

## **A 'Roller Coaster' experience? An exploration of postgraduate international students' perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment, integration with home students and building a campus community.**

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### ***Background***

The internationalisation of higher education tends to be theorised in the literature at the organisational, strategic level or to focus on the growing numbers of 'international students'; there are very few comprehensive investigations of the interactions between international students and academics (Brunner, 2006). Much of research carried out in this area examines the experiences of students from one particular location (usually China); compares the experiences of students from particular culture with those of another, or offers an assessment of internationalisation strategies developed by institutions. There are, however, more and more in-depth studies, which make use of stories from the field and accounts of the experience of both students and practitioners dealing with internationalisation (Sawir 2013; Trahar and Hyland 2011; Trahar 2011, 2010, 2007; Montgomery 2009). Such research attempts to explore the complexities of interactions between international students and home students, and international students and academics, in the constantly changing intercultural higher education landscape. It also highlights a strong need for cultural sensitivity in pedagogical approaches. Lecturers and students often assume that intercultural learning happens automatically, without effort on the part of learners and teachers. The experiences of international students or home students studying with international learners and lecturers teaching international students are, therefore, receiving growing attention.

This paper is derived from my doctoral research, which aims to contribute to an understanding of the international student experience from the perspectives of teaching, learning and assessment as well as social participation. It presents an analysis of focus groups with postgraduate international students as a part of a wider case study carried out at an English university, which draws on the views of international students, home students and staff. Emerging themes from the focus groups were mapped onto the research questions in order to elicit students' views on: teaching, learning and assessment; their experiences with student support services and integration with home students; and the building of a campus community.

### ***Teaching, learning and overall experience***

Students discussed both positive experiences and areas where there was room for development within the themes of teaching, learning and assessment. Some reported that they had chosen to study at a UK university in order to broaden their horizons. They genuinely embraced the huge gap between different education systems and found the new challenge exciting and enjoyable. In addition, some students commented on how much they enjoy feedback given in tutorials, something that the majority of them had not been familiar with prior to starting their educational adventure in the UK. Several also shared that they loved being treated as individuals as opposed one of many like in their previous educational settings. Furthermore, when asked about the content of the curriculum, most students admitted it was already international in nature and that they appreciated how tutors tailored

the programmes to different students' needs. Some recognised the value of being exposed to international staff and professionals from various industries too:

*“Even though our main tutor is British, he will always show examples from different countries, because I have classmates from Colombia, China, India and America. So, I think it is a good thing for us, because I believe that I learn a lot, each time we talk, and it is a new experience for me. I can get inspiration from the different examples from around the world” (Jim).*

What needs to be mentioned is the fact that some of the students had attended a pre-session English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course prior to embarking on their main course of study and then used the in-session EAP support offered via student services. Most of them agreed that if they had not attended these courses that the start of their MA would have been more challenging. Nonetheless, several students reported difficulties with understanding tutors, especially at the beginning of the course.

Above all, the majority of students felt the assessment was fair, as many assignments, presentations, critiques, ‘pitches’, and assessment in general, were evaluated by more than one tutor; as a result they felt confident that this process was fair and reliable.

Nevertheless, overall feedback from students could be placed on a continuum: at one end, students deemed their experience ‘excellent’; at the other end they criticized some aspects of the courses. Some students thought that the learning support the university provided for students was insufficient; they felt uncomfortable asking for help as they felt, or even were told, that the support was limited and relied heavily on part time or sessional lecturers. Further, during the period of data collection, student services and the library were undergoing a restructure, giving rise to some concern among international students that they would not be able to access appropriate levels of support during the summer while finishing their dissertation.

Another major area of disagreement concerned the final MA show in which students presented their dissertation projects in an exhibition. Some students complained about the time of year, choice of venue and lack of close friends and family who would visit the final show, as well as the lack of any professional advertising campaign to attract visitors:

*“Not many people come to our shows, mainly students’ family and friends. I really think we need more opportunities to advertise the event so that people can visit it. When I was a student in Japan, when I graduated, I had three shows, one was on the campus, and one was in a national museum, one in another modern gallery that was really nice. When I displayed my work in external venues, some people noticed me; it’s easier for making connections, networking.” (Lena).*

Moreover, there was a certain level of dissatisfaction with the organisation of the courses involving: late inductions into certain technical areas of the university; lack of a friendly learning environment due to sharing space with students from other courses; limited technician support in specialist areas (workshops) during summer holiday; and long handbooks with difficult language and an inability to find or understand information in them. Students were mostly annoyed by the visa restrictions and the fact they were not able to graduate alongside some of their peers, as to be able to do that, they would need to go back home, re-apply for a visa and then come back for the graduation ceremony, which was problematic and prohibitively expensive for most of the students.

### ***Integration with home students and building campus community***

Some students reported that they belong to virtual communities on Facebook or twitter, for example, Taiwanese, Thai societies or campus-specific Facebook groups on which they share ideas, experiences and provide support to smaller national or campus communities and can use their mother tongue when they feel homesick. Students use this platform as a way of disseminating, for example, what is happening in the area or interesting events at the university. However, some of these groups do not have administrators so the information might be inconsistent, and some students suggested that the Student Union or other university service could run these groups. They thought it would be better to belong to a group with both international and home students, which would enable at least virtual communication. In terms of integration, the majority of international students have bonded very well in their own international groups as they meet regularly, travel together; their favourite activity is cooking and trying different international cuisines.

The major challenge identified by the majority of students in all four focus groups was in regards to communication with home students. Students thought that the dynamics between different groups caused some issues in the area of collaboration, both in the classroom and outside. International students acknowledged that sometimes they think that home students are fed up with working with international students, as it requires more effort to understand them. They commented that home students are not equipped with the strategies necessary to collaborate with students using English as a language of wider communication. All students agreed that this interaction should be somehow facilitated by the University through integration activities at the beginning of the course.

Because of the fact that the majority of students on postgraduate courses are international, some students expressed concern about the lack of opportunities to practise English, especially since some courses tend to attract students sharing the same language. They all agreed that collaboration with other MA or even BA students or any home students, facilitated by the tutors would expand international postgraduate students' circles of friends and improve their opportunities for learning.

In addition, some students said they felt isolated from the main campus building as their course was based in a separate building 15 minutes' walk away from the main campus. However, in this particular instance, the course leaders were considering a change of location and moving the course to a different campus.

Regardless of the fact that the Student Union organised a number of events and parties for all students, some students felt that these were mainly targeted at undergraduate or home students on the grounds that these events usually included loud music and alcohol. Students added that tutors did not disseminate information about events, nor was the information too visible on the campus. Regardless of a number of SU societies and clubs on different campuses, the students claimed they would rather go to a subject specialist club where they could discuss programme-related topics. A number of students reported they attend a Christian Club, as its members are very understanding; they appreciate the fact that international students are listened to and respected, and the opportunities offered for improving their English in reading and interpreting a simplified international version of the Bible.

And finally, even though students expressed a desire for greater integration with BA students, some complained about the 'busy' lifestyles of foundation and undergraduate students living in the same halls, highlighting a potential mismatch of expectations between the two different cohorts of students.

*"I feel that my English is not improving a lot, sorry! It doesn't matter if we are Asian or international, but it's like that, really. And the other thing is that UK postgraduate home students are nice and polite but we don't meet quite often as they have their personal lives, they commute to work, they have no time for socialising. In our accommodation there are mostly international students" (Marina).*

### **What's next and conclusion**

These findings have formed the basis for discussion for the next stage of the research, i.e. focus groups with SU, home students and academics as a means of finding ways in which improvements might be achieved at the target university and more widely.

Responding to diverse students' needs around internationalisation has become a significant issue for university professionals working both directly and indirectly with students. Therefore, this study aims to achieve a deeper understanding of the impact of developments on both students and staff as a tool to maximise, and benefit from, the opportunities for intercultural learning. By exploring the students' varied needs and the relation between academic success and social participation, this research will hopefully have implications for the effectiveness of teaching and learning, as well as for curricular and extra-curricular activities and finally, for the integration of international and home students inside and beyond the lecture room.

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