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Learning at Macquarie: the international student experience

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a research project currently undertaken at Macquarie University. The research explores internationalisation of the University’s curriculum offerings and how this affects international students. The central focus of this paper is to highlight some of the student commentary on communication between teachers and students by problematizing the way it subsequently affects the quality of student learning. The paper concludes by raising some questions around how we may best meet the needs of international students by drawing on inclusive teaching philosophies.

KEYWORDS

Inclusivity and diversity, international students, internationalisation and sustainability, transition experience

INTRODUCTION

The internationalisation of curriculum at Macquarie University has increased in significant proportions in recent years. Current figures show that 23% of enrolments are international students (IS) expanding across all university faculties (Reid, 2002). International students are now an essential part of the University’s teaching sessions. The rapid increase in international student capacity is also reflected in current research: however, relatively little research has focused on the student perspective (but see Ballard & Clancy, 1991; Jones, Robertson, & Line, 1999; Ramburuth, 2001, Reid, 2001). This paper is a contribution to this area of higher education research.

The teaching of IS is a considerable ambition in the University reflected in the commitment to quality education and teaching expertise. The benefits of an integration of IS into the Australian academic cultures are highly valued by the University’s leadership. IS add to the diversity of our

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university populations and further research needs are located in the area of exploring how diversity may add value to the transition experience as a whole (McInnis, 2001). However, reports on students’ experiences testify a somewhat contrary understanding. For example, Reid (2001) conducted a comprehensive study, which surveyed over 300 postgraduate IS at Macquarie University. Contrary to common beliefs, in particular about students from Asian background, IS students were reported to value the interactive mode (i.e. discussion based learning) of unit delivery over a sometimes assumed teacher centred mode. It seems then, at least rhetorically, that ideas about what constitutes high quality teaching and learning differs between the student and staff groups. An example is the common stereotypical belief that students from ‘Asian’ backgrounds prefer rote learning styles and are rather passive in classroom interaction.

If the practices that characterize ‘quality’ are perceived and acted out differently by members of ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ cultural groupings it assumes a questioning of the very meaning of concepts such as ‘quality’ and ‘teaching. These can account for deeply contrasting expectations of educational practice. International students’ ‘so called’ cultural ‘traits’ have been blamed as warranting subsequent teaching and learning problems (e.g. Byrns, 1991; Jones, Robertson, & Line, 1999; Leask, 1999; McInnis, 2001, Ryan, 2000). Such problems range from poor English language and critical thinking skills, failure to participate in collaborative learning mode (e.g. group discussions), differences in cultural communication and academic literacy styles, to expectations of rote learning resulting in lack of independent learning initiatives.

These claims have been refuted by others. Biggs (2001) provides a broad review of research findings that reveal institutional stereotyping of students from so called ‘Asian’ backgrounds. He argues the fact that such students continue to rank in the top levels of our university courses which testifies their ability to adjust well into the ‘western’ learning cultures. The issues and problems are no different from those raised by researchers in the field of the first year experience (McInnis, 2001) of mainstream students undergoing transition into academic university culture generally. Biggs (2001) reports on results showing that at least for some, the mainstream transition experience is fraught with uncertainties about fitting in to disciplinary cultures in terms of academic writing genres and so on (see also Krause, 2001). Anecdotal evidence suggests that students’ working out of their position within disciplinary cultures is a fast developing ability, with beginning students being able to guess at what counts as ‘sanctioned disciplinary practice’ within three weeks of commencing their studies in a major discipline area. This provokes an inquiry into the acquisition of disciplinary know-how that seems as readily accessible by students at our universities, a skill which would not in such case be acknowledged by the academic community?

What seems to be at the core of the debate is a notion of communication between IS and university staff (Hellstén, 2002). There seems to be a need to increase cultural understanding that is reflected in the ways in which policy and practice is mediated between IS and academics. There seems also to be a need to establish opportunities for discussion among IS and staff about the communicative differences that constitute communicative practice, and the way in which these are reflected in classroom teaching settings.

The aim of this paper then is to contribute toward an opening of opportunity for discussing communicative practices between IS and staff at Macquarie University. Of central interest is the first six month time period following overseas students’ arrival here that constitutes their transition period between ‘old’ and ‘new’ learning environments. The interviews consist of one-hour long, semi-structured sessions with IS volunteers within their first year of being in Australia. The participants are enrolled in many different discipline areas of the University and come from a range of countries around the world. The questions are centred around themes of describing their
encounters with Australian communities, learning environments and the academic disciplines. We also explore their sense of quality provided by the University in asking them to comment on how they would describe their experiences to others wanting to come here to study. Below are some features of their commentary.

**Communicating in class**

One of the common assumptions made of IS from Asian cultures is that they find it difficult to ‘speak up’ in class and to participate in classroom discussions. There are many substantial explanations for this, the most salient being feeling self-conscious if conversational flow does not come easily in the English language. This warrants reluctance in attempting to pronounce English words for fear of failure in front of the evaluative eye of other native speakers.

“Yes…. Um… they (teachers) think it’s a job. They ask something. We say nothing… ‘cause we wanna say but… (--) shy. And I’m afraid sometimes I’ll make a mistake, so I don’t want to like that…”

“I think, my friends, sometimes they stay in one course for two … months. Because their character very shy. They don’t want to say, you know, anything even though they know everything. They know everything. So teachers didn’t know that.

“It’s just hard and difficult. I don’t know the feeling, the nuance, I don’t know those in English so… I… I’m not a good English speaker at all. It’s very uncomfortable when I talk with somebody. So I think I… When I speak with Australians I feel they treat me as a children, you know. And they think of me as a just a…(indicates height of a child with hand) that language level person. Like a ten year old kid.”

In conversation with native speakers the student in the third example feels she is being spoken to in the diminutive. The perception that others speak to her ‘as a child’ can be damaging for her sense of self as an academically successful individual. The perpetuation of this perception may in turn result in a reluctance to speak in public. A common communicative feature is for speakers to adjust their conversational style to suit each other in terms of genre, register and so on. A frequent characteristic is that teachers of IS lower their level of language use in hope of making the teaching event more effective and beneficial for low level language speakers. However, this method may be more unfavourable than useful and may be interpreted by IS as a gesture that further marginalises them from mainstream students.

**Communication issues**

Many students in our study commented on the language level at which their lectures were delivered, by Australian lecturers. The consensus was that the mode of delivery is easier than that expected of mainstream student groups. The necessary feedback does often not reach the lecturers due to constraints in culture specific politeness discourses. For example, students from some cultural backgrounds do not feel comfortable in offering criticism of their teachers as a gesture of respect:

“The one thing is they (lecturers) try to speak easier (laughter) because sometimes we misunderstood. And lecturer say to student but nobody nodded. So he try to explain again. So I think most of the Australian lecturer try to give lecture (in an) easier way.”

Delivering lectures in lower level language registers can be perceived as counteractive to IS expectations of improving English proficiency as part of their student candidature in an English speaking country.

“Before I came here I think uh, if I got to Australia I will improve my English skills really very fast. But it’s just a dream. I must do everything. Every day I practise, practise, practise for this.”
Within this commentary is the realisation of the learning experience as hinging solely on his personal investment. The inference here is the renouncing of the lecturer’s accountability for providing the necessary skills aspired to. It is also a reaction to the realisation that the low level of language provided by the classroom interaction will not provide him with advanced level linguistic ability. It seems a rather troublesome side effect of an overseas university candidature to an English speaking country. It seems, based on our student commentary, that the slowing down of English language learning prospect is, at least in some cases, due to lack of challenging classroom opportunities.

Leaving the social comfort of your home country for the arrival in a foreign country, language and culture can be a harrowing experience, especially for the youngest international students. The mentoring programs in place within the University go some way toward meeting the basic transition needs. However, the interview talk revealed that international students consign the responsibility of ‘hosting’ with lecturers rather than the institution. Within this theme, one feature of talk is the student perception of lack of support by teaching staff at the University. For example:

“So, I want teacher to encourage that, and like mom or dad… yes, to take care of them (other IS) a lot because they are really shy and they sometimes they don’t understand…. Just to say ‘OK’. I want our teachers to know that.”

“So there is a consultant. He consult with me. But he is really busy. I can’t contact easily. Just the one (consultant) and a lot of students here. So, and he only work… I think, twice maybe three days a week. So I can’t meet.”

“I visit many times this office. When I need their help I am looking for someone but I can’t”

Commentary about the unavailability of consultation opportunities is extensive among newly arrived international students. There is a perception that special efforts ought to be made by academic staff to accommodate for incoming students’ needs. This is attributed to the need for care and emotional support, and in a familial sense as tantamount to ‘parenting’. This is especially voiced in talk about the younger IS groups. The ethic of care is an expectation of the teaching practices by the students interviewed.

The unavailability of part-time staff poses a further problem for international students due to the conditions of their timed candidature. There is a sense of urgency about the study program and waiting to see staff who are not available is interpreted as obstructing progress toward the completion of the degree. Such concerns are directly linked with the marketisation of education in the new global knowledge economy (Rizvi, 2000). Certainly, international competition of student places and resources is of central interest to Australia as one of the ‘western’ English speaking countries with extensively developed international education targets. We are competing against other English speaking countries in IS numbers. The competition and urgency of this new global dynamic is then reflected in the responses heard from the mouths of IS and which may result in the experiences perceived as less desirable as in the above commentary. The commitment to internationalising the curriculum needs to seek critical and innovative solutions to successful re-evaluation of existing curriculum content, enhanced capacity and mode of program delivery.

Some implications

There is widespread call for implementation of various bridging programs to better prepare IS in their transition into the Australian study environment (Jones et al, 1999; Leask, 1999; Ryan, 2000). Successful mentoring programs are in place in many universities (see Austin, Covalea, Weal, 2002). These go a long way toward the creation of important links between IS and the Australian communities and thus decreasing feelings of social isolation and loneliness. Implications can be considered in terms of enhancing culturally sensitive curriculum delivery and communication and by enhancing a reflective and inclusive teaching culture throughout the university.
Implications for teaching and learning

Some useful resources for the critical examination of our teaching modes and practices are located in a number of professional development initiatives. Inclusive teaching practices are particularly pertinent here. While inclusive teaching philosophies are part of effective teaching policies, there seems to be some uncertainty about their applicability to the teaching setting. Making the curriculum and its discourses explicit and unassuming is a starting point offered by Leask (1999). Provision of obvious and workable program and assessment guidelines that are sensitive to individual variation and diversity are also listed among her recommendations.

One implication emerging from the current study reflects on the need to provide opportunities for staff to communicate and reflect upon their practices in teaching IS. One cost effective way is the forming of focus groups which host ‘impartial’ representatives of the international student body (such as representatives of the National Liaison Student group) and who mediate the views of students to academic and other staff. Awareness of cultural open-mindedness and responsibility towards IS, is an issue that can be explored. Informative sessions may address the examination of religious and other culturally diverging traditions, as well as culture specific discourses. Rizvi (2000) calls for the internationalisation of curriculum to ensure a determination for the promotion of cultural change, that becomes part of both the mainstream and other groupings. The culturally sensitive curriculum will then move away from the stereotypical thinking that blames internationalisation as a responsibility that belongs to someone other than oneself (Leask, 1999).

The underlying premise of Leask’s (1999) statement of shared responsibility for the internationalisation of the Australian higher education curriculum prescribes strategies set into practice to enable the meeting of individual IS needs for communication. Where this relates to increasing staff availability, further resourcing is needed. Clearly, the conditions of an IS candidature rest on adherence to time management and other restrictions such as those dictated by temporary visa requirements. Such constraints necessitate mediation to academic and other university staff for increased accountability and loyalty to consultations and other scheduled commitments. One suggestion for implementation is the making available of a ‘point of contact’ facility staffed by academics and experienced IS mentors. We found that many of the questions of incoming new IS are of general nature and can be answered by individuals experienced within the university system. Such a facility (such as an information booth, linked to an on-line service) meets the deeper need for social and emotional support that is currently felt as lacking among new incoming students.

Implications for practice

Educational practices are largely brought about by constitutive of everyday conduct, held values and attributive actions. To this effect, we gain ground from recommendations for teaching methodology that draws on reflective and inclusive teaching philosophies. However, it is our experience that these philosophies are not entirely understood by the academic community. Some recognition of inclusivity as a dynamic negotiation as opposed to the domination of one over another is called for. This reasoning makes available the notion of flexibility and change as everyday requirements for the accommodation of diversity in our teaching and learning settings. There still exists an alarming need among academics in Australia to reflect upon their cultural affiliations, to explore their ethnicities for the acknowledgement that these are not only ‘traits’ we identify in ‘others’ but also in ourselves. This reflection should then allow for inclusive practice to begin with asking “what can I do” to meet the particular cultural and discursive needs of
international students. This may in itself and without further extended effort transfer into the ‘ethnic of care’ for the younger IS in particular classroom settings.

However, there are some recommendations on offer for the purpose of providing some examples for implementing inclusive practices into the teaching of IS. An initial issue is to consider a needs analysis of the students and how they can be feasibly met within the constraints of the teaching program. Secondly, allowing for the flexibility for understanding some of the cultural discourses and genres that may be encountered in communicative exchanges with IS. Knowledge of the background of one’s students mediates an acceptance and interest in their cultural backgrounds. There are a multitude of publications describing cultural practices of particular nationalities. Other implementational resources are found in application of classroom activities. For example, an exploration of different religious cultural traditions can provide stimulating introductory session material considering it is carried out with sensitivity and without marginalising individual students in the group. Another effective introductory session may regard communication conventions of one’s affiliated cultural group. Allowing students to explore culturally specific behaviours such as the use of voice, tone, affect, body language and body contact in communicating with different members of the community will also open up communication channels between staff and students. This acts as effective preparation for later identification of so called ‘unexpected’ features of communicative conduct.

Concluding comments

The internationalisation of Australian higher education is still in its infancy inviting further collaborative effort from university communities. Although many generalisations exist, we now widely acknowledge the perhaps incorrect perception of quantity underwriting quality. There is a discernment that rapidly increased quantities of IS have not reflected favourably on the capacities of learning institutions in terms of provisions of quality and expertise at least when it comes to inclusive practices and cross-culturally sensitive communication styles. The implications addressed here go some way towards meeting these needs. Further investigation is clearly necessary especially in comparing student commentary with that of staff experiences. The assurance of quality of teaching and providing culturally amenable learning opportunities for international students will indeed be achieved by means of inviting individual cultural change and critical evaluation of current academic discourses and practices.

REFERENCES


