

Cash cows or pedagogic partners? Mapping pedagogic practices for and with international students

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Abstract

Given the context of rapidly expanding international student recruitment and attention on internationalisation of the curriculum, the question 'how do we teach international students?' has become more urgent, yet the literature on pedagogic practices remains limited. This paper reports on the second part of a research project exploring this question, drawing on 45 interviews with teaching staff across the UK in multiple disciplines, institutions, and career stages. Staff were broadly positive about international students, valuing their contributions in the classroom, and described an interactive, student-centred approach with commonalities across disciplines and institutions. Teachers used technology, limited lecture time, and tried to create positive relationships with students to enable multiple forms of participation. Challenging institutional and sector conditions, along with COVID-19, limited possibilities for innovation and reflection. Yet teachers are committed to developing practices to facilitate inclusive classrooms.

Introduction

As the second most popular destination country for international students, the United Kingdom (UK) hosted over 550,000 international students in 2019/20 (HESA 2021), approximately 22% of the total higher education (HE) student population, contributing £25.8 billion annually to the UK economy (Universities UK 2018). The International Education Strategy (DfE, 2019) aims to further increase numbers of international students to 600,000 by 2030, a commitment renewed in the 2021 update (DfE, 2021). As such, there is an increasingly important need for critical research on pedagogies and practices that support international students into epistemic equality in UK HE (Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2015). While policy discourses emphasise that international students offer 'a window on the world', enhancing HE quality by facilitating internationalisation (Lomer 2017), existing

literature tends to emphasise the perceived challenges of teaching international students.

This deficit narrative is often rooted in stereotypes around East Asian students but applies by extension to most non-EU students. It is premised on assumptions that international students should assimilate to traditional British pedagogic practices (Ploner 2018), which fails to recognise them as complex knowledge agents and partners in pedagogy (Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2015). This perpetuates the positioning of UK HE as intrinsically of more value and higher quality than global alternatives. Such narratives shape learning relationships, with many international students perceiving discriminatory language and bias from their classmates (Héliot, Mittelmeier and Rienties 2020) and lecturers (Rhoden 2019).

Yet there is limited critical research into the inclusive, emancipatory practices which challenge curriculum and pedagogic norms (e.g., Turner 2015; Lomer and Anthony-Okeke 2019). Thus, this project has mapped current pedagogic practices and understandings amongst academic staff in different institutions and fields, building an overview of how we are teaching international students and contributing to theoretical understandings of internationalisation in practice.

Research methods

After a systematic literature review (Lomer and Mittelmeier in press), we conducted 45 semi-structured interviews with academic staff in current teaching roles at UK institutions. This included universities across the sector and country, targeting a varied profile of staff across disciplines, career level, gender, and status as home or international members of staff (as self-identified by participants). Interviews used a preliminary set of guided questions based on our research questions and aims but were flexibly adapted during the interview. Questions focused on conceptualisations of international students and pedagogies adopted, as well as the interviewee's professional and personal background. All interviews were conducted online via Zoom (due to COVID-19). Anonymous recordings were automatically transcribed, manually checked, and coded into NVivo using qualitative template analysis (a form of thematic analysis that emphasises a structured coding approach, which is developed and refined through iterative phases of analysis - see Brooks et al. 2015). We followed this up with a workshop with participants to confirm initial interpretations and fill in any gaps revealed in the analysis.

Findings

Attitudes to & representations of international students

Internationalisation and international students' presence were consistently reflected by our participants as an existing status quo in UK HE. For many lecturers, development of teaching practice was inextricably tied to working with international students.

It struck me that I've never taught in a non-internationalised classroom... that's my normal classroom. (Participant 6, Social sciences, Russell Group)

Most lecturers saw international students as beneficial to the learning of home students, making for 'intellectually really rich discussion' (Participant 30, Education and teaching, Russell Group), but rarely the reverse, with limited recognition of whether students want to be held in this regard.

Several participants positioned themselves in contrast to a more problematic culture. Participant 1 described it as 'the old mindset' (Business and management, Unaffiliated post-1992) of an 'unkind' deficit approach. On committee work, Participant 22 shared, 'a member of staff said, well, we work with international students because we have to. And I just couldn't get over that' (Language and area studies, Post-1992).

Negative attitudes focused on Chinese students as frequently the largest nationality group: 'So generally, a number of staff see Chinese students as I guess, sometimes poor quality students' (Participant 34, Business and management, Russell Group). This deficit narrative was particularly expressed around skills gaps, with international students' learning often described as 'really challenging for them' (Participant 3, Business and management, Russell Group).

Participants frequently slipped into deficit framing, often with compassion, but some participants explicitly challenged this narrative. This inconsistency indicates what we might characterise as a broad commitment to inclusivity and the pedagogic contributions of international students, undermined by residual and hard-to-shift deficit narratives of nationality groups.

Teaching beliefs & practices

Participants reflected on international students' presence in relation to inclusive practices, often describing these as simply part of 'good teaching' (Participant 25 Creative arts and design, GuildHE) which benefited wider student cohorts: 'I think what's good for an international cohort is good for everyone.' (Participant 19, Language and area studies, Million+).

We anticipated great variety in pedagogy, but the level of consensus was remarkable. The majority of participants aimed to lecture in short chunks (17/45, 38%); maximise opportunities for active learning (31/45, 69%); use technology for engagement (23/45, 51%); facilitate learning from diversity (28/45, 62%); and foster relationships for social learning (27/45, 60%). Further details are available in the full report (Lomer, Mittelmeier and Carmichael-Murphy, 2021).

As Participant 22 described, 'I break it [the content] down into **small lecture chunks**, maybe 10 or 15 minutes of me going through something' (Language and area studies, Unaffiliated Post-1992). This was done to prioritise interactive learning opportunities, both in face-to-face teaching and online teaching.

Across disciplines, participants explicitly described using **interactive pedagogies**, guided by some form of active learning: 'I'm actually trying to get them to work together to share with one another and do something a little bit different' (Participant 1, Business and management, Unaffiliated post-1992). This integration of content and activity/interactivity corresponds to literature emphasising student-centred, participatory and dialogic approaches.

Participants suggested that student-centred, interactive approaches could be facilitated by **technology**, as participating in verbal discussions was not the only, or indeed best, way to conceptualise engagement: 'You have to create structures by which students will talk to each other, and actually engage with stuff and do the work and become involved' (Participant 17, Social Sciences, Unaffiliated pre-1992).

Building relationships with international students was seen as key. Many participants highlighted 'patience and empathy', 'understanding', and the importance of 'building rapport' as key attributes of a good teacher. Participants aspired to create a positive classroom environment, within which students could feel 'safe' and 'comfortable' to engage in discussions and contribute to collaborative tasks: 'Making them feel comfortable in the classroom, setting that safe culture of learning' (Participant 16, Education and teaching, Russell Group).

Many participants outlined specific strategies for encouraging **learning from diversity**. One popular strategy was deliberately creating intercultural or mixed nationality groups, a well-established methodology: 'I would try and you know, get different people from different countries working together. So they get a different type of experience as well'. (Participant 3, Business and management, Russell Group). This was primarily for low-stakes activities rather than assessed group work, but not all participants would 'force' students into such dynamics.

Wider HE context

The wider HE landscape structures and limits pedagogic possibilities. Neoliberal marketisation, managerialism, and financial austerity create challenging conditions for staff. With entry requirements beyond the control of teaching staff and departments, pressures to increase student numbers, financial restrictions, limited engagement from senior leadership, and increasing workload, one participant suggested that their job of teaching to a large international PGT cohort is 'unethical' (Participant 10, Creative arts and design, Russell Group).

Participants appeared fatigued: 'the current UK higher education position, with years of conservative austerity, is that we're exhausted and there's no resources' (Participant 38, Social sciences, Russell Group). Still, participants aspired to 'know' their students, understand them as individuals, learn names, and build on unique knowledges. Yet, in large cohorts and classrooms of 80+ students, with limited staff time, this was rarely achievable. Perceived levels of support departmentally and institutionally for pedagogic innovations varied widely.

Impacts of COVID-19

Although beyond the original scope of this research, COVID-19 pandemic restrictions have clearly impacted practices. Participants were mainly concerned about maintaining interactive learning: 'I prefer to be in the lecture theatre, for me, teaching online is very difficult. How to build that interaction online?' (Participant 8, Engineering and technology, Unaffiliated pre-1992). However, Participant 7 has made it work:

With our big first-year group [...] they have to have in their background, something from their team so that I can at least identify which of the 14 teams they're in. And then I can usually work out who they are.
(Language and area studies, Russell Group)

Participants reflected on how the pandemic has 'forced' innovative teaching practices, and these changes as long-lasting: 'A lot of people are like taking early retirement, partially because of COVID, because they're offering it but like, because they just don't, they don't want to teach online' (Participant 23, Education and teaching, Russell Group).

Conclusion

Altogether, our findings help illustrate current attitudes and practices across the sector in developing pedagogies with international students. We found that lecturers were overall reflective of international students' needs and most had made changes to their teaching practices with an eye towards inclusion and support. For many lecturers, this was reflected as 'simply good teaching'. However, this often lacked critical engagement with the epistemic challenges of globalisation and, at times, stopped short of transformative teaching that questioned the core assumptions and values underpinning pedagogies in the UK. This was apparent through a persistent deficit narrative and 'othering' of international students, coupled with frequent assumptions about their 'assimilation'. Innovations in pedagogies of internationalisation, and a general lack of incentive to invest in pedagogy, are hampered by disparate literature, making it difficult to identify clear guidance for action. For this field to become established, different ways of conducting research, publishing pedagogic literature, and teaching both creatively and collaboratively are needed. We contribute to the beginnings of this movement by establishing an open-access resource pack through AdvanceHE (available summer 2021) and [a website of interdisciplinary case studies](#) of teaching practices. We welcome further contributions with the aim of developing this field within and beyond our context in the UK.

Related research from this project was presented in a CGHE Global Webinar 158 – 'Mapping pedagogic practices for and with international students' on Thursday 15 October 2020.

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