

Working with International Students: a Guide for Staff in Engineering

an **Engineering Subject Centre** guide by
Kay Bond and Rachel Scudamore

The
Higher
Education
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Author biographies

Dr Rachel Scudamore is an educational developer, with a background in the biological sciences. As Course Director for the University of Nottingham's Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education, she led the adaptation of the PGCHE for the University's campus in Malaysia, and has taught the international academic staff both on the Malaysia campus and via videoconferencing from England. A recent online publication *Learning from Internationalisation* explores the professional development of staff at the University in relation to the internationalisation of higher education. Rachel holds the post of Director of PESL (Promoting Enhanced Student Learning initiative) at the University of Nottingham, and is also a freelance educational consultant.

Dr Kay Bond is an engineering design lecturer, with 15 years teaching experience at the University of Nottingham and a post 1992 university, both of which have significant numbers of international students. More recently, Kay has developed the 2+2 engineering courses for delivery at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China campus; these courses are in their second year and the first cohort is due to arrive in Nottingham in September 2010. The post of Engineering Curriculum Development Manager allows Kay to explore opportunities for the faculty both at home and overseas in terms of improving existing courses and developing new ones.

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Working with International Students: a Guide for Staff in Engineering

Overview

This guide is for those who work with international students on mainstream undergraduate and taught postgraduate engineering courses. It will be useful to those who want to:

- learn about cultural diversity in approaches to learning;
- find out how colleagues address commonly experienced situations;
- revisit their own assumptions and teaching practices.

The approach this guide takes to internationalisation in Higher Education values the diversity that international students bring and seeks to promote teaching where all students can participate and learn effectively.

This guide does not attempt to solve “problem behaviours” or to offer ways to assimilate international students into a UK way of thinking. Both aims would reflect a deficit model which unfairly places the student “at fault” and fails to respect alternative perspectives.

At the same time, it does address commonly experienced frustrations and situations where cultural difference can give rise to misunderstandings. In a range of teaching contexts, there are usually small steps

that can be taken to promote intercultural understanding and effective learning.

In the guide you will find:

- a consideration of the relationship between culture and learning;
- examples of strategies that academics have found successful in teaching a diverse range of students;
- suggestions for further reading.

The guide is written in conjunction with the “Teaching International Students Project” (TIS), a joint initiative of the Higher Education Academy and the United Kingdom Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) with funding from the Prime Minister’s Initiative 2 (PMI2). The project focuses on the ways that lecturers and other teaching staff can maintain and improve the quality of teaching and learning for international students.

The TIS website can be accessed at:

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/internationalstudents>

The website is for teachers in higher education looking for ideas and resources for teaching international students. By ‘teachers’ it is meant all those engaged in teaching (lecturers, tutors etc.); by ‘international students’ it is meant students who have travelled to another country for tertiary study (now almost one in five of the UK university student population).

Contact the Teaching International Students project team at: internationalstudents@heacademy.ac.uk

International students and difference

The term “international students” is usually used (in relation to fee-paying status) to describe those whose home country is outside the EU. It might also be used more informally to describe any non-UK students.

By labelling a collection of students as one group, however, the term itself foregrounds the idea of difference and hides the level of diversity between students in the “international” group. In the context of widening participation amongst UK students, it also encourages an inappropriate view that UK students are homogeneous, and different from “international students”.

The reality is, of course, more complex. Within the increasing numbers of students on UK engineering courses, we should expect and plan for an increase in the range of previous learning experiences, and diversity of approaches to, and understanding of, engineering as a discipline.

If we accept that there is diversity within student groups as well as between them, and commonalities between all students, then the practical approaches here can be seen to be of benefit to all students and not just international students.

Diversity in approaching “learning”

How students, both home and international, approach the task of learning will, in part, depend on what they perceive learning to mean.

Previous experience might lead to understanding learning as some or all of the following:

- the acquisition of facts;
- the application of procedures to a range of situations;

- a development of current understanding;
- grasping new concepts that describe the world;
- developing the skills of a professional practitioner;
- a change in outlook.

Similarly, students arrive at university for many reasons, including:

- to get a good degree that will help them choose from a range of occupations;
- to learn another language and culture;
- to study a discipline that they are interested in learning about;
- because their parents expect them to be university educated;
- as a part of growing up.

All new students have been successful in their education to date, and have met the entrance criteria for the course of study on which they are embarking. The transition into a UK HE context will, however, be challenging and a student's previous experience of learning and their motivation for studying will affect their expectations of a university education and the role of the student and the lecturer within it.

How expectations might vary, and the implications for helping students learn is addressed in the rest of this guide.

Culture and learning

Researchers in the social sciences have studied culture in attempts to understand human societies and behavioural norms. Current approaches view culture as flexible and dynamic rather than rigidly determining an individual's views or behaviour. Any one learner will be

affected by culture from a range of contexts including previous educational experience, age, gender, social status and nationality. Some descriptions of culture are highlighted here as a way of exploring how attitudes to knowledge and learning may vary.

Further resources from the TIS project:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/internationalisation/ISL_Intercultural_Competencies

Collectivism and individualism

Groups have been described as collective when the primary concern is the benefit of an individual's actions to the whole group. The maintenance of social relationships and harmony within the group takes priority. The contrasting individualist end of the scale is concerned with autonomy, independence, and individual achievement.

An understanding of the role of a learning group will affect a perception of appropriate behaviour within it. In education, the distinction between collaboration in learning (often encouraged in the UK) and collusion in assessment (often punished in the UK) can be unclear, particularly when students work in groups towards producing an individually assessed report.

Critical thinking

A common view is that critical thinking is of central importance to western education whereas rote learning of core theories and dominant works takes a central place in Asian, particularly Chinese education systems. This is, however, increasingly questioned as a false characterisation. It is perhaps more useful to see critical thinking, with an outcome of a justified novel position,

as a discipline-specific way of expressing ideas and communicating.

When it comes to assessment, all students are new to HE and to the idea of critical thinking, and all can demonstrate apparent plagiarism and/or inappropriate referencing in their work as part of learning the rules of academic communication and how to apply them.

Further resources from the TIS project:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/internationalisation/ISL_Academic_Writing

Hierarchy and power

There is variation in the extent to which people within a group are unequal, and also whether the inequalities are seen as normal or appropriate. Inequalities might be based on length of membership of the group, skills, experience, social class, age, gender, etc.

If the hierarchy and power relationships between lecturers and students are perceived differently by the student and the lecturer, it could cause awkwardness and discomfort in teaching situations, particularly in small group settings.

Some of my international students expect a more formal relationship and I'm far more likely to be addressed as 'Professor' or 'Doctor' by those students, particularly by email where 'esteemed professor' is the preferred mode of address for some! One of my international third year tutees seems to have compromised by calling me 'Dr. Mike'.

Mike Clifford, University of Nottingham

Low- and high-context communication

Communication can be low-context or high-context in the extent to which we make use of implicit, or shared, understandings. In a low context culture, perhaps a more individualist culture, there is an emphasis on being explicit and giving great detail in messages. A high context culture, by comparison, places greater emphasis on the relationship between individuals and the non-verbal communication that accompanies that.

The result can be a misunderstanding about the purpose of communication, with a low context culture focussing on information and accuracy, often providing great amounts of written material (e.g. in comprehensive handbooks), whilst a high context culture focuses on maintaining group relationships (e.g. by being personally available).

This might result in a student agreeing to undertake a task, even though they are unable to, for whatever reason, because it is most important to not offend the member of staff by refusing.

For procedural matters, a student may prefer to receive, and may seek, personal assurance rather than rely on printed versions of official regulations.

Politeness and “face”

All cultures show respect for each others' concerns for their public image to be approved of, understood, and appreciated (their positive face) and for them to be free from imposition or inappropriate demands (their negative face). Politeness then consists of behaving in such a way to avoid “face”-threatening actions. What may differ between cultures is which aspect of “face” is more emphasised and what face-saving strategies are used in communication.

In intercultural conversations, an unexpected emphasis on negative politeness strategies (being indirect, suggesting rather than telling, impersonalising a discussion) might seem overly vague, weak, or deferential; an absence of such strategies where expected might seem aggressive, demanding and rude. Similarly, an unexpected emphasis on positive politeness strategies (showing attention, actively agreeing, promising action) might seem uncritical or even sycophantic; an absence of such strategies where expected might make someone seem uninterested and unenthusiastic. Being aware of such strategies may help in interpreting students' behaviour and in choosing how to communicate effectively, particularly when discussing and giving feedback on a student's work.

Students unwilling to cause somebody to lose face might readily agree that they understand, in order to avoid implying that the teacher has not been successful in their teaching, or that the explanation is not clear. In this case, tasks that require students to demonstrate understanding are more likely to uncover gaps in learning.

The role of silence

The role of silence is culturally variable and whilst it is often interpreted in UK HE as a negative behaviour indicating lack of interest or knowledge, shyness, etc. it has been found to have a range of other possible interpretations:

- as a face-saving strategy, either to avoid causing loss of face to other students / the teacher, or to avoid loss of face to themselves;
- as a means of actively demonstrating concentration;
- as a sign of respect for others' views and their own modesty;

- as a sign of disapproval of low-standard group discussion;
- as a preference for discussion based on considered reflection more than immediate response;
- as a result of lack of confidence in expressing ideas, particularly in a second language.

Alternatively, a silent student might simply be learning more effectively by listening and reflecting than by talking.

Risk-taking

The approach to taking risks, and the level of comfort with new and open-ended situations may be philosophically based in the idea of there being one Truth (with a capital “T”) as opposed to an outlook that encompasses a number of relative and potentially conflicting truths.

Students who are uncomfortable with risk-taking might express a preference for clear rules and instructions, and show a low tolerance for ambiguity or multiple options. They may seem sceptical of new ideas and expect detailed justification and evidence of likely value/success in order to reduce their uncertainty before acceptance. In the educational context, students might be inexperienced and ill-equipped to manage the student-centred and project-based learning activities that UK HE tends to value.

The impact of research into culture

Very little of the research into culture is based on studies of the educational experience, and recent work takes issue with direct application to understanding the international student in UK HE. Cultural influences are many and varied and arise from experience of a range

of social settings including type of secondary schooling, social class, work experience and social groupings; all have associated cultural norms within which the individual has learned to operate successfully.

Whilst it can be helpful to recognise some of the dimensions along which cultural values and norms vary, people cannot be categorised or their actions/ reactions predicted according to broad generalisations – particularly assumptions made on the basis of nationality.

At the same time, recognising these sources of difference is an important first step in identifying one's own values and assumptions and their impact on practice.

There are, of course, commonalities across cultures as well as differences, and building on these can be important in creating a productive learning environment.

Culture and teaching

There's no simple definition of "culture" but here are two ways of thinking about culture that can be illuminating when applied to teaching.

Culture as values

Firstly, we might think of culture as a set of values and beliefs that are often implicitly held.

This suggests that no teaching is without a cultural basis, and that the values embedded may not always be explicitly articulated, examined, or shared with the students.

Strategies for improving communication around core course values:

- discuss the learning outcomes for course / module with your students – what you want them to learn and why you think it is important, how you teach and how you expect them to learn;
- actively involve students in assessing examples of work, including their own and each others', as part of teaching about marking criteria, degree classification and judgements about quality;
- draw your examples from a range of contexts that will resonate with different students, or ask students to provide examples from their own background;
- acknowledge perspectives on the topic from a range of sources.

Some of these strategies are explored further in the sections on specific teaching contexts.

Culture as behaviour

Secondly, we might think about culture in a very practical sense as the knowledge that people use when deciding what is appropriate behaviour for a given situation.

This suggests a link between observing someone's behaviour and attributing intentions or motivations to that person as a result. If the "knowledge" underpinning that behaviour is not shared, or if the behaviour is subject to different interpretations, then misunderstandings are going to result.

Strategies for reducing misunderstandings:

- discuss your students' previous learning experiences and their expectations, what you expect from your students and what you think it is reasonable for them to expect from you;
- negotiate "groundrules" for groupwork where it's clear what the purpose of the exercise is, what the roles are, and where the responsibilities lie;
- give clear guidance on how you expect students to work together outside of contact time and discuss interpretations of collaboration and collusion;
- separate the observation of a behaviour from an immediate interpretation of that behaviour – ask yourself what might be happening.

Some of these strategies are explored further in the sections on specific teaching contexts.

Further resources from the TIS project:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/internationalisation/ISL_Intercultural_Competencies

Induction

Culture shock

As well as the specific cultural differences addressed earlier, students who are new to living and studying in the UK may also experience "culture shock" in making the transition to university. Indeed, most students will be unfamiliar with living and learning independently, but the magnitude of the differences, and their effect, can be greater for those moving from their home country and working in a second language.

Several phases lasting over a period of months have been identified in the literature, some or all of which might be experienced by students:

1. Euphoria: everything is new and exciting;
2. Disorientation: anxiety, sense of loss (of friends, status, environment etc.), confusion;
3. Rejection by and/or of the new culture: surprise, indignation, feelings of impotence;
4. Re-integration: adaptation to new norms, development of biculturality.

Induction as teaching

Induction has been used as a powerful way to teach, rather than just tell, students about how undergraduate education works and what is expected of them. This is useful in settling all students into their course, since they are all new to the demands of a degree in engineering in the UK.

The following quote from a student illustrates the kind of misunderstanding about, and lack of confidence with, a University education that induction might address:

■■■■■ *If we are supposed to learn matlab by ourselves, why should I go so far away from home, and spent so much money on education, so that to “learn by myself” here?* ■■■■■

Provided by J.A. Rossiter, University of Sheffield,
from Rossiter (2010)

Induction can assist in:

- addressing expectations of the course – what will be taught, why, and how;
- showing how learning is assessed, how feedback happens, and distinctions between collaboration and collusion;
- socialising students and encouraging mixing;
- breaking down barriers between staff and students;
- promoting language skills for non-native speakers of English.

Induction is an ideal route for addressing many of the barriers to successful integration and minimising the effects of culture shock.

Example from the University of Hull

As part of their induction programme, students in the Department of Engineering worked in small groups on the “Orange Tree Game”: to design and then build a tower to freely suspend an orange as high off the ground as possible using only a newspaper and one roll of tape. Each member of the winning team receives a book token.

Example from the University of Nottingham

At induction, 220 first year Built Environment students work in teams with 6th year students who will also be involved in their design studio teaching. The students undertake a series of design tasks, over 2 days, which get more and more demanding. So they start with very small-scale tasks, such as designing the logo and team T-shirt, and build up to bigger design productions. It is very popular with the students. They don't realise how much they are learning because they feel it is a social event. About 35% of our student intake comes from overseas and some of the International students can find it a bit surprising. It really helps them to mix with the home students too.

(Full details at: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/pesl/themes/transition/tourdepa501/>)

Induction that works

Successful induction strategies include:

- involving students in practical activities relevant to studying engineering with clear briefings on the activity itself and on setting ground rules for the working together;

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- mixing students from different backgrounds in groups;
- involving more experienced students as facilitators;
- involving support staff (library, technical, IT etc.) in induction activities;
- rewarding a range of potentially conflicting aspects of design (effectiveness, ingenuity, efficiency, etc.) to demonstrate the range of qualities valued and the absence of a “correct” answer to any problem.

Debriefings following such activities are ideal opportunities to discuss the learning process, the roles of the students and the lecturers, and to explore students' previous experiences (at UK schools, professional training, or abroad) and their initial expectations of the UK model of education.

Following on from induction

Induction activities such as these may connect directly to ongoing systems such as tutorial groupings and “study-buddy” pairings across years of study or across departments. This moves away from the idea of induction as an introduction and towards ongoing, embedded contact with a range of staff and students through group activities, referral to service via tutorials, library-based sessions, and even social activities.

■ *I play quite a lot of football so I arranged a few games of football against the students this year and they seemed to mix quite well – half Chinese and half English students.* ■

Eric, a British lecturer, quoted in Hou et al. (2010)

That's when the ice started to break, and a lot of the students started talking. The lad that came to the match last year, Lee, his English name, I still talk to him when I see him around.

Jim, a student, quoted in Hou et al. (2010)

Further resources from the TIS project:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/internationalisation/ISL_Induction

Teaching contexts

In the lecture theatre

An observation: students don't ask questions

When given the opportunity to ask questions in the lecture, there is little response, but at the end there is a queue of students seeking clarification.

Why is this happening?

Reasons might include:

- an unwillingness to lose face on asking a "stupid" question;
- a fear of causing the lecturer to lose face by implying the explanation has not been clear;
- a perception of hierarchy making it inappropriate to take issue with the lecturer's position;
- a motivation to do well that results in these students, and not others, staying on at the end.

What might you do?

Strategies to make it easier for students to follow the lecture include:

- reducing language-related misunderstandings by writing up new terms, abbreviations and acronyms for all to see, and avoiding or explaining colloquialisms;
- using a range of written and pictorial, audio and visual materials to help convey your message;
- referring often to the structure of the lecture and your place in it.

Strategies to encourage questions include:

- making time for students to come up with questions in groups of two or three before asking for contributions, maybe written on a slip of paper;
- using electronic voting systems to allow students to check their understanding anonymously;
- setting small tasks – filling in gaps in handouts, predicting the outcome, sketching the graph – and emphasise that it's an opportunity for them to check their understanding, not for you to test them.

Further resources from the TIS project:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/internationalisation/ISL_Lecturing

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/internationalisation/ISL_Language

Academics' experiences

The interactive handsets allow students to see their peers' views in real time, allowing the prompting of discussions on learning styles and expectations, and enabling students who might not normally join a debate to feel able to participate without being overshadowed, plus the minority are able to express their opinion without any adverse reaction. It allows students to be critical in a non-confrontational manner.

Carol Eastwick, University of Nottingham

Each week, I'd provide introductory lecture material (supported through handouts downloadable from the VLE and including a glossary of terms). The student groups were required to prepare three powerpoint slides on that week's topic, to present the following week. Student engagement and attendance are better, as is the depth of self-directed learning. Assessment recognises the students' work in class, including a peer-review element.

Simon Steiner, University of Birmingham

Three years ago, the Department of Aeronautics and Astronautics at MIT expanded its repertoire of active learning strategies and assessment tools with the introduction of muddiest-point-in-the-lecture cards, electronic response systems, concept tests, peer coaching, course web pages, and web-based course evaluations.[...] Evaluations and instructor reflective memos provide evidence of the effectiveness and acceptance of active learning.

Steven Hall, MIT (Hall et al., 2002)

In practical and problem classes

An observation: students won't admit they don't understand

A lecturer might ask students if they understood the content of the relevant lecture and they say “yes”, but they can't do the associated problem and are not asking for help. This has implications for the role of the lab in helping students make the transition to more student-led modes of learning.

Why is this happening?

Reasons might include:

- a need for the student to save face in not admitting their failure to understand;
- a need for the student to avoid loss of face by the lecturer by implying that the lecture was not understandable;
- a desire to maintain a positive relationship with the lecturer being more important than getting their help in the class situation.

What might you do?

Strategies include:

- indicating that you expect students not to understand yet – and that the problem class is to clarify areas they are not sure about;
- using open questions to work out what students do and don't understand;
- assigning students to work in pairs or small groups on problems;
- collecting questions jotted down by each group at intervals, and addressing with the whole class;
- using time at the end of the class to encourage students to review their progress and to make links with lectures.

Academics' experiences

■ *We have a system of peer mentoring and tutoring so that students get both technical advice, and also help with approaches to learning from peers. Students find that it can be easier to discuss matters with someone from a common cultural background, and the subject can make more sense when discussed in relation to their previous educational experience.* ■

Mike Thomlinson, Sheffield Hallam University

■ *We found that some Chinese students were good at line-by-line Mathematics, but were weak in interpreting the results. [...] We put the mathematic problem into an Engineering context to encourage students to interpret the results they have got.* ■

Tom, a British lecturer, quoted in Hou et al. (2010)

■ *E-assessments allow students (and staff) to self-assess progress and also to trigger revision of topics at multiple points in the year to reduce the 'just in time' learning that can occur in year-long modules. Dummy tests can help reinforce the formative aspects of these tests to help students practise their technique and gain familiarity with the material.* ■

Carol Eastwick, University of Nottingham

Further resources from the TIS project:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/internationalisation/ISL_Seminars

Projects

An observation: students have difficulties engaging with self-directed projects

Projects demand independent thinking and a willingness to apply learning across modules and subjects; this can be unfamiliar and daunting. Time management is important and sometimes lacking.

Why is this happening?

Reasons might include:

- a level of discomfort with the reduced amount of guidance and the level of uncertainty of outcome involved in projects;
- an expectation of there being a “right answer” leading to frustration with non-directive feedback;
- unfamiliarity with an expectation to form, substantiate and justify an individual position.

What might you do?

Strategies include:

- clarifying the reasons for engaging in project work in terms of professional development;
- discussing the assessment criteria and the reasons for valuing independent learning;
- setting the practical work in a wider picture that includes planning and reflection on outcomes;
- integrating projects with personal development planning to help students identify their learning and plan their progress;
- making students aware of common difficulties and how to identify these in their own work;
- having periodic reviews within the project process to reassure both parties that progress is as required.

Academics' experiences

■ *This year I've changed the assignment from the old alternative energy essay, to research an aspect of engineering relevant to the student's home town/city. ■*

Mike Clifford, University of Nottingham

■ *We get a large number coming directly into our final year and many are not prepared for the individual engineering project, which may be due to spoon feeding at their previous college. We have felt the need to provide substantial guidance on issues such as seeing their supervisors, writing reports, research, plagiarism and referencing. Of course this does not apply to all of our international students – others have an academic foundation more in line with our expectations. ■*

Bryan Attewell, University of Sunderland

■ *The One-Day Project: students are given one working day to produce a group report. They have the same product but in different countries and they have to research, abstract and summarize relevant information about the country concerned. As a preliminary to an extended group project, it demonstrates to students what they can achieve in a few hours if they actually get on with it. The groups tend to divide up the work and interact fairly frequently, which is good practice for later on. ■*

Martin Pitt, University of Sheffield (Pitt, 2010)

Further resources from the TIS project:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/internationalisation/ISL_Assessment_and_Feedback
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/internationalisation/ISL_Supervision
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/internationalisation/ISL_Internationalising_the_curriculum

Groupwork: setting up groups

An observation: students don't mix in groups

International students often claim that being able to mix with other cultures was a key part of their decision to study abroad, and yet self-sorting groups of students are often seen to comprise co-nationals.

Why is this happening?

Reasons might include:

- a need to avoid causing loss of face to others when approaching home students, or a need to avoid loss of face if turned down by home students;
- home students' unwillingness to mix with other cultures;
- lack of confidence in language skills preventing making approaches to other students.

What might you do?

Strategies include:

- saving groupwork until students are more confident with language and have had opportunities to mix in a more guided way during lectures and tutorials;

- assigning students to mixed groups, but with some homogeneity so that no individual feels isolated;
- giving instructions to students to self sort with clear parameters about group membership;
- assigning students to groups by project preference;
- mixing students for some tasks and allow self-sorting for others.

Academics' experiences

■ *Groups are selected on the basis of degree programme so that each discipline is represented. The project work requires input from each discipline so a contribution from each group member is required for success. This approach results in student initiated and student-led project work.* ■

Mike Wood, Aston University

■ *The various project topics were written up around the room and students were asked to stand near a topic that interested them as a way of forming groups. A student on their own had to join another topic area and popular topics formed more than one group. Students were able to sort themselves by topic, but also see who they would end up working with.* ■

Lecturer, University of Nottingham

continued ...

Each group carries out the same project, but set in a different country. We don't assign a student to a group based on his or her home country (but the Nigeria group could ask a Nigerian student in another group for insights). The exception is with short-term Exchange students who find it difficult to fit in with an established class. By creating a group for that country, the group will immediately engage with the exchange student, who is in turn encouraged to participate. I have sometimes seeded a group with a student with a common language so they can translate web pages and give some insight into culture. This has brought out some reticent, lower-achieving students by giving them importance within the group which they would not otherwise have.

Martin Pitt, University of Sheffield (Pitt, 2010)

Groupwork: groups that aren't working

An observation: students aren't working effectively in their groups

Groups might experience a range of problems:

- UK students sometimes complain that international students are not contributing;
- international students sometimes complain that UK students are not putting in enough effort;
- students might interpret others' behaviour as offensive or inappropriate;
- a perception of uneven allocation of tasks can lead to resentment.

Why is this happening?

Reasons might include:

- different ideas about appropriate behaviour in group discussions can lead to unequal contributions and/or a lack of opportunity to be heard;
- different views on the importance of the group and the individual within it can lead to frustrations with contributions and shared products;
- lack of confidence in language skills might prevent full engagement;

What might you do?

Strategies to address the observations might include:

- providing ground rules for groups and how they should work (more detailed for first years);
- talking about the benefits of working with other cultures, whilst also raising the issue of cultural difference and potential misunderstandings with your students;
- assigning a leader to the group and giving them responsibility to get everyone involved;
- briefly joining groups and acting as a role model;
- making the development of group-working skills an explicit part of the task;
- focusing students' attention by assessing their contribution to the task, perhaps via personal statement;
- making the task compulsory to pass the module, but not counted towards the degree classification;
- being clear on the status of assessment of language skills in reports;
- asking yourself if working in groups really is important in this case.

Academics' experiences

■■■■■ *I allowed a self-sorting group of international students to work together, but they became isolated in the course and there was no-one from another culture to challenge their ways of working. They did not do as well as the mixed groups.* ■■■■■

Lecturer, University of Nottingham

■■■■■ *Students are made aware of team formation/evaluation tools (such as those of Belbin and Myers-Briggs). They work in groups initially on smaller tasks that are formatively assessed, as they move towards being an effective team. Group ground-rules, post task team and peer reflection, and individual mentoring and appraisal have been introduced. The summative assessment is a challenging assignment where they can demonstrate their skills development.* ■■■■■

Simon Steiner, University of Birmingham

Further resources from the TIS project:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/internationalisation/ISL_Group_Work

Small group tutorials

An observation: students aren't contributing freely

Students can seem unwilling to engage with, and contribute to, discussions in small group tutorials and/or individual meetings, with the result that home students and the lecturer do most of the talking.

Why is this happening?

Reasons might include:

- a perception that speaking without being invited by the tutor would be inappropriate;
- an understanding of silence as a demonstration of interest and respect;
- reluctance to lose face by offering contributions that are less well-informed than those that the lecturer could offer;
- an expectation that the expert – the lecturer – should be talking, not the learner;
- lack of confidence in language skills.

What might you do?

Strategies include:

- clarifying the role of discussion and explaining to peers in developing understanding;
- using activities and allowing time for a sense of belonging to the group to develop to improve comfort levels;
- using open questions to encourage talking and to reduce fear of giving a wrong answer;
- using techniques, such as brainstorming, that encourage quantity rather than quality of contributions;
- thanking, or otherwise positively acknowledging, students for making a contribution;
- being aware of gender balance issues and the impact of the room layout.

Academics' experiences

■■■■■ *My international students (EU and non-EU) enjoy discussions relating to their own history, literature or sports of interest. For instance, I am fairly liked by Greek students because I talk to them about the Greek classics like 'The Iliad', the Trojan War, etc. In my opinion, this is all it takes, a little bit of appreciation of who they are and where they come from.* ■■■■■

Chandra Vermury, Newcastle University

■■■■■ *I have found that the first thing I need to do is to encourage students to question the lecturer, the literature, each other and themselves. Particularly at Masters level I feel that it is important for the student to realise that there is not only one answer or one way of doing things, therefore the most important ability to be developed is how to view an objective and then think as an engineer in applying judgement. If this means I need to talk to them about their part in their learning as no-one has ever done before then that is how I do it, and I am surprised how this seems to lift a weight from their shoulders.* ■■■■■

Roger Penlington, Northumbria University

Working in a second language

Language difficulties are probably the most commonly cited issues for new international students. There is a gap for students to cross between learning English as a foreign language in one's home country, and using the local, nuanced, informal version of English on arrival in the UK, and the discipline-specific terminology and academic language on their course.

There is no doubting the technical ability of most international students, but the language and communication issues are very real.

Peter Mills, University of Wolverhampton

Whilst students are developing their language skills, it's easy to misunderstand small differences in expectations, when they are not clearly expressed:

One of my personal tutees from China came to see me, so I gave him the normal welcome and asked him to sit down at the chair opposite my office table, by saying: "Would you like to sit down now?" He politely declined, saying "Maybe". I was puzzled, but now I think he meant that he was okay standing and there was no need to sit down. However, it comes out as "Maybe" in his "translated" limited vocabulary.

Darwin Liang, University of Bradford.

What might you do?

Strategies to help students understand specialist language on their course might include:

- writing new terms, acronyms and abbreviations on the board / slides and pointing them out when you first use them;
- providing a written glossary of new terms and referring to it in lectures;

- listening to yourself and explaining idiomatic language – terms such as “shelf life” and “reading up”;
- planning sessions to allow time for reading new material before discussions.

Some of these measures are likely to be helpful to students who are dyslexic or hearing-impaired, as well as those for whom English is a second language.

Further resources from the TIS project:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/internationalisation/ISL_Language

In conclusion

Developing intercultural competence and understanding in students is an aim that universities commonly express for their undergraduate programmes. This can be encouraged through intercultural dialogue and the attendant exposure to alternative perspectives. The inevitable misunderstandings, which demand patience and tolerance to overcome, form an essential part of the learning process for all involved.

The aim of this guide has been to provide supporting information, prompts and suggestions to consider when teaching cohorts that include international students. We have concentrated on teaching activity – from learning environments, group working, and assessment, to the encouragement of students' independent thinking and their engagement in the learning process.

It is, however, helpful to remember that the students' engagement goes beyond the classroom environment,

to include the undergraduate or postgraduate office, the industrial placements office, student support, housing and library/information services, all of which form a part of the HE culture in which they need to operate successfully if we are to provide the best possible learning experience.

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Further reading

- Brown, P. and Levinson, S. (1987) *Politeness: some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. *A study of politeness and face across cultures, identifying commonalities in communication and implications for related fields of study.*
- Caruana, V. Themed resource bank for internationalisation of HE. http://www.leedsmet.ac.uk/world-widehorizons/index_resource_bank.htm [accessed 15th July 2010] *This literature review was originally commissioned by the Higher Education Academy in 2007, and has been recently updated. Coverage includes the curriculum, e-learning and ideas of "graduateness".*
- Carroll, J., and Appleton, J. (2001) *Plagiarism: a good practice guide*. JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee).
- A comprehensive and practical guide to teaching strategies and administrative procedures that aim to prevent, identify and address plagiarism.*
- Davies, C. (2008) *Learning and teaching in laboratories*. Higher Education Academy Engineering Subject Centre. *A related guide in this series, focussing on how students learn and practical approaches to supporting learning in the laboratory setting.*
- Dolan, M. and Macias, I. (2009) *Motivating international students: a practical guide to aspects of learning and teaching*. HE Academy Economics Network. *Although presented as a handbook for lecturers in Economics, most of the issues raised and teaching contexts addressed are relevant across disciplines. The practical advice offered is based on the experience of the authors in their teaching at the University of Bath, as well as on relevant literature.*

DuPraw, M.E. and Axner, M. Working on common cross-cultural communication challenges <http://www.pbs.org/ampu/crosscult.html> [accessed 15th July 2010]

One of many (American) websites giving advice on cross-cultural communication based in an identification of axes of difference between cultures and the misunderstandings that can arise as a consequence.

Higher Education Academy. Teaching International Students. <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/teachingandlearning/internationalisation/internationalstudents> [accessed 15th July 2010]

An ongoing project that includes a resource bank of very practical advice on teaching international students collected from across the sector.

Hofstede, Geert (2010) Geert Hofstede. <http://www.geerthofstede.nl/> [accessed 15th July 2010]

Hofstede's website, which gives an introductory overview of his, now disputed, work on national cultural traits carried out in the international business community.

Promoting Enhanced Student Learning <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/pesl/> [accessed 15th July 2010]

A collection of videos and short texts showing how staff at the University of Nottingham address a range of teaching contexts and learning issues.

Ryan, J. (2000) A guide to teaching international students. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.

Although it's now 10 years old, this readable guide offers relevant strategies to include international students in a range of teaching contexts, with insights into the nature of cultural difference and the student experience of learning and prompts for reflection on practice.

Ryan, J. and Louie, K. (2007) False dichotomy? 'Western' and 'Confucian' concepts of scholarship and learning. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 39(4): 404-417.

An argument against a stereotyping of the west as the

home of critical thinking and the east as the home of rote learning. This paper reconsiders the complexities of culture and the dangers of using simplistic notions to inform teaching practice.

Signorini, P., Wiesemes, R. and Murphy, R. (2009)

Developing alternative frameworks for exploring intercultural learning: a critique of Hofstede's cultural difference model. Teaching in Higher Education 14(3): 253-264.

The authors re-examine Hofstede's much-used dimensions of culture and find they have limited value in informing practice in higher education due to oversimplification of cultural differences and a lack of data from relevant contexts.

Traher, S. (2007) Teaching and learning: the international higher education landscape. HE Academy Subject Centre ESCalate, Bristol.

Sheila Trahar explores the culturally embedded nature of teaching and the discomfort that reflecting on practice can cause. She also presents case studies of the complexity of cross-cultural interactions in teaching from a student and lecturer perspectives.

Willis, L. (2008) *Enhancing the first year experience for engineering students.* Higher Education Academy Engineering Subject Centre.

A related guide in this series, covering a range of activities that contribute to successful induction and retention of engineering students.

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We would like to hear your views and feedback on this publication to help keep the guide up to date.

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