

**A PHENOMENOGRAPHIC STUDY OF
STUDENTS' CONCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES
OF INTERNATIONALISATION AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND**

A Work-in-Progress

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Abstract

This paper reports on the results of an empirical study of students' conceptions, or understanding, of internationalisation of higher education at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. Adapting a conceptual lens of a re-modification of Bernstein's analysis of "intellectual fields" and "pedagogical identities" (1990, 2000) in Cross et al (2007) and Run us (2005), the paper describes the use of a qualitative methodology – phenomenography – that aims to explore the qualitatively different ways in which a group of people experience a specific phenomenon, in this case internationalisation of higher education. Four qualitatively different conceptions are described constituting the phenomenographic outcome space. It is hoped that, investigating and describing the ways in which students understand internationalisation and its different facets in relation to their educational context, could help shed light and inform a holistic Wits Internationalisation Policy, thus creating an enhanced teaching and learning environment at the University.

Key words: *Internationalisation, higher education, phenomenography, University of the Witwatersrand (Wits)*

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1. Introduction

The study of internationalisation of higher education as an area of research has gained prominence over the years. And though many studies over the last decades have been concerned with internationalisation in/of higher education, it has not been from the perspectives of teachers and students and their experiences of aspects of internationalisation in relation to their educational context (that is, as a student, and as a teacher) (Wihlborg, 2005). University students need to learn about and be exposed to the changing international environment in order to be prepared to live and compete in a dynamic workplace of an increasingly global and interdependent society, (Navarro, 2004).

Since 1994 the South African tertiary education sector has undergone major transformation and restructuring process geared to meet the higher education needs of the 21st century. At the same time, South Africa is becoming the continental leader in the provision of high quality tertiary education relevant to the demands of a rapidly globalising, competitive, information-driven world. The desire to be formally linked to the international family of higher education Institutions, after years of isolation that was triggered by apartheid, encouraged some progressive South African universities to either overtly enhance existing international links or to forge new ones and led to the official launch of the International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA) (Jooste, 2007).

South Africa must commit to a *dual process* regarding internationalisation (IEASA, 2005:1). This *dual process* is to expose citizens to the new ideas of other countries, and to become partners of global transformation that forms the basis of possibilities of the new millennium initiatives by increasing opportunities for both staff and students of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In view of the fact that students are key stakeholders in the teaching-learning process of the university system, there is the need to find out their understanding and experiences of the interface between the local and global contexts within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa. The perspective of students and their experiences of aspects of internationalisation becomes an important dimension even as Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, in this case University of the Witwatersrand, reasserts the pivotal role of higher education in South Africa's emerging and transforming democracy.

2. Internationalisation at Wits: Evidences and Practice

Internationalisation is a process (Cross *et al*, *in press*).The process (practice) of delivering internationalized education programmes effectively, attracting foreign students and staff, and engaging in sustainable exchange programmes are thus extremely important. University students (as well as staff) need to have a thorough understanding of how its practice and elements fit into the bigger picture in the teaching and learning at the University. Consequently, seeing internationalisation as a means to an end, and not an end in itself is vital for the development of global citizenship.

There are evidences at the University of the Witwatersrand of interactions and processes related to internationalisation as well as the possibilities and opportunities that internationalisation may or may not offer in enhancing staff and student practice and experience. One of the key steps taken after the end of apartheid was the establishment of the Wits International Office (WIO). The Wits International Office (WIO) is strategically positioned to lead and facilitate all internationalization facets of the university (Wits, 1999). These range from attracting and recruiting international students and providing relevant services to them, putting into action the internationalization strategy of the university, build and maintain the university's international partnerships and collaborations and receiving international visitors/delegations. With this in mind, there has been an increasing role of the Wits International Office over the past years under the administration of the Ms. Fazela Haniff, the Director and President of International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA). Some of the evident practices have been the recruitment of knowledgeable staff, shortening the waiting time it takes international students to get their international clearance certificate, and the increment in the number of and participation of students in exchange programmes in and out of South Africa.

Overall, the picture of internationalisation that emerges at the University of the Witwatersrand is varied, multi-dimensional, and paradoxical (Cross et al, *in press*). In strategic terms, the University has not yet clearly developed its own, unique, model for internationalisation and Wits is not alone in this situation. Maybe, a national policy on internationalisation of higher education in South Africa could have helped Wits as well as other tertiary institutions in clearly defining their internationalisation objective. What is missing is a concerted strategy synchronizing internationalisation at the levels of governance, programme and operational issues and service delivery, to mobilize, stimulate, coordinate and support the immense energy emerging from Schools at the University of the Witwatersrand.

3. Unpacking Contextual Issues and Understanding the Domains and Defining the Dimensions: A Conceptual Framework

An attempt will be made in this section to review studies to unpack contextual issues in literature focused on the discourse on internationalisation of higher education. Afterwards, the study's conceptual framework will be presented as a re-modification of Bernstein's analysis of "intellectual fields" and "pedagogical identities" (1990, 2000) in Cross et a (2007) and Run us (2005).

For more than 20 years, there has been much debate about defining *internationalisation*. The term is not a new one. It has been used for centuries in political science and governmental relations, but its popularity in the education sector soared only since the early 1980s. Before then, *international education* and *international cooperation* were the favored terms, as they still are in some countries (Knight 2004). In the 1990s the discussion about using the term *international education* centered on differentiating it from *comparative education*, *global education*, and *multicultural education* (Knight 2004: 8-9). Internationalisation, an integral part of strategic planning initiatives in universities around the world, is occurring within the context of globalisation (Allen and Ogilvie, 2004). Allen and Ogilvie (2004) stressed that

though linked, internationalisation and globalisation are different phenomenon rather than changeable term. These authors added to the debate on conceptions of internationalisation and globalisation by citing Marginson (1999) that, internationalisation is concerned with relationships among and between individual countries, and 'presupposes the nation-state as the essential unit. That is, internationalisation in every country is perceived as an autonomous unit interacting with other autonomous units. In contract therefore, the authors noted that, globalisation is "about world systems which have a life of their own that is distinct from local and national life". Knight (2004:11) explained the phrase "to internationalise" as the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education. Consequently, it becomes imperative for universities to institute a policy on internationalisation which fosters the process described by Knight.

Coming home to South Africa, Gawe & de Kock (2002:36) asserted that, current thinking suggests that as countries and even institutions of learning, the choice to be either role players or spectators in globalisation has to be made. The authors located the concept of globalisation as embedded in the economic field but not a foreign concept to higher education in South Africa. The end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994 and the signing of the SADC Protocol in 1996 opened-up institutions in South Africa which hitherto were alienated from initiatives around the world. Thus, the new global order makes it imperative for countries to relate more in the area of education and training sharing experiences and best practices. Consequently, South Africa as a nation with her higher education institutions (HEIs) has no choice but to participate in the global economy.

This study, having begun the construction of knowledge from literature on internationalisation of higher education needs an organiser. This organiser which will be the conceptual framework will help provide reference points back to literature. This will assist in making meaning of data to be collected and provide a structured approach to communicating the findings (Symth, 2004). The conceptual framework to elucidate the study is based on a set of ideas and principles from Bernstein (1999, 2000) in Cross *et al* (2007) and Runéus (2005) which appears useful in explaining the relevant field of enquiry around the study of internationalisation of higher education. Drawing on the study by Cross *et al* (2007) titled, "Council on Higher Education (CHE) Institutional Culture, Throughput and Retention Project at the University of the Witwatersrand", Bernstein's domain of socialization that shape students' experiences and perceptions within university environment explores three domains as follows: (i) the Official Domain; (ii) Pedagogical Domain and (iii) the Social Domain. To explore the processes that shape internationalisation in these three domains, the study draws on Runéus (2005).

Cross *et al* (2007:16) characterized the three domains as follows: (i) *Official Domain* which is mainly regulatory focuses on national higher education bodies with institutional issues around vision, mission, policies, and rules produced and managed by university administration; (ii) *Pedagogical Domain* with its main function as academic production and reproduction to consider institutional issues such curriculum, teaching and assessment located in academic faculties, departments and courses, and (iii) *Social Domain* is that domain which explores the domain outside the teaching-learning environment that impacts on the students at the university. *Figure 1* illustrates Bernstein's Domains of Socialization.

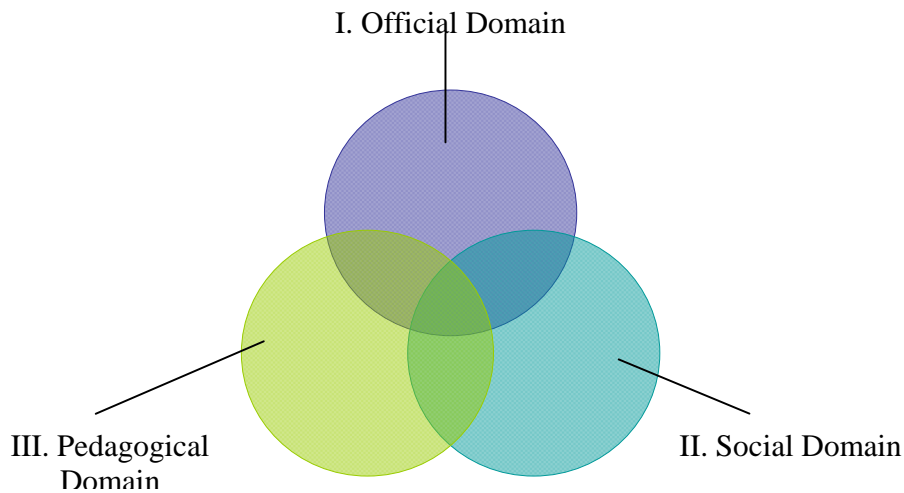


Figure 1: Bernstein's Domains of Socialization

On the other hand, Runéus (2005:14) identified nine definition components of internationalisation of higher education (depicted in figure 2 below). The nine domains which she located within the university as an international environment are depicted in figure 2 below. Her conceptualization based on these nine domains clarifies the key components of what internationalisation should focus on within a university. Furthermore, she explained that key influences on these nine domains as they interface between *strategy & policy* and *infrastructure* are political priorities, system of education; geography/languages and type of education/field.

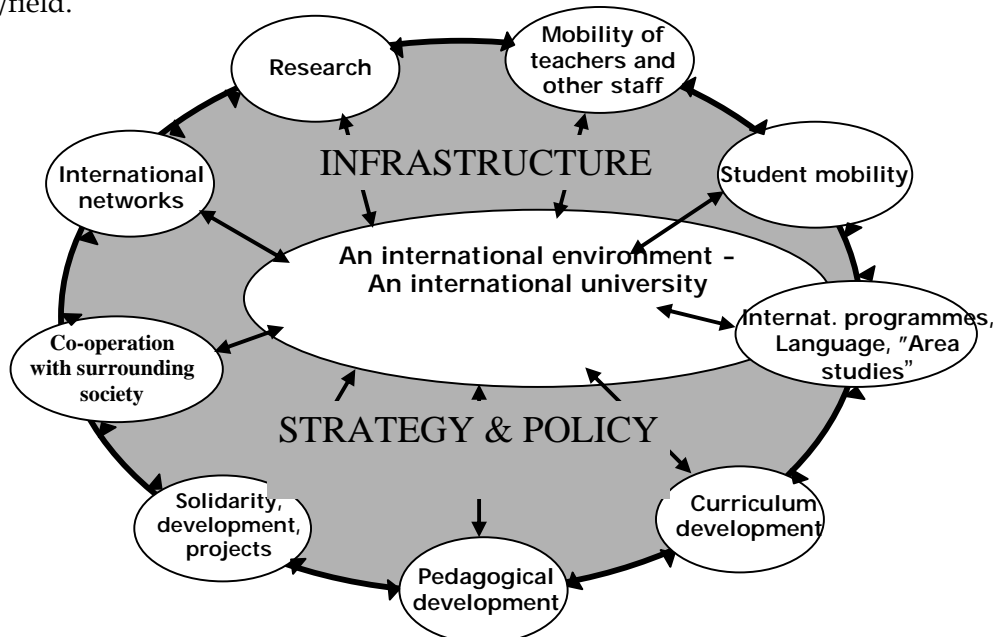


Figure 2: Runéus (2005:14): A University as an Internationalised Environment

The adaptation of Runéus (2005) and Bernstein (1999, 2000) (*see figure 3*) presents the University of the Witwatersrand at the centre as an internationalised university within an international environment. The conceptual framework put forward Bernstein's "three domain discourse" as a *trilectic* relationship with interfaces between *strategy & policy* (on the official domain side) and *materials & base* (on the pedagogical and social domain sides). Within the conceptual framework, main functions for official, pedagogical and social domains are *regulatory, academic production and reproduction, and the interface between the two respectively*.

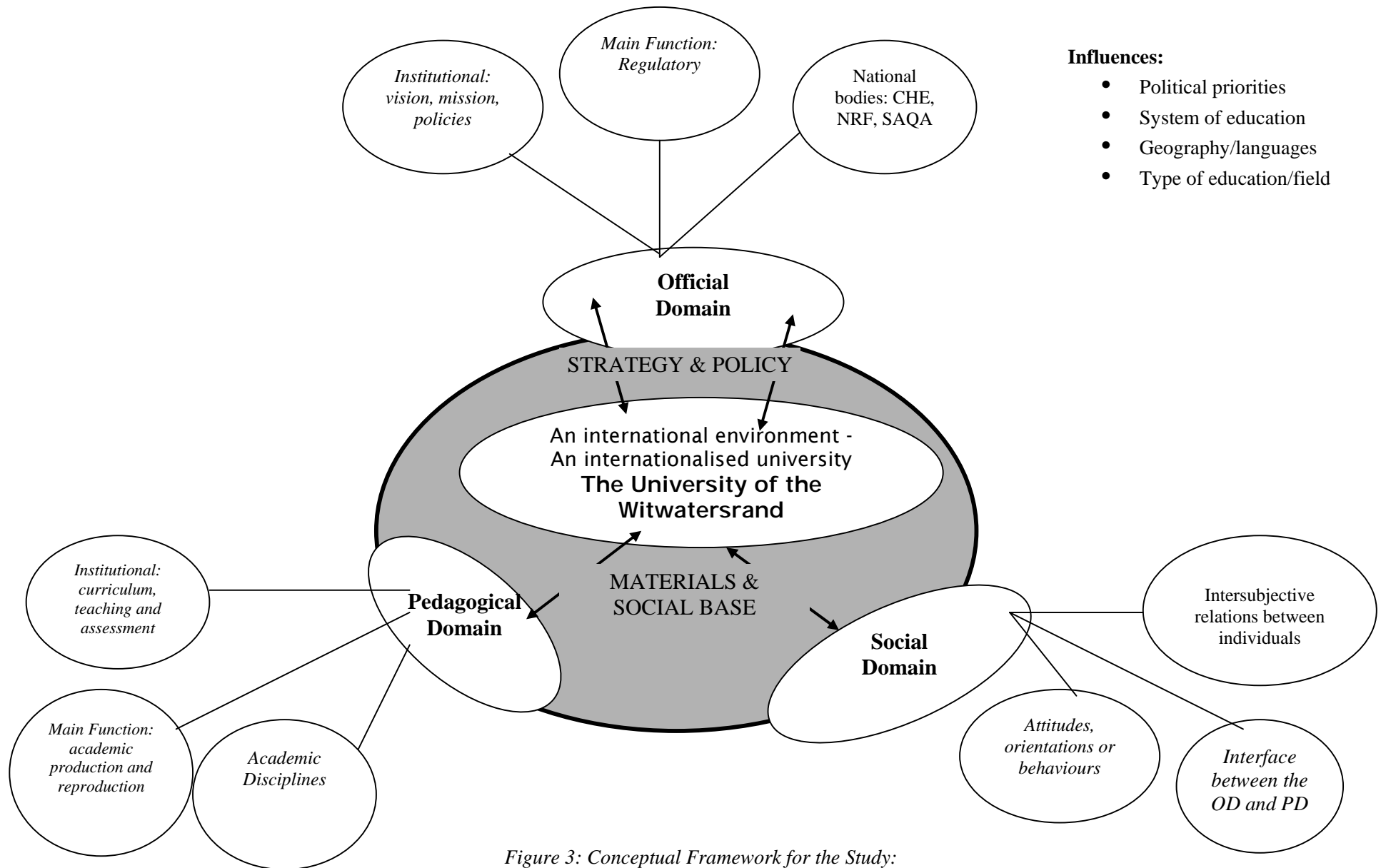


Figure 3: Conceptual Framework for the Study:
A Modification of Runéus (2005) drawing on Bernstein's distinction (1999, 2000)

Bernstein's (2000) Three Domains of Socialization

- I. Official Domain
- II. Pedagogical Domain
- III. Social Domain

Keys

- A** University of the Witwatersrand, as an international university in an international environment
- B & C=D** Strategy & Policy + Material and Social Base

Runéus (2005) Nine Definition Components of Internationalisation of Higher Education

- 1. Mobility of teachers and other students
- 2. Student mobility
- 3. International programmes, language, "area studies"
- 4. Curriculum development
- 5. Pedagogical development
- 6. Solidarity, development, projects
- 7. Co-operation with surrounding society
- 8. Research
- 9. International Networks

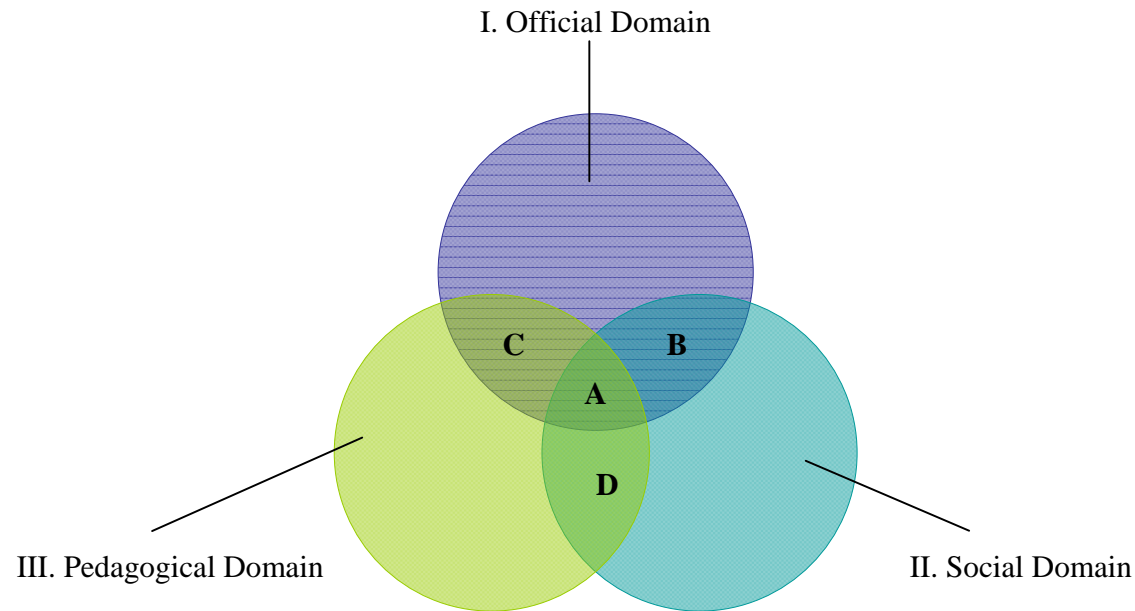


Figure 5: An Holistic Conceptual Framework Showing the University of the Witwatersrand at the core of the "processes" tied with Bernstein's Domain of Socialization and Runéus Nine Domains

4. Methodology

Using phenomenography as research orientation, this study examine students' understanding and experiences of *the interface between the local and global contexts* within the spheres of their academic and social interactions at a South African university, the University of the Witwatersrand. The key research questions are:

- How do students at the University of the Witwatersrand conceptualise, understand and experience internationalisation in relation to their learning (academic context) and their interaction within the university (social context)?
- What is the qualitative variation in students' understanding and experiences of internationalisation at the university?
- Are the expectations of the students with respect to what they believe and hope to learn in an internationalised university met?

Phenomenographic studies strive to discover the different ways in which people understand or experience certain phenomena (Orgill, 2008). Although many possible sources of information can reveal a persons understanding or conception of a particular phenomenon, the method of discovery is usually an open, deep interview (Booth, 1997 cited by Orgill, 2008). Marton (1981, 1994) believes that there are a limited number of qualitatively different ways in which different people experience a certain phenomenon (cited by Orgill, 2008). From this theoretical stance, it is irrelevant if those conceptions are considered correct or incorrect by current standards (Orgill, 2008). The aim is simply to elucidate the different possible conceptions that people have for a given phenomenon. This means that learning and teaching are seen as a relation between the person and the situation that they are experiencing (Reid and Petocz, 2002). The authors further explained that, the outcome of a phenomenographic study is a hierarchical set of logically related categories, from the narrowest and most limited to the broadest and most inclusive. These categories and the relations between them provide the *outcome space* for the research. The categories describe the qualitative differences between one conception of internationalisation of higher education and another. However, it is the structure of the variation across the *group* that emerges through iterative readings of descriptions of the experience (Reid and Petocz, 2002).

Data are typically collected through a series of in-depth, open-ended interviews that focus on allowing each person to fully describe their experience (Bowden, 1996 cited by Reid and Petocz, 2002). Analysis of written materials describing the participants' understanding of a phenomenon has also been used (Reid and Petocz, 2002 citing Marton and Saljo, 1976; Crawford et al., 1994). In this paper, 16 postgraduate students (Masters) at the University of the Witwatersrand's two faculties- humanities *and* Commerce, Law and Management (CLM), were interviewed. The participants were both South Africans (white and black) and non-South Africans (Africans and non-Africans) - male and female in equal proportions. What justifies the selection of this group of postgraduate students is that, these students have been around for at least three years at the university. This premise indicates that, they would have had some experiences at the university and do have a better experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Each interview which lasted

between 45-60 minutes was transcribed verbatim to yield transcripts, which formed the raw material for the study. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee in Education of the Faculty of Humanities, acting on behalf of the Senate of the University of the Witwatersrand. Illustrative quotes that are used from the interviews are labeled with pseudonyms to avoid identification of individual students.

In this phenomenographic study, the questions posed are designed to encourage the participants to think about why they experience the phenomenon in certain ways and how they constitute meaning of internationalisation. Students responded, inter alia, to the key questions/statements: *“What is your understanding of internationalisation?”*; *“What key explanations/experiences of internationalisation readily come to your mind?”*; *“Why is internationalisation important as an idea the administration should pursue at Wits?”*; *“What does it offer the University as well as you to have non-SA students and staff to come here?”*; *“What do you consider as the purpose of the University pursuing internationalisation in the first place?”*; *“Will you consider your understanding /experience of internationalisation at Wits as meeting your expectations?”*

Since the purpose of phenomenographic research is to report on the variation that emerges from the whole group’s understanding of the notion of internationalisation – the range of questions was designed to focus students’ awareness on different aspects related to their experience of internationalisation. These questions were followed by probing questions which responded to the students’ answers. Each interview was conducted and transcribed by me. And each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour, and was concluded when the student indicated that they had satisfactorily explored the research questions. It can be seen from the questions and statements listed above that the interview probed and explored students’ understanding of internationalisation and various aspects of it.

5. Categories Describing Students’ Conceptions of Internationalisation:

Developing the Phenomenographic Outcome Space for Students’ Conceptions of Internationalisation

Categories describing the variation were picked out, refined and verified by repeated reading, and the final categories were confirmed by identification of appropriate quotes in the transcripts. Thus identifying the four qualitatively different ways in which students understand internationalisation.

Conception 1: Internationalisation is about being an international student, and or, bringing students from outside South Africa to come and study at Wits

In this conception, students’ understanding of internationalisation focused more on the presence of international students on campus. The understanding of the students was more focused on seeing demographics on campus: white, black, South Africans, non-South Africans.

Jake: *Hummm...internationalisation...for me, it's about...its about...okay, me being an international student ...so its like you are an international student because you are from outside South Africa.*

Jenny: *I am not sure on that one. But I think internationalisation...bringing other international students, people from other countries, and making them part of Wits. I meant students from other countries. This is my own opinion.*

Jean: *Haa...I mean for example, I have met many international students too- from Africa and Europeans, coming for exchange programmes. And since we have like Socrates Erasmus which is very necessary even in Europe, something that every student go through...and I think its very important*

Jesse: *I don't think we have a choice. I don't think any country has a choice because people are speaking about the global village...so in the real sense of it, I would define internationalisation as concept in higher education...new students...international students coming to South Africa to study and bring their experiences.*

Conception 2: Internationalisation as an enrichment of the students' mind to learning about the world at large and exchange of ideas

In this conception, students' understanding of internationalisation focused more on the learning experience taken out of the presence of South Africans and non-South Africans at the university as evidenced by the diversity in the campus climate. In the students' understanding of the phenomenon too, many expressed that the exchange of ideas in and outside a class situation at the university is really enriching.

Jesse: *We don't think we have a choice because in Africa, we need to think as a block. And for us to survive as a region, we need to think developmental as a continent. So that will not be possible if we think suspiciously of other people. So, I see internationalisation as a cross-fertilization of ideas and experiences.*

Jean: *Internationalisation is a vital idea. Wits should pursue it. It enriches the students as well as the understanding of people around them.*

Jenny: *To be honest with you, I am learning a lot here at Wits and I think if I were to go back home, I can use my knowledge. You want more? I don't know. We are learning at Wits, a lot, a lot. I think they push you which is good. That's one thing I appreciate. It's hard but really good.*

Jesse: *The nature of the discourse at Wits draws initially from international debate and gradually adapted to local content. So I think Wits alerts you at post grad level to issues.*

Conception 3: Internationalisation is about mutual respect and acceptance in the new world order caused by globalisation

This conception of students' understanding of internationalisation emphasized more the occurrences of xenophobic tendencies at the university. It was a conception virtually all the students interviewed- South Africans and non-South Africans, assented to.

John: *I was very excited in coming to Wits to study. And I also found so many issues in South Africa. For instance, discrimination- not for me- but for different group. They cannot make*

friends with each other. My black friends and white friends do not relate with each other. I wish they could be friends, but they are not. My white friends and Chinese friends, they are not very close- they have quite a different ideology. Both because of skin, but just in their minds, their ideologies are different. So, that should be changed in South Africa.

Jesse: All my friends are international students. I am forced to interact with them because even if I don't like it, they are the only people that are there.

Jenny: Although this might sound as if it's discriminatory, the only students given recognition are those living in the international house. ...it's nice to network. If you want to grow academically or otherwise, networking is vital. I wish that platform could be there for international and SA students. But there isn't.

Jake: For students, I think what I learnt is to try and (as people) appreciate other people for who they are. Try and learn about where they come from...and not these major towns in SA. But they come from different places...its more about mutual respect and acceptance.

Conception 4: Internationalisation is about Wits striving to become a top 100 university in line with their cliché, "Wits give you the edge".

All the students interviewed- both South Africans and non-South Africans, agreed that internationalisation of higher education is vital for the university to pursue. All at different times said, "Wits gives you the edge". What's interesting is that, all the students are conscious of Wits' goal to become a top 100 university. And they alluded to it that, one way Wits can achieve this is through the internationalisation of higher education in which non-South Africans are encouraged to come to the university as well as encouraging South African students to access programmes and opportunities outside.

Jenny: I think they don't have much choice- or do they? They don't! If you want to be part of the global world. Then encourage people to come to your university. Don't live in an island. How are you going to grow? ...I think it's the idea of Wits wanting to compete with other international universities to be ranked internationally...aiming to be in the top 100...I don't know...I really don't know

John: Yes, internationalisation is important. As an internationally reputed university, Wits should pursue internationalisation. This concept is very important for the good university because Wits is one of the top, leading advanced knowledge in South Africa.

Jake: To start with, Wits gives you the edge- its known worldwide that with a Wits certificate, you're a high flyer...I know Wits is striving to be amongst the top 100. I can't remember...but one of the top in the world. So I think that is one of the other tools to use to get to that standard is internationalisation.

Jesse: I think for them to be internationally-compliant. To do what is done elsewhere...there are two answers: that Wits would want to be seen (and they pride themselves) as been the leading university in the region.

6. Concluding Remarks

This study for me is my first encounter with phenomenography as a qualitative, research orientation. The process of this study, which is still on-going, has been very reflective and has been a learning curve. In making meaning of data (transcripts of the interviews), without contradicting the interpretivist and emergent rule of a phenomenographic analysis (Reid and Petocz, 2002), I was both inductive and deductive in the analysis. Firstly, I was *inductive* making my own judgment of the transcripts as I distance myself from the interview situations and participants. Secondly, I was *deductive*, trying to map-out the phenomenographic outcome space in the light of my conceptual framework earlier developed.

In *problematizing* the interface between a Bernstein- Run us externalist framework and phenomenography's relational framework, I found out that all the four qualitative variations in the students' conceptions of internationalisation somehow reflects on the three domains of socialization. The *Official, regulatory* domain guides students' mobility in and out of the university (conception 1). At the same time, this regulatory domain in various ways affects the conceptions 2-4 as well. The *social* and the *pedagogical* domains are equally influenced by the conceptions 2-4, with allusion to conceptions 2 and 3. Reflecting therefore on figure 1 above- *Bernstein's Domains of Socialization*, the domains as experienced by the students play different roles at different times in the students' ways of experiencing internationalisation.

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