



Catalonia and the role of international education

Policy & Strategy

By MARINA CASALS SALA



In this post, published on the one-year anniversary of the Catalan independence referendum, Marina Casals Sala shares her perspective on the role of international education in responding to dealing with diversity and difference at home as well as abroad.

This past year has been a very intense one on many fronts. And, as a result of the conflict that has made itself apparent in the little corner of the world where I live – Catalonia – I have reflected long and hard on the role of internationalisation in higher education.

I work in this field because I believe that internationalisation contributes to making the world a better place, to helping us better understand each other and embrace our differences, or at least be better prepared to deal with them. I firmly believe in what internationalisation can do, especially when linked to education. But in line with this come other values which are equally important, such as freedom of expression and of ideas, the principle of non-violence and that everything can at least be discussed. I may be naïve, I do not deny that – but those beliefs are what make me wake up every morning and give my best at my job.

“ How do we promote dialogue at home? How do we practice at home what we preach abroad? ”



Yes, since October of 2017 – when a highly controversial referendum vote on Catalonia’s independence from Spain took place, accompanied by many different and divisive legal, social, and political developments before, during, and after this event – I have had to question some of these ideas and beliefs. As a result, today I am possibly a bit more critical about the field of international higher education.

As with all complex issues there is not one single version or reality. In this article I am not trying to present my reality, but rather question why our great Europe sometimes chooses to remain silent and look away, followed closely by our own profession. What is our role in all of this?

The role of international education

The key questions I have been wrestling with include: In times of domestic crisis, how do institutions dedicated to developing interculturally competent students who can deal effectively with differences in an international context, respond to the challenge of ‘difference’ closer to home? What is the role of international officers in this process? How (if at all) do we plan for

uncertain scenarios that turn our institutions and communities into fraught political and sociocultural landscapes? How do we communicate and deal with conflict?

“ How do institutions dedicated to developing interculturally competent students respond to the challenge of ‘difference’ closer to home? ”



In my view, linguistic and cultural diversity should be celebrated, not feared; but right now such diversity is often a source of tension, both in Catalonia where I live and in many other places around the world. The same goes for just a simple difference in opinion – or is a difference in opinion never simple?

The elephant in the room

The conflict in Catalonia has touched upon sensitivities on many other fronts, much like when your best friends suddenly getting a divorce makes you reflect on your own marital happiness. It ceases to be ‘that conflict over there,’ in that region, and suddenly becomes the conflict that could expand to many more regions in Europe—a conflict that some link to Brexit, to extreme-right movements, to the Scottish, the Flemish or the Italian cases... I have heard it all.

And in the middle of all of this, I have seen all kinds of reactions, mostly pretending that the big elephant in the room – ie one’s own national turmoil – is not really there, or that it is not our job to point at it and say “does anyone else see a big fat elephant taking up most of the space here?” There have been moments when I have truly felt like shouting, “Come on! It is right here! Can’t you see it?!”

So, how do we promote dialogue at home? How do we practice at home what we preach abroad? Are we ready to listen to uncomfortable exchanges of opinions?

Cultivating intercultural understanding at home

Unfortunately, I think that most of the time we just operate in survival mode and are not equipped to face a healthy, constructive debate. I am as guilty of this as anyone. I have found myself trying to continue to live life ‘as usual’, trying to regain normality in an abnormal context, and in this challenging scenario, still sending students abroad in order to promote cultural

understanding, which has felt strange, to say the least. Because, where was this understanding at home?

If it is not easy to understand a conflict from within, it is often even harder to do so from the outside, so we tend to simplify things in order to have the feeling that we understand what is going on. It is human nature. We judge, jump to conclusions and try to explain to ourselves situations that we do not really grasp, just to feel that we understand them and are still somehow in control.

“ Sometimes we just need to say to each other, ‘I do not understand, but I am here if you need me’. ”



Many of my international colleagues were struggling to understand what was going on in Catalonia, probably afraid that the effects of this conflict might splash them and stain them in some way or another, and from that uncertainty or that fear they would judge and criticise, point an accusing finger or look the other way. Fortunately there were others who dared to simply ask, “how could I understand better what is going on?”, or “how do you feel about what’s happening around you?” or simply “how are you doing?”. In so doing, they showed concern without judgment and for that I thank them profusely.

As for those who have jumped to conclusions, I truly understand. Because if I have learned anything from this past year, it has been that it is easy to judge and difficult to keep an open mind, that there are always two sides (at least!) to every situation, and that sometimes we just need to say to each other, “I do not understand, but I am here if you need me”.

And maybe, just maybe, saying these words would already make this world a better place.

28 September 2018

By MARINA CASALS SALA

Share this page

