but are also an instrument for promoting the international mobility of German students.

For universities, it will be crucial to internationalise the curricula systematically and in an integrated fashion. To this end it is necessary to involve all groups and areas of the university and to shape the change process together. The spectrum ranges from university leadership through academics and students to administration. We recommend that universities make staff and financial resources available in order to make the internationalisation of curricula successful and sustainable.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The present paper was prepared by the HRK working group Internationalisation of Curricula under the leadership of Vice-President Prof. Dr. Dieter Lenzen. The HRK sincerely thanks the members of the working group for their commitment: Prof. Dr. Verena Blechinger-Talcott (Freie Universität Berlin), Prof. Dr. Hiltraud Casper-Hehne (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen), Prof. Dr. Clemens van Dinther (Hochschule Reutlingen), Prof. Dr. Jörg Fedtke (Universität Passau), Prof. Dr. Angela Ittel (Technische Universität Berlin), Prof. Dr. Elspeth Jones (Professor Emeritus, Leeds Beckett University), Prof. Dr. Yasemin Karakaşoğlu (Universität Bremen), PD. Dr. Michael Knipper (Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen), Prof. Dr. Ursula Lehmkuhl (Universität Trier), Prof. Dr. Karin Luckey (Hochschule Bremen), Prof. Dr. Gerhard G. Paulus (Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena), Prof. Dr. Markus Pudelko (Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen), Professor i.R. Dr. Reinhard Putz (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München), Dr. Tanja Reiffenrath (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen), Prof. Dr. Carolin Rotter (Universität Duisburg-Essen), Prof. Dr. Oliver Sawodny (Universität Stuttgart), Prof. Dr. Carsten Wolff (Fachhochschule Dortmund) und Prof. Dr. Jianwei Zhang (Universität Hamburg).