

IncludeAll – Enhancing Practice

Working across cultural and linguistic boundaries

What are the key issues?

We recruit a wide range of students onto awards and any class may be a mix of different nationalities, ethnicities, culture and languages. At Staffordshire University, for example, we have students from over 120 different countries. These students come from a wide variety of backgrounds and add depth and richness to our student population. However, there are many students who have moved recently to the UK, as well as students who are UK citizens, who experience a mixture of cultures and languages at home.

Thus, national, ethnic, cultural and linguistic boundaries can impact the entire student population. In this section we will consider the impact of cultural and linguistic boundaries associated with Home, EU and International students. Therefore, the teaching, learning and assessment techniques suggested in this section should be considered for the entire population of students.

Whilst the diverse backgrounds of our students are likely to enrich and enhance the learning experience, there are likely to be some challenges and consequent changes to be made to your approach to teaching, learning and assessment. We believe that adopting effective classroom management strategies which are specifically designed to help manage diversity can help address some of the issues emerging from national, ethnic, cultural and linguistic barriers to learning.

Some students will have experienced a different educational regime prior to joining university. Even in the UK, students may have experienced a range of teaching styles ranging from different educational approaches, different school environments, and lived in communities which had distinctive attitudes towards education. This is not 'right' or 'wrong', just different. The following table outlines a typical educational regime students may have been accustomed to culturally or have experienced at their previous institution:

| Teacher-student relationship | Teaching methods | Assessment methods |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High power difference between teachers and students • Respect and deference expressed through gifts and silence • Teacher has concern for whole student welfare • Teacher is seen as the expert • Teacher has high out-of-class visibility • Teacher has the ability to modify decisions to show favour | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher telling and student listening • All tasks structured and supervised • Lots of homework assessed orally in class • Deep knowledge of a small number of texts • High value on knowing information; low value on using information • Punishment for evaluating information • High value on personal diligence expressed as time on homework • All tasks done individually | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exams only • Questions about content knowledge • All short answers or MCQs • All marks norm-referenced • Prevalent use of ranking • Marks commonly between 75 and 100% • No failures • Each teacher's performance linked to marks |

There are some specific issues which international students commonly face, many of which may also apply to UK students. The view of many international students is:

My lecturer: should be an authority, know the right answers and tell me, make sure I pass.

A good student: learns by listening and doing everything they are asked to do.

Whilst the view of lecturers in UK higher education is:

A good lecturer: is a good facilitator; helps students to be independent learners.

My best students: participate in discussion; think critically about the issues.

At the start of their studies at the University, almost all students are trying to make a major adjustment to living away from home and getting used to different ways of living. They may, for example, be lonely or homesick, and this can impact adversely on their ability to settle down to their studies. Therefore, it is helpful to design teaching sessions so that there is every opportunity for interaction and integration between students through group work and/or discussion. However, you also need to be able to point students to the various sources of advice and guidance within the University including Student Support, guidance on the website and the different

clubs and societies on offer through the Students' Union, which might help students to integrate and feel comfortable. Part of the Staffordshire Graduate is Global Citizenship (see www.staffs.ac.uk/study/staffordshiregraduate/attributes/global-citizen/index.jsp) and the presence of students from a variety of backgrounds can help all students develop a more global perspective and start to work across national, ethnic, cultural and linguistic boundaries.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Clearly, all students are different and generalisations cannot easily be made. However, the following points are for you to reflect upon and consider in relation to your experience of teaching diverse groups of students.

Background knowledge:

Students have different background knowledge or experience of your academic subject. Students will have a variety of entry qualifications, so you cannot assume that they are all building upon a base of previous knowledge and understanding about your subject. The important factor is to create an environment in which students are encouraged to share their knowledge and in which opportunities are provided to help students understand why they and their peers might adopt different perspectives on their academic subject.

Culture:

Students have very different perceptions of the role of those who are teaching them. You may be seen as the expert and rarely challenged by students, or you may be seen as a guiding mentor. The students' previous educational and cultural experiences will shape how they feel they should connect to the teacher.

To help students make a cultural shift into being inquisitive learners, you will need to encourage them to ask questions in a safe environment and give them plenty of positive feedback, making comments such as 'That's a really useful question – so pleased you've asked it.'

Being cognisant that there may be cultural barriers that creep into subjects that require individual creativity is important. Indeed, a collective identity is more rewarded than individual creativity by some cultures, and so a move away from this belief needs to be supported. In addition, in some subjects certain topics will be quite sensitive (perhaps for religious or ethical reasons), so a reluctance to take part in discussions should not be interpreted as a lack of engagement. Ideally, any anticipated sensitive material or topics should be announced in advance, and have an alternative activity where possible. This should allow some students to engage more fully.

Sometimes there will be cultural misunderstanding, between different groups of students and/or yourself. Culture is complex, learnt from birth and most of us are unaware of our cultural norms or assume our way of doing things is the only way until it conflicts with someone else's. Differences around how we use time, personal space and the gestures we use all complicate communication. We all have different ways of communicating politeness and respect and in some cultures it is important not to lose 'face'. For instance, there can be a reluctance to use first names, and lecturers are often referred to as 'professor' as a way of being polite and respectful to whoever is teaching them. There can also be problems around 'gifts' and their meaning. The Further information and background reading section has more detail on intercultural communication.

Language skills:

An early formative written task which you set **for all your** students often helps to identify those who need extra support. This does not need to be an extensive piece of work and may take the form of routine seminar/small group preparation tasks.

International students will vary in their language competence, both written and spoken even with a similar IELTS score. If you suspect that any of your international students are struggling, there is language support -

www.staffs.ac.uk/international/support/english

Working in partnership with your Faculty's Student Guidance Advisor and Academic Skills Tutors is highly recommended, but you cannot assume that students will know who these are, where they are located or whether they will access them. Indeed, any support service which is (wrongly) perceived as remedial may not be readily accessed by students. They may face pressures from their family and friends to feel they should learn and work in a specific way. As a teacher, it is important to find ways to promote these services in a positive manner which removes any stigma and which encourages students to want to use these services. Your role in signposting students to and/or working with these other staff members is critical to the success of students.

For students who are non-native speakers of English, it is worth remembering how tiring it is to be constantly translating what is being said or read. There may be a delay in answering questions or talking to neighbours, seeking clarification or translating for each other. As the grammar and syntax of their first language may be very different, there may be some errors in written work. As the students' vocabulary, technical or otherwise, may be not being as broad in a second or third language, written work may appear simplistic.

A glossary of technical terms is useful for everyone, as is a discussion of vocabulary with all students.

Approach to study:

National, ethnic, cultural and linguistic barriers may mean students need structured advice and guidance about how to study. For example, in some communities the idea of discussing or arguing against an idea may be alien. Making it very clear what you expect of all students a) within the teaching sessions and b) in their out-of-class study will help to clarify what is expected. Assumptions should not be made about students necessarily knowing how and when to study. If, for example, you refer them to a text to read, be very clear about which parts you need them to read and what to do once they have read it. Structuring study skills and building up skills in critical analysis and referencing will reduce problems with plagiarism. Problems with plagiarism can often arise where students have been used to demonstrating knowledge by quoting portions of text verbatim and because these texts are so well known, it is not thought necessary to attribute them to a particular source.

What works really well

Communication:

- Take care not to talk too quickly and articulate clearly
- Use short, uncomplicated sentences when necessary
- Become aware of and avoid using jargon, colloquialisms, acronyms and abbreviations without explanation
- Allow pauses for clarification, including when asking questions

Explaining your session:

At the start, clarify what your session is about, the structure, what exercises/tasks will be set and what is required outside of the session. Being explicit rather than implicit helps all students know what is expected of them.

Explaining your approach to teaching:

Some students might assume that you, as the expert, will be passing on your knowledge and wisdom and that they, in turn, will be the passive recipients of your knowledge and wisdom. You, therefore, need to explain and justify a more interactive and discursive approach to teaching, punctuated with many activities and opportunities for challenge and debate, where appropriate.

Clarifying your expectations of students:

Be clear about your expectations. Reassure all students that you understand that, even though they come from different backgrounds, there may be some specific

learning activities in which you expect everyone to engage. For example, all students will have to:

- Check the Blackboard VLE prior to the session for any alerts and/or hand-outs
- Contribute positively to group discussions
- Offer to answer any questions in class
- Be prepared to share their experiences
- Make notes (but not write down everything you say)
- Carry out any follow-up work or reading

Managing group-work:

Group-work is often a challenging for many students for many reasons. These include:

- Language - students may struggle to communicate their points effectively
- Social skills – different national, ethnic and cultural norms mean that students may struggle with social anxiety when faced with group working
- Group dynamics – different national, ethnic and cultural norms mean that not all students cope well with difficult interpersonal dynamics
- Lack of familiarity – students from different educational backgrounds may not be familiar with group work
- Confidence – for all students, lack of confidence may affect performance in group work

Try to ensure that groups contain a variety of students. Try to integrate students for whom English is not their first language into groups of other students where they will receive support. Although some students who speak the same language might want to sit together in teaching sessions, you may need to intervene and manage the setting up of groups for different activities. You may need to build skills in discussion by starting with pairs first and then larger groups for instance, before getting students to work together for assessments.

Some students may need further instruction in regards to group work. Ensure that you fully explain the purpose, set up ground rules (see section on Inclusive by Design; Group- work) and justify the link to the summative assessment (if relevant).

Jargon-busting!

We are often unaware of our habitual (and often unknowing) use of educational jargon within our conversations. For example, we talk about 'NSS', 'SVS', 'group

crit', learning outcomes and reflective practice, all of which we understand, but we cannot assume that all students will. It is therefore imperative that you become more aware of your use of jargon and then seek to replace it with other words where the meaning is more transparent. Keeping language straight-forward is important, as is using clear and explicit guidance and instructions.

If you teach a subject where there is a lot of specialist language, and key terms and/or abbreviations which have to be learnt, it is advisable to provide a glossary. It is good practice to write new words or key terms on a flipchart or board as and when they are introduced.

The globalised curriculum:

As relevant to your module content, it is important that you try to include within your teaching as many examples as possible from different national, ethnic, cultural and linguistic experiences (see also Inclusive by Design: Curriculum Content). This will help to make the curriculum more inclusive and provide a more global context for learning for all students. For Ryan (2000) this helps students to look at their own background objectively, stepping back and learning to value cultural diversity.

Preparation for assessment:

Cultural and social expectations can make assessments very stressful for students. This may be because they are familiar with different assessment systems such as ranking by results or marking on the curve. Your role is therefore to make sure that you can contribute to alleviating any stress for your students by:

- Giving as much detail as possible, thoroughly explaining the assessment and what is required
- Making sure the assessment-brief is as clear and unambiguous as possible
- Clarifying any key words/phrases or abbreviations which are critical to the assessment criteria e.g. analyse, synthesise, comparative analysis, SWOT analysis
- Being clear about how much weight will be given to spelling and grammar. For many reasons, including English language skills or learning disabilities, students may not all be able to demonstrate the same fluency, grammatical accuracy or vocabulary initially. Consider whether, at the beginning of the course, the priority is 'communication rather than correctness?' (Reisz, 2012)
- Giving examples of good and poor practice
- Providing an overview of common mistakes (and how to avoid them)
- (Re)explaining plagiarism and how this can (and must) be avoided

- Explaining the assessment criteria- what it means and how they need to understand it in order to gain maximum marks
- Explaining the importance of feedback, how and when this will be given and their role in using this for future learning

Further information and background reading

British Council (2007) *Cultural Connections: How to Make the Most of the International Student Experience*. London: British Council [online] Available from: www.educationUK.org

Carroll, J. and Ryan, J. (eds) (2005) *Teaching International Students: Improving Learning for All*. London: Routledge.

Foster, M. (ed) (2011) *Working with Cultural Diversity in HE*. SEDA Special 28. London: Staff and Educational Development Association

HE Academy – Internationalisation. Webpage. [online]. Available from: www.heacademy.ac.uk

Reisz, M (2012) *A Word of Advice: let speakers of Englishes do it their way, UK told*. Times Higher Education; 17 May 2012; p19

Ryan, J. (2000) *A Guide to Teaching International Students*. Oxford: Oxford Brookes University.

Scudamore, R. (2013). *Engaging Home and International Students: A Guide for New Lecturers*. York: HE Academy.

Staffordshire University Staff Development Toolkit – articles on ‘Barriers to Effective Intercultural Communication’ and ‘Effective Intercultural Communication’ [online] Available from: http://www.staffs.ac.uk/support_depts/personnel/index.jsp

Tomalin, E. (2007) *Supporting Cultural and Religious Diversity in HE Pedagogy and Beyond*. Teaching in HE; 12:6; p621-634.

UKCISA UK Council for International Student Affairs) – Study Tips www.ukcisa.org.uk/International-Students/Study-work--more/Other-useful-information/Tips-on-successful-study/ [accessed: 20 May 2015]

Checklist for reflection: Cultural and Linguistic Boundaries

Many of these are general good practice but are useful reminders.
Have I



| | |
|---|--|
| Checked my handbook to ensure it is welcoming and clear to international students? | |
| Found out how many students in of my classes are international? Where are they from? What is their likely prior educational experience? | |
| Found out what their EILTs (or equivalent) score was on entry to the University for both written and spoken English? | |
| Liaised with my study-skills tutor in anticipation that some students might need more help? | |
| Made efforts to learn more about the cultural backgrounds of these students and considered how this could enhance the learning of others? | |
| Explained clearly what is expected of all students? | |
| Changed the way I communicate so as to use short, uncomplicated sentences? Made efforts to avoid jargon and colloquialisms whilst also seeking to explain abbreviations and acronyms? | |
| Used imagery and language in hand-outs which is global in nature? Used case studies and activities which enhance cross- cultural and global understanding? | |
| Introduced group-work and explained the roles and intended outcomes? Monitored the engagement of international students in group-work? | |
| Effectively managed the group-work so that everyone can contribute in a safe environment? | |
| Effectively explained the assessment so as to maximise the chance for all students to succeed? | |
| Made sure all students understand what is meant by plagiarism in UK higher education and how to avoid it? | |

Reflection into action



Having reflected on the above, my key priorities for making my teaching more inclusive are:

| Changes to be introduced | By when | Indicators that it will make my practice more inclusive |
|--------------------------|---------|---|
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This document is part of an inclusive practice 'toolkit' - *IncludeAll*. The whole Toolkit, as one complete document or as separate documents, can be found on the University website at www.staffs.ac.uk/inclusivepractice .

It is split into four sections: Core Concepts; Inclusive by Design; Enhancing Practice; Checklists for Self-reflection.

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