

‘A golden layer on your skin?’ A narrative exploration of the experiences of ‘local Widening Participation’ and ‘international’ students in a UK higher education environment (0169)

This paper will report on a qualitative investigation into the learning experiences of selected groups of undergraduate and postgraduate students in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Bristol, UK and of undergraduate and postgraduate students in the Bristol Business School at the University of the West of England, UK. The main purpose of the research was to identify possible opportunities for synergy between the internationalisation and Widening Participation (WP) agendas in the learning environment, to identify the extent to which the environments were experienced as inclusive and to identify examples of good practice in developing cultural capability in higher education.

The local contexts were selected as they contain significant numbers of international students as well as high numbers of UK students, many from WP backgrounds. The student constituencies are, therefore, relatively evenly balanced. Narrative interviews were conducted with 28 participants in order to gain rich, in depth accounts of their experiences and perceptions.

Background

With the current rate of international migration - for educational purposes - to urban cities in the UK (Cangiano, 2010, HESA, 2011), it is critical for higher educational institutions to maintain awareness of the level of interaction between ‘local’ and ‘international’ students and to seek to enable local communities – of academics and students – to benefit from the opportunities to develop cultural capability brought about by greater diversity in higher education. Given the decimation of teaching budgets in the UK context, many universities are looking to increase their fee income by recruiting more students from outside the European Union. Continuing to increase the numbers of such students without taking account of qualitative intelligence about their academic experiences together with the experiences of ‘local’ students is at best unwise and at worst foolish and likely to lead to a decrease in the number of applications.

The UK Equality Challenge Unit’s (ECU) study *Internationalising Equality, Equalising Internationalisation* focused on the intersection between the equality and diversity agenda in the higher education sector, identifying opportunities for synergy between broader equality and diversity agendas and internationalisation, particularly in learning and teaching practices (Eade and Peacock, 2009). A subsequent (2010) study *Joining up Agendas: Internationalisation and Equality and Diversity in Higher Education* concluded that there are similarities between international students and WP students, for example,

both groups may need additional support to navigate new cultural systems, in particular to become comfortable with learning and teaching approaches. The study found that those institutions with a strong tradition of engaging with the WP agenda might be better placed to understand the needs of current and potential students, whatever their background. While there is a growing corpus of research that focuses on the experiences of 'international students' in higher education, and of that which explores the experiences of 'local' students in learning environments that are increasingly diverse, there is very little that investigates the extent to which the background of local students may impact their propensity to interact with students from other contexts. Bradley and Healy's research (2008) among young British BME adults, for example, showed how much they appreciated the experience of attending highly regarded universities but also highlighted pressures that forced them to socialise mainly within their own ethnic groups. A study by Harrison & Peacock (2011) exploring the intersection between race, class and culture suggests that students from lower socioeconomic groups experience particular anxiety from interacting across cultures, which may work to counter the positive benefits anticipated through the internationalisation at home agenda. There is, therefore, a potential challenge in those classrooms where both the numbers of students from WP backgrounds (identified in the UK as being from an ethnic minority, having a disability, or being in a lower socioeconomic group) and of international students are rising. The challenge is to ensure that all students, irrespective of background, context and previous educational experience, feel that the environment is structured to be inclusive rather than one that marginalises those who are not of the dominant majority.

The study reported on was entirely exploratory aiming to establish a framework for cultural capability in higher education (Trahar, 2011) and to identify opportunities for synergy between the internationalisation and broader equality agendas in the learning environment. It thus builds on the ECU studies cited earlier. Preliminary analysis of the data reinforces much of the research in this field and yet again indicates that the level of interaction between students from different contexts in international learning environments is relatively poor but that where academics encourage integration in the classroom, students respond positively and are highly appreciative of the diversity. The data also appear to suggest that some students from WP backgrounds found it more problematic to interact with other local students than with those from outside the UK context. They attributed these difficulties to ethnicity and social class. In our presentation of the outcomes of this research, we report not only on the perceptions and experiences of the participants but also on the strategies that they themselves identified for effecting greater inclusivity inside and outside of the classroom and that we contend are crucial in fostering greater understanding of each other in the interconnected world in which we live.

References

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