From English to Undergraduate, the international student experience

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Introduction

Over 3000 international students study at Northumbria, of who over 70% originating from the Pacific Rim region choose to study programmes within Newcastle Business School (NBS). On a regular basis, large and small scale learning and teaching experience - based studies have been undertaken by Northumbria with all students. Demographic information, collected in all cases, allowed data extraction for both UK and international NBS students. Studies included questionnaires, distributed to students studying English Language (ELAN) courses followed up once students started their chosen programme, which drew upon established research outlining issues relating to international student adjustment to UK study. These research findings led to recommendations on adapting practice to make teaching more inclusive, which were distributed to lecturers. Following a suitable bedding-in period, an additional study was undertaken to establish whether students concurred with the recommendations made and to assess the extent they believed these were now being practiced. This paper presents the most significant findings from the studies outlined above.

Lecture Sessions

In lectures, international students can encounter problems if the lecturer's speed of delivery is too quick and if s/he has a pronounced regional accent. Unfamiliar terminology also leads to an inability to determine what is relevant and can affect note taking in lectures (Shakya and Horsfall, 2000; Beaven et al., 1998). Although international students did illustrate they had more language difficulties once entering undergraduate (UG) programmes in comparison to ELAN courses (p<0.01), this was only reported in small proportions, For example once in NBS 30% of international students felt their teachers talked too quickly. Focus group participants observed that some lecturers obviously reduced pace of delivery. However, they believed specific advice for slowing speech was inadvisable as they would be concerned that the student majority would be *"spoken to as if they were children"*.

In light of this, the suggestion made was for lecturers to allow students to make recordings of lectures. Overall a high proportion (68%) of NBS students said that this

would be useful, international students showed slightly more interest in this being allowed to take place (p<0.05). However, 50% noted how this is rarely permitted. Indeed, some international focus group participants reported refusal when asked. One found recording so useful they had surreptitiously recorded lectures. To avoid this, further recommendation will be for lecturer preference on recording to be made explicit on student module/programme handbooks. This will be accompanied by strong recommendation for lecturers to allow recording to take place, especially as this alleviates difficulties associated with note taking in lectures, which 59% of students on ELAN courses believed were difficult. This proportion reduced to 48% once undergraduate study commenced and, upon further investigation, it became clear that what also assisted was the integrated use of the virtual learning environment (VLE) for posting material to support classroom contact. In ELAN, although handouts and set texts are regularly used, as yet little use is made of the VLE. 80% of respondents agreed that the availability of lecture notes via the VLE helped their study.

Seminar Sessions

For seminar classroom contact international students' language fluency confidence can be exacerbated by a change in familiar practice e.g. classroom interactivity. Confidence associated with language fluency potentially also has a major impact on the establishment of relationships with peers.

Iinitial investigations included the question 'I like being in a classroom with a cultural mix of students'. Table 1 illustrates the responses from the international students when studying their ELAN course, results from the same question once the UG programme was underway and the responses from the UK students.

Table 1: Responses to 'I like being in a classroom with a cultural mix of students'

%	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree
ELAN	69	20	10	2	0
NBS International	28	48	20	3	0
NBS UK	9	30	41	13	6

Although international students respond positively about this question there is a marked shift in opinion from strongly agree to agree. Notably, focus group students commented that on ELAN and NBS programmes, in some seminar sessions, the majority of students were Chinese and therefore they reverted to the use of their own language for group discussion. It was pointed out how useful it would be to have UK students in the class to redress the balance. UK students exhibited a more mixed response to the statement above. Ledwith (1997) found international students working in groups where students whose English language skills were perceived as poor were being either ignored or excluded from group processes. Shakya and Horsfall (2002) also comment that many international students have difficulties joining culturally mixed groups and are rarely assisted in doing so by staff, as many assume that all students have equal social skills. Therefore, it was felt crucial to suggest how lecturing staff might adopt practices encouraging interaction between students of different cultural backgrounds:

Table 2. Lists these recommendations and indicates how useful international and UK students felt they were.

Table 2: Percentage responses to the usefulness of recommendations on seminar practice

Statement	Extremely useful		Fairly Useful		No preference	
	UK	Int.	UK	Int.	UK	Int
Early in module seminars students are given a chance to introduce themselves to other students in the group	27	32	39	49	34	18
For group work, the lecturer carefully selects the group members.	14	28	33	54	51	19
Ground rules are set for group discussions e.g. only one student speaks at a time	14	25	48	55	39	20
Students are given a few minutes before group discussions to jot down an outline of what they might say	43	48	46	48	11	5

Although percentage responses indicate that high proportions of all students felt these recommendations were useful, apart from the final statement significant differences were

found between the preferences of the UK and international student groups. International students had a greater preference ($p<0.01$) for the careful selection of group members and the establishment of ground rules. International students also showed slightly more preference ($p<0.05$) for the chance for introductions to be made amongst seminar group members at the start of a programme.

Reported implementation was lower than hoped, for example 53% of the NBS students said group selection rarely occurred with 44% also reported that it was rare for ground rules to be set for discussions.

Peer mentoring programmes in which an international student is matched with a home student can be of value in promoting interaction (Poyrazil et al, 2002; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Ellis et al (2005) also noted that the idea of peer mentoring was praised by international students as a method of overcoming early dilemmas. Therefore, this is something worth future consideration for recommendation.

Learning Culture (Preparation)

Studies concur that international students entering the Western academic system are required to change their cultural identity with regards to ways of thinking and writing. Many international students displayed a tendency to get the most out of seminars by conducting preparatory reading beforehand. 31% said that they spent a lot of time preparing for classes significantly higher ($p<0.01$) than UK students (17%). In terms of reading and writing skills, there is a general Western academic perception that Pacific Rim students are rote learners (i.e. they simply memorise text rather than understand and critique it). As the accurate recall of texts is not required in the Western academic system many international students are required to change their reading strategies.

One question in the survey asked international students if they could read English academic texts with understanding. Whilst results made it clear the majority felt they could read texts with understanding, respondents seemed less sure in the NBS undergraduate environment than whilst they were on the ELAN course. Further questions asked whether they felt there were too much specialised language and too many unfamiliar concepts during reading. Around half of the respondents felt that they did encounter specialised language with a slightly lower percentage (41%) reporting they came across many unfamiliar concepts. This was further corroborated in focus groups where difficulties due to language and terminology used appeared to increase as level of study progressed. A number of recommendations, to

alleviate changes in learning culture were made in relation to both directed learning and classroom practice. (Appendix 1)

Although all were deemed to be useful by the majority of students (both international and UK), the most popular of the recommendations was for materials such as handouts and PowerPoint slides to be made available on the VLE stated by 99% of all students, 89% claiming this would be extremely useful. The reasoning for this became clear in focus group discussions:

"We will make a good preparation for the class if we can get the information beforehand. You can prepare some questions about each class, understand more about each session, and solve problems through asking the tutor in class"

Heaton-Shrestha et al. (2005) comment on staff concerns that posting materials early on a VLE would vie with campus-based activity i.e. attendance. At Northumbria these fears do not appear to the present as it was pleasing to note that students reported that around two thirds of their lecturers did pre-post materials on the VLE. Furthermore, students themselves stressed that the availability of VLE materials did not affect attendance.

Managing Assessment

The original Northumbria surveys addressed the issue of assignment work in a number of different ways including investigating understanding of plagiarism - an area of increasing concern for many academics.

The usual assertion made is that international students are more likely to plagiarise than their host peers but as Introna et al (2003) point out this raises an issue of potential discrimination since detection may be easier than for 'home' students. One aspect i.e. neglect of referencing, is frequently a reflection of other cultures' differing academic practices. Carroll (2003) also notes how international students may not understand what they are expected to do owing to their lack of experience in western academic writing.

Students were asked whether they understood the need to use referencing and quotation marks and the need to explain ideas in their own words. In both cases around 70% of the international group indicated that they did understand these requirements. This was also confirmed by international students taking part in focus groups, although they noted that the need for referencing was less common and that there seemed to be fewer "rules" to follow in their own countries. The students also noted that plagiarism was something which was not

particularly mentioned until entering NBS where it was then perhaps overstressed. *'It is the first thing we heard on every module!'*

Focus group participants noted how writing was very different in the UK from China and felt unsure about academic writing. This extended to the ability to summarise particularly large articles as they felt that there are a number of things they needed to understand in an article and they needed to understand it before it could be summarised. Recommendations it was felt would help students adjust to the Western style of summarising included:

- Lecturers providing examples of good work and work which could have been improved

- Lecturers providing opportunities for students to show them work in progress

Three quarters of NBS students said it would be extremely useful for lecturers to provide exemplars of previous work, as well as opportunities to show work in progress

However generally these were recommendations that around 50% of students felt rarely occurred in practice. In the focus groups, the desire for exemplars was further stressed when participants discussed how they were shocked by marks for their first assignment. Despite, in their view, excessive reading and research, they were receiving marks in the 50s accompanied by comments saying they were 'too descriptive'. They felt that illustrations of higher scoring pieces of work (past examples was inferred) would have helped to put what was required into context. Students also noted that although many lecturers asked students to email them for an appointment when needed they interpreted this as a subliminal "do not disturb" message. Students realised that a fully open door policy was not practical but did express a preference for a set of drop-by office hours to be made available. Therefore, a future suggestion is that lecturers' willingness to look at work in progress along with set office hours could be made explicit on module/assignment handbooks.

Conclusion

All recommendations for inclusive teaching and learning were corroborated positively by both UK and international students. In a number of areas it is clear that staff practice is assisting international students to adjust to UK study. However, there is still room for improvement particularly in regard to seminar practice and the management of assessment as outlined above. Inevitably, there are additional suggestions which could be made to staff to further enhance practice in order to reach the primary objective of ensuring teaching and learning practice is fully inclusive for all students entering higher education.

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Appendix 1

Table 1: NBS student response to Inclusive Teaching and Learning Recommendations (%)

Statement	Extremely useful	Fairly Useful	No preference
Lectures			
An overview of each lecture at the beginning is provided	50	41	9
In lectures there are obvious pauses for reflection or catch up	45	45	10
Lecturers use a variety of material in their lectures e.g. not just bullet points	52	37	12
Lecturers use microphones in large lectures	65	21	15
Audio or MP3 recordings of lectures could be permitted	41	37	32
In lectures any key or unfamiliar concepts are explained	73	26	1
In lectures no assumptions are made about background knowledge	38	48	15
In lectures global or international examples are used to illustrate topics or concepts	62	30	9
In lectures students are encouraged to ask questions	42	45	13
Seminars			
Early in module seminars students are given a chance to introduce themselves to other students in the group	30	44	25
For group work, the lecturer carefully selects the group members.	19	42	39
Ground rules are set for group discussions e.g. only one student speaks at a time	19	48	39
Students are given a few minutes before group discussions to jot down an outline of what they might say	43	47	10
Preparation			
Reading lists are distributed early	79	17	3
Reading lists identify which materials are essential or core and which are just recommendations.	80	19	2
Lecturers provide a teaching & learning plan at the start of each module with precise guides for directed learning and seminar preparation	87	13	1

Statement	Extremely useful	Fairly Useful	No preference
Materials such as handouts and PowerPoint slides are made available on Blackboard a few days before lectures.	89	10	1
Lecturers make the use of email or VLE to repeat any announcements made in teaching sessions	80	18	2
Glossaries of abbreviations & jargon within subjects are provided by lecturers	57	31	12
Assessment			
There is an element of individualisation to assignments	56	34	10
For large assignments, lecturers break the work up in to tasks each with its own deadline	59	29	12
Lecturers expand on assignment tasks, e.g. explaining the purpose, what the title is really saying etc	78	19	3
Lecturers give clear instruction on the format and structure of reports and essays	82	16	2
Lecturers give guidance on how to judge the authority of information sources, e.g. web pages	61	36	4
Students are given examples of texts offering alternative viewpoints and explanations	64	34	2
Lecturers provide examples of good work and work which could have been improved	75	22	3
Marking criteria are fully explained	76	23	2
Lecturers provide opportunities for students to show them work in progress	75	24	2

Table 2: NBS student response to Reported Practice of Inclusive Teaching and Learning Recommendations (%)

Statement	Majority of lecturers do	Some lecturers do	Rarely occurs
Lectures			
An overview of each lecture at the beginning is provided	51	43	6
In lectures there are obvious pauses for reflection or catch up	12	51	36
Lecturers use a variety of material in their lectures e.g. not just bullet points	19	54	27
Lecturers use microphones in large lectures	38	38	14
Audio or MP3 recordings of lectures could be permitted	6	14	47
In lectures any key or unfamiliar concepts are explained	29	59	10
In lectures no assumptions are made about background knowledge	16	50	29
In lectures global or international examples are used to illustrate topics or concepts	38	47	12
In lectures students are encouraged to ask questions	26	44	29
Seminars			
Early in module seminars students are given a chance to introduce themselves to other students in the group	23	37	37
For group work, the lecturer carefully selects the group members.	7	37	53
Ground rules are set for group discussions e.g. only one student speaks at a time	16	34	44
Students are given a few minutes before group discussions to jot down an outline of what they might say	29	45	22
Preparation			
Reading lists are distributed early	57	32	10
Reading lists identify which materials are essential or core and which are just recommendations.	53	41	6
Lecturers provide a teaching & learning plan at the start of each module with precise guides for directed learning and seminar preparation	74	25	1

Statement	Majority of lecturers do	Some lecturers do	Rarely occurs
Materials such as handouts and PowerPoint slides are made available on Blackboard a few days before lectures.	65	29	6
Lecturers make the use of email or VLE to repeat any announcements made in teaching sessions	42	44	13
Glossaries of abbreviations & jargon within subjects are provided by lecturers	9	35	49
Assessment			
There is an element of individualisation to assignments	36	51	11
For large assignments, lecturers break the work up in to tasks each with its own deadline	18	33	42
Lecturers expand on assignment tasks, e.g. explaining the purpose, what the title is really saying etc	22	46	19
Lecturers give clear instruction on the format and structure of reports and essays	26	49	24
Lecturers give guidance on how to judge the authority of information sources, e.g. web pages	15	49	34
Students are given examples of texts offering alternative viewpoints and explanations	16	49	34
Lecturers provide examples of good work and work which could have been improved	12	29	56
Marking criteria are fully explained	26	50	21
Lecturers provide opportunities for students to show them work in progress	15	38	46