

Understanding International Students' Learning Needs and Improving Student Experience in an Increasingly Multicultural Context (0283)

Angela Christidis

University of Exeter, UK

Background and Relevant Literature

The increase in international student numbers on campuses has a direct impact upon the student experience. Research into student experience within Higher Education recognises that in order to implement the 'Internationalisation Strategy' successfully, all parties need to be involved extensively in the university – not just the lecturers or tutors delivering the classes but extends to all university staff ranging from academic to administrative and professional service staff. (Fielden, 2008; Peacock and Harrison, 2009; Montgomery, 2010).

This study aims to investigate in more depth issues related to working with international students and develop further understanding on their academic needs and learning style. As Trahar (2007) suggested, "academic staffs are core players in the process of internationalisation". With this in mind, this study aims to better understand the international students' learning needs and provide a teaching and learning environment that improves the student experience in an increasingly multicultural context. In this paper, students' views are discussed alongside staff's perspective to investigate whether there is a mismatch in perception, which, as literature suggest, is likely to arise unless lecturers take account of the students' learning needs (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996).

While it is important to improve understanding of the international students' learning needs, it is also essential not to compromise the needs of home students and the integrity of professional teaching and learning standards in UK Higher Education. The objectives of this study are to 1) "foster intercultural communication and learning" (Trahar, 2007), 2) "understand cross-cultural knowledge" (Montgomery, 2010), and 3) "improve academic staff's ability to interact with students from culturally diverse background" (Ryan, 2000).

Methodology and Sample

Interviews were conducted with a number of undergraduate and postgraduate students from China, India, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Taiwan, and Thailand. They come from different colleges, including Business School, College of Humanities, and College of Life and Environment Science. Interviews were also conducted with a number of academic and professional staffs. In preparing the interview, open-ended questions were employed as suggested by Cortazzi and Jin (1996) to explore the cultural differences in learning. Using a more open-ended approach would give students and staffs more opportunities to

voice their perspectives in their own way. The sample may be expanded where possible to include students and staff from other countries.

Preliminary Findings, Reflective Evaluation and Implications

It is important to assess the views from different parties, since there is often mismatch in the perceptions (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996). Some common issues pointed by students and staff albeit from a different perspective include areas of concern related to independent study, critical thinking, group work, assessment, language issues and plagiarism, and interaction with home students.

Despite the fact that student and staff interviews were conducted separately and interviewees were prompted to give their views by simple open-ended questions, both parties raised remarkably common issues. "Differences in the culture" is a phrase that kept recurring during the interviews. It is therefore important to understand the effect culture has on the students' way of learning and the staff's methods of teaching. Wiseman (1995, p.219) states that 'culture is the lens through which we view the world' and points out that people from different cultures will often endorse different and incompatible values, different relationship styles, and different communication styles and rules.

It is important to manage the complex teaching and learning environment skilfully when dealing with students from many different countries in the class. "Interaction between students and lecturers is the key to internationalisation" (Leask, 2007). Ryan (2000) argues that the cultural background of a student may have a significant impact on how students perceive the relationship with academic staff. It is hoped that understanding the international students' learning needs would offer insights on developing strategies to strengthen relationship with the students. This may be implemented through providing constructive dialogue and effective feedback as an example.

Ryan and Carroll (2005, cited in Brown and Joughin, 2007) suggested that a good starting point is to recognise that international students are "bearers of culture", not "bearers of problem", and that approaches to teaching, learning and assessment can be highly culture-specific. Students should be given opportunities to appreciate the similarities and differences between their own and other students' cultures (Corbett, 2003) that would enable them to develop their intercultural competence (Byram, 1997; Byram et al, 2001; Alfred et al, 2003). It is also important that academic staff stimulate and encourage students from diverse cultural background to work together productively and learn from each other effectively (Shaw, 1981; Kirchmeyer and Cohen, 1992; Leask, 2007).

Montgomery (2010) argues that intercultural learning should become the goal for all students. Not only do international students need to adapt to the UK educational and social system, but home students and academic staffs should also attempt to learn about their cultures. This form of "cultural synergy" is also identified by Cortazzi and Jin (1996) as the best way to incorporate the culture of learning from international students without abandoning the strengths of Western approaches. Cultural synergy thus involves developing "intercultural competence" (Byram, 1997; Byram et al, 2001; Alfred et al, 2003).

“International students are now seen to be at the heart of the University and a valuable source of cultural capital” (Jones, 2007). Many researchers argue that a good pedagogic practice for international students is a good practice for all (Leask, 2001; Carroll and Ryan, 2005; Brown and Joughin, 2007). Although problems of adjustment into the Western educational system are more acute for international students, home students may sometime also have difficulties understanding the academic requirements or interpreting the assessment requirements. As we endeavour to make our teaching, learning and assessment methods fit for purpose with international students, this will eventually benefit the home students as well (Brown and Joughin, 2007). It is hoped that the teaching and learning strategies that give consideration to the needs of international students will bring about improvement in teaching and learning “for all students from all educational and cultural backgrounds” (Leask, 2001).

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