Supporting change and adaptation in teaching and learning for international students

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Teaching International Students Project
Higher Education Academy
Overview

• Changing university contexts
• Staff and student experiences and ‘pressure points’
• How teachers can change and adapt
• The Teaching International Students Project
Teaching International Students Project

Run by the Higher Education Academy
Funded through the Academy, UKCISA & PMI2

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Internationalisation of higher education: Challenges and opportunities

- International students 1 in 5 (22.9% increase 2010 UUK); revenue £25.4b (The Economist 5/8/2010)
- University contexts have changed BUT teaching and learning practices relatively unchanged
- Focus is usually on students to change and adapt
- IS seen as ‘bearers of problems’ rather than ‘bearers of culture’
- Use international students as a resource for learning (‘the world in our classroom’)
Quality of educational experiences

- UK is number 1 choice
- Increasing competition for international students, including non-Anglophone countries
- International student market in UK driven by perceptions of quality
Q22 Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course

![Bar chart showing the satisfaction levels of UK and international students from 2005 to 2009.]

- UK students
- Int students
## NSS 2005-2009 results

**Q22 Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course**

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NSS - Q6 Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair
Pressure points for students

• Different language, expectations, what’s valued and rewarded (don’t know the ‘rules’)
• Lack required **background knowledge**
• **Language** issues
• **Assessment** issues
• Difficulties participating and making **friends**
• Do achieve well but **need support** and **understanding**
• **BUT** do adapt and are successful
Pressure points for staff

- IS bring unfamiliar expectations and experiences
- Extra time (especially marking and supervision)
- Little reward or recognition
- ‘I didn’t sign up for this’
- **BUT** can be richly rewarding for lecturers and home students
What students want

- Understanding and support
- Opportunities to participate
- Ability to draw on own experiences
- Opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and ability
- Friendships with local students
Staff perceptions

• ‘Deficient’ learning styles: rote learners, lack critical thinking skills, prone to plagiarism (homogeneous group)

• Don’t want to participate in class discussion

• Only interact with others from similar backgrounds

• Don’t consider contextual teaching, learning and assessment factors, role of previous experiences and expectations, or role of language in learning
Role of language

- Language proficiency is often confused with intellectual ability
- Language difficulties (10 times longer to do reading)
- Prime role of language in not only conducting dialogue but also in expressing thought
- Lack of sophistication of language hinders complex thought
- Unable to use the nuanced language often required in complex academic arguments – feel ‘deaf and dumb’
- Developmental nature of learning and language use
Support for lecturers to adapt: Possible strategies

• Lectures – improving understandability
• Tutorials – encouraging participation
• Group work – engineering interaction
• Readings/resources – ‘lightening the load’
• Assessment – being explicit and fair
Teaching International Students

The Teaching International Students Project is a joint initiative of the Higher Education Academy and the United Kingdom Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) with funding from the Prime Minister’s Initiative 2 (PMI2). It is a two year project, hosted and co-funded by the Higher Education Academy.

Increasing student mobility and successful national policies to recruit international students have led to more culturally diverse higher education landscapes around the world. The UK is the most popular destination for international students due to the quality of its provision, and it is important that this quality is maintained.

The project therefore focuses on the ways that lecturers and other teaching staff can maintain and improve the quality of teaching and learning for international students through providing guidance and information about how to meet the diverse learning needs of international students, and, importantly, in ways that will benefit all students.

TIS activities

The TIS project activities include:

- the ‘International Student Lifecycle’ Resources Bank
Teaching International Students

The International Student 'Lifecycle'
Higher education students: undergraduates, postgraduates, exchange, distance learning students

Pre-arrival support
- Courses in home country
- Welcome documents

Induction
- Course preparation & academic preparedness

Teaching & Learning in the 'classroom'

Life outside the 'classroom'
- Joining the student & local community

Employability & next steps

Transition

Teaching Context
- Lectures
- Seminars
- Tutorials
- Lab work
- Field work
- Work placement
- Supervision
- Online teaching
- Transnational and multimodal teaching

Teaching Approaches
- Pedagogic theory
- Group work
- Assessment & feedback
- Blended learning & Web 2.0
- Language

Learning
- Critical thinking
- Note-taking
- Reading
- Reflective learning
- Academic writing
- Avoiding plagiarism
- Independent learning
- Language issues

Curriculum
- Internationalising the curriculum
- Disciplinary approaches

Intercultural Competencies
- Mixing with local students
- Intercultural competencies
Welcome to the Teaching International Students Resources Bank.

A diagram of the ‘Student Lifecycle’ is available to download as a PDF document (PDF - 37KB).

This collection of resources is aimed at teachers in Higher Education. It targets issues which are especially (but not exclusively) relevant to teaching students who have travelled to the UK to study from other countries. You can read more about the TIS project and about the underpinning rationale for creating this resources bank here.

If you teach international students, you can look to the TIS resources bank for:

- An overview of common teaching topics
- Selected resources for teachers
- Links to specialist sites and research databases
- Lists for further reading.
- Case stories written by teachers and by international students to make the topics ‘come alive’.

You can use this site to check how others deal with teaching issues. For example, a check on how others handle group work could affirm your own approach and suggest further action.

You can use the Teaching International Students site to plan ahead.
Assessment and Feedback

Description

The information on this page has been developed as part of the Teaching International Students project.

Many teachers find international students less problematic to assess than UK students and more than a few say they are ‘a joy to teach’. On the other hand, many have concerns linked to students’ varied language skills, background knowledge, and familiarity with UK assessment methods. This section concentrates on how teachers can assess students’ work, using practices that are fair, reliable and efficient. It also considers feedback, which is an aspect of assessment crucial to all students but especially so for international students who may be unfamiliar with assessment requirements and with marking criteria. Feedback helps students to check if they are on track for success and to reorient their efforts if they are not.

Whilst the focus of this section is on teachers’ actions, external factors also influence assessment. Assessment decisions might reflect disciplinary priorities, students’ future employment possibilities, recruitment and reputation. Sometimes, teachers report they even think about financial matters such as the departmental budget if teachers’ actions mean that many students fail. This complex context can make addressing assessment issues problematic.

In other sections, you will find additional guidance on issues associated with assessment such as group work, plagiarism and critical thinking.

The main issues: getting started

Teachers’ concerns when assessing international students often include:

Time. In a diverse student group, it can take longer to teach necessary skills, to provide practice opportunities,
Language

Description

The information on this page has been developed as part of the Teaching International Students project.

Language is one of the most difficult areas for both teaching staff and international students. Even with high IELTS scores (see http://ielts-preparation.110mb.com/bands.htm for an explanation of the IELTS bands) and good language skills overall, non-English speaking background students are likely to struggle at first with language in lectures and tutorials, complex reading and writing tasks, and new academic and disciplinary concepts.

The main issues: getting started

International students may have a range of difficulties with language especially at the beginning of their studies. They may have trouble with fast-paced lectures, non-standard English, accents, local references and discipline-specific language, and in the beginning may only understand between 10 and 50 percent of lectures. They may be unable to participate verbally in tutorials in any meaningful way or without encouragement. In assessments, they may not be able to demonstrate their true abilities.

There are many ways that teachers can assist their international students to cope with the challenges of learning in a foreign language or where terms and concepts are unfamiliar, and many of which may also be of benefit to local students. The following section describes:

- The complexity of language learning
- Steps teachers can take to increase their own understandability and the understandability of texts
- Ways to help students participate successfully and use language
- Steps teachers can take to improve students’ own language skills
Steps teachers can take to improve students' own language skills

- In the early days of a programme, help students self-assess their language skills. The Open University Scotland produces an online workbook called ‘Am I ready to study in English?’ which sets tasks and guides a student to self-assess their skills. See http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=3638
- Organise group tasks of students speaking to each other (see the suggestions in Group Work to ensure these encounters are positive / helpful)
- Encourage peer support and review where students help each other (this needs sensitive organising)
- Where appropriate, explicitly point to opportunities to use English from the simple (listening to local media) to the more challenging (such as part time work or volunteering). This recognises that the university is not the only place for rich language interactions and requires the student, too, to take the initiative and move outside of their ‘comfort zone’.

See also the sections on Lectures and Seminars for further ideas about the use of language and structures to assist students’ comprehension and learning. The section on Assessment also gives ideas on assessing language in assignments.

Top resource


What is the evidence?

Further reading:

It takes us extra time

I am an international student currently studying MSc Economics. This is the first year and first time I came to UK. Actually, there are a reasonable number of difficulties while I am taking these modules. The biggest problem I have found is the listening skills. As an international student, one has to catch up with what the lecturers have stated in class. You know, the teachers often speak at a normal native speaker’s pace. Sometimes it is hard to follow the instructors in detail, which can be a barrier to grasp the key elements in handouts. Often, some international students are ashamed to ask questions in class and even after class and let it be. Day after day, problems stick together and I do not know which to tackle first.

The next problem is the translation issue. For international students, if we want to totally understand the context from lectures, we have to translate English into our mother tongue. In some circumstances, we can not find the right interpretation for the terminology. The lecturers in foreign countries can only explain them in other words; maybe they are still a struggle for us to understand.

The third problem is our relatively lower reading speed. We international students read the core books and supplementary books recommended by the lecturers much more slowly compared with native students. Therefore, we need much more time consuming and grasping the idea of the book. This kind of problem is hard to solve. We have to practice more.

The final problem is the different way of thinking between English people and people from some other parts of the world. We international students often find it very
The problem with making assumptions

In the Qualitative Research Methodologies module, there were now two groups of students. I realised that there were more Chinese students than before and that all of the Chinese students in both groups were regularly sitting together. Previously there had been only a few Chinese students and, I must admit, I hadn’t really noticed where they had sat. The Chinese students and the other international students seemed to have similar questions and problems and seemed disconnected from the local students. The local students seemed completely uninterested in mixing with the international students and tended to dominate the discussion in class, try as I might to get everyone to talk.

Were (the international students) starting at a lower level and should I adjust my teaching? Should I just separate the international and the home students? ...Instead, I asked the students to self-select into a ‘beginners’ and a ‘more experienced’ group. ...to my surprise, the following week when they turned up for the new self-selected groups, both international and local students almost equally chose each group...
Challenging assumptions and stereotypes

• Students from China (largest group)
• Stereotypes inaccurate, out of date and unhelpful
• ‘Gap’ is narrowing
• Rapid changes in China
Stereotypes of Chinese/‘CHC’ students

- Western views of CHC students filtered through eyes of teachers observing international students, struggling in culturally and linguistically different learning environments.

- ‘Western’ and ‘Asian’ or CHC scholarship and learning described in binary terms: ‘deep/surface’, ‘adversarial/harmonious’, ‘independent/dependent’

- Construct Asian or CHC students in ‘deficit’ terms > the antithesis of Western academic virtues.
‘Western’

- Critical thinking
- Independent learning
- Student-centred learning
- Adversarial stance
- Argumentative learners
- Achievement of the individual
- Constructing new knowledge
- ‘Deep’ learners seeking meaning

‘Confucian’

- Follow the Master
- Dependence on the teacher
- Respect for the teacher
- Harmony
- Passive learners
- Achievement of the group
- Respect for historical texts
- ‘Surface’ or rote learners
Changing contexts

• Rapid and profound physical, social and cultural transformations in China

• Much diversity within China eg. developed coastal vs less-developed inland regions (Hu, 2003), Chinese learners little different from Western counterparts (Shi, 2006)

• Education reform in China over past 5-10 years – move to student-centred learning and autonomous learners
Beijing No. 4 Primary School
New school Inner Mongolia
Life science curriculum in Shanghai middle schools
DNA extraction & observation
Testing water quality
Classroom in Qifu
The ‘Chinese learner’

Will be very diverse, BUT...

- Will be an only child (3 ‘onlys’; 6 adults per child)
- High parental expectations
- Competitive nature of Chinese education
- Hard working (ability vs effort)
- A lot at stake (consequences of failure)
- Benefits for them – opportunity costs (especially of postgraduate study)
Chinese students’ expectations

• More pastoral care from teachers – relationship with teachers is paramount
• Home students should initiate contact
• More structure, less prepared for more independent study (but can think ‘critically’)
• Silent in class but want to ask questions after class
• Talking inhibits understanding
  → Will need to clearly establish and model your expectations (eg you are open to criticism)
Moving beyond stereotypes

- We look for **differences** rather than **commonalities** - unhelpful in establishing genuine dialogue
- Stereotypes get in the way – polarise views - unhelpful and **outdated**
- Unspoken rules of a culture – You only learn the rules when you break them
- We all carry cultural ‘baggage’ – the ‘gift’ of international students
Intercultural communication

- Different expectations and experiences can lead to misunderstandings
- Transition issues – new ‘rules’ to learn (may not admit to difficulties)
- Making friends – will expect the host to make the first move
- Will be ready to adapt but need to know how
- Talk about ‘cultures’ (not just ethnicity); develop ‘meta-awareness’ (reflect on your own academic culture/s)
- Can be transformative for all parties
Newsflash

TIS/CAPRI/CICIN
International Conference on International Students and Internationalisation

16 & 17 June 2011

CALL FOR PAPERS SHORTLY

More information: internationalisation@heacademy.ac.uk