The Enhancing Series Case Studies: International Learning Experience

Strategies for the improvement of international students’ academic and cultural experiences of studying in the UK

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Introduction
This case study provides an insight into international students’ perceptions of their educational experiences in the UK, and possible solutions for improvements to their learning experiences. Through the use of a qualitative approach and through the themes of language, social and cultural issues that impact on learning processes, the study examines the challenges for international students and the reasons why some find it difficult to adjust to their new environment. (Parts of the case study are reproduced from a case study written for the online Higher Education Academy Economics Network with the kind permission of Bristol University.)

Key Words: International classroom, international students, experience

Abstract
The internationalisation of student cohorts at undergraduate and postgraduate levels poses challenges for students and tutors alike. This case study provides a qualitative analysis of some of the issues surrounding the international student experience of higher education in the UK in a large urban higher education institution, through the use of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Based on the findings a number of recommendations are made to enable those who come to the UK from other educational backgrounds to adapt and make the transition necessary in order to enhance their experience of studying here.

Rationale and Objectives of the Study
The challenges presented by the international classroom gave the focus for this research. The research project therefore sought to investigate the perceptions of international students of their learning at London Metropolitan University Business School (LMBS), whether they were having any difficulties in making social and cultural adjustments to studying in the UK and what process the university could introduce to help these students to cope with their new environment. It was important to try to ascertain and consider possible improvements from the perspective of the students, not just to consider the views and experience of the
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academics who were their tutors and recruiters. This had particular resonance for the author, who is responsible for the academic experience of the international students on business courses. As Turner (2006) has pointed out, there is a danger of unconsciously imposing our own cultural behaviours and expectations on these students, who do not have a working knowledge of UK cultural expectations and behaviours.

Context
London Metropolitan University has a high intake of international and European students, who account for approximately 20% of overall student numbers and at present 45% of the student numbers for the Business School. This not unusual and there has been a corresponding growth in the literature on the international classroom (Carroll 2006) and the ‘internationalisation’ (Asteris, 2006; De Wit, 2002; Knight, 2006) of higher education which evidences the importance of discussion of these issues.

There are clearly challenges for international students studying at higher education institutions in the UK. These challenges require higher education institutions to revaluate teaching and learning strategies in the light of the increased recruitment of such students to the UK in order to consider ways in which their experience can be improved.

Description
This case study explores some of the key issues that arose from a research project focused on an analysis of the international student's perception of their experience in a post-92 London university. The project used a qualitative approach for the collection of data, through the use of four focus groups, three in-depth semi-structured interviews with students at postgraduate, undergraduate and semester-only students as well as open-ended questionnaires. The findings were analysed on the basis of the international student experiences in the classroom and how international students adapt to the challenges presented by a different educational system, academically, culturally and socially. The term "international students" is taken here to mean those students who have been educated in a national education system outside the UK and who on the whole are likely to be non-native speakers of English, although this is not necessarily the case.

Evaluative Comments

English Language Ability

A big challenge for international students concerns English language ability, and consideration of those international students who are non-native speakers of English. There is a minimum language requirement for entry which for international and European students would normally consist of a TOEFL or IELTS score. However, even when students more than meet this entry requirement, they may not be familiar with technical terminology for a specialist subject area.
For some students who have only just achieved the language criteria, studying in English, particularly at masters level, can prove onerous and stressful. Half the students in this case study had only just met the language entry requirement, and for those students the independent study required at a very early stage of the course was problematic. There are those that are confident in their language ability and who feel that language support classes do not meet their needs as the classes are too generic and what they are seeking is further explanation of specialised terminology. However, little time is spent in addressing the more specialist support required by these students. As a consequence, these students become frustrated, as lecturers can mistake their specific lack of knowledge in technical (or even political or cultural) terminology for generic difficulties with language. This is an example of a student expressing this frustration in one of the focus groups:

“They need to know that most postgraduate students were international, there was only one British. They need to understand that we are not English. It is important so they know how to explain things, how to talk to us”.

In addition the students have different levels of English, which can hinder the educational experience of the whole group. Another student from one of the focus groups commented that:

“There are some people who come from different backgrounds - I don’t know enough about how people are taught in China but we have different levels of English and different backgrounds - some people just receive and don’t give”.

Not speaking up in class can also make it difficult for tutors to gain a clear picture of the levels of English language ability and the understanding of the students.

Social and Cultural Adjustment

Volet and Ang comment that

“Tertiary institutions have a social responsibility to design learning environments which foster students’ developments on intercultural adaptability” (1998:21)

While students did not feel that a lack of social and cultural knowledge of the UK had affected their ability to study, there was a feeling that lecturers should incorporate the knowledge of the students’ native cultures into their class discussion as this could benefit everyone.

The focus groups felt that tutors should also not assume background knowledge of political and economic issues in the UK. Other expressed strongly that the differences in study methods compared to their home countries were a challenge, particularly in the first few weeks of their course. Class contribution can also be a traumatic experience but this can be facilitated by tutors who can make the students feel more comfortable in discussing subjects with other students that they don’t know. The importance of class interaction for international students is reinforced by Jackson (2003) who comments on the necessity for building a ‘considerable rapport'
with the group. This rapport is seen as one of the most effective learning and teaching techniques for international students.

**Study Methods**

Differences in study methods compared to the country of origin present a difficulty for international students. In many countries students spend a much greater amount of time in class. There is less emphasis on independent study and more focus on developing the information provided by lecturers in their sessions. Obviously the extent of this varies, but it is true to say that many experience a great deal of difficulty with making the transition required in a very short period of time. For example, students have to cope with what is expected and this is usually an increased amount of required reading (in another language) as well as developing the ability to synthesise that information in a critical way. This has to be done often within the first eight weeks of being in the UK and with no further input from tutors until it comes to getting feedback on an assessment.

De Vita (2001) shows differences of approach in addressing a piece of assessment, discussing the different discourse styles experienced by students from different countries. This creates tensions that affect a students' performance. Groupwork may also be an issue - the cultural diversity of groups requires that students acquire intercultural skills which can be an onerous additional requirement in certain business subjects.

It was clear from the focus groups that students from different cultural groups react to these stresses in different ways. There are clearly cultural groups which found class interaction more difficult than others, for example, those from more collectivist cultures.

In addition to this it must not be forgotten that many students are suffering from 'culture shock' and are still trying to adjust to life in the UK when their first assessments are due. As one student put it, 'even little things, like how to submit your essay if you are in a different country are problematic'.

Students commented in some depth about the culture shock that they had experienced and this was exacerbated by the difficulties that many students had in making friends in London. The isolation that many international students suffer as result of coming to the UK to study can vary enormously but it was an ever-present theme. Institutions need to consider the social context of students’ adjustment in order to address this isolation.

**Discussion: Students’ Perspectives on the Possibilities for Improving their Experience and Suggestions for Improvement**

Both the focus groups and the interviewees made suggestions with regard to the cultural, social and academic aspects of their studies which they felt would improve the student experience.
Byrne, Flood, & Willis, (2002), comment that the present global environment requires that students be equipped to survive and thrive in a competitive global environment by encouraging them to develop as independent, active and lifelong learners. With this and the findings from the research in mind the following suggestions are proposed to enable international students to make the transition necessary to study in the UK.

(i) Peer Mentoring

Hughes and Wisker (1998) comment that the introduction of a mentor (a peer who has already completed the year/term that the new student is starting and who can provide guidance and support) will help international students to cope with their new cultural experience. The findings of this research indicate a number of areas in which the introduction of a mentor would assist including the lack of communication problems that international students identify. Peer mentoring provides students with a method of communicating with those who have already progressed in their studies. Bamford (2003) analysed the introduction of a pilot peer mentoring project for international postgraduate students and the feedback was very encouraging. The focus groups indicated that students thought it would be an appropriate addition to student support. Students can offer peer advice on aspects of study such as skills, details on the nature of a subject being taught, help with approaches to assessment, provide support for language difficulties and a social framework for studies. The introduction of a peer assisted learning scheme by LMBS has so far proved extremely successfully in offering students an additional support system.

(ii) Local Language/Study Skills Group

It was generally felt in the focus groups that communication and interaction between students ought to be encouraged. One of the ways this could be achieved was by encouraging the students to get to know each other in the first semester. Of the comments made by the students interviewed, Student C felt that classes held on study skills and language ought to encourage friendships between the students. Student C felt there would be more context to their study if students knew each other better.

There are clearly challenges for the students surrounding language, for example understanding the accents of other students or even the lecturer’s pronunciation. Some students in Focus Group D felt that they could simply not understand their tutor’s accent, as he was not from the UK. As the faculty of an institution becomes more international, another dimension can be added to the problems of communication for all students.

Focus Group A said that central language support was inadequate for their needs as it was offered at too basic a level and some of the important information that they needed, such as how to reference properly, was not given. The findings demonstrated that students identified the importance of study skills and having guidance on such things as referencing as crucially important to their learning development, as was a forum where they would be encouraged to become more acquainted with each other and which would facilitate their communication in class.
In response to this, it is suggested that good practice requires that study skills support is subject specific and if possible course specific, reinforcing the development of students’ communication with each other, thus allowing students to become confident within the context of their specialist study area. When the focus groups and the interviewees were asked what they thought of the introduction of such sessions the responses were very positive.

(iii) More Social Activity

Socialisation was clearly another important theme. Student C commented at great length on the importance of social networks for the Chinese students and the need for the students to feel a sense of identity with the university. The focus groups also clearly felt that there had been a lot of activity in the first week but nothing since then. Some even commented that it had been difficult to make friends although they did not expand on the reasons for this. Comments made by students in the focus groups and interviews clearly reflect the need to develop effective communication between students. The creation of friendships and a social network assist this process by providing students with an identity, both with each other and with the institution.

A study carried out by Hughes and Wisker (1998) found that all the students raised the issue of socialisation. They found that, while the students appreciated the help that they had received in induction, they felt that they would benefit from more assistance, as it would help them settle into life in their institution more easily. In the second part of their study they note that students reported the usefulness of initial and ongoing induction and orientation, both academic, and emotional and cultural. This sort of induction reduces the wastage of ‘emotional energy’ on ‘culture shock’. Again good practice determines the continued resourcing of support for social networks for international students. An easy way to address this, and one that students are willing to engage in, is through the use of internet social networking sites.

(iv) Teaching, Learning and Assessment

The finding of the research clearly touched on aspects of the students’ experience that are relevant to teaching, learning and assessment strategies and highlights how these should take into consideration the additional dimension of the international classroom. The growth in international student numbers in the UK has important implications for the teaching and learning strategies of higher education institutions, particularly those with high levels of international student recruitment. This is the case in the Business School, where at least one third of the department’s students arrive in the UK from another country. The focus groups containing Far Eastern students commented on the differences in teaching style in their home countries and in the UK. Student C felt that Chinese students learning styles were initially incompatible with what tutors expected, and that they were too shy to express the difficulties that they were having. Some of the students also felt that they had something to contribute to other students’ learning experiences and that tutors need to be aware that the international dimension of the classroom can provide an added benefit here. The focus groups felt that this was something that was often ignored.
Swisher & Schoorman, (2001) comment on the importance of the tutor having some knowledge of the cultural differences of the students in the classroom. The diverse communication patterns among cultures require that tutors need to be prepared for classrooms where students who dread being called upon by their first name to answer a question, are in a class with students from cultural backgrounds which are quite at home with such interactions. They argue that a student’s non-verbal communication is important, for example differences in eye contact.

They state that teachers should recognise that their own classroom interactions and expectations are also ‘culturally rooted’, in the same way as their students. A type of behaviour or indeed way of talking may be accepted practice in the UK but to students from a different background it may be detrimental to understanding.

The requirement therefore is to be sensitive to diversity in the classroom without being patronising. The issues of differences in assessment have been previously mentioned and it is clear that teaching and learning strategies need to consider the impact of cultural diversity in the classroom on the teaching and learning process. Institutions need to implement strategies that consider the implications of having a high number of international students from a variety of cultures whose first language is not English.

(v) Staff Development

Biggs, (1999) highlights the concept of assimilation as an approach to teaching international students, in other words, international students are expected to assimilate in accordance with our definition of what constitutes a good student.

It is here that many of the stereotypes about international students will be reinforced and self-fulfilling. Biggs argues that some of these generalisations are true, but that they could be true of any student (for example “they don’t understand what plagiarism means”), or they are simply untrue, (for example, “they do not easily adjust to local conditions”), and that it is generalisations such as these which colour the learning experience.

Another example of misinterpreted stereotype student behaviour offered here – “they don’t express opinions because their English is poor” - is in fact a generalisation that is often likely to be incorrect, as was demonstrated by the focus group findings. It was evident from the discussion in Focus Group A that students felt pressured to contribute to class discussion but they felt that if they did not have anything to contribute, then they should not have to do this:

“....in one module nobody speaks because we do not know the others and they do not know us......we are all separates. We are sitting there and the others are sitting there.”

The focus groups spoke about the difference in the second semester and how, as students become more comfortable with their surroundings and their peers, they become more confident and relaxed about contributing in class. Turner (2006) also demonstrates the differences between the British archetype student and the Chinese archetype student.
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It would be prudent in a culturally diverse institution to provide members of staff with informative sessions on cultural patterns of expression and expectations of learning, and to address some of the stereotypical preconceptions of certain cultures in order to increase tutor awareness in the classroom and to improve the student learning experience. Clearly international students feel that lecturers could learn something from the international classroom. This view was expressed in focus group A, where students felt that tutors were not taking on board the valuable experience of the students in the class which could be used to broaden everyone’s knowledge. Gay (2001) provides further evidence of the reluctance of teachers to take on board multicultural issues, however, there was some conflict with this result in this case as some students clearly felt that staff were aware of their international background, whereas others in focus group A and B did not. The questionnaire results demonstrated that the majority felt that staff teaching styles should take student international backgrounds into consideration. This is an important area for staff development as was demonstrated in the study carried out by Maxwell et al, (2000).

Hughes & Wisker, (1998) underline the positive effect that staff development can have when dealing with international students. By investigating staff experience in the multicultural learning environment they were able to identify not only the difficulties but also strategies for improving the student learning experience. In their study some of the staff were international students themselves and were able to use their experiences to help develop effective teaching strategies. They found that staff development sessions helped people to share experiences, disseminate findings from research and develop suggestions for good practice, such as the most effective socialisation techniques.

Conclusion

The research clearly demonstrated the difficulties that international students have in adjusting to a new academic environment, as well as providing a student perspective on possible approaches for improvement of their experiences.

Universities and departments need to consider the impact of recruiting large numbers of students who are non-native speakers of English, who have been educated in a national education system other than that of the UK, or who have non-UK matriculation qualifications or degrees. The institution needs to consider whether teaching and learning strategies should address the specific study needs of these students. Students commented that some had felt that their learning style and the teaching styles used were incompatible, particularly those from the Far East, and that they were too shy to express the difficulties that they were having. In addition, tutors could perhaps evaluate the appropriateness of strategies when assessing cohorts of these overseas students: for example, the use of groupwork.

It may also be useful for institutions to provide activities for students to encourage the social adjustment that students need to make. Students could be encouraged to organise these activities themselves. Social networks are particularly important for students. For example, students from China commented in great depth on the lack of this aspect to their studies. Friendships and social networks are important in helping students feel a sense of identity both with their peers and the university. This has
been very difficult in this urban institution, where the courses are modular which highlights the issue of isolation. Many of the home students, for example, do not live 'on campus' and have social networks which exist outside the university environment. They come to class and go home and do not socialise at the university or even know others, and they are in different classes for each of their modules. This is certainly typical of London based institutions.

Peer-assisted learning is being used more frequently and can prove to be a useful student support mechanism. Students gain a more structured means of communicating with international and UK students who have already progressed on their course. Such mentors can offer advice on aspects of study skills and possible approaches to assessment. This also provides additional social contact with students already on the course.

The findings from the research illustrated that students would like further guidance on aspects such as referencing and study skills, in sessions that were subject-specific. When these sessions are held on a voluntary basis, attendance can be an issue and some thought needs to be given as to how to incorporate these into the curriculum. A useful model for first year undergraduate students has proved to be a compulsory higher education orientation module. It is common in some countries to incorporate "communication" based modules into the curriculum, particularly in Business Schools, which provide a forum for students to focus on the communication aspects of their studies.

Some consideration could also be given to the different levels of language and possibly different countries of origin of the students. The use of ice-breakers in the first one or two classes is a useful way of getting the students to engage with each other and feel less self-conscious about expressing opinions in front of those that they don't know. Tutors need to be aware that non-verbal communication is also an important aspect of classroom communication, and that there is a need for sensitivity towards cultural diversity in the classroom.

**Biography**

Jan Bamford is an academic leader and international student co-ordinator for London Metropolitan University and is responsible for the international strategy of the school and support for international students within the school. Her research interests are in the field of the internationalisation of higher education, particularly focusing on the international classroom, the experiences of international students and transnational collaborative links and joint degrees.

**References**


