Talking cultures: fostering cross-curricular intercultural awareness and the development of a transferable intercultural framework

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The project has been developed in order to enhance teaching and learning across the institution and beyond, through developing a focused short course in intercultural awareness which aims to provide a holistic approach to internationalisation.

The changing nature of the student body aligned with the shifting global context in which HE is couched, means that UK HEIs must keep in close touch with the needs of international students and the developing requirements of educational support available to students within the international HE community. Internal feedback and research conducted by the University of Kent's School of Psychology in 2010 has shown that some students feel uncomfortable approaching or working with peers from other cultures, particularly if it is perceived that the cultural background has distinctly different features from their own.

We were therefore keen to establish a pilot project which explores the themes of inter- and cross-cultural communication further which involved collaboration with partner (non HEI) institutions in both the UK and internationally.

Institutional context and history/rationale for the initiative

The University of Kent has a long tradition of welcoming international students from around the world. Of our total student body (approximately 19,000 students), 23% are from outside the UK, from 125 different countries.

This project was led by the University's Centre for English and World Languages (CEWL) which specialises in the delivery of internationally-focused pathway programmes, modules and courses in English and other World languages. CEWL's provision is driven by both the University's Internationalisation Strategy and our institution's position in the sector as the UK’s European university.

As our Centre is designed to connect different aspects and stages within the University, we are also aptly placed to assist with ventures which have an impact on enhancing transition.

Management of the project

In May 2012, a steering group was established which comprised of colleagues from CEWL and across the institution, all closely involved with students and the University’s Learning and Teaching processes.

Working closely with colleagues at Hilderstone College in Broadstairs (an English Studies Centre) and Capital Knowledge in Bahrain (where one of the University's academic pathway programmes is currently delivered), CEWL led a research project across the three institutions to better understand what students and staff at the different institutions felt about intercultural communication and awareness within and outwith the classroom.

The research, undertaken by the project lead and tutors who would be creating the subsequent teaching materials, comprised of a series of focus groups and semi structured interviews which took place over a period of one month with, on average, between four and ten people in each session.
The project was evaluated through a final workshop where students from the University of Kent, who had participated in the earlier focus groups, were invited. Materials developed as a result of the intelligence obtained through the focus groups, were shared with the students at this workshop and feedback was obtained. Part of the feedback included asking students to reflect on whether the workshop had raised their awareness of other cultures, but also to provide suggestions regarding the proposed short course syllabus and how we might best market the credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing iterations to their peers.

**Timescales**

The project was set up to run between May and July 2012. The focus group and related research activities were conducted during May and June 2012. Attention then turned to the materials development, drawing on the findings of the focus groups. This aspect of the project required the most dedicated time. The evaluation workshop, which acted as our ‘short course pilot’, took place on 24 July 2012.

**Key deliverables**

This project has produced a number of deliverables which positively address the project’s original aim. The final overarching outcome is the provision of an intercultural awareness development ‘toolkit’ which is presented as a website ([www.kent.ac.uk/talkingcultures](http://www.kent.ac.uk/talkingcultures)). This website is divided into a number of key sections:

- homepage;
- handbook (a short course guidance manual for practitioner use);
- credit-bearing (a course specification, syllabus and related materials);
- non-credit-bearing (a course specification, syllabus and related materials);
- workshop (an outline with accompanying resources);
- transferable framework (Learning and Teaching techniques and considerations for local application);
- transitions (advice regarding particular local and cultural contexts);
- contact us (feedback and further suggestions on the courses and associated materials/resources are welcomed).

The content of the website provides practitioners with access to a range of teaching materials, associated short course specifications and syllabi and aims to develop students’ engagement and integration with their fellow classmates within a teaching and learning setting. However, it is also envisaged that, through an interactive mode of delivery and related assignments, students will be able to apply their learning outside the classroom, particularly in social contexts both on and off campus.

The website also provides a transferable framework, providing suggestions on how intercultural awareness as a theme might be embedded within established degree programmes at a given institution.

**Sustainability**

The scope of the project was considerable. We were keen to not only look at mechanisms to enhance intercultural awareness within our own institution but to explore ways to enhance the experience of students currently studying at feeder institutions (Hilderstone and Capital Knowledge) and planning to ‘transition’ into the University of Kent shortly. This aspect of the project has not been explored fully and we, at CEWL, intend to follow these student cohorts during their academic studies at Kent, mapping academic progress and monitoring/following their student experience through formal and informal mechanisms. Thus the project is
perceived to be wholly sustainable as the notion of transition and transnational education becomes ever more prominent within the UK HEI landscape. We are planning to continue our work with the partner institutions over the course of the next academic year.

A paper will be presented by the project lead, and one of the colleagues behind the creation of the classroom materials on this topic at the next IATEFL conference, in March 2013. As well as disseminating the project, there will be an opportunity to encourage other HEIs across the sector to embed intercultural awareness within modules and programmes (see recommendations below).

**Key outcomes**

- The short course produced a number of ‘learning experience’ benefits to the students who participated in the pilot. Students fed back that the course helped them to build more confidence in understanding different cultures and opened their views on their own personal culture which they could apply positively to their other classes to enhance their integration with others. Students also seemed more interested in the course if it ran as a credit bearing module;
- it is envisaged that some of the materials from the short course will be adopted by Kent’s Department of Human Resources as part of the University’s staff development programme to as a way to better support all staff at the University operating within a multi-cultural working environment;
- a newly created Diversity and Student Experience Working Party, co-chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (External) and the project lead, will be meeting termly, from September 2012, to explore how aspects of the methodological features of this project, can be woven into the institution more widely;
- teaching staff who were involved in producing the materials have reported that this project has acted as a useful reminder of the sensitivities involved in working within a multi-cultural classroom. It is anticipated that this reflection will be continued by as colleagues prepare and deliver their classes for the forthcoming academic year;
- the Centre for English and World Languages has approved the non-credit-bearing iteration of this short course which will run in the Spring term (starting in January 2013). Methodology from this project will also be embedded by CEWL in to a short bespoke course due to be delivered to a group of general practitioners from September 2012;
- further exploration is planned by CEWL around the development of a transition programme which brings together in-country pre-departure events, with input around HEI learning and teaching methodology to enable incoming international students to begin the transition before they leave home. An integral element to this aspect of the project is the continued ‘connections’ to be made with other key student support services across the institution. Aspects of the short course will also be integrated in to Kent’s pre-arrival materials aimed at both home and international students;
- in continuation of this project, we are planning to work more closely with the Student’s Union to develop a ‘Talking cultures’ student/staff society. The Union’s input in to aspects of this intercultural awareness project is seen as an invaluable additional partnership to ensure we, an institutions, continue to meet the needs of the students;
incorporating student feedback into the module design through student tracking.

**Challenges that have been overcome**

This project presented a number of challenges and barriers, most notably the emphasis that the short course placed on nationality diversity within the classroom. For the materials created for this short course, and its various iterations, it was paramount to have a diverse spread of nationalities amongst the student body, but to also maintain as equal a spread of home and international students as possible. This remains an ongoing challenge for CEWL but will be addressed by running the credit-bearing iteration, to give participating students the opportunity to gain credits.

Much of the project also ran across the summer vacation period and therefore finding home students who were able to be involved in the project was also difficult, however this was overcome by approaching the postgraduate and research student community at the University.

One further ongoing challenge, which is still being tackled by the project lead, is the adoption by the academic schools at the University, of the ‘intercultural framework’. Further work, through setting up awareness-raising workshops is planned in this area during term 1 of the new academic year.

**Recommendations**

As a result of this project, the following recommendations have emerged:

- on reflection, simply developing a short course, with multiple iterations and testing the material with both home and international students was already quite a lot to tackle. Institutions may wish to consider managing the scope for future projects to ensure the output is achievable;
- it is now understood that the summer period is a difficult time to embed new learning and teaching approaches within a University. The wider application of this project, including embedding of theoretical and practical outcomes, should have a much stronger impact when the project is disseminated during the Autumn/Spring terms. This is also true for making connections across the institution;
- in order to further promote the notion of a ‘transferable intercultural framework’ across the sector, institutions could be encouraged to weave in a standard paragraph re intercultural awareness in all newly designed programme/module specifications which would add in flexibility and versatility (see website for further details: www.kent.ac.uk/talkingcultures);
- the importance of making connections and working collaboratively with Learning & Teaching specialists across the institution should not be underestimated to help further embed this methodological approach to intercultural awareness. A steering group which meets termly to develop and monitor ‘interculturally-related’ themes may be one way to approach this;
- to gain a further understanding, qualitative data needs to be obtained in order to measure the effectiveness of student engagement in and outside classroom. Student tracking projects to more formally measure student feedback at the start, during and end of the credit-bearing iteration of the short course could be useful in order to encourage wider participation for future courses;
- further scope for this project could be adapted to the non-student world, starting with businesses which have regular contact with students, such as housing agencies, retail outlets etc.;
• to encourage more buy-in to this notion of a transferable framework, colleagues could invite external
speakers to the sessions to deliver a one off workshop which borrows aspects of the core syllabus or
invite a speaker who may cover a topic for one of the lessons from an external viewpoint. This could
be a speaker from for example, the Department of Anthropology, Sociology, or Psychology or from
the local community outside the University.

Further information
The project outcomes and associated deliverables can be found at: www.kent.ac.uk/talkingcultures
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