

Academics' conceptualisations of their own power and agency in relation to supporting culturally diverse students (0191)

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## **Background**

The many conferences and publications in the field of curriculum internationalisation in recent years have opened up discussion in a range of areas, including implementation of institutional change (Leask 2015) and values and global citizenship (Killick 2015). However, there can be a challenge in identifying where academics' require support as individuals and teams in terms of supporting their international students. This paper will argue that this challenge comes in part from the institutional top-down message that controls the discourse around internationalising the curriculum and makes it difficult to translate it into meaningful action in the classroom. Following Carroll's (2011) suggestion that we need to adapt our narrative or discourse about internationalisation depending on the different audiences at university (professional and academic for example), we explore the discourses that frontline academics use to describe their practice as teachers of culturally diverse groups. In particular, we focussed on their implied understandings of their own power and agency in this discourse, and the likely implications for their academic practice and development needs.

Many studies (for example Akerlind 2007) have highlighted the range of academics' conceptualisations of teaching, from simply transmitting information to critical pedagogy. Akerlind also suggests that development initiatives may be more effective when they recognise these different conceptualisations, and therefore do not expect similar outcomes for all who engage with them. In our interviews with academics, we aimed to dig beneath statements of values and intent, by detailed discussion of classroom experiences and practice. We explore what their linguistic choices tell us about how they conceptualised their roles in supporting international students. In particular we looked at how they frame the blockers and enablers (Beelen and Leask 2011; Leask 2015) to supporting their students' learning in explicit or implicit assumptions about their own power and agency. We aim to build on existing literature to identify foci for academic development initiatives in this area.

## **Methodology**

As scholars of the humanities, we have been trained to approach 'texts' as relational and even as a set of "social practices" that create reality even as they represent it (Fairclough 2003). Our texts for this project were the recordings and transcripts of semi-structured one-to-one interviews with university teaching staff from three universities. Two of these were research intensive, one was teaching-focussed. Most interviewees were identified by staff working in Academic Development functions at their universities, and were therefore often selected as people to whom our work was especially relevant. This was either because they

had a particular interest in teaching intercultural groups, or they taught on programmes where there was a high degree of cultural diversity.

We chose one-to-one interviews recognising that staff may well be anxious, cautious and self-monitoring when expressing opinions in this area, for fear of breaching legal and moral imperatives relating to diversity, race and ethnicity. By attending to choices of metaphor and figurative speech, as well as to the ways in which the lecturers implicitly and explicitly conceptualised the extent and limits of their power and agency as academics and professionals in relation to their teaching practice, we aimed to identify how academics both construct and negotiate blockers and enablers in the context of their practice. In particular, which factors had turned personal blockers, or potential personal blockers, into enablers for these individuals? How do they position themselves in relation to their students, institutions and the knowledge and skills required to effectively support student learning? Did they perceive their role as educator in an international context to be complex and ongoing, or straightforward and finite? Was prior international experience, of work or study abroad, a necessary precursor to a sophisticated understanding of the social and cultural processes at work in their diverse classrooms?

### **Findings**

Using our rigorous textual analysis skills in combination with techniques from critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995) it becomes clear that our approach help us to capture the narratives or discourses academics have created with regards to internationalisation and how it is enhancing their academic practice. While all the academics interviewed here expressed a commitment to supporting international students, there was great variation in how they conceived of their roles as academics, and as individuals with something particular to bring to this. While all gave examples of how they had adapted their practice to take account of a culturally diversifying body of students, they were mostly very clear about the limits and constraints on them in doing this. Only one individual described overcoming initial problems, and turning round an unsatisfactory situation, without focussing on 'unmanageable' blockers. There were also mismatches between the views expressed and the language used in which to express them.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this paper, we expose the ambiguities lying beneath the dominant discourse of internationalising the curriculum through analysis of the stories told by academics who are in many ways controlled by this discourse but who have also found different ways of liberating themselves from it. Understanding these versions has implications for all of us in academic development. These implications include:

1. The need to focus on examples of practice, rather than generalised or relativized statements of practice and intent, when conducting a needs analysis.
2. The need for academic development to provide opportunities to explore authentic examples of academic practice as well as theoretical frameworks.
3. The desirability of identifying both frustrations or blockers, and the specific events and skills that have enabled better practice to develop.

## References

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