

## **Students perceptions of internationalisation in higher education.**

Steele Deborah, Ryan Paul, *Newman University Birmingham, UK*

The use of term internationalisation in higher education is relatively new, however it is now used for a vast array of services and functions in higher education and has a variety of meanings. To some it involves international activities such as staff and student mobility's (Carbonell 2012), partnerships, projects, shared international programs and research initiatives. For others it's around the delivery of higher education through offshore or onshore means, through online or blended learning with overseas campuses and franchises (Sweeney 2012.). It can be about ensuring an international, intercultural and global perspective into the curriculum, learning and teaching (Otten 2003; Leask 2009) where as for others it can mean international development projects or the commodification of higher education with increased international trade (Kirp 2003, Altbach 2002). The meanings of the term are varied and complex.

This research reports on a case study of Newman University, Birmingham. With around 3000 students, Newman University is a niche institution with a catholic ethos that has a mission of service to support inclusive practice, cherish diverse traditions and challenge values. The case study forms part of the development of a strategy to internationalise the university and concentrates on the perspectives of 'home' students. There are many definitions of the term 'home' student, particularly in relation to fee status, however, and for this case study home students are defined as students with permanent residence within the UK. Part of the strategy is a whole institution learning experience with the aim to increase cultural and mobility capability of staff and students, allowing an increased confidence in dealing with new cultures, strengthening employability in global markets. The strategy for increasing internationalisation amongst staff and students involved:

- ◆ Raising awareness of intercultural differences within our classrooms,
- ◆ Creating opportunities for sharing of staff and student experiences in issues of international and intercultural learning and teaching
- ◆ Highlighting the need for greater consideration of intercultural differences, not only with our international students, but also with our home students.
- ◆ Considering opportunities for outward mobility for staff and students, work experience, study or short educational visits.

Newman has very multicultural cohorts of students, although we have a small number of international students, our home student population report a birthplace in 51 different countries around the world. This appears to be common with many other UK universities, who report an increasing cultural mix of what we consider to be home students. Haigh (2009) suggests that despite the growth in multi-cultural classrooms, the UK higher education sector still tends to teach in a *'predominantly white, middle class, traditional English way'* (Haigh

2009). Thompson (1997) argues that teaching in traditional ways is a reasonable approach; he suggests that it allows teachers to teach from their strengths, avoiding experimentation and teaching in ways in which they would feel uncomfortable and would therefore be less efficient. Biggs (2003) in his three ways of teaching suggests that good teaching relies on the universality of the learning process where the ethnicity of students is not relevant. Haigh (2009) states that classrooms in higher education include large numbers of students with non-westernised cultural roots that tend to be ignored by most HE curricula. Most teachers in higher education value diversity, however time constraints, teaching load and the need to conform to what are considered to be standards of academic excellence can mean that teachers may not have the time or the flexibility to reflect on the diversity or specific learning needs of their students (Haigh 2009).

This paper offers a view of internationalisation from the home student's perspective within a multicultural university that attracts predominantly non-traditional students. What are the beliefs and attitudes of students towards internationalisation in higher education? In what ways can higher education study prepare students to work in the global work market? How can higher education institutions accommodate the beliefs and attitudes of this group of students relating to internationalisation?

The student voice is increasingly important in higher education. The current ideology that espouses the virtues of marketization, places the student as a customer, right at the *'heart of system'*, Browne 2010 states that *'Students are best placed to make the judgement about what they want to get from participating in higher education'* (p25). The dangers of representing the student experience is that it can homogenise students and deprive them of any real agency, whilst at the same time as attempting to give them a voice (Sabri 2011). Work towards the strategy and this research has included students as partners in planning, gathering data and analysis.

For the exploration of the student perspective on internationalisation at Newman, a case study methodology was considered to be the best option. A case study has many definitions, Yin (1984) defines a case study as an investigation of *'a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context'*, adding that the boundaries between the phenomena and the context are not always clear and that multiple sources of evidence are used (p23). Yin's definition of a case study applies to this research. Punch (2009) explains that in case study research there should be an explicit attempt to preserve the wholeness, unity or integrity of the case. The case in this study is the student population of a single university, the majority of the student sample are undergraduates and the specific focus is on internationalisation.

The mixed methods research took place over 18 months, a survey of students (n=149) from across the university in 2013 exploring student's perceptions of intercultural learning and teaching, a focus group (n=6) to gain a deeper understanding of issues uncovered in the first survey, followed by a further survey of students (n=96) in 2014 which focussed on student understanding of

internationalisation. Data from the surveys was collected by students themselves and was coded and analysed by the students and researchers. The focus group was led by one of the researchers, all data is anonymised and stored confidentially.

The results show three clear themes: Learning to study and work within other cultures, expectations of the university in creating opportunities to learn about the world out there and the considerable barriers faced by this group of students in taking up some of those opportunities. Students tell us that they are often an 'untapped resource' in a multicultural classroom, they question structures that are put in place to ensure quality within universities but that also form barriers to learning opportunities at home and abroad, they remind us not to forget the considerable sacrifices that students from widening participation backgrounds face in attending university, particularly in the current climate, which can severely restrict opportunities to take up 'extra curricula' activities such as work, study or visits abroad. The research concludes with a number of considerations and recommendations for internationalisation to meet the needs of non-traditional, multicultural students.

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