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A practical look at the why and how of supporting international students: A checklist of teaching tips

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A practical look at the why and how of supporting international students: A checklist of teaching tips

Abstract

This paper looks at a pilot of a strategy designed to help academic staff better respond to the inclusive teaching needs of its international students. The strategy was implemented by a School in a Western Australian University and offered academic staff evidence-based information on specific techniques for internationalising curriculum content and delivery. The extent to which international students perceived lecturers had implemented the suggested strategies was subsequently evaluated. While the evaluation found the School had performed adequately in the eyes of its international students across key areas of teaching practice, it also suggested that achieving greater inclusiveness required attention to things beyond classroom processes. These broader aspects included the University's climate of belongingness and the extent to which the curriculum content took account of international perspectives.

Keywords

higher education, international students

Introduction

The number of international students at Australian universities continues to rise, with almost 400 000 enrolled in 2018 (Australian Government, Department of Education and Training, 2018). As well as making an economic contribution to universities and the wider economy, these students interact with domestic students, exchanging cultural perspectives on issues that provide access to information and skills that are valuable in professional life (Andrade, 2006; Crose, 2011). To achieve the best outcomes, however, Australian universities need to attend to both the adjustment and educational requirements of international students (Arkoudis, 2006; Studies in Australia, n.d; Markus, 2011). According to Hitch, et al., (2015) attending to these needs is especially critical during the first year of university study, when the establishment of connections and a sense of purpose are vital to forging successful academic pathways.

This paper presents the findings of evaluation of a small-scale pilot study undertaken in a School within a Western Australian university. The *'international students'* who were the focus of the pilot were predominantly people who had undertaken the majority of their prior education in countries where English was not the main medium of instruction (Arkoudis, 2006) and had gained entry to Australia via a student visa.

Part of the impetus for the pilot was that retention of international students within the School concerned was problematic. While university-wide, five per cent of international students dropped out in the first six weeks of semester, attrition within the School was eight per cent. Data on university-wide course completion by international students was also lower in the School and substantially below the University's retention target (Cook, 2019). Consequently, the pilot was an attempt to better respond to the adjustment and educational needs of international students.

The information presented in the paper accords with the call from Hitch et al. (2015) to investigate the inclusiveness of university learning environments. The stance of the pilot avoided a criticism made by Hellsten (2007) that there was a tendency to view international students coming to Australia as having deficits and it instead sought to align with her call to look at the adequacy of institutional efforts to support international student learning.

In broad terms, the evaluation suggested that while the School concerned performed well on issues of assessment guidance, student support, and classroom teaching practice, there seems much more to do in the areas of internationalisation of unit content and in fostering a sense of belonging among international students. The gaps identified appear critical to creating university climates across Australia that offer more positive experiences for international students and in turn, generating potential benefits for domestic students and the broader university sector with regard to sustainability.

Internationalising curriculum content and delivery

Informing the pilot were two main strategies that had been reported to improve the experience of international students. First, 'internationalising' the content (i.e. curriculum design) and second, 'internationalising' learning and teaching practices (i.e. curriculum delivery) (Arkoudis et al., 2013).

Recommendations on internationalising curriculum included using examples/case studies from countries other than Australia, having guest speakers present on international issues, and using international research and information. Internationalising the delivery of the curriculum broadly focussed on encouraging efforts to create safer learning environment in which international

students felt supported to interact and make a contribution (Arkoudis, 2006; Arkoudis et al., 2013).

Structuring learning activities to facilitate that international student collaboration with their domestic counterparts was another suggestion for internationalising curriculum delivery. This was supported by research indicating there is very little interaction between domestic and international students (Arkoudis et al., 2013; Trees, 2013). It was therefore regarded important to foster learning environments in which international and domestic students met and interacted with each other early in the semester (Arkoudis, 2006; Trees, 2013).

A further dimension of the pilot was to encourage greater awareness among academic staff of the impact of the language they use in class. For students learning in a Western university for the first time and where English is not their first language this has been found to be a key factor in the quality of their educational experience (Arkoudis, 2006; Macgregor & Folinazzo, 2018).

Promoting speaking skills and increasing opportunities for students to speak was another area of teaching practice that was encouraged. This was based on literature that suggested that international students report wanting to participate but lacking the confidence to do so (Macgregor & Folinazzo, 2018). The importance of making expectations about student participation clear to international students was also highlighted in the pilot, to allow international students time to prepare for participation in class (Arkoudis, 2006).

The pilot also sought to respond to the added transition-to-university pressures experienced by, international students finding themselves in a learning environment with which they are not familiar (Macgregor & Folinazzo, 2018). A known consequence of this has been misunderstandings about plagiarism, which can occur because some come from cultures where academic writing involves repeating published information with little need to acknowledge sources (Arkoudis, 2006). Adopting an educative approach to plagiarism was therefore seen as an essential component of an internationalised curriculum. This meant that rather than focus on what students should not do in terms of plagiarism, the issue was framed in terms of how to enhance student professionalism and academic integrity.

The development of critical thinking skills has long been known to be a commonly experienced challenge for both international and domestic students. Additionally, the development of international students' critical thinking skills was understood to be further compounded their English language ability because this influences their reading, understanding, interpretation and evaluation skills (Arkoudis, 2006). Consequently, purposefully supporting students to develop their critical thinking skills was acknowledged within the pilot as another important aspect of an internationalised curriculum (Atake, 2019).

Racism was also an obvious area of consideration in the pilot because of the challenges it poses for international students (Henderson et al., 2016; Markus, 2011). For universities, Paltridge et al. (2014) offer a nuanced perspective of less overt forms of this, suggesting that international students in Australia are often welcomed economically but otherwise marginalised. Obviously, addressing this and other dimensions of racism were fundamental to the objectives of the pilot.

Perhaps more pragmatically, it was also acknowledged that international students are no different to domestic students in requiring specific guidance about assessment tasks and regular opportunities to discuss and clarify requirements. Explaining assessment expectations was therefore seen as another essential element of an internationalised curriculum within the School's pilot.

Addressing each of these issues resonated with the description of inclusive teaching approaches offered by Hitch et al. (2015) which they saw as central to a positive learning environment for

all learners. They argued that this was especially true in the transition period of the first semester of university courses, which was interpreted as critical for acclimatisation to the learning environment, for friendship formation, and many other aspects that could serve to enhance academic performance (Macgregor & Folinazzo, 2018).

Reflecting the previously mentioned dimensions of ‘internationalising’ curriculum design and delivery, a suite of suggested teaching strategies was developed and disseminated to academic staff in the School. The strategies were evidence-based, providing general guidance as well as specific suggestions for teaching practices.

Study Method

The previously mentioned suite of suggested teaching strategies was used to construct a curriculum content and delivery questionnaire for completion by international students. The instrument comprised 60 statements with Likert-type scale response options (i.e. always, mostly, sometimes, never, unsure) (Appendix 1). Items that asked about the behaviours of fellow students rather than curriculum content or delivery were omitted from the analysis. Collectively, the curriculum-related items measured the perceived frequency with which respondents believed academic staff had implemented the suggested strategies and were therefore considered to be a measure of the extent to which the School’s learning environment had been internationalised. Demographic data were purposefully not collected as a strategy to reassure respondents of anonymity.

Prior to being deployed the questionnaire was assessed by an expert panel and the face and content validity of the items were confirmed. Questions broadly addressed the following dimensions:

1. Fostering belonging among international students;
2. Internationalisation of unit content;
3. Assessment guidance;
4. Student support; and
5. Teaching practice.

The questionnaire was deployed at the beginning of May 2019 via a standard web survey platform following receipt of ethics approval for the study. A web link to the questionnaire was emailed to 249 international students enrolled in courses offered within the School. More than half of these students were female (55%) and a majority were mature-aged (62%). A minority (41%) had previously completed a bachelor’s degree and approximately three-in-five (58.4%) spoke English as a second language. The email outlined the rationale and potential uses of the study information

Findings

At the conclusion of an eight-week data collection period, 40 completed questionnaires had been submitted. This modest response fraction (16.1%) left substantial scope for response bias in the data as a result of the characteristics of responders versus non-responders. Notwithstanding this, the questionnaire addressed observable, ‘concrete’ aspects of curriculum content and delivery rather than wholly subjective views about these issues. This meant the data offered useful guidance on the School’s internationalisation efforts. Acknowledging the limits of the study, it also responded to Hellsten’s (2007) call for more consultation by Australian universities with international students about their learning experiences.

Respondent data from the web platform was download into Microsoft Excel. Likert scale response categories of ‘always’ and ‘mostly’ were combined and used to characterise the most

commonly perceived experiences of respondents vis-à-vis the teaching and learning practices in the School. Where response proportions are reported in the following sections, 95% confidence intervals are reported with parentheses around upper and lower limits.

Fostering Belonging

This group of items covered teaching practices related to maintaining a sense of belonging by international students. These spanned things like actively seeking international student perspectives in class through to things like tolerance of racist comments or innuendo. Some responses reflected positively on the School's approach to international students, while others identified substantial scope to implement practices to foster increased belonging. For example, while most respondents (78% [91, 65]) believed their lecturers were consistent in requiring respectful communication and behaviour in their classes, far fewer reported consistent use of international students' names (53% [68, 38]) or asking international students to share their opinions or experiences (55% [69, 40]). Broadly, the evaluation suggested that many international students perceived a climate of ambivalence about them being in the School, perhaps one more akin to being accepted more than welcomed.

Internationalised Unit Content

Items in this group addressed practices that corresponded with efforts to internationalise unit content for international students. These spanned use of guest speakers presenting on international issues, case study examples taken from other countries, discussion on issues covered in class and how they were being addressed in students' home countries, and the use of international data. In general, respondents did not perceive high levels of internationalisation of unit content. Rather, there seemed to be a general perception that unit content emphasised Australian issues, data and research.

Quality of Assessment Guidance

This category considered practices related to the assessment guidance offered to international students. These items covered topics such as provision of exemplar assignments, example exam questions, opportunities to discuss assignment requirements in class, use of marking rubrics, and post assignment feedback. In all but one case, the majority of respondents indicated that their lecturers always or mostly undertook the practice. This spanned near universal reporting that marking rubrics were always or mostly given (98% [100, 94]) through to approximately one in two reporting that exemplar exam answers were always or mostly offered (53% [68, 38]). In general, these data suggested the School performed adequately in the area of giving international students support for assessments.

Quality of Student Support

These items covered issues such as links made to the School's Learning Advisor, the School's Librarian, guidance on writing support offered and so on. Once again, in all but one case, the majority of respondents reported that their lecturers in the School routinely delivered the type of support indicated. For example, almost all students reported their lecturers usually advised them about the assistance they could get through the library (93% [100, 85]) and a similar proportion felt their lecturers helped them understand the meaning of academic integrity in an Australian context (85% [96, 74]). Similarly, high proportions reported their lecturers informed them about campus learning and writing support services, about referencing, and that they spoke at a pace the students could understand and follow, again suggesting teaching staff performed well on these areas of support.

Quality of Teaching Practice

This cluster of items pertained to efforts to ensure quality of teaching practice being offered to international students. Included here were things like classroom set up, explanations of terms used, end-of-lecture summaries of key points, group work, reviews of readings and so on. Again, this was an area in which a majority of students reported positive practices from their lecturers.

Discussion

Australian universities are actively recruiting international students and it has been well-documented that many of those arriving to study in this country will face significant challenges. These challenges can be variously interpreted but seem least helpfully viewed as problems to be predominantly addressed by the students themselves. As Hitch et al. (2015) note, it is more apt for the universities they attend to consider the things they can do to better support these students, especially in the area of their teaching and learning strategies. In doing so, they recommended mainstreaming of efforts to facilitate greater participation. It was in this light that the pilot project that was the subject of this paper was undertaken.

The School pilot outlined earlier encouraged its academic staff to adopt specific inclusive teaching and learning practices and emphasised a view of the diversity of the student cohort as an enabling resource. The corresponding evaluation sought to understand whether and how the strategy translated into teaching and learning practices and if it led to international student experiences that were encouraging, challenging and supportive.

While the response fraction for the evaluation of the pilot was modest, the data obtained suggested that while the School performed well on ‘bread and butter’ issues of assessment guidance, student support, and classroom teaching practice, there seemed much more to do in the areas of internationalisation of unit content and in fostering a sense of belonging among international students. Both of these two areas appear to be front-and-centre issues insofar as sustainably creating a climate in the School that is positive to international enrolments from the standpoint of these students. This finding seems potentially important because the literature suggests these issues have been little considered or researched aspects of international student experience in Australia.

At heart then, the School’s experience has suggested that to ensure the sustainability of international enrolments and to offer these students the best possible experience, an emphasis beyond doing the same things better in areas like classroom teaching practice and assessment will be needed. This is likely to be challenging and unfamiliar territory for many because, rather than situating responsibility for internationalisation at the frontline, it will entail a need for deep reflection at all levels of the University on the place and contribution of international students. This will include not only how international students are seen as consumers of the University’s courses, but also how they are invited to contribute to the overall learning environment offered to all its students. As is usual in such cases, comprehensive efforts seem likely to be required both within and outside classroom settings, meaning that disseminating ‘tips’ for academic staff will unlikely be sufficient.

Addressing the issues outlined previously seems to have potential to resolve some of the challenges Australian universities have with international students, which perhaps have significant elements of their roots in feelings of being accepted more than welcomed and too little exposed to unit content that touches on issues relevant to a broader spectrum of countries. This perspective seems to resonate with Paltridge et al.’s (2014) description of the partial and contingent acceptance of international students in Australian universities, with them being depersonalised as a useful source of economic benefits and needing tight controls to manage the risks associated with their participation in courses. A broader perspective than this is also likely

to be in the interests of domestic students, who stand to be the beneficiaries of a tertiary education system that is more clearly globalised in its outlook.

Conclusion

It has been long established that Australian universities need to address the adjustment and educational requirements of international students. This small-scale pilot study undertaken in a School within a Western Australian university set out to investigate the extent to which the adjustment and educational needs of international student were being met in order to help academic staff better respond to the inclusive teaching needs these students. The extent to which international students perceived their lecturers had implemented specific techniques for internationalising curriculum content and delivery was assessed. The students were asked to rate their experience in terms of their sense of belonging and if they felt the curriculum content was internationalised. They were also asked about their perceptions regarding the quality of assessment guidance, student support and teaching practices. While the low response rate (16.1%) means the results must be interpreted cautiously, the evaluation found the School had performed adequately in the eyes of its international students across key areas of teaching practice. It also suggested that achieving greater inclusiveness required attention to aspects beyond classroom processes. These broader aspects included the University's climate of belongingness and the extent to which the curriculum content took account of international perspectives.

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Appendix: International Student Survey Objective and Survey Items

Survey Objective 1: To what extent do international students perceive the curriculum content to be internationalised? All questions included a five-point Likert response scale.

1. Do your lecturers use examples/case studies from countries other than Australia?
2. Do your lecturers use guest speakers from organisations that are global?
3. Do your lecturers use guest speakers who present information on international issues?
4. Do your lecturers use guest speakers from international backgrounds?
5. Do your lecturers refer to research done in countries other than Australia?
6. Do your lecturers use international statistics?
7. Do your lecturers ask international students to share their opinions and experiences?

Survey Objective 2: To what extent do international students perceive the delivery of the curriculum to be internationalised? All questions included a five-point Likert response scale.

Classroom environment and opportunities to collaborate with domestic student questions

1. Do your lecturers use 'warm up activities' to help create a friendly classroom environment?
2. Do your lecturers help international students to meet domestic students?
3. Have your lecturers helped you to make friends with domestic students?
4. Do your lecturers do activities where you work in small groups with other students?
5. Do your lecturers set up the classroom so students sit in small groups?

Accessible information questions

1. Do your lecturers provide learning materials (such as Provide PowerPoint slides) available on Blackboard before the class?
2. Do your lecturers outline the main points to be covered at the beginning of classes?
3. Do your lecturers make recordings of the class available on Blackboard?
4. Do your lecturers help you to understand discipline-specific terms?
5. Do your lecturers give you opportunities to ask questions and clarify information?
6. Do your lecturers pause during classes to check you understand information?
7. Do your lecturers provide you with time in class to summarise important information into your own words?
8. Do your lecturers finish classes by summarising the main points covered?
9. Do your lecturers ask you to explain to domestic students how this issue/topic/problem is dealt with in your country?

Lecturer voice and language questions

1. Do your lecturers speak at a pace you can understand and follow?
2. Do you understand the instructions lecturers give during class?
3. Do your lecturers use Australian language (i.e. slang) that you don't understand?
4. Do your lecturers check that everyone understands what to do?

Lecturer provision of opportunities for international students to speak in class questions

1. Do your lecturers expect you to contribute to class discussions?
2. Do your lecturers use students' names in class?
3. Do your lecturers give you time to think about a question before you answer?
4. Do your lecturers give you advanced warning that you will be asked to speak in class? For example, do they say 'next week you will be asked to speak about...?'

Zero tolerance for racism questions

1. Have your lecturers discussed discuss the requirement for respectful and professional communication and behaviour both in class and in on-line communications?
2. Have your lecturers discussed the advantages of having students from many countries in the class?
3. Have your lecturers made it clear that racism is not tolerated at ECU?
4. Have your lecturers ever ignored racist comments or innuendo?

Educative approach to plagiarism questions

1. Have your lecturers taught you about what academic integrity means?
2. Have your lecturers taught you about APA referencing?
3. Have your lecturers given you examples of correct APA referencing?
4. Have your lecturers given you time in class to practice APA correct referencing?
5. Have your lecturers given you time in class to practise paraphrasing and summarising.
6. Do your lecturers use correct APA referencing in all their teaching materials?
7. Do your lecturers provide you with exemplar assignments that demonstrate correct direct and indirect reference citations?
8. Have your lecturers asked you to complete the ECU Academic Integrity Module on Blackboard?
9. Have your lecturers organised for you to meet the Academic Learning Advisor (Diane Bunney) in class?
10. Have your lecturers told you about the academic learning and writing supports available at ECU?
11. Have your lecturers helped you to learn about the help that is available at the ECU library?

Critical thinking questions

1. Do your lecturers ask you think about information and challenge concepts?
2. Do your lecturers ask you to think about what might be wrong with a theory or concept? When lecturers give you readings to complete, do they give you questions and/or activities to undertake when completing the readings?
3. Have your lecturers given you guidance on how to 'actively read' any required readings?
4. Do your lecturers provide you with a chance to discuss the content of any required readings?

Assessment Expectations questions

1. Do your lecturers spend time in class to explain what is required in assessment tasks?
2. Do your lecturers allow class time for you to discuss your progress on each assignment?

3. Do your lecturers provide opportunities for student to discuss assessment requirements in class?
4. Do your lecturers provide marking rubrics for assignments?
5. Do your lecturers provide exemplar assignments on Blackboard so you can see what a good assignment looks like?
6. Do your lecturers give examples of end-of semester exam questions?
7. Do your lecturers give examples correct answers to examples of end-of semester exam questions?
8. Do your lecturers provide you with helpful feedback when you get your assignments returned after they have been marked?
9. Once marked assignments have been returned to students, do your lecturers spend time in class discussing general feedback?