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Responding to Twenty-first Century Societal Trends through Nurturing Globally Competent Citizens

Abstract

Higher education institutions play an active role in addressing and responding to twenty-first century societal trends. The two main factors, which have transformed the way we live and work are globalization and technological advancements. Consequently, global competence became imperative in twenty-first century. As evident from scholarly literature, global competency is the currency in today's world, which includes the capacity to view life from different perspectives, to value diversity, to engage in multicultural interactions and to have skills to respectfully navigate in the complex inter-connected world. Higher education has an important role to play in nurturing globally competent citizens with a critical worldview and the above-mentioned abilities. Considering the importance of this topic and the scarcity of literature grounded in South African context, the scope of this paper is to explore the development of globally competent citizens in selected South African higher education institutions. Employing document analysis method, this qualitative project investigated to what extent higher education institutions positioned themselves to address twenty-first century societal trends. Special attention was paid to competencies of globally competent citizens, educators' role in developing global competence and HEIs response to twenty-first century trends. Based on the findings, recommendations are provided on how higher education institutions may maximize development of globally competent citizens.

Keywords: higher education, global competence, globally competent citizens, twenty-first century trends

Introduction

The twenty-first century brought many changes and with them opportunities and challenges. We learn from literature that South African higher education institutions (HEIs) are not effectively adapting to these changes, hence graduates are not developing global competencies required to thrive in the twenty-first century. Consequently, detrimental social and economic ramifications follow. Reade et al. (2013) warn that this is problematic because individuals who do not possess the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to be globally competent will hinder their own employability, leadership skills and their ability to make a positive impact on the world.

Globalisation as a twenty-first century trend is not only creating new realities, it is also creating new rules in which to prosper (financially, socially, and academically). Thriving in new realities and under new rules will depend on the individual's ability to understand and adapt to political, social, cultural, and economic situations. OECD (2019) reported that globalisation has a major impact on other twenty-first century trends; as a result, it is imperative for education systems and globalisation to be linked. This can be accomplished by the development of

learners' global competencies through their engagement in interpreting local, global, and intercultural issues as well as promoting values and attitudes that encourage sustainable consumption of resources. Learners need to understand that their personal engagements and decisions of their countries impact other places, which Jooste and Heleta (2017) described as being globally literate.

Todd (2017) defined global competence as the ability to understand and react to global trends. This includes having the ability to scrutinize the world, acknowledge own views as well as to convey and act upon own ideas, perspectives, and research. Hughes (2014) described global competence as a conscious attempt to understanding cultural norms and expectations of different individuals. Globally competent individuals are informed about current global trends and issues, have their own perspectives, and can communicate with different individuals (Kopish, Shahri & Amira, 2019). It is important to clarify that developing globally competent citizens is essential for each nation not only because such citizens can be employed globally but because such citizens can function effectively also in their own, often diverse nation. For instance, South Africa is one of the most diverse and complex nations with 11 official languages.

As evident in the scholarly literature, education should be an essential tool that society employs to regulate and direct change. Therefore, the education system, its structure, curriculum, and academic functions should meet global standards. Steyn and Wolhuter (2014) argue that South Africa's HEIs need to meet global standards especially in terms of employability, sustainability, and cross-cultural engagement. According to Tjønneland (2017), however, achieving global standards may be problematic for South African HEIs since universities have experienced several protests calling for free tertiary education and decolonisation of HEIs curriculum and structures. Tjønneland (2017) argued that the associated strikes are a response to the failure of HEIs to transform and change. In addition to the protests, other social challenges such as inequalities, discrimination, high unemployment rates and poverty also constitute obstacles in achieving global standards. One way to respond to the above-mentioned changes and challenges is to develop citizens who are globally competent (Programme for International Student Assessment, 2018). Global competence can ensure employability, thus reduce unemployment, poverty and poor economic growth. Global competence encourages actions that are respectful and sustainable, which in turn have potential to reduce discrimination, promote cross cultural engagement and sustainability.

Employing document analysis method, the purpose of this qualitative research project was to explore the development of globally competent citizens in South African HEIs. The overall project investigated to what extent South African HEIs positioned themselves to address twenty-first century societal trends. Considering the length constraints, this paper will address the following: competencies of globally competent citizens, educators' role in developing global competence, and HEIs response to twenty-first century trends.

Research methodology

This qualitative research study employed document analysis method. Bowen (2009) described a document analysis as a methodical process that entails reviewing, examining, and evaluating documents to gain understanding and meaning.

Furthermore, document analysis is used to supplement other research methods, but can also be effective as an individual method. This research study employed purposeful sampling since a random selection of documents may have produced inconclusive and inconsistent results. Documents were purposively selected from the top five universities in South Africa according to their relevance, authenticity, and credibility (Nieuwenhuis, 2020). It is also essential to note that to undertake a document analysis, applicable data must be accessible (Yavuz, 2016). All selected documents were freely available on the internet and the universities' official website. The top universities were selected according to the QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) University Rankings 2019. The QS BRICS ranking was established in 2013 with the aim of highlighting prominent universities in the five major evolving economies of the BRICS countries. Furthermore, the QS BRICS ranking system was used for this research study because QS specializes in the analysis of HEIs and is trusted globally (Lumpur, 2019). To locate relevant documents, the researcher ran searches for specific keywords within the universities' official websites assuming that these institutions would be well versed in development of globally competent citizens. In addition, complimentary documents were selected to address the research questions. Initially, 54 documents were collected from the years 2010-2020 then 25 documents were selected for analysis in this article. The analysed documents can be classified as public records and physical evidence (Triad, 2016).

A detailed and systematic manual colour coding process of the text was followed to code the 25 documents that were selected for the purpose of this research study. The researcher initiated the coding process with open coding, followed by axial coding and continued with selective coding. Through the systematic coding process, a total of 61 open codes were identified, which involved breaking up the data into relevant parts. Next, axial coding occurred by examining the relationship between concepts and categories created during open coding (Kaiser & Presmeg, 2016). Axial codes were created using the words core category, casual conditions, context, intervening strategy and actions and consequences as headings. Then, through revisiting and refining the open and axial codes, twelve selective codes emerged, which were then categorized into three main themes that informed this paper.

Findings

The results for each theme are reported collectively based on all analyzed documents. It was not our intention to compare the effectiveness of each institution against the other but rather to evaluate overall situation and focus on an effective way forward.

Abilities of globally competent citizens

As per collective description in various documents, globally competent citizens possess the ability to respond to employability, technology, globalisation, sustainability, climate change, the fourth industrial revolution and migration as twenty-first century trends. These trends present citizens with many opportunities, however, not without challenges. The overall purpose of global competence is to

effectively respond to twenty-first century trends in a sustainable and inclusive manner. Additionally, globally competent citizens must be able to identify and cope with potential conflicts or disagreements between people and institutions. To respond to societal trends, reduce their damage and harness these societal forces for good, will require citizens with a special set of skills. In other words, if countries are to thrive in a sustainable manner, the development of globally competent citizens will need to be prioritized.

Global competence is a complex, multidimensional concept which contains systematic objectives. In the analysed documents, the objectives of global competence have been reconstructed and presented as dimensions. Some documents showcased four dimensions while other documents only three dimensions. Furthermore, the different dimensions of global competence contain a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes globally competent citizens must strive to develop. The following are the four dimensions illustrating knowledge, skills and attitudes required:

1. The ability to investigate local and global issues. Higher order thinking and the selection of appropriate knowledge sources are required to form an opinion about a local or global issue.
2. The attitude of openness, responsibility, and respect for numerous perspectives. Globally competent citizens understand and acknowledge the viewpoints of other citizens that may be different from their own.
3. The ability to engage in effective cross-cultural communication. Communication (written or verbal) is meant to respectfully share views and look for common ground not conflict.
4. The goal to make informed decisions and take sustainable actions. The action taken by globally competent citizens improves the conditions of others, themselves, and the planet. The action does not have to be global; the local environment is equally important and more realistic for most citizens.

For a citizen to be globally competent, all the above-mentioned dimensions of global competence should be harnessed. It is also important for globally competent citizens to have the ability to:

1. Identify and challenge their own and others cultural, gender and racial stereotypes and biases.
2. Make informed decisions in their daily lives using the knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes they have acquired.
3. Ask questions before making assumptions about other citizen's cultures, history, and beliefs.
4. Disagree respectfully with others. Globally competent citizens view disagreements as the opportunity to add to their own perspective, instead of seeing it as a threat or a source of conflict.
5. Display empathy, value human dignity and cultural diversity.
6. Work with diverse groups towards a common objective.

It is important to recognize that the twenty-first century has created changes in employment. Jobs that involve repetitive tasks or scripted reactions are being done through automation and computers. In addition, businesses are becoming multinational organizations, requiring employees to work with people in different parts of the world. Simply having a degree does not make a graduate employable.

The changes of the twenty-first century call for employees who are globally competent and thus able to capitalize on the opportunities offered.

HEIs response to twenty-first century trends

HEIs in South Africa have effectively adapted their curriculum, resources, and strategic planning to cope with the changes of the twenty-first century. HEIs prioritize their response to three twenty-first century trends. Firstly, they dedicate their planning and resources to develop a knowledge society. Statistics within the analysed documents indicate that the number of citizens engaged in postgraduate studies is increasing. Furthermore, the quality and quantity of research has also shown promising progress. In addition, all South African HEIs are improving their enrolment rates. However, it is important to recognize that about 55% of students in South African HEIs do not complete their studies. Secondly, HEIs are continuously balancing the demographic dynamics of staff and students to be inclusive of diversity in terms of race, class, language, and gender profile of South Africa. Lastly, HEIs are involving all staff, students, and faculties in education for sustainable development initiatives. It is evident that institutions are aware of their responsibility to respond to all twenty-first century trends in a sustainable manner. In addition, South African HEIs are making efforts to address local as well as global challenges, through research and innovation.

Education systems play an important role in educating citizens about global developments that affect the world and their lives. Yet, educators are the key players who with support of management should play an active role in supporting and promoting global competence.

Educators' role in developing global competence

Education for global competence does not require new subjects to be integrated into the curriculum. Nor does it require exceptional teachers and an abundance of resources. Educators can develop the global competencies of their learners without the use of elaborate resources using four strategies: Firstly, subjects that are already being taught can be expanded to include a global dimension. Secondly, educators can integrate a topic broadcasted on the news into their lesson. Thirdly, educators can use learner-centered pedagogy to create a safe environment for learners to engage with controversial local and global issues. Lastly, any of the dimensions of global competence can be integrated into the lesson. In addition to the aforesaid, learners also need to have a say in their own learning. Therefore, educators should act as facilitators; continuously enable critical thinking by probing for more perspectives and deeper responses.

The successful implementation of global competence will depend on quality of educators' training. In other words, educators cannot teach what they do not know. Thus, through ongoing support from educational leaders, educators need to keep developing their own global competence and expand their teaching methodologies to nurture global competence within their learners. Furthermore, educators engaging with controversial issues need to manage their feelings of fear, anger, and anxiety. Educators should take responsibility for their own global competence by always being informed about the latest global topics.

Based on the analysed documents, the list was created to showcase examples of how educators can promote global competence in their lessons:

1. Use the rich diversity within the classroom to learn about different cultures, languages, and perspectives.
2. Learn about organizations such as the United Nations.
3. Evaluate unbalanced power, relationships, historical conflicts between countries and ethnic groups.
4. Learn about marginalised groups' use of languages, history, and cultures.
5. Educate learners about why climate change occurs and how it impacts different places.
6. Ask learners to track the origin of everyday products such as cell phones, sneakers, and musical instruments.
7. Use a community problem in a role-play activity in which, learners are given the opportunity to engage with real life challenges, decisions, and responsibility.
8. Organize structured debates that enable a deep analysis of global issues. The debates provide learners with a platform to present their perspectives and show their ability to communicate effectively and respectfully.
9. Play games where team members must pool together resources to solve a problem.
10. Inform students about the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by providing vivid examples.

Conclusion and recommendations

Global competence has been researched extensively by many prominent local and international researchers. However, global competence in the context of South Africa is under researched, thus this research study adds to the body of knowledge on global competence in this specific context. The findings expanded understanding about competencies that globally competent citizens need to have and educators' role in developing global competence. In addition, HEIs' response to the twenty-first century societal trends was explored.

It is encouraging to see the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to be globally competent being developed by HEIs. It is concerning, however, that the development of global competencies by South African HEIs is occurring in a scattered and inconsistent manner. The dimensions of global competence being developed by HEIs such as sustainable actions are being developed as a response to twenty-first century trends and unintentionally overlap with the dimensions of global competence. The term 'twenty-first century trends' is stated on multiple occasions and consciously planned for. Yet, the reviewed documents do not refer directly to 'global competence' even though they position themselves to respond to twenty-first century trends. In short, there is a lot of focus on twenty-first century trends but it is not clearly associated with global competence.

HEI educational leaders should consciously aim to foster global competence within educators and learners by adding the dimensions of global competence to HEIs' mission and vision statements. In addition, educational leaders should emphasize statements about global competence in educational documents such as strategic frameworks and annual reports. The development of global competence is

especially important for educators. Therefore, HEIs could prioritize programs that develop the global competence of graduates in all Faculties. Similarly, HEIs should continuously provide their teaching staff with ongoing professional support in the development of their own global competence. In turn, this will have the potential to transform teaching pedagogies that develop global competence in learners.

Considering that global competence can address major issues such as unemployment and inclusion then more South African research studies should investigate development of globally competent citizens. Scarcity of research on this topic may result in global competence being disregarded and further excluded from future curricula and educational strategic planning. Further exploration about the development of globally competent citizens within a South African context could include case studies about the effectiveness of an individual HEI in developing globally competent citizens. Moreover, an in-depth exploration of each faculty within a specific HEI could be explored to uncover the extent to which the faculty is developing globally competent citizens.

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