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# INTERNATIONALISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH A 'CRITICAL EVENT' NARRATIVE INQUIRY: PERSPECTIVES FROM THREE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS

PATRICIE MERTOVA

## **Abstract**

*This paper discusses a study of senior academics' perspectives on internationalisation in three higher education systems: Czech, English and Australian which utilised a critical event narrative inquiry method. It gives a brief background on the origins of the current focus on internationalisation in higher education. It outlines the trends and dimensions. Further, it explains the research method utilised in this study – a critical event narrative inquiry method. The paper outlines the different types of critical events drawn from interviews conducted with senior academics in the three higher education systems. And finally, the overall findings of the research study are summarised drawing out general/common (not specific to any one HE system) and culture-specific (unique to an individual HE system) aspects/issues within their higher education contexts of internationalisation highlighted in the critical events described by academics.*

## **Keywords**

*higher education, internationalisation, senior academic perspectives, critical events, narrative inquiry*

## Introduction

Internationalisation has been on the agendas of higher education institutions around the world as one of the key drivers for some time. Internationalisation as a phenomenon in higher education has developed over the past three decades (Van der Wende and Westerheijden, 2001). This timeline is relevant particularly for Anglophone and Western European higher education systems. This trend appeared in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries a bit later: around a decade ago. In the CEE region, it was instigated particularly through the European Union's so-called Bologna Process which was utilised very differently across the signatory countries.

This paper reports on research which investigated senior academics' perspectives on internationalisation in three higher education systems: Czech, Australian and English. The research focused on these particular perspectives based on previous research indicating that senior academics (such as heads of schools/departments and associate deans academic) play significant roles in instigating and implementing change in higher education and yet they are often 'neglected' (Bell, 2004; Anderson & Johnson 2006; Green & Mertova, 2010). This research utilised a *critical event* narrative inquiry method. The research was instigated partly by a previous study investigating quality in higher education, where particularly Czech academics drew a direct link between quality enhancement and internationalisation (Mertova, 2008), and partly also by literature indicating a lack of research on academic perceptions of internationalisation (Dewey and Duff, 2009). Although the study investigated internationalisation and quality, internationalisation was the dominant focus, and thus this article will mainly focus on academic's perceptions of internationalisation. The following section outlines the understandings of internationalisation broadly relevant to the research.

### Internationalisation in higher education

Internationalisation in higher education is a phenomenon which has become a widespread and strategically significant aspect of higher education (Van der Wende & Westerheijden, 2001) over the past three decades. Internationalisation was pioneered particularly in the Anglophone higher education systems, such as the USA, UK and Australia.

Throughout the 1990s, significant shifts in foreign policies, particularly in the Anglophone countries, have occurred where education started being treated as an export commodity. Prior to that, education 'exported' overseas was primarily seen as a development activity or cultural programme.

This change has led to a search for effective ways of improving the quality of provision, and thus maintaining a 'competitive edge' (Knight, 2004). This was also a point where the links between internationalisation and quality started being more consciously developed. Internationalisation in Czech higher education started being forged more systematically, particularly on the mobility front, in the early 2000s (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2001a; Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2001b). Internationalisation in Czech higher education and in other CEE countries was instigated particularly by the EU's so-called Bologna Process.

Internationalisation has always existed in higher education, despite renewed attention to this phenomenon, only perhaps more utilitarian and politicised meanings and values have been ascribed to it in more recent times. In some form, universities have always been influenced by social, cultural and physical (the 'wandering' scholar) movements which have given them the ability not to confine themselves within particular spatial boundaries (Van Damme, 2001). However, there have been some notable exceptions which relate to this research – for instance, the universities in undemocratic political systems, such as the former Communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe, where these spatial boundaries were firmly closed for over forty years (between the late 1940s and 1980s).

For the purposes of the broad focus of the research, Van Damme's (2001) outline of the forms of internationalisation was utilised. According to him, internationalisation incorporates the following forms:

- Student mobility – includes outgoing as well as incoming students;
- Teaching staff mobility;
- Internationalisation of curricula;
- Branch campuses – Van Damme indicated that this phenomenon is more widespread among Anglophone countries;
- Institutional cooperation agreements and networks – this includes collaboration between universities as not a particularly new phenomenon, as well as institutional cooperation in the field of teaching as a relatively recent one.

Knight (2004) described four different dimensions of internationalisation, which were perceived as complementary. They are the following:

- *Activity* dimension – internationalisation as specific activities or programmes, this perception was associated with internationalisation in the 1970s and 1980s;
- *Competency* dimension – internationalisation in terms of the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of the students;
- *Ethos* dimension – relates to the culture and climate of the organisation to support particular principles and goals;

- *Process* dimension – relates to an integration of international, intercultural and global aspects into academic programmes as well as guiding policies and procedures within the institution.

Australian and English academics who participated in the present study referred to all the forms and dimensions of internationalisation. Czech academics referred largely to student and staff mobility and the *activity* dimension of Knight's definition. The explanation for this may be perhaps less extensive experience with internationalisation within the Czech tertiary context but also the particular cultural, historical, political and socio-economic context. The following section describes the methodology utilised in the study.

### Methodology

The research project was conducted in the form of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with senior academics in English, Australian and Czech higher education. The project involved 81 interviews: 30 in England (30% female), 36 in Australia (47% female) and 15 in the Czech Republic (20% female). In terms of the overall numbers, 29 interviewees were female (36%) and 52 male. No conclusions can be drawn concerning gender representation in senior academic positions among the three countries, due to the relatively small sample of participants. Nevertheless, there may be a slight indication of the female representation at the senior academic and leadership levels within the three systems. The interview participants represented disciplines of Education, Higher Education, Law, History, English, English Literature, Classics, Philosophy, Australian Studies, Political Science, Sociology, Psychology, Media Studies, Geography, Business and Economics, Medicine, Engineering, Maths, Physics and Chemistry. The broadest range of disciplines was covered at the most senior management level, at the faculty and school/department levels; the disciplines represented were mostly focused on humanities, arts and social science disciplines. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The research was conducted between June 2010 and June 2011. The researcher recorded the interviews; these were subsequently transcribed and analysed extracting critical events in professional practice of the interviewees. The interviewees were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Interview data was analysed utilising a qualitative research method – a *critical event* narrative inquiry method. The essence of the method is in identification of *critical events* in professional practice of individuals; in this case it was the academics. The identification of *critical events* was negotiated between the researcher, interviewees and at least two independent researchers.

A *critical event* is an event which would have a significant impact on professional practice of, for instance, an academic. Such an event might have entirely or considerably changed the academic's perception of their professional practice, or even their worldview. A *critical event* can only be identified retrospectively, and such an event would have happened in an unplanned and unstructured manner. The causes of a *critical event* might be 'internal' or 'external' to the professional practice of an individual, or entirely personal. A *critical event* has a unique, illustrative and confirmatory nature in relation to an investigated phenomenon. *Critical events* in professional practice of academics in the present research were elicited through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with the individuals.

According to the degree of significance and unique characteristics, *critical events* in professional practice of academics were further distinguished as *critical*, *like* and *other* events. Narratives that were collected through narrative inquiry interviews were then analysed and events in them were identified as *critical*, *like* and *other*.

A *critical event* is an event which has been selected because of its unique, illustrative and confirmatory nature in relation to the studied phenomenon. An event which has a similar level of significance as a *critical event*, but is not as unique as the critical event, and which further illustrated, confirmed and/or repeated the experience of the critical event is referred to as a *like* event. A review of the *like* events is useful in confirming and/or broadening issues arising from the critical event (Webster, 1998). *Critical* and *like* events are distinguished according to the criteria outlined in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1  
*Features of a 'critical' event in professional practice*

Feature	Presence/ absence
a) Has a major impact on people involved	√
b) Is unplanned and unanticipated	√
c) Is only identified after the event	√
d) May have life-changing consequences	√ x
e) May reveal patterns of well-defined stages	√ x
f) May be intensely personal with strong emotional involvement	√ x

[Note: √ indicates presence; x indicates absence]

Table 2  
*Features of a 'like' event in professional practice*

Feature	Presence/ absence
a) Has a major impact on people involved	x
b) Is unplanned and unanticipated	√ x
c) Is only identified after the event	√
d) May have life-changing consequences	x
e) May reveal patterns of well-defined stages	x
f) May be intensely personal with strong emotional involvement	x
Additional features	Presence
aa) Not as unique (as critical event)	√
ab) Repeats and/or illustrates experience (of critical event)	√

[Note: √ indicates presence; x indicates absence]

Further, confirmatory event/s that may or may not have taken place at the same time as the *critical* and/or *like* events are referred to as *other* event/s. Typically, such events relate to other background information which may have revealed the same or related issues. The criteria which distinguish *other* events are described in Table 3 below. These *other* events are interwoven in the analysis of the *critical* and *like* events (Webster, 1998). *Critical*, *like* and *other* events may occur within the narrative of a single interview, but more often would occur across a number of different interviews.

Table 3  
*Features of 'other' event in professional practice*

Feature	Presence/ absence
a) Has a major impact on people involved	x
b) Is unplanned and unanticipated	√ x
c) Is only identified after the event	√ x
d) May have life-changing consequences	x
e) May reveal patterns of well-defined stages	x
f) May be intensely personal with strong emotional involvement	x
Additional features	Presence
aaa) Further background information	√

[Note: √ indicates presence; x indicates absence]

Distinguishing *critical*, *like* and *other* events provides a way of approaching the complexity and extent of data that is typically collected using qualitative research methods. A common question in qualitative research is how to manage the amount of collected data. The identification and distinguishing of individual events provides one way to assist the researcher in this (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

#### *Limitations of the study*

There were a number of limitations to the study. These limitations largely do not bear on the actual research method. Firstly, the limited time (and resources) had an impact on the number and range of institutions covered in the research. Related to this, there was not enough scope in the study to consider distinctions in approaches to internationalisation and quality of different types of institutions in the three higher education systems (e. g., “old” vs “new”, post-92 institutions, former polytechnic) institutions in the English system; “research-intensive”, Go8 universities vs the “technology network” vs “regional” etc. in Australia, and “metropolitan” vs “regional” institutions in the Czech system). Further, there was not enough scope to have a representative sample of the widest range of disciplines; and the widest range of disciplines occurred only among the most senior institutional leaders. Another limitation might have been the predominant focus on senior academics and leaders, which was explained earlier. Finally, Czech academics and leaders were generally less responsive to invitations to participate in the research.

### **Critical events in academic narratives**

As was mentioned above, according to the level of criticality, *critical events* can be distinguished as *critical*, *like* and *other*. This section will give examples of the range of events from the three higher education systems to help illustrate the types of events. Not all academic narratives contained all types of *critical events*. Academics are referred to by pseudonyms to protect their identities.

#### *Critical events*

James [an English professor; discipline – education; tertiary experience – over 30 years] referred to a *critical event*, his first sabbatical abroad, and he referred to this as *internationalising himself* when he spent a month in Malaysia and nine months in Australia. He referred to this experience as a “major turning point” in his career and explained that “it wasn’t the specific stuff –



I wrote an important paper but it was just brought in my mind that there was a much bigger world out there” and he went on to say that he has developed “lots of ongoing work in Malaysia. The Australian one – that’s absolutely ongoing, I have lots of good contacts there, so lots of collaborations with Australia.”

James also experienced a second *critical* event which related to a capacity building project in an institute of education on the Indian subcontinent which was undertaken by his current department. This experience introduced him to a different and much more professional set of practices than he was used to from his previous institutions.

Although James’s *critical* events relate back to the professional, they predominantly highlight the cultural aspects of these events. James very likely would not have been able to reflect on his professional practices in such a way, had he not had these experiences. In his story, James has also referred to an *other* event related to the lack of foreign language proficiency among the majority of his English colleagues (certainly within his discipline of education); the event is outlined later on.

Mark [a senior Australian academic; disciplines – anthropology and sociology; tertiary experience – over 20 years] for many years travelled extensively through Asia, the Pacific and India and during that time he experienced a *critical event* or even a series, as he spoke of experiences which had been highly significant in his life. In his words: “I had to face who I was ...and they [the experiences] spoke to me about difference, similarities, the importance of language, to be able to handle one’s fears, uncertainties in sometimes quite difficult situations; they also made me appreciate learning, the need to learn from others; I probably also had the advantage of studying anthropology, when I started initially, and anthropology gave me that terrific breadth of understanding culture and then I saw some of those changes away from traditional anthropology towards much more critical anthropology...”

Mark’s series of *critical* events also involved cultural aspects and engaged him as a human being. These then subsequently impacted his professional practices later on.

Krystian [very senior Czech university executive; disciplines – history and political science; tertiary experience – over 20 years] remembered a *critical* event which he experienced in the Communist era in the 1980s when he attended an underground university which was run through a series of lectures and seminars organised in private flats in his home town. These were secretly organised for 6 years until 1989. They were given by outstanding British philosophers, political philosophers and sociologists. And this experience gave him so much more than a study at a communist university: “for the first time, I’ve experienced a very different form of debate and freedom of opinion and this has in some ways significantly shaped my future academic and research direction.”

Krystian referred to another *critical* event which although it repeated some of the features of the previous event, incorporated all the features of criticality in a very different context and focusing more on cultural than professional aspects. In 1990, he spent some time at a German university. Although the professional aspects were quite important, the cultural context and differences were much more important for him, as he said that it was the notions of “strangeness and loneliness in a cultural context where he understood the language perfectly but did not understand the humor and other subtleties.” Such experiences, he believed, were not possible to pass on without the actual experience.

Krystian’s first *critical* event did involve enhancement of pedagogical practices, although there was a strong underlying political and cultural context. In his second *critical* event, the professional played a more superficial part and Krystian highlighted the cultural aspects of his experience.

#### *Like events*

Anna [a senior Australian academic; disciplines – history and English literature; tertiary experience –over 20 years] described a *like* event which was situated in her current institution. The event involved her teaching a course on postgraduate supervision and delivering a module on Indigenous issues. Anna understood internationalisation in its broadest sense to include indigenisation within the Australian context. She invited an Indigenous colleague to talk about Indigenous knowledge and bringing that into the university as a discipline and one participant stood up and said: “I’m not sure that this belongs in the university, I mean plumbing isn’t taught in the university, is it?” Anna was astounded at the arrogance and the lack of understanding about history, culture and indigenisation and she believed that such an attitude to Indigenous knowledge would be similarly reflected in the academics’ attitudes to e. g., Eastern knowledge, African knowledge, South American knowledge etc. This event repeated Anna’s previous critical event experience also related to Indigenous education.

Claudia [a senior English academic; discipline – education; tertiary experience – over 30 years] experienced a *like* event when she worked at an Australian university and the dean of her faculty came to her and told her: “you are going to fly to Malaysia, deliver a course within a week and then you’ll fly back” and she agreed but requested that: “I fly out a week before so that I can look at their teaching and adapt my teaching accordingly and then I want to stay the week after so that I can evaluate how they’ve perceived my teaching”. The dean disagreed, so Claudia refused to travel to Malaysia. She was outraged at the arrogance but also a certain naivety in totally disregarding the cultural context. This event repeated some of Claudia’s experiences from the start of her career.

Marek [senior Czech university leader; discipline – sociology; tertiary experience – over 20 years] discussed one of his sabbaticals spent overseas as a significant moment in his academic career. This event repeated some of the features of his previous time spent overseas, this event was mainly professionally focused.

Both Anna's and Claudia's *like* events underlined the significance of the cultural contexts impacting on their pedagogical practices. Marek highlighted mainly his own professional development.

#### *Other events*

Richard [a senior Czech academic and administrator; discipline – English language and literature; tertiary experience – over 30 years] discussed an *other* event related to internationalisation in a large research-intensive university in the Czech Republic. He perceived internationalisation as linked to a number of aspects of quality. One aspect that was being debated in his institution concerned the approaches to gaining more international students through delivering educational programmes either in Czech or in English. Such a language aspect, for instance, would not represent a significant quality measure in the Anglophone systems, as a great majority of, if not all, programmes offered to foreign students would be delivered in English. Richard further outlined how the language of delivery would be strongly related to offering programmes to particular groups of international students:

- 1) Programmes delivered in Czech would be targeted at Central and Eastern European students who would be able to master Czech with the help of a short language course (as they would be mainly speakers of other Slavonic languages);
- 2) Programmes delivered in English would be targeted more at other overseas students mainly from the 'Western world.'

Richard pointed out that insisting on delivering programmes only in Czech was related to a kind of 'self-satisfied' attitude among some Czech academics who felt that the quality of their programmes did not need further improvement. The delivery of programmes in English was, however, associated with certain 'fears' of some academics that weaknesses in the content and style of delivery of their programmes (normally taught in Czech) would be revealed by offering these in English, as at that point these programmes would be more easily comparable to other similar programmes delivered in English in other higher education systems around the world. Therefore, the academic believed that the aspect of the language of delivery was felt as a powerful quality measure in his institution.

Alexandra's other event [Australian university senior leader; discipline – human geography; tertiary experience – over 20 years] related to learning languages in the Anglophone context. She highlighted the significance for her university staff, even at the administrative level, to learn other languages and her university were offering courses in other languages for these people. Alexandra believed that languages other than English had a vital role to play in internationalising endeavors.

The *other* event described by James related to learning foreign languages among English academics. He acknowledged that being in Europe, it was absolutely vital to learn other languages, although he regretted that he has not done so himself. He related his situation to many other British academics of whom it is fairly “typical that they don't speak any other European languages or not to the level one could work in; related to the educational system which is English oriented, so it takes you around the English-speaking world, and leaves you actually blind to Europe.”

A great majority of the different types of events described by the academics above have involved them in a reflection on their professional practices as impacted by cultural and contextual difference. Their experiences and reflections were intertwined throughout their professional practices. The Czech academic, Marek, was the only one who did not engage in a deeper reflection. His experience was relatively typical of the majority of senior Czech academics interviewed for this project. His lack of reflection might have been caused by his relatively limited range of experiences in internationalisation and perhaps also his subject area. The explanation for this may be perhaps less extensive experience with internationalisation within Czech tertiary institutions caused by the cultural, socio-economic, political and historical context. Krystian's and Richard's life trajectories were perhaps slightly unusual for the Czech context which enabled them to be more reflective, with Krystian being involved in an underground university and Richard having been born and educated in Canada.

### Overall research findings

Eliciting *critical events*, the study uncovered a number of *general/common* aspects in internationalising HE and *culture-specific* aspects particular to the individual HE systems. These relate to the above examples of events but also more broadly to events described by other senior academics who have taken part in the study.

The *general/common* aspects included:

1. Concern about the hegemony of the English language; the lack of knowledge of other languages flattening the experiences of cultural,

historical and social contexts (e.g., in relation to researching particular topics). This was also previously highlighted for example by Marginson (2007) and Green & Mertova (2010);

2. Adopting Western pedagogies and approaches without considering the local contexts does not necessarily improve practices (may e.g., result in so-called ‘reverse cultural shock’ – related to students studying within very different cultural contexts and returning to their native countries);
3. The need for academics to have had the *critical event* type of experiences related to internationalisation (not necessarily always in an HE/academic context) and their ability to step back, reflect on and learn from these experiences to be able to utilise them in their pedagogical and other practices;
4. The *critical event* experience is important in terms of internationalising the academic ‘Self’ (Sanderson, 2008), i.e., developing themselves as *global citizens* to be able to pass that experience on to their students and to encourage gaining such experience.

The *culture-specific* aspects included:

1. Fairly direct positive link between internationalisation and quality enhancement drawn by many Czech academics in the study;
2. Internationalisation understood mainly as student and staff outward mobility in the Czech context;
3. Pressure on publishing in English for ranking/prestige reasons may lead to demise of subject terminology in less dominant and minor languages;
4. Internationalisation as an aspect of quality enhancement in Czech higher education related to the introduction of programmes in the English language;
5. A form of internationalisation as quality enhancement strategy in the Czech context through attracting elite students from neighboring Slavonic countries (e.g., Slovakia, Russia etc) to study in Czech alongside Czech students;
6. Within the Australian context, indigenisation of teaching and learning as a broader understanding of internationalisation (related to developing intercultural competencies in staff and students); difficulties and resistance related to the lack of ‘moral skill’ and ‘moral will’ (Schwartz, 2013).

## Conclusions and reflections

In terms of internationalising themselves, academics across three higher education systems (as also outlined in the above examples of events described by academics) highlighted the notions of: *being challenged, put into a very different context, being taken out of their comfort zone, being able to accept and accommodate difference, being able to listen and learn* which were perhaps the key ingredients enabling the academics to step back, reflect and utilise their experiences in their pedagogical practices. The academics also believed that the cultural context matters – either in adopting (Czech HE) or proposing (English and Australian HE) particular pedagogical or other institutional models. Czech academics perceived internationalisation as a quality enhancement strategy either through the need to improve their own teaching material when required to teach their courses in English (with some parallels in other non-English speaking countries), and be thus more open to external criticism, or through bringing in elite students from neighboring Slavonic countries.

The Czech academics perhaps had the least experience with a broader range of forms of internationalisation among the three groups which might explain the rather uncritical and unreflective attitudes towards internationalisation among some of them. This may to a degree also be explained by the particular cultural, historical, political and socio-economic context of the Czech Republic as a conservative, relatively monocultural country with a very low mobility of the population, including the academic population. In comparison, English and Australian academics were more skeptical and critical of internationalisation and its relations to quality which could be ascribed to their particular cultural, historical and political circumstances which some academics discussed in detail. Czech academics mainly perceived internationalisation as student and staff mobility (there may be some parallels with other, e.g., European higher education systems). Very few Czech academics discussed transformations in teaching and learning; and if they did, these were mainly related to transformation of teaching methods and techniques, which would also require change in attitudes to some degree. Australian and English academics focused more on the level of attitudes and values.

For a whole host of reasons, internationalisation of higher education is here to stay as a complex, multi-layered process in progress. As was indicated through the range of *critical events*, a great majority of academics within the three examined systems have pointed to the complexities of developing international and intercultural competencies related to their personal lives and academic trajectories but also the particular historical, cultural, political and socio-economic features of the higher education systems within which they operated, highlighting some important aspects of internationalisation in higher education and sounding some warnings when considering adopting certain practices from different cultural contexts.

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