

Chapter 16

Employability skills as guiding principles for internationalising home curricula

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The relevance of an internationalised home curriculum for all students is generally acknowledged. Other than study abroad, the home curriculum gives programs of study full control over the way students learn international, intercultural, and interdisciplinary perspectives. However, misconceptions, lack of strategies, lack of skills of academics, and lack of connection between stakeholders present major obstacles to internationalising teaching and learning “at home” (see Beelen, 2016, 2017a; Beelen & Jones, 2018).

The practical trajectory outlined in this chapter presents programs of study with the opportunity to focus on employability skills instead of on a semantic discussion on internationalisation. By linking this orientation on employability skills with the articulation of intended learning outcomes (ILOs), a pathway for developing employability skills in all students will be created. Within this pathway, international, intercultural, interdisciplinary, and future-focused dimensions serve to enhance students’ acquiring employability skills.

The trajectory presented here evolved out of action research on internationalisation with academics. During the action research, taking employability skills as a starting point emerged as an enabler for the internationalisation process. It helped to overcome lengthy and semantic discussions on the meaning of internationalisation. After that, international and intercultural dimensions are included in these employability skills. These skills are then translated into ILOs.

Similar action research in Australia had resulted in the process model of internationalisation of the curriculum by Leask (2012, 2015). Action research in the Netherlands resulted in an adaptation by Beelen (2017a). The Dutch research took place in business studies at two universities of applied sciences. Subsequent action research in a range of disciplines at a third Dutch university of applied sciences and in Belgium and Norway suggests that this approach can be applied in other disciplines and other countries as well.

Early stages

In 2011, The Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences made internationalisation at home the focus of its internationalisation policies. After a few sessions in which we explained the concept of internationalisation at home to lecturers, we quickly concluded that such sessions were hardly effective. Lecturers grasped the concept well enough but struggled to implement internationalisation at home in their programs once they had returned to their departments.

We, therefore, initiated the practice of following up general internationalisation-at-home sessions with individual coaching sessions. The lecturers were approached as the specialists in the discipline and asked a range of questions by the facilitator, a disciplinary outsider. Because of this focus on questions, the title of the publication that grew out of this early stage was “Socrates in the Low Countries” (De Wit & Beelen, 2012).

The developments in Amsterdam ran parallel with those at Australian universities, where Betty Leask developed her framework and process model for internationalisation (Leask, 2012). During her National Teaching Fellowship, she facilitated workshops with lecturers in a range of disciplines and found that the disciplinary context was an essential element of internationalising curricula (see Leask & Bridge, 2013). Over the next few years the Dutch and Australian approaches developed in tandem. This process involved other researchers, notably Wendy Green and Craig Whitsed, who also followed a discipline-based approach for their publication on critical perspectives on internationalisation of the curriculum (2015) and attempted to bring to the fore the voices of academics as the key protagonists of curriculum internationalisation.

While the action research in Amsterdam bore similarities to the “imagination

phase” described by Leask (2012, 2015) and the “disciplinary spaces” described by Green and Whitsed (2013, 2015), there were also differences. For example, the Questionnaire on Internationalisation of the Curriculum (QIC), that formed an element of the action research by Leask, was not effective in the Dutch context, also not when it was translated. One reason for this was that the QIC does not include the issue of English language proficiency, which emerged as a key topic for Dutch lecturers and for those teaching in Dutch medium programs.

Researching obstacles and enablers

The type of action research discussed above was further developed during a doctoral study that I undertook at the Centre of Higher Education Internationalisation (CHEI) in Milan between 2012 and 2016 (Beelen, 2017a). The study focused on international and domestic (i.e., delivered in Dutch) business programs at two Dutch universities of applied sciences. The aim of the study was to identify obstacles and enablers to the process of internationalising intended learning outcomes. While the primary research participants were lecturers, other stakeholders, such as international officers, were involved, too.

When I initiated the study in 2012, internationalisation of intended learning outcomes was gaining momentum. The 4th Global Survey concluded that internationalised learning outcomes were “booming” (Egrom-Polak & Hudson, 2014, p. 106). However, this boom related mostly to institutional learning outcomes, rather than to learning outcomes at program and module levels, which can be assessed as part of student learning. In Europe, thinking about internationalised intended learning outcomes as indicators of the quality of internationalisation culminated in the introduction of the Certificate of Quality in Internationalisation (CeQuInt) in 2015 (see Aerden, 2015).

Employability studies

In addition to my own research on the implementation of internationalised learning outcomes, there has been a proliferation of other related studies on this topic. Some of these studies had been conducted in the European context, such as the study by Humburg, Van der Velden, and Verhagen (2013) and the Erasmus Impact Study (European Commission, 2014). Others focus on individual national contexts, such as Finland (Centre for International Mobility, 2014), Australia (Lilley, 2014) and the Netherlands (The Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, 2014). Other studies examined how individual universities’ approach to implementing internationalised learning outcomes (e.g., Funk, Den Heijer, Schuurmans-Brouwer, & Walenkamp, 2014) or focused on the distinct approaches adopted by six Dutch universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands when internationalising the same program (e.g., Kosteljik, Coelen, & de Wit, 2015).

Not only were the contexts of these employability studies quite diverse, their perspectives also differed considerably. The study by The Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences does not connect the acquisition of employability skills to internationalisation of teaching and learning. This may be attributed to the fact that the study was mainly conducted from the perspective of employers within the Dutch labour market.

On the other hand, the studies by the Centre for International Mobility (2014) and the Erasmus Impact Study (European Commission, 2014) focused on the perceptions of both employers and mobile students. These two studies establish a positive correlation between international student mobility and the acquisition of employability skills but do not address how the home curriculum can facilitate non-mobile students to learn the skills that the mobile minority may acquire abroad (Jones, 2011, pp. 22–23. This question remains valid, as up until now only a few and small-scale studies (e.g., Soria & Troisi, 2014; Watkins & Smith, 2018) have explored how students develop international skills at home.

How employability skills levered the internationalisation process

For action research into the internationalisation of learning outcomes in this study, the employability studies proved an important focal point. Introducing

a range of employability skills into the early stages of action research with lecturers turned out to be a key enabler. Discussing employability skills proved a more productive starting point than discussing the concept, meaning, value, or semantics of internationalisation (at home) and trying to contextualise the concept to the program. However, the research led to the identification of other obstacles and enablers. Some of these had been known before, while others had not been identified yet, or had only been known in general terms. These obstacles and enablers are described below.

Obstacles and enablers to internationalising home curricula

The PhD study resulted in the identification of a range of obstacles and enablers to internationalising home curricula. These could be organised into four categories: external, disciplinary, internal, and personal. External obstacles are beyond the control of universities and can be related to global or national developments, educational systems, or legal restrictions. The discipline itself and its traditions in research, teaching, and learning constitute disciplinary obstacles and enablers. Internal obstacles are found within universities, faculties, and programs of study. Finally, personal obstacles are related to the skills of individual stakeholders in the process of internationalising learning outcomes.

Subsequent action research (see Beelen, 2017b) at other universities led to the identification of more obstacles and enablers. These are included in the discussion below, insofar as they are relevant to the articulation of internationalised learning outcomes that facilitate the development of employability skills.

External obstacles and enablers

Among the most persistent obstacles to internationalising the home curriculum are misconceptions about the character of internationalisation at home. Many participants in the action research remarked that the original definition of internationalisation at home (Crowther et al., 2001, p. 8) did not offer them much guidance. A key outcome of this study was the development of a new definition: “internationalisation at home is the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments” (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 76; see also Beelen & Jones, 2018).

However, publishing a definition will not end misconceptions. The Swedish government published an Inquiry (Swedish Government Inquiries, 2018) as the basis for a new national policy for internationalisation. While the Inquiry acknowledges the importance of internationalisation at home, and even quotes the definition, it still considers it as an alternative for those students that do not study abroad. The same is true for the joint agenda on internationalisation of the Dutch university associations (Vereniging Hogescholen & Vereniging van Samenwerkende Nederlandse Universiteiten, 2018), which form an important component of the policies of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

Considering internationalisation of the curriculum an alternative for mobility tends to limit internationalised teaching and learning to one semester, the standard period that some students spend abroad. Rather, the full duration of the curriculum for all students should be used as a vehicle to incorporate international and intercultural dimensions, which enhance the acquisition of employability skills.

Disciplinary obstacles and enablers

Business and management programs, both English and Dutch medium, focused more strongly on intercultural communication than on internationalisation. The tendency to consider internationalisation as equivalent to intercultural communication has been observed before in the business discipline (see Green & Whitsed, 2015, p. 13). In my study, English medium programs developed intercultural communication skills in stand-alone modules, while Dutch medium programs attempted to develop these skills in conjunction with training for foreign language proficiency. In both cases, intercultural communication skills tended to be developed outside the business discipline, and therefore more as personal than as professional skills. The research, therefore, confirmed Green &

Whitsed's observation.

Internal obstacles and enablers

Internal obstacles and enablers can be distinguished at several levels: institution, faculty, and department/program. Misconceptions around internationalisation at home were encountered at all levels, but were most prevalent at program level, where teaching, learning, and assessment are designed.

Institutional level

At institutional level, strategies to support internationalisation-at-home policies were found lacking in most universities. In the Netherlands, Van Gaalen and Gielesen (2016, p. 54) found that few universities have strategies to support their institutional policy for internationalisation at home. There was also little evidence of universities monitoring internationalisation activities within programs of study. This is to some extent due to the particular nature of internationalisation at home, which can only be shaped in the disciplinary context of a program of study and, therefore, from the bottom up.

A key obstacle was the lack of institutional strategies for offering training or professional development in internationalisation of the home curriculum. While some universities offer training for teaching in an international classroom, there was generally no training for redesigning curricula with an aim to integrate international and intercultural dimensions.

A related obstacle was the lack of connection between key stakeholders in the internationalisation of teaching and learning, notably between specialists in didactics and educational developers on the one hand and in internationalisation experts on the other. Since the internationalisation of teaching and learning needs stakeholders in both fields, it is of paramount importance that expertise in both these fields is identified and combined. Action research brought to light that educational support of programs of study is organised very differently across universities, even within the same country. In some cases, educational developers were part of a teaching and learning centre at central level. In other cases, they were primarily assigned to faculties or to individual programs of study. In yet other cases no apparent infrastructure for educational development could be found at all. This confirms Carroll's view that institutions demonstrate a considerable variety in "curriculum design culture" (Carroll, 2015, p. pp. 102–103). This lack of connection between specialists in education and in internationalisation was found even when educational support was directly linked to a program of study.

The divide between the "silos" of education and internationalisation is demonstrated by critical voices on Dutch education's focus on employability skills; for example, Meester, Bergsen, and Kirschner (2017), who stress the importance of knowledge. They do this from an educational perspective without reference to the role of internationalisation in acquiring employability skills. This shows yet again that there are two parallel discourses on employability skills: one from the perspective of internationalisation and the other from the perspective of education.

The action research showed that faculties (as organisational units) presented an obstacle rather than an enabler to the process of curriculum internationalisation. They did not effectively transmit institutional views down to the programs of study, or operationalise them. The faculties' internationalisation plans did not offer much guidance since programs within faculties tend to be diverse enough to require very different contextualisations of internationalisation. Faculties did not offer opportunities for professional development for internationalisation either. In contrast, international officers in faculties were found to be key enablers since they understood the concept of internationalisation at home and had resources to work with lecturers in individual programs. However, their contributions were not systemic because they only had the opportunity to work with a few champions and the process was not supported by educational developers.

Program level

At program level, a key obstacle was the lack of specific and detailed input from

employers, as members of a program advisory board, on employability skills. While competencies had been discussed in general terms with these boards, employability skills and learning outcomes had not. A systemic obstacle was that lecturers were, generally, not included in opportunities to meet the advisory boards.

Another obstacle within programs was the lack of consistent intended learning outcomes (ILOs) that related to the added value of study abroad. During the action research, we initially looked if intended learning outcomes for internationalisation abroad (i.e., study or internship) could serve as a starting point for the discussion on learning outcomes for internationalisation at home. After all, it can be argued that if study abroad is considered an additional experience for some students, the outcomes of the home curriculum constitute the standard that all students should achieve. However, when we tried to determine how the added value of study abroad was described, we found that the learning outcomes were hardly related to professional skills. Instead, such learning outcomes for study abroad as there were focused on the development of personal skills. This was maybe to be expected in programs with an optional study abroad component, but it applied equally to international programs with compulsory study abroad.

This obstacle also raises the question as to what extent mobile students acquire employability skills purposefully; that is, through a guided trajectory that includes intended learning outcomes and assessment of the added value (beyond credits for disciplinary content). In other words, to what extent is the acquisition of these skills planned and purposeful?

It has been previously demonstrated that mobile students belong to a “cultural elite” (Saarikallio-Torp, & Wiers-Jenssen, 2010; King, Findlay, & Arens, 2010) with a mind-set that encourages them to go abroad. While studies such as the Erasmus Impact Study indicate that students demonstrate a range of transversal skills after their return, it may be possible that they had these skills before they left.

Another reason why outgoing mobility is not the most effective tool to acquire employability skills is that it reaches only a minority of students. Statistics Netherlands (2018) published data on credit mobility of Dutch students which show that, on average, 22% of students go abroad for study or internship of at least 15 credits. The respondents’ main reasons for not going abroad are “too expensive” and “other obligations.”

It can be argued that the home curriculum is a far better vehicle for the development of employability skills than study abroad, since the home curriculum extends over several years (as opposed to the usual six months or less for study abroad) and the home institution has control over the educational process, including intended learning outcomes and their assessment. It also allows for employability skills to be developed in the framework of disciplinary competencies rather than as personal attributes that are detached from the content of the program.

Personal obstacles and enablers

The PhD research was conducted within universities of applied sciences in which internships are an important component of study programs. Even lecturers who were involved in the supervision of internships had not previously reflected on the outcomes of a program of study in terms of employability skills. However, they were quite familiar with the concepts of graduate competencies (competence-based education was gradually introduced in Dutch universities of applied sciences from the mid-1990s). Lecturers were also familiar with the term “employability,” as they were with the terms “soft skills” and “21st-century skills”; however, there was a tendency to equate these terms with intercultural communication skills. The term “employability skills” was valued quite differently by lecturers across disciplines in universities of applied sciences, with business programs having a more positive association with the term than, for example programs in social work.

Contextualising broader concepts to the program of studies

In all disciplines, lecturers struggled with contextualising broader concepts to the program of studies. This certainly applied to the concept of internationalisation. Lecturers frequently remarked that their managers should be involved in the work so that they would “also understand what internationalisation really means.” Lecturers also expected that enhanced understanding of internationalisation would lead to managers being more involved and giving better direction to the process of curriculum internationalisation. The struggle with concepts was not limited to internationalisation but also occurred in relation to global citizenship, ethical responsibility, and other overarching concepts.

The action research on internationalising learning outcomes demonstrated a lack of experience in articulating learning outcomes in general. Even those lecturers who had followed the compulsory Basic Teaching Qualification Programme struggled to “craft” or rephrase intended learning outcomes and determine appropriate assessment.

It is here that we touch upon what actually constitutes the lack of skills and expertise that the Global Surveys consistently identify as one of the key obstacles to internationalisation (see Egron-Polak & Hudson, 2014, p. 68) but does not “unpack” beyond teaching in English. The action research demonstrated that this lack of skills has two components: “imagining” internationalisation and educational competencies for designing education. Both of these components are included in the conceptual model that is presented below.

Conceptual model

The PhD study led to an adaptation of the process model by Leask (2012). In the revised version (see Figure 16.1), the discussion on employability skills forms the beginning of the imagination phase, which concludes with the articulation of internationalised ILOs. This differs slightly from Leask’s model, as this has been moved forward from “revise and plan” to “imagination.” This adaptation establishes a direct alignment between employability skills and ILOs and makes lecturers the key actors in articulating ILOs, thus increasing their sense of ownership of learning outcomes.

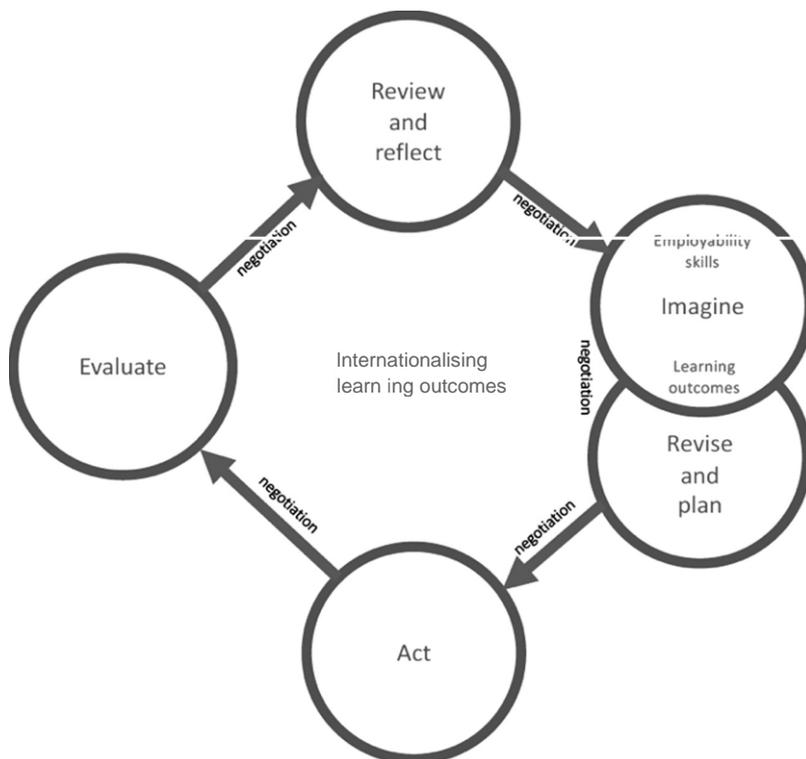


Figure 16.1 The process model by Leask (2012) adapted for Dutch universities of applied sciences.

Source: Adapted with permission Beelen (2017a, p. 229, Fig. 10.1).

This adaptation was made specifically for the context of business programs at Dutch universities of applied sciences but has since proved applicable in other contexts and disciplines.

Towards a guided trajectory for the implementation of employability skills

Building on the outcomes of the PhD study, the action research was subsequently extended to other universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Norway. In each of these universities, teams from a range of disciplines were involved, varying from engineering and information technology to social work. The trajectories were designed to last 8–10 months, with four to five full-day work sessions, alternating with Skype sessions in which the participants received feedback on learning outcomes, initially at program level and later at module level.

Going through the trajectories simultaneously with a number of teams (usually four to seven) from different disciplines was considered meaningful by the lecturers, who enjoyed comparing the work of the teams during the work sessions. Over time, teams developed different speeds, due to differences in resources, management engagement, and time and resources.

As in the PhD study, the continued action research filled the gap in professional development for internationalisation of home curricula. It also confirmed that universities of applied sciences have very different infrastructures to support educational development.

Overall, the initiative to internationalise the curricula of a number of pilot programs was taken by international officers, who felt responsible for giving internationalisation of teaching and learning an impulse. For international officers of continental European universities this is in itself not unusual, since they have a wide range of tasks with regard to internationalisation, ranging from management of mobility to policy development.

A trajectory in steps

Incorporating employability skills into the process of internationalising learning outcomes constituted a positive force in action research and was developed into the key aspect of the trajectory.

The principle was to reverse the traditional top-down approach to internationalising curricula, by which European, national, institutional, and faculty policies are all stacked on top of each other. Lecturers were generally not familiar with most of policies and felt pressured by the demands of all these policy levels. In the revised approach, postponing the discussion on institutional policies served to strengthen a bottom-up approach and challenge lecturers to assume responsibility for teaching and learning within their own program, and to consider themselves the “owners” of the internationalisation process.

On the basis of the outcomes of the action research, the following approach, in steps, was developed.

Step 1: Clarifying settings and processes

This step serves to determine the roles and positions of the participants. Key questions are, who to involve (management, international officers, and curriculum committees), how the process is resourced in terms of hours, whether the participants have volunteered, what information is available from alumni surveys or other external sources, and which relevant institutional documents should be taken into consideration at a later stage. A key issue is to what extent educational developers or quality assurance officers are involved to support lecturers. In this step, lecturers consider Sinek’s (2011) Golden Circle, an effective tool

for focusing on the “why” discussion first and to later guide the discussion to the “what” and finally into the “how.” In this adapted version from the original model, “what” represents the learning outcomes that include the international and intercultural dimensions that the program considers essential for its (future) graduates. The “how” represents the activities through which these learning outcomes are achieved.

Step 2: Introducing employability skills as a framework for imagination

This step focuses on external sources of information feeding into discussion on what the program wants to achieve, the type of graduates that it wants and needs to educate, and the external circumstances in which it operates.

As a point of orientation, drivers that reshape the workforce landscape (e.g., Davies, Fidler, & Gorbis, 2011) prove useful. This is because they are not very recent, and therefore provoke discussion on the extent to which they are still relevant for the program’s context. Connected to the drivers are Work skills 2020, which outlines the skills required to deal with these drivers. Reviewing these skills opens a conversation on employability skills and the ways in which international perspectives could enhance these skills. At this point, several sets of employability skills effectively drive home the message that lecturers have a choice. Specifically, they should not just adopt a particular set of skills but rather adapt existing sets or define their own versions.

The purpose of introducing lists of employability skills from outside of both the national and European context serves to highlight that these are topics that are being discussed across the globe, and also to urge lecturers to make a choice on the basis of their discipline and local context. In addition to the lists of employability skills, lecturers are encouraged to integrate as much available external input as possible. This can be international, national, regional, and local policy documents and reports; surveys of alumni and employers; and views of advisory boards.

At this stage, lecturers frequently struggle with imagining the professional field of their graduates in the future, which drives home the need to include learning outcomes for dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity. Another point of discussion is notions of professional ethics and contextualising the concept of global citizenship to the program, so that these can be developed as an integrated professional dimension and not only a personal one.

Step 3: From employability skills to program learning outcomes (PLOs)

The next step is to merge employability skills into existing program learning outcomes (PLOs), as a step towards internationalising the module learning outcomes (MLOs) and their assessment.

Dutch programs at universities of applied sciences have national profiles with a jointly agreed-upon set of competencies. Although individual programs are free to modify these graduate competencies, lecturers (and managers) may feel reluctant to add international or intercultural dimensions to existing competencies.

They may fear that this can lead to issues with accreditation and, therefore, may not be prepared to suggest changes to these competencies.

The focus on complying with nationally agreed-upon standards may lead to reluctance in choosing a profile that distinguishes the program from similar programs at other universities. Even when such national profiles do not exist, lecturers still find it difficult to pinpoint what sets their program apart from others.

Step 4: From PLOs to module learning outcomes (MLOs)

This step involves deriving learning outcomes for semesters and modules from the PLOs in a process of “reverse engineering.” In some cases, it is helpful to first determine the learning outcomes per semester and sequence them in leading up to the PLOs. It can then be determined which of the modules within that semester would be the best learning environments for achieving the semester learning outcomes.

At this stage, it is important to get rid of meaningless phrasings such as “in an international context” or “(inter)national” as they make it difficult to assess

achievement of MLOs. Another key point of attention is to discuss “awareness” versus “competence” and to make sure that skills are described as the application of knowledge rather than as just knowledge. ILOs that focus on knowledge, with “knows” as active verb could well be replaced by ILOs that specify “apply knowledge.”

Step 5: Zero-assessment

This step involves a scan of current MLOs to determine to what extent these already meet the desired outcomes. This involves a comparison of the PLOs that were newly derived from the PLOs with the current MLOs.

This step also involves an analysis of current learning activities and the extent to which they actually contribute to achieving MLOs. The Program Logic Worksheet (see Deardorff, 2015, p. 121) is a meaningful tool in this step as it guides lecturers to distinguish input, activities, output, outcomes, and impact. Particularly, the distinction between output and outcomes is a key point of discussion. This represents the difference between the student’s product (the output) and what they learn from making this product (the outcome).

Step 6: Plan of action

The final step involves drawing up a plan of action, which outlines which modules need to be (re)developed in order to achieve the rephrased MLOs. A key discussion point at this stage is how the action plan will be presented to the management of the program. The action plan provides managers with the opportunity to select lecturers to contribute to the development beyond the champions of internationalisation and “usual suspects.” Support of educational developers should be an integral part of the plan of action as assessment of internationalised ILOs can be considered the essence of the learning and the internationalisation process.

A point of consideration is whether the plan should include the articulation of session learning outcomes (SLOs) – that is, learning outcomes for each of the sessions that constitute a module. Some lecturers may resist SLOs as they feel these limit their flexibility in teaching and hold them accountable more than they feel comfortable with. Others may welcome them as providing clarity on the contribution of each session to achievement of the MLOs, particularly when a module is taught by several lecturers.

Conclusions

The trajectory described above is time consuming and requires intensive support to guide the process. On the other hand, the added value is considerable.

Working on internationalising learning outcomes for employability leads not only to fundamental discussions on the future of the profession, but also on the ambitions and current educational practices of the program. Rephrasing learning outcomes, therefore, has a meaning beyond internationalisation and contributes to the overall quality of education in the program.

Integrating employability skills into curriculum design and ensuring that they are included in PLOs and MLOs is a complicated process that involves many stakeholders. The contribution of educational developers is crucial for this process. Little is known about how educational developers engage with internationalisation of curricula outside the Anglophone world (for the UK see Killick, 2018) and with the role of internationalisation in enhancing employability skills. More research is required to find out what knowledge and inspiration they need to be able to fulfil their role effectively.