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Enhancing the Postgraduate International Student Experience

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Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education tends to be theorised in the literature at the organisational, strategic level and/or focuses on the growing numbers of 'international students'. There are very few comprehensive investigations of the interactions between international students and academics (Brunner, 2006; Montgomery, 2009; Sawir, 2013; Trahar and Hyland, 2011; Trahar, 2011, 2007, 2011), especially in the UK. As the majority of studies are neither supported by stories from the field, nor informed by accounts of the experience of practitioners dealing with students in various multicultural landscapes, there is a strong need for cultural sensitivity in pedagogical approaches.

Research aim

The aim of my research is to contribute to the improvement to the international profile of an English university with regard to teaching, learning, assessment and enhancement of the postgraduate international student experience overall. I will explore various experiences of postgraduate international students with English as their L2 and home students, lecturers and other staff involved in dealing with internationalization as well as my own practice.

Research questions

- How do the current teaching, learning and assessment methods accommodate the international PG students' needs?
- What are the attitudes of university staff towards internationalization and its implications for curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment of international PG students?
- To what extent do structures such as: International Department, Library and Student Services, Student Union, etc. meet the needs of international PG students?
- How do international PG and home students perceive each other and what impact does this have on their student journey?
- Which communities do international PG students become members of while studying and what influence can these communities have on their learning process?

Participant sampling

I have used purposive sampling to recruit participants for my study concentrating on the strategic nature of data sources rather than using them as statistical representations of a population. The methods of snowball technique and a friend of a friend technique were implemented into the course of my research. I accessed students via social networks, flyers, posters, university VLEs and staff via emails, disseminating research information and presentations at various events and conferences.

Research Approach and Design

Critical Ethnography

- research leading to action
- making participants aware of the broad implications of internationalization in teaching and learning landscape
- allowing participants to develop a deeper understanding of their roles in HE context with an emphasis for improvement

Multiple case studies

- four distinctive university campuses
- potential rich data coming from different cohorts of international PG students across 2 academic years
- good working relationship established at work
- implementing internationalization of curriculum at work

Methods

- Separate semi-structured focus groups with international PG students and home students and staff
- Interviews with key staff members and elite interviews with heads of departments
- Document analysis: e.g. universities' internationalization strategies and policies, national student satisfaction surveys, Student Barometer Surveys, external policies (PMIs, HEA and QAA documents on internationalisation).

Summary

Lecturers and students often assume that intercultural learning happens automatically without effort on the part of learners and teachers. The experiences of international students, of home students studying with international learners and of lecturers teaching international students are, therefore, receiving growing attention. I hope to recognise that although universities enthusiastically espouse internationalisation as part of their mission, there is currently little being done about carrying out this vision in terms of pedagogy and curriculum at practical level. I would like to treat my research as a tool to challenge these preconceptions and take it further to implement internationalisation into curriculum.

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