International Students and Inclusion: A personal perspective

Abstract

In this age of internationalisation and globalisation, attracting international students into higher education in the United Kingdom becomes reliant on factors that are multifaceted. Inclusion, as the creation of equal opportunities and removal of barriers to learning, is one such crucial factor. Whilst international students are encouraged to acculturate, the higher education environment needs to create academic fields where Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy theories are deployed to ensure better learning experiences and success for these learners. An overview of research clarifies these complex issues and highlights the perceptions of international students. Furthermore, it emphasises how dichotomies, such as ‘us’ and ‘them’ are still ingrained in higher education today. Viewing international students as ‘cash cows’ is not a secret anymore, Botas suggests, as these students are becoming aware of how they are perceived in higher education. Understanding cultural differences and how they affect the learning of non-indigenous students is key in these matters, as is shown in Manikutty, Anuradha and Hansen. Exploring Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Entwistle's learning styles sheds considerable light on our understanding of how these students learn, and opens doors for further research. The inclusion of international students, as also advocated by the Quality Assurance Agency, is vital if higher education barometers, such as NSS and IBS, are to show positive results.

Keywords

internationalisation, inclusivity, learning styles

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Introduction

Both Freire, with his notion of the true word (Freire, 1970, p.68), and Bakhtin, in his concept of utterances (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 91), emphasise the dialogic nature of genuine communication. But in my experience as a naturalised British citizen whose first language is not English, there are obstacles to authentic dialogue that are beyond the individual’s control. The cultural shock of being sometimes prompted with the appropriate word to say, the right pronunciation of a word, or even the neglect of a solution I offer to a problem, because the thinking process behind my ideas was not comprehended, has dented my confidence, albeit in many cases this was not the intention of the other person. On reflection, I realise now that cultural differences interfere hugely in our day-to-day verbal or non-verbal communication. I have also come to the conclusion that feeling pained or humiliated is reactionary. I realise that I have, firstly, to make the other person aware of my feelings, and secondly, to work on my personal education in such matters in order to transcend these realities. There is no doubt that I consciously embarked upon a process of acculturation.

During my observations of some of the students on the Education courses I teach, who are either fully international or of a similar situation to mine, I also noticed that these students’ academic achievement is often hindered by similar cultural factors. Lack of confidence, misunderstanding, misinterpreting or being misunderstood, and social introversion were examples of the manifestation of these factors. In many cases they posed obstacles to the students’ personal and academic fulfilment in their educational reality. Furthermore, there may be a considerable knock-on effect on these students’ practice if in placements outside university. Hence one question comes to mind: whose responsibility is it to help these students overcome their cultural shock and reach a stage of acculturation (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2003, pp. 43-46) without losing their identity?

Hockings (2010) states that inclusion as the creation of equal opportunities and the removal of barriers for all learners, is an obligation on staff. However, in order to enhance the learning of foreign students we need to consider the concept of inclusion even more seriously than we do with home students, as the inclusion issues are more complex and multifaceted. The ideas that underlie my perceptions in this paper relate to both the Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy schools of thought. I will expand on my understanding of both in view of the cultural issues that higher education is experiencing in this age of globalisation, which encourage the abolition of such dichotomies as ‘us’ and ‘them’. I will also explore research on cultural issues, in particular that of Manikutty, Anuradha, and Hansen (2007), which engages with the probable effect culture can have on students’ learning styles in higher education.

Theoretical Considerations

Critical Thinking, according to Siegel (1998), challenges a person to evaluate the assumptions behind his/her day-to-day thoughts and actions; thus a person realises where and when to adapt to changes or adopt them, increasing the possibilities for freedom and self-sufficiency. Furthermore, critical thinking requires a person to understand ‘the importance and evidential force of reasons for [his/her] beliefs and actions’ (Cuypers, 2004, p.76). However, although it is worthwhile to understand the motivation behind these daily assumptions, it is another endeavour altogether to know how to act upon them. Moreover, in the present context, it is essential to clarify that critical thinking in education in British universities is a traditional historical ‘Western’ concept that emerged with the emergence of the positivist empirical philosophies of the nineteenth century. This in effect requires us to account for alternative ways of thinking in other cultures (HEA, 2012) and to initiate dialogue, where the alternative voice of the minorities is heard (Burbules and Berk, 1999). But this is not a straightforward process, as developing critical thinking skills is demanding of all students regardless of ethnicity (Carroll and Ryan 2005; Brown and Joughlin 2007 cited in Bartoli, 2011). To achieve this, critical thinking needs to be promoted frequently in the classroom for students of all backgrounds to engage with, and not only when completing summative assessments. And even though critical thinking ‘may manifest itself in different ways’ and cultures (HEA, 2012), its characteristics of presenting reasoned arguments and putting forward world views with evidence are beneficial to education (Seigel, 1998; HEA, 2012). To that effect, I feel that the utilisation of critical thinking creates a paradox, being both an aid and an obstacle to learning and inclusion at the same time. Modelling it is essential to minimise the negative connotation tagged to its utilisation, and to decrease the impact of cultural shock.
Critical Pedagogy on the other hand has often been linked with the creation of a ‘more diverse and culturally inclusive learning environment within the formal university and college context’ (Hovey, 2004, p. 246), where the student is at the centre of the learning process. Consequently, creativity rather than traditional practice is promoted (Burbules and Berk, 1999). Critical Pedagogy looks outside the person into systems and beliefs that affect him/her; it emphasises the role education plays in consolidating or transforming these systems. Richard Shaull, in the foreword to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, supports Freire’s views on education, that no education is neutral; it either ‘brings about conformity to it, or it becomes “the practice of Freedom” the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality’ (1970 p. 16; also cited in Pratt-Adams, Maguire and Burn, 2010, p. 101). The role of education, to Freire, is to question and unsettle, if necessary, the status quo, and to transform inequitable, undemocratic or oppressive practices. To achieve this, education must move away from traditional pedagogical practice, the banking concept of education (*ibid*, pp. 54, 61-67), towards a problem-posing and solving system, where the individual exercises critical thinking on what is being learned, evaluates, adapts and relearns if necessary. This is Freirean *praxis*, where the learner is aware and responsible, critically reflects on the existing reality and acts on transforming it towards freedom of thought and practice. The consequences are not only liberation and acquisition of choices, but also empowerment in learning, thus developing autonomous, critical thinkers. This is closely related to the concept of Critical Thinking that Seigel advocates, but goes further in that it creates an environment where the learner can attain responsibility for one’s self through education.

Both approaches encourage the mobility of the thought process in contrast to traditional methods, which may encourage passivity. If education nurtures an individual who is willing to question the accuracy and relevance of the authoritative utterance, to ask for answers, to analyse and offer value judgments, then we are able to use both schools of thought to the advantage of the student. An international student or a student who is not from a Western background may find it difficult to apply this criticality at university; some cultures show deference to the teacher, as they regard him/her as wiser and more learned (Poulson and Wallace, 2004, pp. 3-4); as such the enactment of this critical thinking approach seems to some students exclusive, due to cultural conflicts. It is then up to us to find ways to prepare these students for effective learning in higher education, while nurturing their cultural diversity: ‘we need to be mindful of the individual rights and needs of the diversity of students in higher education today’ (Hockings, 2010, p. 2). Hockings rightly advocates *Universal Design* in education that will promote this diversity and act as a preventative measure, where lessons are designed to cater for all students rather than the deployment of methods that are only interventionist (2010, p. 4). The existing diversity in higher education settings shows us that not all international students are the same. Therefore what is the effect of cultural conditioning on their perceptions? Hofstede (1991, pp. 4-6) asserts that our cultures condition our minds and are responsible for distinguishing members of one group from another. But this is not the only outcome of belonging to a particular culture; from my personal experience I discovered, to my detriment sometimes, that when I came to England I brought with me many cultural characteristics, which, as mentioned before, led to instances of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. As Poulson and Wallace state, ‘there is not one-to-one correspondence between the social world out there and people’s interpretation of it in their minds’ (2004, p. 10); hence cultural background is a factor that we ought to consider seriously when we plan to invite international students into our midst. There is a need for mutual respect and reciprocal acceptance between our culture and the cultures of those who choose to come to us to study. The least we can do is welcome them and include them, thus aiding acculturation, increasing their opportunities of success and ensuring that the intercultural exchanges they experience empower them rather than diminish their confidence (Freire, 1970).

**Research Overview**

There has been significant research which suggests that international students perform less well than indigenous students. De Vita (2005), for example, suggests that this *deficit model*, which is influenced by various factors including international students’ difficulty with the English language, and cultural adaptation, ‘has recently shifted onto academic institutions the responsibility to cater for the different needs of an increasingly diverse student population, to promote equality of opportunity, to target support, and hence level the playing field’ (*ibid*, p.1). Too many international students tend to be negatively described as rote learners, plagiarists, unable to think critically, and demanding (De Vita, 2005). The levelling of the playing field De Vita speaks of, and a more positive stance towards international students...
recently, coincides with the concept of the internationalisation of higher education (Hovey; 2004; Montgomery and McDowell, 2010), ‘where an international environment to which international students contribute significantly is seen as a considerable benefit in terms of enabling the university to operate more successfully in a globalised environment’ (Montgomery and McDowell, 2010, p. 1). It also coincides with the financial cuts governments are imposing on higher education institutions. Enrolling international students has become a very important contributor to the general finances of universities.

Dr Paulo Botas, in a polemical article in the online *University World News*, warns that ‘the marketisation of higher education has increased its pace, and new competitors such as China, Saudi Arabia, India and Brazil are entering a global marketplace that used to be monopolised by Anglo-Saxon and American universities’ (2012, p. [1]). Furthermore, this imperialist split of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (otherisation) by some academics, who only care for their research and ‘label international students as incapable, dependent, submissive, passive and intellectually deficient, should stop if we want more international students to come here’ (*ibid*; Arkoudis and Tran, 2010, p. 170). Seeing these students ‘who sound different, look different, behave differently or hold beliefs different to us’ (*ibid*) as ‘cash cows’ is dangerous, because they are changing and are aware of their rights. ‘21st century international students will become a terrifying prospect for higher education and academics’ (*ibid*), he says. Therefore, for ‘HE institutions to attract more international students they need to address the behaviour and attitudes of their academics and to make these students more accepted and supported’ (*ibid*). To my mind, if we were to analyse such academics’ beliefs and behaviour according to Freirean concepts of learning, they become oppressive educators, rendering the international students oppressed, incapable of progress academically and intellectually (Freire, 1970). The ramifications of this, I believe, would clearly affect the happiness and success of these students, and may change their aspirations of coming to study in our universities. A loss of cultural and intellectual richness and diversity we can ill afford.

Manikutty, Anuradha, and Hansen (2007) conducted a study on whether students’ culture has an impact on their learning styles at university, fusing Entwistle’s approaches to learning with Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. Entwistle identifies three major students approaches to learning: deep, surface apathetic, and strategic (Entwistle, 2000; Entwistle, Tait and McCune, 2000 cited in Manikutty, Anuradha and Hansen, 2007). However, the quality of learning, he asserts, is also influenced by the interaction between the students and the teaching-learning environment. Students’ thought processes, studying rituals, and their past experiences of teaching in addition to their present teaching-learning environment, determine the pace and progress of learning (Entwistle, 2000, pp. 5-7). It is the adoption of the teacher-focused and content-oriented, or on the other hand the student-focused and learning-oriented practice, that has a major influence on their transformation of knowledge, even beyond academic settings. These findings do not deviate from the theories to which I alluded at the beginning of this paper; the student and the education system s/he is in need to work harmoniously for transformation to happen (Freire, 1970).

Hofstede, on the other hand, through studying the national value systems of IBM employees from over fifty countries, identified five dimensions of culture. ‘A dimension is an aspect of a culture that can be measured relative to other cultures’ (Hofstede, 1991, p. 14), and shows differences or similarities between them. He named these dimensions as: power distance, collectivism versus individualism, femininity versus masculinity, uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation versus short-term orientation. Due to the limitations of this paper, I will not be able to expand on these dimensions in detail, but it is important to emphasise that each of these was studied by Hofstede within various fields including that of education (Hofstede, 1991). Therefore it is reasonable for Manikutty, Anuradha, and Hansen, (2007) to argue that ‘all the five dimensions have implications for approaches to learning in so far as cultural patterns in the society are reflected in the cultural patterns of the learning environment’ (Manikutty, Anuradha, and Hansen, 2007 p. 73). In this sense the impact of culture cannot and must not be ignored, because, as Hofstede explains, ‘even the minds of the researchers studying it are programmed according to their own particular cultural framework’ (Hofstede, 1991, p. 15). I believe this can be equally said of teachers and students in a higher education learning environment.

Manikutty, Anuradha, and Hansen (2007, pp. 80-83) related approaches to learning to the cultural backgrounds of learners. They identify Hofstede’s concepts of power distance and individualism / collectivism as crucial factors in determining learning styles; this links directly to the main purpose of this paper, which is to advocate the creation of equal opportunities for international students, and the removal of barriers to their learning and success. To me, these goals are essential, because they not only reflect...
day-to-day interactions within communities, including those in higher education, but also offer some explanation of the perception of international students by some lecturers, and likewise of the students’ perception of authority figures in an educational setting. For example, Chinese and Indian students have a collectivist approach; opposing, questioning and debating with a teacher means disrespect (Hofstede, 1991, p. 40; Manikutty, Anuradha, and Hansen, 2007, p. 79; Huang, 2005, p. 37). In comparison, the western individualist approach, where the self is the focus, promotes independence, criticality and questioning, thus preparing most students to argue their points openly (Poulson and Wallace, 2004).

Conclusion
The independent Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) reinforces the challenges that higher education is facing. The international students’ voice in the National Student Survey (NSS) and International Student Barometer (ISB) surveys reflects less ‘satisfaction in a number of areas, including integration on campus, work opportunities and career advice, and cost and financial support’ (QAA, 2011, p. 2). And in its 2012 guidance, the QAA reiterates the importance of inclusion: ‘institutions should seek to provide an inclusive environment where the needs of international students are considered and met alongside those of other students in an integrated and embedded way’ (p. 5). The NSS and ISB surveys are therefore of great importance for the achievement of high standards of teaching and learning in higher education, and for the adoption of an inclusive approach to all students irrespective of their nationality. If positive outcomes of these surveys underpin the success of higher education, then it is reasonable for universities to endeavour to do well in them. Positive reputation is in itself a universal advertisement for good practice and an effective persuasive mechanism for more international students to want to come to the UK. But if our universities are to court international students, it is imperative that inclusive approaches to all strata of students must be open and honest. Moreover international students ‘historicity as their starting point’ (Freire, 1970, p. 65) must not be neglected, diminished or demeaned. Botas’ ‘cash cows’ model needs to be readdressed or international students will be seen solely as ‘objects of assistance’ (Freire, 1970, p. 64), inanimate non-historical beings.

Anglia Ruskin University advocates critical pedagogical teaching that develops students’ critical thinking and underpins its inclusive approach. Great effort is made to bring this to fruition through engendering opportunities for international students to succeed both in terms of academic achievement and in terms of acculturation. But with the rise in fees and the current government’s tightening of immigration rules, international students will need to know that their learning journey here will fulfill their aspirations in totality, just as home students do. This surely includes enhanced global employability on completion of their studies. The difficulties some international students face in obtaining employment here after their studies, and their worries about the ‘tier’ that classifies them (UKCISA, 2012), are just some of their concerns. The conflicts and contradictions between aspirations and reality cannot and must not be overlooked.

Some research has been focused on how to help international students find their position in British culture (for example Bartoli, 2011; Sovic and Blythman, 2006; Huang, 2005), but more localised research is needed in these times, when globalisation and internationalisation are at the centre of so much academic dialogue.

References


