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## Practice Papers

# England, Whales and Princess Diana: A case study of US students' perceptions of Wales

John Harris<sup>a,\*</sup>, Sangkwon Lee<sup>b</sup>, Andrew Lepp<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Management, Glasgow School for Business and Society, Glasgow Caledonian University, Cowcaddens Road, Glasgow G4 0BA, UK

<sup>b</sup> School of Foundations, Leadership and Administration, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio 44242, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Studying some part of a degree course abroad has witnessed significant growth in the past decade as part of a broader internationalisation agenda of many Higher Education institutions. Within this paper we present a case study of a group of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management students at a state university in the United States of America and look at their perceptions of Wales as a country and as a potential place to visit. The results highlight that Wales has a very limited profile and is a place that many students know nothing about. This work also problematises the discourses of internationalisation and considers some of the challenges facing educators.

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## 1. Some notes on the internationalisation of higher education

We are increasingly told that we live in an age of globalisation and that 'the world is flat' (Friedman, 2007). In the world of Higher Education (HE), many institutions across the world now compete for students in an international marketplace yet what is rarely acknowledged is that others remain as 'local' as they have ever been. Top-down directives from administrators may urge faculty to internationalise their programmes but at times there is little consideration of what this really means. Whilst often presented as a contemporary development it is also important to note that the 'internationalisation' of Higher Education is actually hundreds of years old.

Broadly speaking, the internationalisation of HE involves incorporating an international dimension to areas of teaching, research and service (de Wit, 2002). Knight (2004) has noted that the internationalisation of HE has become increasingly important, complex and confusing. Chan and Dimmock (2008) provide a useful analysis to highlight the different interpretations, purposes and emphases of internationalisation that capably highlights the distinct differences inherent in internationalisation agendas of very different institutions. There are, it must be acknowledged, many ways of internationalising programmes and courses across institutions at quite different stages of development in this respect.

The fields of hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism provide fertile ground for internationalisation as evidenced by a number of recent contributions to this journal (e.g. Huang, 2007; Jordan, 2008; Munar, 2007). Jordan (2008), in addition to outlining the many recent developments in these fields, argues that hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism (HLST) educators need to be more reflexive and carefully consider the power relations that underpin curriculum design. Our subject areas are often identified as particularly ripe for pushing forward internationalisation agendas given the subject matter and the many recognised sites for focusing on the intersection of different nations. Black (2004) looked at issues contributing to the internationalisation of a faculty delivering courses in HLST. This work suggested that the success of

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [john.harris@gcu.ac.uk](mailto:john.harris@gcu.ac.uk) (J. Harris), [slee33@kent.edu](mailto:slee33@kent.edu) (S. Lee), [alepp1@kent.edu](mailto:alepp1@kent.edu) (A. Lepp).

internationalisation strategies depended on the cross-cultural competence of staff members involved in the teaching and support of students coupled with the development of international collaborative partnerships. Despite a wealth of literature focusing on internationalisation, Brookes and Beckett (2011) note how there have been limited efforts to consider what internationalisation means at the programme level. Their work emphasised the perceived importance of shared cross-cultural experiences and also highlighted some of the constraints in internationalising degree programmes.

Despite the marked differences, not only across institutions, but across various programmes within these universities as well, it cannot be disputed that the emergence of new technologies and the notion of a 'networked society' (Castells, 1996) means that we are more connected than ever before. Scholars have explored the interplay of the local and the global in a range of varied contexts. Whilst much of this work is located within a framework that positions the local and the global as something of a dichotomy, it is important that we move beyond such simplistic delineations. For rather than conceptualising this as an either/or scenario it is through examining the interplay between the local and the global that we can develop our knowledge of the many changes taking place. In order to better understand some of these broader issues, such as internationalisation, we need to look at different cases in context. Somewhat more contentiously, we would also suggest that much of what is presented as internationalisation and/or globalisation in higher education is actually little more than 'globaloney' (Veseth, 2005). Veseth (2005) uses this term to highlight the ways in which particular interests, and the arguments that best advance them, are employed in this way. There is a danger that we engage in semantics and/or rhetoric whereby there is a perceived need to invoke the concept of internationalisation but do not fully understand some of the key factors which underpin it.

Also overlooked in many discussions of internationalisation and the buzzwords that surround it as a feature of much contemporary discourse aimed at selling HE programmes, is that in some ways many places remain as 'local' as they have ever been. The pressure to gain a university degree, and the financial burdens that this often entails, means that for many young people studying at a University closest to home is the only choice now open to them. Financial pressures are also a factor in the decision of many to continue living in the family home and commuting to campus. In the US the massive difference between tuition fees for 'in state' and 'out of state' students also contributes to this localising agenda whereby it is not uncommon to have somewhat homogenous classrooms with little diversity. In short the idea of an increasingly internationalised HE experience is less of a reality for a number of students who in many ways could be more firmly rooted to the local than previous generations of students. Stroud's (2010) work, for example, highlights that living more than 100 mile away from home is a key factor in the decision to study abroad. This of course is just one example of how various factors impact upon such motivations but clearly demonstrates the many barriers facing different student groups.

## 2. A foreign country: the case of Wales

In an attempt to adopt a slightly different track to much of the work in this area, the present study presents preliminary results from a survey exploring students' perceptions of Wales. The questionnaire was based on previous work exploring students' perceptions of, and intentions to visit, Uganda in Africa. Research from this work has been published elsewhere (Lepp, Gibson & Lane, 2011) and a successful study abroad initiative has been in place for five years that has provided 65 students with the opportunity to visit Africa and experience another way of life.

In focusing upon Wales we were interested in investigating the perceptions of, and intention to visit, a very different destination. A small country with a population of around 3 million people, it sits in the shadow of England and has a very limited profile and recognition overseas including much of North America (Pritchard & Morgan, 1996). We locate this wider research within and around an emerging interest in the field of events from scholars across the domains of hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism that appear within *JoHLS TE* (Tribe, 2008). In October 2010, Wales hosted the biennial Ryder Cup golf match and this event seemed to provide an appropriate site to explore pre and post-event images of a nation that many students may never have heard of before. This golf match was positioned as the focal point and catalyst of a wider tourism agenda in the nation (Visit Wales, 2007, 2010) and could be conceived as the biggest international event to be staged in the country since the investiture of Charles as Prince of Wales in 1969 (see Ellis, 2008).

As outlined above, Wales is a small nation that is often obscured by England. In terms of its presence and positioning in North America, where the study took place, it remains a largely hidden nation despite the fact that there are long-established links between the two nations. Davies (2001) notes that one third of the signatories on the Declaration of Independence were of Welsh descent. A number of Welsh people had moved to the USA during the nineteenth century (see Jones, 1993). It is also worth noting that the State in which this study took place, has one of the highest number of citizens of Welsh descent in the USA.

Yet compared to Ireland and Scotland, the Welsh are largely unknown and not always recognised as a distinct group of people in the same way that the Irish and Scottish are. This observation is supported by the work of tourism researchers Pritchard and Morgan (1996) who noted that Ireland was a mature destination, Scotland an established one, whilst Wales represented a 'new' destination for the US market. This has also been acknowledged in relation to the area of golf tourism where Scotland and Ireland are well-established brands in the international marketplace whilst Wales is described as a 'challenger brand' (Pride, 2004) aiming to break into an already crowded and competitive arena. Hudson and Hudson (2010) have provided a useful overview of this developing field of golf tourism and tie together many of the key themes shaping the field. Their text begins with a case study of Ryder Cup Wales to highlight the burgeoning field of golf tourism and note that the event would attract one billion viewers worldwide. Much of the literature promoting the event positions

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