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Diversity in peer groups - the benefits and tensions it may entail (0181)
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Purpose: The purpose of this presentation is to discuss the benefits and tensions that diversity may entail when students work on mandatory assignments in diverse peers groups. It is exemplified by the findings of a small-scale study among MSc students of business, analysing their expectations and experience with diverse peer groups in the first semester of their two-year master programme.

Background: As a consequence of English Medium Instruction (EMI) and Internationalisation at Home (IaH), students are often expected to work together in diverse groups. There may be different reasons for introducing group work where students work across cultures as, ideally, this should prepare them for working in an international and intercultural context, strengthen their understanding and recognition of other cultures and thus challenge cultural stereotypes (Carroll 2005; De Vita 2000 and 2005; Knight & de Wit 1995; Montgommery 2009; Volet & Ang 1998). Moreover, research has shown that collaboration in multicultural groups may lead to better learning outcomes (Da Vita 2002; Kimmel & Volet 2012).

The fact that there is an opportunity for intercultural contact and interaction in international programmes does not necessarily mean that the students take advantage of it. On the contrary, students often tend to stick to peers with the same linguistic and cultural backgrounds as they have themselves unless intercultural collaboration in diverse groups is an explicitly expressed requirement (Cozart & Lauridsen 2012; De Vita 2002; Kimmel & Volet 2012; Montgommery 2009).

Aim of study: Students' attitude to collaboration in multi-cultural as opposed to mono-cultural groups have been analysed in English speaking countries (Carroll 2005; De Vita 2000, 2002, and 2005; Kimmel & Volet 2012; Montgommery 2009; Volet and Ang 1998), but less so in EMI programmes in non-English speaking environments. Peer collaboration seems to be most difficult when cultural differences and linguistic barriers impact on students' ways of interacting with each other (Kimmel & Volet 2012). Against the backdrop of these observations, the aim of this study was to analyse students' attitudes to multicultural collaboration in an EMI master of business programme in order to assess whether there was a difference between the attitudes and experience of home (Danish) and international students and if so, what they were. Students were asked about their preferences as regards the group composition before they started working together; about the importance of the experience gained in the diverse groups with a view to their future career prospects; and, finally, how they evaluated the experience after they had completed the assignments.

Method: These questions were asked as part of their course evaluation at the end of the term. In the evaluation form, possible answers were on an ordinal scale from no importance (1) to very important (5) or a Likert scale from completely disagree (1) to completely agree (5).

The cohort was 120 students at Aarhus University, Denmark. The response rate was 37.5 per cent. 45.5 per cent of these responses were from home students who had also completed their bachelor degree in Aarhus; 20.5 per cent had completed their bachelor degree at another Danish university; and 34.1 per cent were international students. These figures were very close to the distribution of students in the full cohort, with the home students slightly overrepresented.

Findings: The international students were the ones with the most positive attitude towards collaboration in diverse peer groups, the ones most convinced that they would benefit from the experience in their future careers, having the most positive experience of the group work overall. They are also the ones who attached least importance to working with peers with the same disciplinary background as their own.

The home students, one the other hand, attached more importance than any of the other groups to working together with someone with the same disciplinary backgrounds as their own; they were the ones with the least positive attitude towards diversity just as they did not attach much value to it with a view to their future careers. However, some of them were slightly more positive after they had tried working in diverse groups. The Danish students from other Danish universities were between the other two groups. Similar differences between home and international students are also seen in other studies (e.g. Volet & Ang 1998) and thus apply to both English and non-English speaking environments.

Discussion and implications: Responses to the questionnaire itself do not explain the results, but it seems reasonable to assume that the students' motivation and reason for choosing the EMI programme in the first instance plays a role here. The home students had chosen between staying in Aarhus and complete their programme in English or transfer to another university to do it in Danish. For them the EMI programme was not necessarily a positive choice. The international students and students from other universities, on the other hand, had deliberately made the decision to transfer to Aarhus in order to enrol in an EMI programme. It is worth noting that the programme did not have an explicitly stated international dimension in the description of its aim and expected learning outcomes. Whereas the international students and the Danish students from other universities seem to have expected that and seen it as a benefit when they chose the EMI programme, the same may not have been the case for the home students who therefore seem to have focused on the tensions without seeing the benefits. These differences in expectations seem to be one possible explanation for the discrepancy between the students' responses to questions about their group work in the evaluation.

EMI does not automatically mean that a programme is international. If it is to be beneficial to home and international students alike and not create tensions, the international dimension must be explicitly expressed and be reflected in its content and its teaching and learning processes, including collaboration in diverse groups. This above assumptions should therefore be tested in a more comprehensive study, and recommendations for the didactic implications should be developed.

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