

Promoting Cultural Identity Within the Curriculum of the University of Languages and International Studies (in Comparison with that of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities)

Trần Minh Toàn *

*VNU University of Languages and International Studies,
144 Xuân Thủy Street, Cầu Giấy Dist, Hà Nội, Vietnam*

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Abstract: First of all, this paper deals with the definition of “international studies” and its implications as well as different approaches in the world to this concept. Next, the author examines in details the differences in the curricula of the University of Languages and International Studies and the University of Social Sciences and Humanities as far as International Studies is concerned. Why the University of Languages and International Studies should focus its curriculum on culture rather than economy, politics or social and religious issues as the pillars of international studies represents the main content of this article. In addition to this, the author also briefly looks into the fact that unlike the curriculum of the University of Languages and International Studies, that of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities focuses on the political aspect of international studies. Finally, the author comes up with some suggestions on how to improve the current curricula of the 2 universities regarding International Studies.

Keywords: Cultural identity, curriculum, University of Languages and International Studies, University of Social Sciences and Humanities.

1. Introduction

International Studies courses are widely taught at different universities around the world, including those in Vietnam. However, sad as it is, many of these courses fail to come up with their own definitions of “international studies”. That is the case with the University of Languages and International Studies as well as

the University of Social Sciences and Humanities even though the latter specializes in this field.

2. A definition of International Studies and different approaches

It is well agreed that International Studies generally refers to the specific university degrees and courses which are concerned with “the study of the major political, economic,

* Tel: 84-0968893013

Email: tmtan1981@yahoo.com

social, and cultural issues that dominate the international agenda” [7]. The term itself can be more specifically defined as “the contemporary and historical understanding of global societies, cultures, languages and systems of government and of the complex relationships between them that shape the world we live in” [2].

Different countries in the world have different approaches to international studies. As far as this article is concerned and in relation to the research undertaken by this article, the author only mentions the approaches to international studies of Australia, the UK and the US and finally, Vietnam.

The study of the International Studies discipline in Australia occurs mostly within universities, which generally approaches the subject as a holistic study of international affairs and phenomena. The study is also offered in some Australian high schools. The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) system, operating within Victoria, offers International Studies as an elective to year 12 students [6]. The two units offered in International Studies VCE are “Global issues and conflicts’ and ‘International Relations” [6].

In the UK, international Studies is often related to or attached to the study of International Relations. At the University of Oxford, “the Centre for International Studies exists to promote and advance research in International Relations” [4]. In this sense the use of the term International Studies differs to that of the Australian use of the term in that it is tied to the discipline of International Relations, rather than addressing them as separate entities.

In the US, there exist a number of institutions which promote International Studies in the United States of America. The

Centre for Strategic and International Studies is a foreign policy think tank which aims to “provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision makers in government, international institutions, the private sector, and civil society” [1]. The Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies is a research center based at Stanford University which is a “primary center for innovative research on major international issues and challenges” [3]. Both institutions focus primarily on the study of international affairs and relations in relation to US foreign policy, and therefore differ to the Australian approach to International Studies. Alternatively, the undergraduate International Studies program at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York is a holistic program that more closely follows the Australian model.

The International Studies discipline is usually offered as either part of an arts degree or as a specialist arts degree. As such, students are able to select from a very broad range of subjects to undertake. Following are some areas of study which are regularly and generally offered [2]:

- + The political, social, economic and cultural relationships within the international system
- + Foreign policy, diplomacy and other modes of interaction between the countries of the world
- + The significance of foreign societies, cultures and systems of government
- + The international movement of people as immigrants, refugees, workers, students, tourists and investors
- + The role of international organizations
- + The globalization of the world economy
- + Foreign languages
- + History

International Studies include Country Studies. In other words, Country Studies forms part of International Studies and is a branch of International Studies. This is understandable because each country is regarded as a cell of the international community. When we look into the international community, we need to look into its cells, i.e. the countries involved.

On the basis of the analysis above, we can safely draw some conclusions regarding International Studies. First, the terms and concepts of International Studies and international relations are strongly related. However, international relations focus more directly on the relationship between countries, whereas International Studies can encompass all phenomena which are globally orientated. Second, there are 2 current trends in International Studies teaching in the world as well as in Vietnam at the moment. The first trend mostly relates to politics while the other is predominantly relevant to linguistics. It should be noted here that international relations represent external politics.

3. Promoting cultural identity within the International Studies curriculum of the University of Languages and International Studies

At the University of Languages and International Studies and the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, many subjects within the domain of International Studies are taught. Due to the limited extent of this paper, the author could only discuss the subjects that are taught in English at the University of Languages and International Studies. The question is: as the member universities of the Vietnam National

University, do the curricula of these 2 universities with regard to International Studies overlap to a certain extent? The answer is “no”. There are indeed some differences between them that need to be taken into account. First, the subjects relating to International Studies at the University of Languages and International Studies are taught in foreign languages. That’s why both teachers and students approach the International Studies discipline from the perspective of linguistics. Besides, it must be stressed that International Studies constitute one of the 2 branches of teaching that are undertaken at the University of Language and International Studies. The other branch is linguistics and that’s why the university gets the name “University of Languages and International Studies”. The University of Languages and International Studies is composed of 11 faculties. The author of this paper is working at the Faculty of Linguistics and Culture of English Speaking countries, which is composed of 3 divisions: Country Studies, English Linguistics, and Literature and Cross-culture Communication. For that reason and due to the limited extent of this article, the author can only discuss the subjects taught at this faculty, or to be more specific, at the division of Country Studies.

By comparison, judging by the curriculum of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities [5], it seems the university specializes in politics, or to be more specific, international relations. About 50% of the subjects focus on this domain. The remaining subjects are to do with economy, culture, history, social and religious issues.

Taking a look back at the definition of International Studies at the beginning of this paper, we will realize that this concept involves the studies in politics, economy,

culture and social issues. So, culture constitutes one of the four pillars of International Studies. Culture is an essential component of International Studies, but that doesn't mean the 3 remaining components are less significant. In fact, they are all interdependent and complement each other. And now, it's time to turn to the main content of this paper: why should the University of Languages and International Studies promote cultural identity in its curriculum or in other words, why should the curriculum of the University of Languages and International Studies focus on culture rather than any other pillars?

As we all know, linguistics and culture are closely connected. In fact, linguistics represent and form part of culture. If the culture of a country is likened to a house, then its language(s) constitute(s) its door(s). We can only enter a house if we cross its door(s). From that perspective, languages represent a means to discover and explore the culture of a country. That's the first reason that explains why the University of Languages and International Studies should focus its International Studies curriculum on culture. That's an inevitable development trend and also a future orientation for the university.

Secondly, the curriculum of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, as mentioned above, focuses on politics. As another member of the Vietnam National University, the University of Languages and International Studies should definitely focus its curriculum on culture if the latter doesn't want its curriculum to overlap with that of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities. Focusing on other pillars other than culture, that is to say politics, economy or social issues, is absolutely not a good and wise choice for the university.

Thirdly, studying cultures is a good way to enrich the national culture and the so-called

"individual culture". In other words, discovering and exploring cultures helps you become more cultured and refined and thus helps to improve yourself in different ways.

Fourthly, of the 16 subjects within the International Studies curriculum of the University of Languages and International Studies, only 3 are being taught. They include: General Geography of the UK and the US, American studies and British studies. The remaining 13 are supposed to be taught at the University of Languages and International Studies in the next 2 years. Textbooks and reference books for these subjects are being finalized. However, the most noticeable limitation of the 3 subjects that have been taught is that they are full of facts and figures and lack insightful and critical analysis of the cultures of the countries involved. This may make the subject boring for students unless the teachers know how to make them interesting by including into them their own in-depth analyses of cultures. According to a recent poll carried out among a group of about 50 second-year and third-year students at the University of Languages and International Studies, when asked what upsets them most in relation to the 2 subjects "General Geography of the UK and the US" and "American Studies", half of the students answered it's the facts and figures and they have to go to great lengths to remember them all as it's a requirement of the subjects and maybe some of the facts and figures are present in their exams. Therefore, promoting the cultural identity in the International Studies curriculum of the University of Languages and International Studies is a step in the right direction. This is partly demonstrated in the efforts of the lecturers of the Faculty of Linguistics and Culture of English Speaking Countries in refining their textbooks as well as improving their teaching methods. Rather than

making students remember as many facts and figures as possible, teachers should ask their students to think “culturally”.

However, a lot still needs to be done so as to focus the International Studies curriculum more and more on culture. Besides the measures and solutions that have already been mentioned above, the University of Languages and International Studies should map out a clear teaching schedule for the 13 remaining subjects. When their textbooks should be finalized and when they would be officially taught should be stipulated. The university should attach much more importance to those subjects that seem more significant than others, including: Cultures of Southeast Asian countries; Regional organizations and the trends for international cooperation; Globalization and its impacts on contemporary societies; The current position of China in Asia and the world; A comparison of Eastern and Western cultures.

As for the curriculum of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, the author would like to make a suggestion on how to improve it. Before embarking on this article, I had a brief interview with the Dean of the Faculty of International Studies, Associate Professor Hoang Khac Nam, at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities to collect data for my article. Following the interview, I'm aware that currently, at the beginning of the International Studies curricula, students at the university are not introduced to the key definitions of the course such as “international studies”, “its implications”, “different approaches to international studies in Vietnam and in other countries”. This proves to be a huge drawback to the university's curriculum. That's what this paper has been trying to do at the beginning.

4. Conclusion

Promoting cultural identity within the International Studies curriculum of the University of Languages and International Studies is simply a suggestion that the author of this paper strongly wants to make. In fact, it has proved to be central to the development of the university over the past 10 years, since the first subjects in this domain were introduced into the curriculum. It's undeniable that the progress that has been made so far by the university is admirable, but a lot more still needs to be done in this direction if the University of Languages and International Studies wants to be ranked as a top university in Vietnam in the near future.

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