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International Students in the UK: how can we give them a better experience?

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This paper is circulated for discussion purposes only and its contents should be considered preliminary.
International Students in the UK: how can we give them a better experience?

Abstract

This paper focuses on practical actions that can be taken to improve the learning experience of international students in the UK. Informed by personal experience in the UK, New Zealand and Australia, supplemented by an extensive literature search, a series of actions are recommended to improve the learning experience of international students from culturally diverse backgrounds. The suggested actions cover issues for individual lecturers, Departments, Higher Education Institutions and national level bodies.

The approach taken is to incorporate personal reflection and personal views and the ideas of writers in the field. The paper is written in the first person and sets out the author's wish list of ideas, hopes and aspirations for the future, from the perspective of a teaching fellow working in a research focussed University in the UK.

International Students in the UK: how can we give them a better experience?

Introduction

In 2004/5 there were 318,395 international students (non UK domiciles) in Higher Education in the UK. This represented around 14 percent of the total student population (UKCOSA). International students numbers will rise and fall over the years as a result of currency fluctuations, changes in student visa regulations and changes in customer perceptions. However the international trade in Higher Education (HE) is here to stay for the foreseeable future (Turner 2006). It follows that the Universities and University staff in the UK, if they have not already done so, will have to adapt their approach to take account of the changes in the background and prior learning experience of students attending their classes (Zepke *et al* 2004). Departments, lecturers, supervisors and administrative staff and systems that do not evolve to work with students from diverse backgrounds and different countries will in time damage the reputation of their institutions. Likewise, those that consider and adapt to the needs of international students will benefit from an enhanced reputation and will be seen to be more attractive to the discerning international student.

In this personal reflective account I seek to blend my own experiences in Management Education, with suggestions advanced in the growing literature in the subject area. I will argue that it is not appropriate in the UK to leave individual lecturers to develop their own responses to internationalisation through reflective practice. There is a place for this approach, but it is not enough on its own. Instead, I argue that a multi-level agenda is essential, so that action is also taken at Programme and Departmental level, across institutions and at a Government level. These ideas

were formed following a recent study tour to New Zealand and Australia where I studied how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in those two countries had developed to face the challenge of teaching large numbers of international students and home students from diverse backgrounds.

In New Zealand what is known as 'export education' is the 4th largest export earner (Bennett 1998, Li 2004). Asian students have been travelling to New Zealand to study in the HE system since the late 1980s, with large numbers travelling from Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong in particular. International students make up over 25 percent of the student numbers in several Universities, (Ministry of Education 2005). In 2002 New Zealand HE saw a 25 per cent growth in International Students driven by big increases in students from Peoples' Republic of China (PRC). Over 50 percent of International students in New Zealand in 2003 were from PRC (Li 2004), but numbers of PRC students have fallen significantly since then with a 50 percent reduction (over 5,000 students) and 17 percent fall in all international students between 2005 and 2006, (Education New Zealand 2006). As a result HE institutions across New Zealand are facing financial difficulties, especially where they have funded expansion plans on the back of anticipated international student numbers.

Australia, has been recruiting South and East Asian students, since the early 1980s from Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Korea, Indonesia and Hong Kong and, more recently, from PRC (Chapman & Pyvis 2006, Bennet 1998). In 2004, 24 percent of students in Australian HE were international students, (Carroll & Ryan 2005), compared with 9 percent in the UK, (The Independent 20/10/05). In the Faculty of Economics and Business at the University of Sydney, 60 percent of the students were

from Non-English speaking backgrounds (this figure includes international students as well as Australian citizens for whom English is their second language). The largest language group of students being Mandarin speakers, with Cantonese, Arabic, Greek and Vietnamese also well represented as first languages alongside English (University of Sydney 2004).

The purpose of the study tour was to examine how institutions in other countries had responded to an influx of international students. Combining these international insights with an extensive literature review and my own experiences, my findings propose actions that can be taken at several levels ranging from those initiatives that can be taken by individual members of staff, actions that can be taken by Departments, Institutions and through to national level initiatives.

Lecturer actions

My own experience of teaching international students started with a largely unsuccessful attempt to offer academic skills training to Chinese students. At the start of 2004-2005 there were 42 overseas undergraduates in the Department of Management Studies at the University of York. Many of these students had very good English skills and had few difficulties studying in a second or third language. However, it was noticeable at that time that students from PRC were experiencing particular challenges. This was evidenced by poor marks (below their own and the Department's expectations), a growing number of academic misconduct hearings and difficulties in integrating with other students.

With these issues in mind, the Department surveyed its overseas students in early January 2004. The survey identified that students considered that language was the main barrier they faced. As a result, a plan was put together to offer targeted support to Management Studies students with weaker written and spoken English language skills; in particular, concerns were expressed about the language ability of Chinese students. The targeting of students stimulated some debate in the Department. In order to satisfy all parties, it was agreed that the planned sessions would be optional and offered to all first year undergraduates and strongly recommended to all those from a non- English speaking background (NESB). In the hope that students would self-select for the sessions a formative writing exercise was organised and the sessions were arranged to take place after the first set of assessments had been completed.

The University of York funded the plan with a teaching innovation grant, which provided for 10 hours extra tuition by colleagues from the University's Language Centre, in English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The sessions were planned to cover reading, note taking, planning work, structuring assignments, use of sources, writing style, paragraphs, academic conventions and some basic grammar.

Looking at the outcomes, the main feature of the sessions was the lack of attendance. Out of a year group of 80, only 14 students completed the formative writing exercise and got feedback on their writing style. A total of 22 different students attended the 6 skills sessions. Of these 11 attended just one session, and only 2 attended 3 or more sessions. The original target group, students from a NESB were poorly represented even within the 22. Only three Chinese students, one Middle Eastern student and 3

from EU countries other than the UK attended the sessions; one Chinese student attended 2 sessions

A secondary but noticeable trend was that the students who did the formative exercise and attended the sessions were the equivalent of the 'worried well', i.e. students who had reasonably good academic skills, but were worried enough about their lack of expertise to attend the sessions.

Those students who attended the sessions did marginally better in the second set of assessments than those who did not but this was on average only a 1.5 percent improvement and as numbers were a small it was not a statistically significant trend.

Although well intentioned, the project did not achieve its objective of assisting the development of academic skills for Chinese students from NESBs. A period of reflection followed as I tried to understand the reasons for the apparent failure of the project. The main issues identified, are summarised below:

Extra and optional – A fundamental error was trying to fit EAP into the timetable as an extra programme, many NESB students (in particular the Chinese students) struggle to keep up with the demands of the programme, so many simply chose not to spend time attending an extra optional module.

Communications – The Department did not signal the importance of the EAP sessions in a range of communications with students. It may be that some students interpreted this as a sign that it was not important. Weaker NESB students should have been encouraged to attend by their academic tutors.

Academic credit – Linked to both the above was the lack of credits for taking the module. This may have reduced the motivation of some students who could not see the benefit of the EAP work over other demands on their time. Although staff in the Department felt that the EAP sessions were going to be very useful to help students complete future assignments, this feeling was difficult to convey to first year undergraduates who did not have the benefit of hindsight.

Deficit model – The communications with students notifying them of the EAP programme implied that international students from NESB had a 'problem' and this programme was designed to sort it out. On reflection it is clear that many of the NESB students were high achievers who had excelled in their prior educational experience, so it was not appropriate to imply that they had a problem.

Context – The formative writing exercise asked students to write a short essay on leadership. The case study was taken from a TV programme about the Chairman of a struggling English Football club. Although football is an international game the context was very UK specific and was arguably not appropriate for international students new to the UK.

Workload – The timing of the EAP sessions meant that the last two or three sessions took place at a time when many students were preparing to submit their second set of assessments.

My own experience suggests that in an attempt to do something to help international students, it is possible to end up unsuccessful or even make matters worse, (Warwick 2005). Providing additional academic language support is not a bad idea. However it is not a good idea to implicitly indicate deficiency in prior learning experiences, or by

creating extra requirements, make life harder for international students relative to home students.

My attempts to provide a case study for the formative writing exercise were also unsuccessful mainly because I expected international students to overlook the context within which the study was based and instead to concentrate on the leadership issues. However it was very difficult to concentrate on the leadership question if you did not understand the nature of the business in which the leader was working.

As a result of these experiences and the lessons learnt the EAP sessions were reorganised in 2005/6 with improved communications, timetabling and much more specific targeting of NESB students. These changes do eradicate all the problems identified above, but by trial and error the programme is slowly improving. Academics are not noted for sharing their poor experiences, so it is interesting to speculate about how many colleagues are struggling in isolation making the same or similar mistakes and hopefully through reflective practice making gradual, incremental improvements.

Spurred on by this thought, I went on to look at some of the teaching and learning literature about what interventions a module leader can make to improve the learning experience for an increasingly diverse and international student population. It is possible to identify a number of themes in this area: respect for students, cultural awareness and structure and organisation.

Respect - In her study of instructor behaviour Buttner (2004) identifies disrespectful behaviour as a key issue. If students feel that they are not respected, or if the instructors do not show concern for the student then their motivation and liking of the subject fall markedly. Unfortunately it is still common for UK lecturers and UK institutions to view international students as a 'problem', (Asmar 2005, Barrington 2004, Carroll and Ryan, 2005,) and for the actions of staff and the institutional policies to overlook many aspects of cultural diversity. To improve the teaching and learning experience for all students, including international students, assumptions about students' prior experiences, and cultural stereotypes (Ballard & Clanchy 1997) need to be disregarded.

Cultural awareness - Fisher (2001) made it clear that good teaching involved developing a clear understanding of the profile of the students being taught. Curry (2005) calls for management teachers to develop better understanding of international students, Jin & Cotrazzi (1998) call for western educators to develop a clear understanding of the nature of Chinese students' prior learning experiences. Also, lecturers need to be aware of their cultural 'pre-programming' (Carroll & Ryan 2005 p46) when entering a classroom, and should not make assumptions about student knowledge or understanding. Also with increasing diversity in the lecture theatre, lecturers should aim to develop programmes that emphasise a range of different preferred learning styles, (Warwick and Ottewill 2004) and take account of multiple intelligences, (Barrington 2004). Not all students enter higher education with self-directed learning skills not all have strong verbal and linguistic skills and not all are at their best trying to relate to a theoretical lecture. It is therefore important to design learning opportunities, which can bring out other skills and

allow students to learn from activities, observing and experiencing as well as listening to standard lectures.

Structure and organisation of group work – It is clear from student feedback that all students appreciate well-organised and clearly structured modules, this is particularly the case for NESB students. Group work is also an area of teaching and learning, which individual members of staff can improve and develop for the benefit of all students. Parks and Raymond (2004) observed how international students were often relegated to subordinate roles with groups, (even those with relatively good communication skills and prior work experience). Others observe how students will often gravitate to mono-cultural groups and can be very uncomfortable if they are forced into multicultural groups (Volet and Ang 1998, Cathcart *et a*l 2006). De Vita (2002) challenges the received wisdom that multicultural groups lead to a reduction of marks for home students, by making the point that a more diverse range of perspectives within a group, helps multicultural groups improve the mark of home students. This is particularly the case with group work that requires a range of tasks that benefit from lateral thinking and creativity.

By being clear about the task and the rationale for group work, by carefully selecting group membership (and explaining the reasons for the selection of members), by setting out ground rules for group working and by selecting appropriate tasks, De Vita (2001) argues that group work is ideally suited to creating opportunities for multi-cultural learning. Group work is also a useful way to build on the prior learning experiences of many ethnic Chinese students from a Confucian tradition (Flowerdew 1998). Flowerdew suggests that when it works well, group work

exploits the Confucian value of cooperation and can be used to overcome some of the face saving silences, by encouraging groups to express opinions rather than by forcing individuals to put forward personal views.

So at practice level, lecturers should: be clear about their own cultural background and assumptions (Carroll and Ryan 2005); develop a greater awareness of their students; value the diversity within the group (Fisher 2001), by making sure that case studies and examples are taken from a range of cultures (Da Vita 2001), they can move away from Anglo-American assumptions in standard text books (Curry 2007) and adapt their teaching style to make it more accessible to an international audience (Xu 2005). This might mean slowing down, tolerating silences, being explicit about instructions, improving arrangements for group work, designing culturally inclusive tasks and moving away from complicated phraseology in exams and assessments (Carroll 2002).

No doubt some lecturers have developed their teaching to take account of these ideas. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that many, especially those in research focussed institutions where priorities may lie elsewhere, have not. Without action at Departmental and Institutional level, they are unlikely to do so. By taking no notice of the changing make up of the student population, it could be argued that teaching staff are showing the disrespect, which Buttner (2004), argued was the most significant issue in determining student motivation and appreciation.

In my view it is not appropriate to leave it to individual members of staff to make these changes and alterations themselves. Even if staff are equipped with the tools of

reflective practice (perhaps through taking Postgraduate Certificates in teaching or academic practice) this does not guarantee results. Instead, I believe action should be taken to adapt and develop programmes and individual modules at a Departmental level.

Departmental and Programme level actions

Learning from my attempt to introduce an academic skills programme, I found that others had been more successful when they been able to incorporate similar content into a credit-bearing module (Pealo & Luxton 2004). I also found that other Departmental level changes can be introduced which not only recognise student diversity but use it in an positive way to improve the experience of all students, whilst at the same time providing transferable skills to aid student personal development.

One way to use diversity to the advantage of all students, is to introduce cross-cultural study modules. These are possible in a wide variety of disciplines from science and medicine through the arts and into social sciences. One example of good practice was developed by the Business School at Massey University in New Zealand where a Cross Cultural Communication module was offered to undergraduate Human Resource Management, (HRM) students. This module, nicknamed the 'Kiwi Friend' programme, offered an opportunity for third year undergraduates to develop practical skills in cross-cultural communications by working with new entrant international students.

Dilemma theory, as developed by Hamden-Turner (cited in Ramsey and Mason 2004) gave the HRM students a "basis for describing the differences people encounter when

moving between communities" (Ramsey and Mason 2004 p688). A typology of strategies for dealing with dilemmas helps the students consider how their international student mentees are coping with their own cross cultural adjustment.

The strategies range from resistance, to assimilation as follows:

- Resistance, students cling to the values and practices of their home culture
- Marginalisation, students withdraw from contact with home or receiving cultures
- Assimilation, students reject the values and practices of their home culture and substitute them with those of the receiving culture
- Coping, students make a temporary adjustment, they do enough to get by in their receiving culture
- Balanced adjustment, students grasp the opportunity for personal growth and learn to act freely and successfully in their receiving culture, while retaining the ability to adjust back to home culture values.

The goal of the 'Kiwi Friends' mentors was to help the international students avoid resistance and marginalisation strategies and help them achieve a balanced adjustment. In order to do this they were expected to lead a range of workshops at which they helped the international students' academic induction, they talked about aspect of New Zealand culture and dealt with a range of communication issues, both formal and informal, (Ramsey *et al* 2004). Added to the formal sessions were regular conversation hours and twice termly social events.

The HRM students undertook the module as a third year option and received credits towards their final degree classification, for a reflective assignment and teaching portfolio. The international students obtained a certificate of completion, and it gave them a social network.

The 'Kiwi Friend' programme was extremely well received by the students (Ramsey and Mason 2004). I believe it was successful because it addressed a series of problems and dilemmas faced by colleagues at Massey University.

- International students who had come to New Zealand to improve their English, but found that they did not get many opportunities to use their English
- The workload faced by students meant that, despite their best intention to form friendships through activities, international students did not feel comfortable taking time to relax away from their books.
- Language barriers meant that international students, especially Asians, struggle to understand the accents of home students.
- Home students often struggle to understand international students
- Misunderstandings derived from home students seeing international students talking in foreign languages to their peers and assuming they do not want to speak in English. International students seeing home students avoiding group work with international students and finding other reasons to not sit with them or talk to them
- Teaching staff view Asian students as an extra burden on their time, best avoided by restricting opportunities for unwanted contact wherever possible.

Using the vehicle of a module in cross-cultural communication, these problems were largely overcome creating a community of learners that facilitated formalised contact between home and international students. A credit bearing module in cross cultural communication gave HRM students transferable international management skills and gave academic staff allocated time to run a module which made a direct contribution to improving international student learning experience.

Apart from looking at programmes of study, departments can benefit from sharing understanding and teaching experiences. In an appropriate and supportive environment, colleagues can accelerate the process of reflection by talking through the issues and working with each other on ideas for changes and minor adaptations. However, Departments cannot usually bring about change at an institutional level. So, I suggest that there is also a set of institution level actions which should encompass not only recruitment of international students and home students from non traditional backgrounds but should include the student learning experience, staff development, curriculum development and internationalising the experience of home students.

Sou

Institutional level actions

In New Zealand and Australia, I found all the HEIs I visited to be international in their outlook. Many staff were from overseas and websites, accommodation arrangements and even administrative systems and procedures appeared to be geared up for international students and staff, in a way that is the exception rather than the rule in the UK, (Welch 2002, Butcher & McGrath 2004, Poole 2005, Asmar 2005, Chapman & Pyvis 2006). While some UK HEIs have already embarked on

Internationalisation projects (Grant & Chan 2006) others have made token gestures in that direction, possibly added a few pages for international students on their website, (Turner 2005). I suggest the UK could learn from practice overseas in developing and embedding an international outlook.

Bartell (2003) describes a continuum of internationalising strategies from limited symbolic gestures, through to what is described as a full globalisation of curriculum, research, role, activity and stakeholders. He is clear that students should be prepared for careers in the global economy, by outward looking institutions, (p66), and not myopic inward looking institutions, preoccupied with internal maintenance issues. This then is a clear manifesto for the Internationalisers.

Bartell also advocates institutional adaptation, so that institutions transform themselves to mirror the diversity of the student population. He argues they should operate for a global rather than a domestic market. They should review their curriculum to reflect this global mindset, work to give home students a global experience and utilise and embrace the diversity within the class room rather than ignoring it. Likewise, Zepeke & Leach (2005) advocate moving beyond strategies that enable international students to integrate and assimilate into the institutional culture; instead they argue that institutions should adapt to reflect the students they recruit. This applies just as much to mature students and other home students from non-traditional backgrounds as it does to international students.

As pointed out earlier, some UK institutions have moved a lot further than others on this type of issue. Unfortunately for many international students, it is not always the

HEIs with the highest international reputation or best ranking that are the most adapted to their needs.

However, as Asmar (2005) points out, on some counts, HEIs are in a no win situation, because if they do adapt to accommodate international students and students from non-traditional backgrounds, these adaptations are viewed as cynical attempts to boost recruitment. Going beyond policy and procedural changes Ortiz (2004) advocates curriculum changes, opening minds to new cultures, encouraging travel exchanges, and encouraging Departments to recruit staff with international experience. Echoing policy measures in other parts of the public sector, arguably internationalised departments should be rewarded more favourably than those that remain inwardly focussed.

Institutional actions can have a significant impact on the learning experience of all students from all backgrounds. Those institutions that are looking to internationalise are arguably taking a much longer term view than those institutions whose main efforts remain focussed on recruitment of international students. However, the New Zealand experience suggests that even this long-term view might not be in itself enough without some national level action to develop and regulate practice across the entire international education market.

National level actions

The UK government acknowledges the potential benefits to the economy of international students and the Second Prime Ministerial Initiative announced £7 million funding for UK Universities (Department for Education and Skills 2006, The

Guardian 18/04/06a, The Guardian 18/04/06b). However, this does not compare in scale or scope with the Export Education Levy system in New Zealand. If UK Higher Education wants to improve its ability to attract and retain international students one way of doing this would be to introduce a quality control, research and development funding and the sharing of good practice mechanism that is allowed for by the Levy system in New Zealand. Introduced in 2004, the Levy provides the Ministry of Education in New Zealand with funding to:

- Undertake diplomacy on behalf of New Zealand education providers
- Build quality of education provision by identifying and sharing good practice
- Develop and fund links with international partners
- Fund research and innovation projects and
- Fund promotional marketing of the New Zealand Educational brand

(Ministry of Education 2004)

The Levy was introduced for a range of reasons: firstly an acknowledgment of the importance of the export education business to New Zealand, secondly in response to a number of scandals (concerning the treatment of students) and financial collapses in private language and boarding schools and thirdly in response to the evidence of a decline in enrolments in 2003 onwards. The scandals and financial difficulties compromised the educational prospects of international students and further dented the reputation of the New Zealand Education system. Related to these problems, international enrolment began to fall, after a period of rapid expansion. The Government perceived a failure of the education market to provide and maintain adequate quality standards and therefore set up the Levy in order to regulate and

maintain the reputation of the New Zealand education system. As Li (2004) noted, problems in any part of the education system have implications for enrolments in other sectors. In this case, problems in language colleges and residential secondary schools did appear to have dented the image of the tertiary sector.

The Levy is linked to the number of full fee paying international students at each education provider in New Zealand. A flat rate charge is levied from for all providers of international education (approximately £75) along side a variable fee (currently 0.45 of percent of total fee income). Just less than 50 percent of the levy income comes from Universities, with language schools the next largest contributor accounting for 20 percent of the Levy's income (Deloitte 2006).

Funded by the Levy, the Export Education Department of the Ministry of Education has produced a Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students and commissioned research on a range of issues including: managing cultural diversity, (Ho *et al* 2004), best practice teaching strategies for international students, (McCallum 2004), interactions with international students, academic achievement of international students and the experiences of international students in New Zealand (Ward and Masgoret 2004).

Many HEIs in the UK are very good at dealing with diversity and others are well-organised for dealing with large numbers of international students. Unfortunately there are also a lot of institutions, Departments and individual members of staff who are not good at either (The Times Higher 2006). Experience in New Zealand suggests that one or two rogue institutions can create problems for the entire education system,

so in my view there is an argument for national level action in this area, whether it be organised by the Department for Education and Skills, Quality Assurance Agency or some other body.

Conclusion

Changes in the student population affect everyone working in higher education. This is not an issue that research focussed academics can leave to Student Support Officers, Students Services Departments or Teaching and Learning Advisors to sort out for them. It is something that requires action by all of us. Like many working in HEIs in the UK, I now teach classes that are more culturally diverse than I have before experienced, often with a large proportion of international students. I have had little formal preparation for this task (although I have been to several optional sessions in the University). Over the last two or three years, I have reflected on my approach and made changes to what I teach and the way that I do it, many colleagues will have done the same. However, I suspect some have not and few will have attended optional workshop sessions, especially those whose focus and interest lies elsewhere. As a result, some students, many of whom pay large sums of money to UK HEIs, continue to have bad experiences. It is not appropriate to allow international students to be thrown in the deep end and left to sink or swim. Action is needed by individual members of staff, by departments, institutions and at government level to ensure that this no longer happens.

At a UK national level we could do worse than follow the example set by New Zealand of putting in place research and development funding to develop best practice and to ensure some form of quality control checks are in place. Institutions should no

longer require students to assimilate into their culture; they should instead be adapting the culture and the way they are organised to reflect student diversity. They should also follow the example of forward looking institutions in the UK and overseas that have undertaken all encompassing internationalisation projects, covering curriculum, support services, staff development, and teaching and learning.

Departments need to look at how they can develop and share good practice between colleagues, they need to review programmes, modules and ensure that appropriate orientation, induction and academic skills programmes are in place. Individual members of staff ought to review their practice, by looking at their own cultural assumptions, reviewing assessment and group working arrangements, and reviewing their instructions, expectations and above all trying to get to know and respect their students for who they are, where they come from and for the abilities they bring with them into the lecture theatre and seminar group.

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