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**“teaching is a co- learning experience” : academics reflecting on learning and teaching in an ‘internationalized’ faculty**

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**Introduction: thinking beyond recruitment in the international higher education institution.**

The contribution of international students to the UK economy generally and to Higher Education (HE) institutions in particular has long been recognised. Many universities have highlighted internationalization in their strategic plans, with ambitious targets for growth in overseas student numbers. Research has therefore tended to focus on recruitment and the student perspective (Walker, 1999). Professor Colin Gilligan’s benchmarking report on international marketing practice for the British Council Educational Counselling Service (2000) criticized HE for complacency in working with international students. Gilligan (2000, p.6) suggested that it is somewhat naïve for universities to assume that they can simply rely on their excellent educational reputation, turning attention to issues of quality.

Postgraduate programmes have been criticized for ignoring culturally inclusive pedagogy (Causey et al, 1999), aligning to a particular pedagogy (Graybill, 1997) or merely infusing some international material into existing course syllabi, rather than addressing deeper pedagogical or practical considerations related to the quality of the learning and teaching experience (De Vita et al, 2003). There may be an expectation that ‘necessary adjustments will be made primarily by the

incoming students, often with very little reciprocal adjustment...’ (Cadman, 2000, 476-477).

Academics have expressed concerns about the impact of internationalization on learning, teaching and assessment standards. Devos (2003) has challenged such concerns and the conceptualization of international students as problematic. This, she suggests, deflects attention from the underlying problem, the decline in public funding which created the imperative to grow overseas student fee income.

Nevertheless such concerns have led to consideration of innovative approaches to professional development (Ho et al, 2001; Ottewill et al, 2002; Brew et al, 2004; Gibbs et al, 2000). Engaging faculty in a constructive dialogue about processual and pedagogical issues, personal and shared theories of learning may help participants to identify and articulate their tacit understandings and beliefs, their ‘personal practical knowledge’ (Bolton, 2005; Errington, 2004) and to review negative conceptions that may impact on the quality of the student experience (Johnson and Inoue, 2003).

In reflective discussions about professional experiences, ‘the narratives and metaphors by which we structure our lives, the taken-for-granted, are questioned and challenged’ (Bolton, 2005, 274). Exploring and optimizing the match between personal and shared views can confront complacency and address concerns in a constructive manner, fostering a more positive cultural climate (Williams, 2005). Conceptual change can lead to change in practices,

detected by students as a qualitative improvement in their learning experiences (Ho et al, 2001).

### **The institution**

This paper focuses on the experience of internationalization in one institution which had recently undergone a radical restructure. The vision for the future presented by the new senior management team highlighted internationalization as one of four major areas for growth. Whilst activity inevitably focused initially on ways to increase recruitment, a university consultation paper circulated late in 2004 highlighted the importance of developing a more holistic approach to internationalization. Consideration began to turn to ways in which the university might become an internationally-minded community, not simply an institution with an increasingly large number of international students. This provided an opportunity to engage the academic community in a discourse about the impact of internationalization on their working lives and professional identities and the challenges and opportunities it presented for learning and teaching.

A small scale study was conducted in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. This multi-disciplinary faculty, comprising nine academic schools and a Language Centre, attracted the largest number of international students in the university. Some schools within the faculty have long and varied experience of international work, including offshore delivery, while others have relatively recently experienced an influx of international students.

## **The study**

As part of the response to the internationalization agenda, the authors were seconded from their academic roles to work with colleagues across the disciplines, to investigate the progress of internationalization, to assist the identification of future priorities and actions and to disseminate good practice. The secondment extended across one academic year from 2004 to 2005, but the data reported here, collected over a four month period to January 2005, related to one aspect of this work. This involved initiating discussions with thirty five key members of staff about their experiences of internationalization.

The participants included all the Heads of Schools, and programme directors, senior administrators and lecturers who recruited, managed, supported and taught international postgraduate students and shared the responsibility for the strategic planning for internationalization within their schools. Two representatives of the International Office also participated. The proportion of participants from each school was commensurate with the number of international students in those schools. The gender of participants (21 male: 14 female) broadly reflected the gender balance of staff in schools. The fora for discussion included a Faculty Away Day; a heads of schools forum; small, discipline-based groups; and meetings with key individuals. Data from these discussions were transcribed, cross referenced and analysed.

The analysis of the data revealed themes relating to experiences and understandings of internationalization, and the challenges it presented to participants' theories of learning and teaching, their practical responses and what they regard as worthwhile learning innovation (Errington, 2004).

Implications for staff development and support to enhance learning and teaching and to develop a broader vision of internationalization were also explored.

### **Experiences and understandings of internationalization**

Since strategic targets for recruitment had recently been announced, unsurprisingly most participants referred to the internationalization agenda in terms of the expansion of postgraduate student numbers. This represented the major area of growth in the faculty, with an influx of students from S.E. Asia, and China in particular. The majority of participants viewed the growing diversity of the postgraduate population positively, including a director of postgraduate studies who said that:

‘Internationalization is clearly a route that we are going down and it will increase. It can lead to more interesting teaching and learning, an enriching experience’.

This new professor was one of a number of recently appointed international academics in the faculty. These strategic appointments were part of a broader vision of internationalization evident in the strategic plans of three schools, driven largely by research imperatives. However the appointments had also led to the development of new interdisciplinary postgraduate programmes, developed and marketed with an international perspective and an international audience in mind. Other heads of schools noted the accidental benefits of international appointments in their schools which enhanced intercultural research and teaching.

Although there was a general agreement in principal that internationalization is desirable, concerns were voiced about the practicalities, such as the additional time and effort perceived to be involved in new programme development and in supporting international students. A minority of staff regarded the growth in international student numbers as an 'unfortunate necessity' equated with increased staff-student ratios, and teaching, supervisory and pastoral responsibilities. A number of participants were anxious about the extent to which these additional responsibilities impacted upon their research and potential for career development. A head of school endorsed this dilemma:

'Workload debates have been predominantly about students but highlight tensions between teaching and learning and research.... The burden falls heavily on a few key staff, with consequences for their research careers'.

This notion of international students as a burden, even in schools with substantial experience of working with them, was commonly expressed. Hence some directors of studies were uncomfortable with the idea of marketing their programmes and were reluctant to recruit a broader diversity of students. Others expressed uncertainty about the image or brand the university aimed to project in its marketing drive. A senior female academic managing professional development programmes for health- and education-related professionals commented:

'The idea of having 'markets' for us is bizarre. We respond to a training and educational need as specified by [a national body]. Of course we have to attract students, but they have to have the right qualities. It is a reciprocal relationship, not one of consumer and provider.'

This notion of reciprocity in the learning and teaching process is an important core value which we will return to later.

### **Learning and teaching**

The majority of participants agreed that the cultural diversity of the student body adds to the richness of the teaching and learning experience and 'can be a lot of fun...it can transform the learning environment.' The benefits of the internationalization of the student community were largely perceived to result from students sharing experiences and appreciating each others' cultures. However the growth in the international community was unevenly dispersed across disciplines and several participants alluded to the predominance of Asian students in certain programmes. Concerns were expressed that students registering at the university with the expectation of having 'the UK experience' may be disappointed to find themselves in a cohort with few, if any, home students. A director of programmes, himself of Chinese origin, commented that homogenous groups tend to 'stick together' to the detriment of the development of 'interpersonal skills and cross cultural communication [which] is good preparation for the world of work':

'Normally they overdo their contact with other Chinese students. I constantly warn them against this. [They risk] cultural underachievement.'

There were some concerns that home students may not share the view that being part of a diverse learning community was beneficial, and that difficulties may arise when 'the expectations [of international students] collide with those of small groups of home students'. One participant considered it the job of the director of studies to work 'to develop cohort identity'. This might prove challenging to those participants who were more comfortable with familiar



modes of learning and teaching and who referred to the domestic cohort as 'our students', inadvertently designating international students as the cultural 'other'.

Discussions about internationalizing teaching tended to focus on programme content rather than pedagogy. There was some recognition of the importance of 'designing postgraduate programmes for an international audience' and there were examples of programmes which 'drew on [the tutor's] research interests in identity, narratives, culture, entrepreneurship and application to pedagogy'.

Many participants however seemed to be relatively unaware of the cultural nature of teaching and learning practices and cultural pedagogies. There were few examples of programme development based upon pedagogical considerations or clearly articulated examples of how reciprocal benefits might be achieved. The changing profile of the postgraduate community presented a challenge to prevailing pedagogies and modes of delivery (De Vita et al, 2003).

The emphasis on western participatory modes of learning and teaching were perceived by a number of participants to contrast with the preferred modes of learning of Asian students. Chinese students were characterized as passive, and reluctant to engage in critical thinking, argument and discussion. A female professor and head of school noted:

'Chinese students may come with a different aesthetic and there can be difficulty about notions of criticality.'

Students' inhibitions about participation in class were attributed to cultural factors, rooted in learning cultures which view teachers as experts, and transmitters of knowledge (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; Newton et al, 1997; Littlewood, 1999; Cheng, 2000; Turner and Acker, 2002). When confronted with

the expectations of postgraduate studies in the west, which often embody constructivist principles, students may be unfamiliar with the reflective, metacognitive or self engagement aspects of learning considered necessary to successful thinking and learning (Schon, 1987; Gelter, 2003).

However two heads of school dismissed the implication that a lack of familiarity with reflective and critical practices has a detrimental impact on standards:

‘It is important to approach this with some kind of integrity. I am less inclined now to think this will lower standards.’

‘The implication that Chinese students cannot think critically is nonsense.’

A clear articulation of the expectations for learning and teaching was recognised to be vital to induct students into the learning culture. The use of flexible, innovatory approaches and modes of delivery should take account of students’ lack of familiarity with the new learning environment and the skills and processes they are expected to master. As another head of school commented:

‘We need to be really welcoming to different ways of thinking and different approaches’.

Matching the approach to the expectations and cultural values of students was perceived to be difficult:

‘It’s difficult to design a truly international course. The challenge is to meet the needs of people with different expectations and backgrounds.’

A tutor with considerable experience in working with international students expressed doubts about the support he offered:

‘I’m not sure I’ve got to a position where I’m handling different student expectations really well.’

This led to consideration of the wider role of the tutor:

‘A lot of them are the age of my kids. If my kids were in their position, I’d want them to be treated in a way that was different ...’

Another programme leader also said:

‘Taking very good care of students is the most important thing. We offer tutorials every week for each student, very close monitoring of students and their performance, and lots of counseling for students who don’t do very well. We must be very caring but at the same time very firm’

The expectation that the teacher would attend to the spiritual, moral, and intellectual development of the student is embedded in a number of education traditions. While most degree programme directors indicated that they provided guidance on a range of academic, pastoral and social matters, western traditions promote the development of independent or autonomous learning. There was a lack of consensus among the participants about the degree of independence students were expected to acquire and demonstrate.

### **student induction and support**

Most participants indicated the importance of an induction period for students prior to their programmes of study, acknowledging the cognitive, conative, affective, and situational aspects of learning impacting on students’ understanding in the new environment (Claxton et al, 1996; Busher, 2001, cited in Leonard and Morley, 2003). A participant with long experience as a programme director in the Business School was sympathetic to the demands made on students, particularly those studying one-year, full-time master’s programmes:

'It's not fair to expect them to cope with culture shock; they need a year to acclimatize'.

Taking account of the stresses and anxieties for international students to adapt to expectations in a UK institution, other participants noted that cultural sensitivity is essential, particularly with respect to student expectations of structured v less-structured teaching and supervisory styles. Students from a number of Asian countries were considered to expect more deferential arrangements with supervisors and to be uncomfortable with democratic and less directive styles of supervising (Harman, 2003). Participants commented that students may find speaking in academic settings challenging and prefer traditional lecture input (Adams, 2004).

Schools with more comprehensive induction programmes attempted to provide students with the skills necessary to independent study e.g. ICT skills, library skills and offered explanations about western discourse conventions, such as the rules of turn-taking, paired work and group work. Participants from Education and Communication noted that international students often require support to access necessary information and supervision and to adjust socially and culturally. This was perceived to require more time and ongoing support than tutors were accustomed to provide for traditional domestic cohorts or for European students.

Discussions about orientation and induction arrangements were strongly associated with promoting understanding of 'our way of doing things.' As one Head of School illustrated:

‘students who are very good in their own countries may struggle with the expectations here...we need to explain the expectations; they need time to assimilate the culture’.

A director of postgraduate programmes endorsed this view and cited in particular the need to understand students’ differing expectations of assessment and marking procedures:

‘North American students can be horrified that they get 60+ and are told that this is a good mark here!’

However a number of researchers have questioned the assimilation model, and the implied superiority of western conventions for learning and teaching, and assessment. Cadman (2000, 480) considers the appropriateness of acculturation of students into the host institution’s ‘way of doing things’, and argues that this is neither appropriate nor adequate.

For staff and students from other contexts or cultures, approaches to postgraduate study in the UK may contrast with their earlier experiences of learning and teaching and a period of adjustment was considered to be inevitable. While there were undoubtedly challenges for students to adapt their learning behaviours e.g. moving from structured learning to independent learning, and from reproductive to critical thinking, reciprocal learning development and adjustments in the host institution were considered necessary by a number of participants.

The embodiment of constructivist principles in postgraduate programmes may be incompatible with the cultural and religious values of some students. It was noted that there may be obstacles to the implementation of reflective practices,

for example in interactions between men and women and between superior and subordinate within research groups or networks (Richardson, 2004; Gelter, 2003). Gelter (2003) suggests that tutors should not assume that students have the skills and dispositions to be critical and reflective, since they are learned processes of historically recent origin, arising in cultures based on democracy and used infrequently in professional practice. Development of such skills requires dedicated time, effort and support.

Short, intense induction arrangements were considered to be inadequate. One programme director commented on the high level of coaching and tutorial support he considers necessary:

‘Feedback is very important and a lot of... practice and intensive personal coaching and mentoring’.

Recognising the need for a staged, gradual induction process, another degree programme director stated:

‘We’ve decided not to front-load induction but to spread it out, to coincide with study phases e.g. plagiarism, assignments, how to interpret feedback...’

Ongoing language support was also considered to be important. Some colleagues seemed to confuse students’ language difficulties with their learning capacity:

‘The language problem is cultural – they need to be able to think for themselves’.

A head of school challenged the assumption that proficiency in the language of instruction could be equated with intellect capacity:

‘Not everything is a language problem: teaching is a co- learning experience’.

A participant from the Business School endorsed this view, stating:

‘We need greater understanding of what creates good will. It’s all very well to do things to attract students in, but it’s what you do when they are here that’s important, and that we don’t do.....we don’t claim to understand it.’

Some participants were open to negotiation of appropriate methods of learning with students and recognized that:

‘We’re not listening to students’.

### **Reflecting on learning and teaching: towards a culturally inclusive pedagogy**

Cruickshank (2004) suggests the notion of cultural inclusiveness lies more in the willingness to negotiate learning and teaching strategies, to reflect on values and beliefs and to understand and embrace different ways of knowing, than in the adoption of any specific approach to pedagogy. The invitation to take part in a reflective discussion about their experiences of internationalization was welcomed by the majority of participants. Colleagues with several years of experience of working in departments with relatively large numbers of international students noted that there were rarely structured opportunities to ‘engage in intellectually engaging discussion about the issues’.

It was felt that the lack of discussions of this kind meant that

‘positive energy for internationalization is within individuals, not bedded in the school. We’ve lost our way; we can only skim the surface.’

A number of participants felt that there was little time to reflect upon or adapt pedagogical approaches to take account of diverse student needs. It seems

unlikely therefore that deeper pedagogical considerations will inform day-to-day teaching practices in a meaningful way.

Previous studies have investigated the models of understanding which underpin student learning behaviour and guide teachers' work (Ho et al, 2001; Newton, 2000). The vagueness of the language used in lectures and the potential for different interpretations e.g. of metaphor, may inhibit understanding. When lecturers and students conceptions of learning are similar, it is less likely that students will experience difficulties in learning (Newton, 2000). Where a dialogue takes place between students and supervisors, this can lead to reciprocal adjustment in instructional approaches, settings, curriculum content and resources.

Chinese students have been reported to freely participate in discussions when they understand the discourse conventions and ground rules (Stephens, 1997). Similarly, in a study prompted by the apparent reluctance of adult students to participate in university classroom interactions, Tomlinson et al (2005) found that students would welcome changes to the culture of their classrooms, but teachers were largely unaware of students' views. Cadman's (2000) data demonstrates students' appreciation of a reciprocal learning approach: negotiating a common postgraduate culture enables students from different national cultures to communicate effectively.

The reflections of participants highlight some important variables to be considered if learning and teaching in postgraduate programmes in the faculty is to be inclusive and responsive to diverse student needs. Further investigation



might focus on factors relating to gender, maturity, religion, culture, class etc. that impact on the experiences of students. This shifts the focus from the need to adapt provision for international students to a reconceptualisation of learning and teaching in postgraduate studies with potential benefits for other students, including mature students who have not engaged in formal education for some years, or non-traditional learners (Leonard and Morley, 2003).

### **Staff Development: supporting conceptual change**

The concerns highlighted above point to the need for practical staff development opportunities, to address negative conceptions of internationalization, or of international students; to promote reflection upon pedagogies and practices, and to promote the development of culturally inclusive pedagogies (Causey et al, 1999). Participants were resistant to the idea of organized courses, resonating with wider views about the value of staff development programmes that impose a generic set of teaching skills (Brew et al, 2004; Ottewill et al, 2002). However an encouraging number of participants valued the opportunity to take part in the discussion and the opportunity this study presented to reflect upon their experiences and understandings of internationalization. Concern was expressed at the lack of fora, outside of formal committee agendas, in which they could discuss learning and teaching issues or share good practice.

Professional development activities which incorporate reflective practice, action research networks or study groups to explore issues, address common concerns and engage tutors in the kinds of learning that they are expected to provide for their students have been found to impact positively on practice (Ho et al, 2001;

Boyle et al, 2004). Studies which attempt to achieve conceptual change in teachers indicate that engagement in longer-term professional development activity can encourage participants to clarify their personal conceptions of effective learning and teaching, confront inadequacies in existing conceptions and enhancing awareness of the need for change (Ho et al, 2001; Boyle et al, 2004).

The promotion of a range of teaching approaches which are sensitive to, but also extend and develop the ontological, philosophical and metacognitive understanding of students may be helpful (Cruickshank, 2004; Moseley et al, 2004). Further empirical investigations are planned to explore approaches which can facilitate development in teacher conceptions and provide evidence about consequent improvement in teaching practices and students' learning.

Taxonomies or frameworks for thinking may be helpful to both staff and students in reaching shared understandings about the aims of educational experiences (Moseley et al, 2004; DeVita et al, 2003). Frameworks for thinking can also create a common language for course designers, teachers and learners to deepen understanding and improve management of the multi-dimensional aspects of successful learning (Moseley et al, 2004).

## **Discussion**

The internationalization agenda has created new challenges and opportunities to increase the level and sophistication of strategic planning to develop learning and teaching across institutions (Gibbs et al, 2000), and to engage in 'a radical

reassessment of the purposes, priorities and processes' of HE (De Vita et al, 2003, 383).

This study indicated a common acceptance among participants in one faculty of the inevitability and the potential benefits of internationalization, although the data also indicated a lack of clarity about what internationalization meant for the university, beyond the imperative to generate income from increased recruitment. A tension emerged where internationalization, envisaged as increasing numbers of international students, impacted upon participants' preferred identities. Some concerns about the impact of the increasing diversity of the student body on the quality of the learning and teaching experience, and on the wider experience of being a postgraduate student in the UK, were also voiced.

Is this an internationalized faculty? The data from this small-scale study indicated a predominantly underdeveloped conceptualization of internationalization as an increase in postgraduate international student numbers. A range of strategies was evident, from innovative new programme development aimed to enhance recruitment, to comprehensive induction and orientation arrangements aiming to enhance the student experience. A minority of participants, predominantly male and Anglo-Saxon, retained implicitly UK-centric pedagogies and routine practices from halcyon days that privileged home students and disadvantaged international students (Cruickshank, 2004).

Encouragingly more participants were open to a more holistic approach to internationalization, in which universities become internationally-minded communities, not simply institutions with increasingly large numbers of

international students (MacKinnon and Manathunga, 2003; Marshall and Martin, 2000; Volet, 1999). The increasing internationalization of the academic staff, driven largely by the research agenda, has brought new values and understandings to the discourse (De Vita, 2003; Johnson and Inoue, 2003) and broadened the vision of internationalization for the faculty.

Referring to the efforts of mainstream schools to accommodate the needs of an increasingly diverse range of pupils, Ainscow (1997) suggested that inclusion was a process, rather than a state, and challenged schools to continue to strive to become more inclusive. Internationalization can also be conceptualized as a continual process of improvement (see Table 1), leading towards the development of an inclusive culture, in which diversity is celebrated, and intercultural learning takes place, with reciprocal benefits for staff and students.

< **Insert table I** >

The process of internationalizing at this institution might be indicated by an uneasy transfer through the phases of table 1, hindered by the lack of a broader vision from the centre and a paucity of opportunities for discussion.

Internationalization calls for a range of pedagogies and explicit induction into the discourse communities of the university (Williams, 2005). An investigation of the postgraduate student experience is planned to explore students' understandings, expectations and experiences of postgraduate learning and teaching in the faculty. This will address the extent to which postgraduate programmes reflect predominantly western theories and constructs, or are positioned within international communities of thought. Discussions can develop teachers' and students' conceptions of learning and teaching, contribute to the

development of critical and reflective skills and can lead to pedagogical change (Newton, 2000; Turner and Acker, 2002; Ho et al, 2001).

Participants recognized the need for professional development opportunities to facilitate the development of inclusive learning environments. The majority of participants appreciated the opportunity presented by this study to reflect on their pedagogies and practices. The need for systematic identification and sharing - in a range of fora - of good practice within the university and externally was recognised. This suggests a need for ongoing broad-based, staff development opportunities based on reflective dialogue, action research and the formation of collaborative discourse communities.

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