

Understanding the UK student response to internationalisation

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Context

While the promoted social and academic benefits of internationalisation are numerous and well-documented (e.g. Higher Education Academy, 2006) there are concerns amongst support professionals and academics about the lack of integration between student groups and a realisation that the mere presence of international students does not constitute an 'international experience' at home. Da Vita (2005) notes that "the ideal of transforming a culturally diverse student population into a valued resource for activating processes of international connectivity, social cohesion and intercultural learning is still very much that, an ideal" (p. 75).

Whereas international student views have been traditionally sought in attempts to understand patterns of interaction and integration (notably UKCOSA, 2004), and globally some studies of domestic students do exist (e.g. Volet and Ang, 1998; Ward et al, 2005) there is little research into the views and attitudes of UK students.

This article reports the first stage of a research project being undertaken by the University of the West of England and Bournemouth University, funded through the 'Prime Minister's Initiative 2'.

Methodology

This stage comprised a series of eight focus groups, averaging eight UK undergraduates in each, split equally between arts or business courses. The proportion of international students on these courses varied between 10 and 50%. Participants comprised a range of ages and ethnicities, broadly mirroring the student population as a whole, although women were slightly over-represented. The students were paid and not informed of the topic in advance, in an attempt to reduce bias.

Patterns of interaction

The focus group participants described relatively limited interaction occurring in seminars, in shared accommodation and during occasional social events. However, a number of key themes emerged from these descriptions:

Similarity and difference

There was a tendency across all focus groups to see similarity as a basis for friendship and difference as a barrier to interaction. Difference in age was a recurring factor for many which, it is hypothesised, impacts particularly on work orientation and social preferences.

Stereotyping

UK students had more individualised conceptions of students from European, Anglophone and Latin American countries, compared to those from 'the rest of the world'. Students in this latter group were categorised crudely on a number of occasions, by geography (e.g. African), ethnicity (e.g. Chinese¹) or religion (e.g. Muslim). Discourse about these students was very general – names, interests and country of origin were often not known. Further they were perceived as "shy", "introverted", having "nothing in common" and being "difficult to get to know".

Critical mass

Studies have suggested that a critical mass of international students may tip the balance of perception and interaction from positive to negative (Ward et al, 2005). On several occasions, our focus group students (and especially those on business courses) made negative reference to perceived large numbers of international students, particularly where one nationality grouped together, who were variously described as "cliquey", "intimidating" and "annoying". One student noted, "We do have a lot of

Chinese students... there's loads... they do all seem to group together and I don't think they integrate quite as well."

Academic threats

There was some evidence that perceived competition for resources, specifically access to staff time and attention, impacted negatively on UK students' perceptions. Also, there was some concern that the learning experience was being compromised by some international students' lack of intelligible English. On a business module, groups of students teach the course material and one noted, "We are sort of reliant on people to give a presentation. There is one group... it was very hard to actually understand what they were getting at and to actually understand what they were trying to teach."

De Vita (2002) suggests that students often choose to work in mono-cultural groups on assessed projects for fear that multi-cultural group working with all its associated challenges and complexities might compromise their final mark. This perception was apparently shared by some of our focus group students, particularly in relation to language, "When we got put into groups, there were people I didn't want to work with because of their level of English".

Language skills and use

The greatest barrier to interaction perceived by UK students appeared to be poor English language ability. Students with poor language skills require more effort, particularly where there is a fear of misunderstanding or being misunderstood, leading to anxiety, embarrassment and awkwardness. Negative experience seemed to discourage further attempts.

Students felt that conversations with international students required 'mindfulness' (Stephan, Stephan and

Gudykunst, 1999) and were unwilling to make the necessary effort in social contexts; they “just wanted to relax and have a laugh.”

International students were perceived, on occasion to exclude outsiders through communicating in their own language, whether deliberately or unwittingly. Referring to a particular group of female international students sitting together, one UK student said, *“They do come across very annoying and I think they do wind up all the other people in the lectures quite a bit... I don't know if it's a difference in culture but they do come across quite rude at times.”*

Interestingly, where international students spoke good levels of English it emerged that other cultural barriers were significant, including the importance of “getting it”, “having a sense of humour” and a shared cultural resource (especially comedy) to draw from. A strong grasp of the English language makes one-to-one interaction simpler and more rewarding, but without the shorthand of shared cultural experiences, meaningful communication can still remain elusive.

Observing academic norms

UK students reported a number of instances of international students challenging prevailing British academic norms through, for example, a lack of participation in group work, poor time-keeping, arrogance, ‘misuse’ of virtual learning environments and a ‘lack of respect’ for staff and other students. One described the frustration felt in response to a student’s failure to abide by instructions, *“Before he started we were 4 minutes under time and by the time we'd finished we were 4 or 5 minutes over and none of us really wanted to say ‘stop’, but the teacher finally said ‘wrap it up’ and he still nearly kept going, purely because he didn't really understand.”*

Work-orientation and extroversion

International students were judged across a spectrum of behaviours relating to their orientation to academic work and their relative introversion or extroversion.



For some UK students, *“International students... really just want to work and they don't socialise that much and they knuckle down and that's how they are different in a way, they just don't have as much in common as us,”*

But others felt that many international students did not apply themselves, were frequently absent and on occasion jeopardised group projects. For example, *“I don't know if it's a cultural thing. Because I lived with two different Chinese people and one did nothing, the other worked really hard.”*

The research team felt that focus groups participants perhaps used these paradoxical discussions to explore their own international student stereotypes before generally concluding that they were most comfortable with students whose work orientation and extroversion most closely mirrored their own, regardless of cultural background.

The British ‘drinking culture’

As supported by findings in ‘Broadening Our Horizons’ (UKCOSA, 2004), the difference in alcohol drinking habits and associated social activity across cultures is highly significant. One said, *‘I used to go out with Kevin all the time, my French housemate, because he was just like... one of us. He used to come out and get drunk.’*

UK students identified a clear ‘British drinking culture’ of which they were variously ashamed or proud. Most

understood how this could be a barrier to interaction and saw how their behaviour helped to establish negative stereotypes in the minds of international students. Some participants admitted feeling uncomfortable socialising with others who didn't drink, partly for fear of being judged negatively. They also recognised that many of their daily conversations revolved around shared experiences involving alcohol and were therefore excluding.

Positive benefits of international interaction

Participants were asked whether they could identify benefits for the international classroom, but few could with any certainty. Direct academic assistance was mentioned both in the case of language learning and the value of culturally-different perspectives and information, *“With advertising you've got to be constantly thinking of new ideas, you've got to be a bit creative and having someone from another culture gives us another angle which really helps...”*

This was particularly strong amongst students from the arts, who placed particular value on global perspectives and individual skill sets. Students on programmes with a strong ‘international’ component (a year abroad/language/intercultural learning modules) tended to differentiate less but were inspired by international peers’ language capability and global knowledge and experience. Business students were less able to identify gains from the international classroom, focusing more on challenges and threats.

Whose responsibility

For the majority, friendship patterns “just happened that way”, with the majority adopting an ambivalent stance, expressing regret that they didn’t have more international friends, whilst blaming the international students themselves for excluding behaviours (eg not speaking English in public), having poor language skills or for not themselves initiating interaction.

Another common response however, was to blame the institution and its academic structures. “I think it would be good to get to know them a little bit better, to get to know about different cultures, I think it’s just because we aren’t given much of an opportunity on our course to actually mix with them... if they were maybe integrated more into our groups that would give you the opportunity.”

Further, several students suggested that the first two weeks of the first year were crucial to the formation of friendships, suggesting more mixed-group socials and ice-breakers would be helpful.

A few commented on the benefits of cultural awareness-raising activities, though there was general scepticism around cultural events which showcase difference. There was also reference to how accommodation allocation policies can inhibit meaningful interaction.

Methodological difficulties

Two methodological difficulties became swiftly apparent. Students were uneasy discussing issues of difference and diversity, particularly in those groups which contained students from ethnic minorities. A major factor appeared to be fear of causing offence, coupled with anxiety about being seen to be poorly-informed about issues related to diversity. Related to this, participants were often overly-keen to stress international students’ positive qualities (e.g. “they are really, really good at things”). This ‘response amplification’ (Stephan & Stephan, 1996) occurs when there is fear within an in-group of being perceived as prejudiced against an out-group, driven by guilt and a desire to demonstrate egalitarian views.

These difficulties, which are well-reported by other studies (e.g. Hyde and Ruth, 2002), require a degree of care when analysing and interpreting focus group discussions.

Conclusions

Though wary of drawing solid conclusions from limited data, a number of issues may be identified that appear to have some enduring validity and where further investigation will be useful:

1. Interactions between UK students and some groups of international students can be limited, problematic or non-existent. The sheer fact of proximity does not appear to offer significant gains for the internationalisation agenda. Discomfort with difference and obstacles around language ability, work orientation and alcohol use appear to be significant.
2. UK students report some benefits of working in an ‘international classroom’, however these are often incidental, of low yield and not contextualised. There is a prevailing interest in other cultures, but this does not appear to be tied more widely into learning or skills acquisition.
3. It would appear that most cross-cultural interaction occurs in the classroom, but groups are often not actively managed to best effect. Further research is needed to develop ideas of good practice around the management of the international classroom.
4. It was apparent that cross-cultural interactions were affected by the demographic background of students, especially in terms of age, social class and ethnicity. However, the numbers of students involved in this stage of the research precluded any detailed investigation and this will be a priority for future work.
5. Finally, having such conversations with our UK students can be considered in itself a positive learning intervention and should be encouraged wherever possible. Several students commented that they had never before thought about the issues discussed and claimed they would be more aware of their interactions with international students in the future.

Notes

- ¹ On the basis of informal data collection, it is hypothesized that ‘Chinese’ is most commonly used as an ethnic label used to refer to any student from East and South East Asia, including Malaysia, Japan and Vietnam.

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