Hyland F, Trahar S, Anderson J and Dickens A ‘A Changing World: the internationalisation experiences of staff and students (home and international) in UK higher education’ (November 2008)

Summary by: Dr Laura Hodsdon (August 2009)

Overview
This paper reports on research that explored staff and home and international students’ perceptions of internationalisation in their institutions.

Aims and background
Internationalisation is often theorised at an organisational and strategic level, but there have been fewer investigations of individuals’ experiences and perceptions and the ‘complexities of intercultural encounters and communication’ (pg 6). This study considered staff and students’ perceptions across five specific areas, asking: 1) what the terms ‘internationalisation’, ‘internationalising the curriculum’, ‘teaching and learning in an international landscape’ mean; 2) the extent of internationalisation within their institution; 3) the effects of internationalisation on teaching and learning; 4) the challenges they have faced, and their successes; 5) how internationalisation could be developed further in their discipline and institution.

Methodology
15 focus groups were run with groups across five HEIs: six comprising staff, five international students, and four home students.

Key points
Aims 1&2: what the term ‘internationalisation’ means and the extent of internationalisation within their institution
- The term ‘internationalisation’ itself can be perceived by staff as meaningless/’quangoey’ (pg 11), but they also noted the potential diversity and richness of the classroom environment.
- There was also perception that internationalisation is linked with the government’s economical agenda such that ‘internationalisation means recruitment’ (pg 12).
- Staff acknowledged that HEIs are responsible for producing a workforce that can complete internationally (pg 12).
- There are concerns that IELTS/TOEFL expectations are too low and that students are being accepted when their language capabilities are not sufficient (pg 12).

Aim 3: the effects of internationalisation on teaching and learning
- Some staff felt that tokenistically placing aspects of curriculum in an international context was not necessarily helpful or relevant (pg 14).
• Nevertheless, some felt that theory is universal and could therefore be inherently international (pg 14).
• Group work is relevant for all disciplines and therefore has potential for cross-cultural working between students (pg 14). It is a challenging area, particularly when assessed, but more students spoke positively about their group experiences (pg 17).
• Some disciplines have encountered problems where professional accrediting bodies have imposed restrictions on the curriculum (pg 15).
• Some have found practical difficulties when placing international students on work placements, for example (pg 15).
• There is a need to ensure that support for international students is not seen as ‘remedial’; staff also noted cultural differences in the extent to which students will seek out support (pg 18).

Aim 4: the challenges they have faced, and their successes
• Themes were: some staff did not enjoy the challenge of adapting, and felt that they do not have the necessary qualifications or experience outside the UK; staff development is often seen as ‘remedial’ (pp 19-20).
• There is a need to listen to students and view them as individuals rather than as a homogenous group ‘international students’ (pg 20).
• Students said that they appreciated having multicultural peers (pg 21).
• Problems preventing a more dynamic mix of students were identified as: cultural cliques; language; cultural differences in socialising; institutional or course barriers; making the effort (pp 21-2).

Aim 5: how internationalisation could be developed further in their discipline and institution
• Suggestions for improving students’ learning experiences included: effective induction to the course, the UK and the local area; encouraging discussion and feedback about past and present experiences; ensuring accessible information and support (pp 22-3).
• Suggestions for improving the staff experience included: discussion opportunities and good support structure; language support for non-native speaking lecturers (pg 23).
• Suggestions for curriculum design: focus on desired outcomes/attributes; invite in experts; allow opportunities for students to mix socially (pg 23).
• Organisational suggestions: provide support to lecturers; ensure social inclusiveness in accommodation allocation and in clubs and societies (pg 23).

Discussion
• HEIs should not rely too heavily on IELTS assessment: recruitment should not be allowed to outweigh rigour.
• Staff felt they were at the front line, yet recruitment, language and welfare were out of their hands: more dialogue between different levels of HEIs would be an advantage.
• Labelling a course ‘international’ can narrow the appeal of the course to international students, resulting in a lack of diversity in the uptake (pp
Further research and support is needed on the logistical challenges around logistics (e.g. work placements) (pg 28).

Home students showed a lack of engagement with the concept of internationalisation, suggesting support could be directed to them (pg 28).

Select bibliography
Trahar S (2007) *Teaching and learning: the international higher education landscape – some theories and working practices* ESCalate discussion paper

Link to full text
http://escalate.ac.uk/downloads/5248.pdf