

## **Identifying and addressing international teachers' complex needs**

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### **Rationale**

The rationale for this study originated with observations by the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and the International Staff Office of international teachers' initial experiences of teaching, learning and assessment at a Danish university. Whilst individual teachers' experiences varied, there were repeated references to being uninformed about university culture and practices and having to source the information needed informally. Informed by Hsieh's (2102) recommendation for inter-cultural training and information sharing for all university teachers, data was collected from new international and national teachers. The timeliness and relevance of this study was echoed by the recent UK university based report (Equality Challenge Unit, 2013) which concludes with recommendations on providing international colleagues with relevant information, advice and guidance. Having reviewed other universities' online resources for international colleagues or multicultural teaching teachers' views on the potential of an information based and discursive online resource were sought.

### **Emperical data**

Three data sets were collected including: individual interviews with international teachers, an online survey which was made available to all teachers enrolled on the pedagogic programmes provided for teachers at the start of their university careers and follow-up focus group meetings. The study mainly focused on collecting data from relatively new teachers to the university. Four international teachers volunteered to be interviewed; the interviews were semi-structured and interviewees were invited to share their initial experiences of teaching, learning and assessment when they started working at the university. Once the study's focus extended, the data collection was extended to include Danish teachers who taught groups with international students. Approximately 50% (n=45) of the teachers registered on the pedagogic programmes responded to the online survey and five contributed to focus group discussions.

Therefore data have mainly been collected from staff with teaching roles that fit one or more of these categories, they are: in their first year at the university, international staff, teaching international students, enrolled on the pedagogic programmes.

### **Findings 393**

The findings are summarized in the following categories:

#### **1. Accessing Administrative Information**

Informal support by administrative and teaching colleagues was highly rated however there were recurrent references to the unavailability of relevant information in English pertaining to university administration and systems. In addition, the findings indicated considerable variation between departments in the provision and accessibility of relevant information. 90% of survey respondents

rated 'knowing where to access relevant information on course structure and design, knowing what is non-negotiable and negotiable' as very relevant/relevant.

*We need guidance with all the administrative aspects of starting a new course. In my first course I had problems with issues ranging from choosing a textbook, applying for changes to courses to the study board, grading, when my course needs a re-examination, why and how should I do an action plan, what to do when students have been discovered cheating, among many other issues. This guidance could be via a website with frequently asked questions supplemented with a forum.*  
(Survey respondent)

## **2. Cultures and Systems**

The findings indicated that new international colleagues were aware of differences in departmental cultures but they often felt uninformed about their department's pedagogy and philosophy. Teachers who were not enrolled on the pedagogic programme were unaware that the university offered courses on teaching, learning and assessment. None said they had been made aware of cultural issues for national or international students which may affect learning and student engagement; a survey respondent referred to the 'challenges of the multicultural classroom'.

## **3. Pedagogy**

Teachers expressed their commitment to their teaching role and wanting to do their best for the students. Guidance was requested on pedagogic dilemmas such as allocating limited class time to student interactions or teacher student interactions. 91% of survey respondents rated developing a shared understanding with students of the criteria and expectations for each assessment grade as very relevant/relevant. 79% survey respondents rated maximising student attendance in sessions as very relevant/relevant. 82% survey respondents rated encouraging students to do presentations or to participate in peer feedback as very relevant/relevant. There were additional comments on the variation in students' attendance, their willingness to respond to or ask questions in class, to present in front of their peers unless required by the course assessment and on having other agendas such as getting a job in Denmark.

### **Teachers' views on an online resource**

39% respondents expressed interest in an online gateway to relevant information and resources and a further 39% expressed possible interest. There were questions about the relevance of a centralised, university resource as most queries are department based. Some suggested FAQs, online discussions and blogs with a preference for these being Department based.

## **Analysis**

As with Luxon and Peelo's (2009) finding that international teachers face complex challenges this study's findings suggest their needs are both complex and often inter-connected could be represented as interwoven continua of needs. The interconnectedness of these continua is evident in examples where a teacher needs to design a new course, plan the teaching, learning and assessment and plan for the inclusion of students from diverse cultures. The initial continuum relates to their need for immediate access to administrative information, course organisation and design information in English and to have ongoing access to relevant information on a need to know basis. A second continuum relates to their need for guidance on the university or department's pedagogy and methods of assessment. And the third continuum relates to cultural and intercultural needs for appropriate and sensitive guidance and insight. Beyond addressing their initial needs as international it could be argued all teachers need access to these continua on a need to know basis.

## **Conclusion**

The questions which arise from this study include how to best accommodate these diverse and complex needs? With the three categories of needs in mind, how can we distinguish between challenges related to university teaching and challenges related to intercultural meetings in university teaching? Will more easy access to information about administrative procedure and the Danish educational system be helpful if not related to pedagogic practice?

## **References**

Equality Challenge Unit (2013) *Improving the experiences of international staff in UK higher education*. Accessible from <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/>

Hsieh, H. (2012) 'Challenges facing Chinese academic staff in a UK university in terms of language, relationships and culture.' *Teaching in Higher Education*. Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 371-383

Luxon and Peelo (2009) 'Academic sojourners, teaching and internationalisation: the experience of non-UK staff in a British University' *Teaching in Higher Education* Vol. 14, No. 6, December 2009, pp.649-659.

## **Danish universities international staff support**

Aalborg University:  
<http://www.iso.aau.dk/>

Aarhus University:

<http://ias.au.dk/international-academic-staff-ias/>

[http://issuu.com/internationalcommunity/docs/coming\\_to\\_denmark\\_-\\_our\\_stories](http://issuu.com/internationalcommunity/docs/coming_to_denmark_-_our_stories)

Copenhagen University:

<http://ism.ku.dk/>

Roskilde University:

<http://www.ruc.dk/en/about-the-university/news-portal/ru-news/view/article/making-it-easier-for-international-staff-and-phd-students-to-be-part-of-life-at-ru/>

University of Southern Denmark:

[http://www.sdu.dk/en/Information\\_til/International\\_staff](http://www.sdu.dk/en/Information_til/International_staff)