

**Dealing with large classes within the Business School of Bournemouth University:  
An investigation of practices dealing with a postgraduate large class attending the  
unit ‘managing people’**

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## Introduction

Globalisation has brought about many changes in education in Britain since it led to an increase to university enrolments from overseas and European students. In an effort to accommodate both, the ever multiplication of student numbers, and to provide a cost effective education due to limited resources, universities were made to replace small classes with large class teaching. However this change has caused several challenges. Anderson *et al.*, (1998) and Goff *et al.*, (2007) cite that the quality of education has been compromised because it limits the engagement of the student with the delivery of the lecture.

Further, active learning is supported by questioning, discussions, and debates (Cohen 1994; Springer *et al.*, 1999). According to DeCorte (1996), Hake (1998) and Palinscar (1998) long-lasting learning is only achieved when students interact in class, because they can comprehend what they are being taught, since they are able to construct their own meaning. Yet it is difficult to decrease class sizes taking into account also the governmental policies, which cater for open admission in educational institutions in the UK (Edwards *et al.*, 2001). However and despite these challenges large class teaching still remains one of the most popular means of knowledge delivery to university students since they are able within a short time span of one or two hours to receive extensive textual, oral and visual explanation of concepts.

There is not a universal and agreed definition of a large class. However researchers such as Billington (1997) and Davies (2000) agree that smaller classes might have a direct effect in the students' performance because they facilitate active learning through discussions between the lecturer and the student; students receive more regular and timely feedback; while any problem arising can be resolved instantly. However, McGregor *et al.*, (2000) argues that a large class setting neither automatically means that the delivery of education is poor, nor does a small class is synonymous to the provision of quality education. Significant role plays the tutor and his/her approach to teaching. Meaning his/her ability to organise large classes in such a way, that learning can be effectively delivered. According to O'Sullivan (2006) the focus should be on the styles of teaching on both small and large classes rather than the size of class per se.

The following account will discuss the issues arose as a result of my delivering a lecture for the unit 'Managing People' in a class of 52 postgraduate students. Firstly I will present the school then the unit, the methodology that I employed to contact the research and then I will discuss the ways that I dealt with this particular class.

## **The academic context**

### *School Presentation*

The school itself attracts large numbers of students both from Britain and abroad alike, and especially for its postgraduate courses. This is mainly due to the nature of courses that the school offers which are industry orientated coupled with its industrial links, which enable students as part of their undergraduate degree to undertake work placement for one full year as part of the programme. Consequently this creates a competitive advantage, which the school is utilising to differentiate itself and recruit students both home and overseas. However, due to limited resources and in an effort to deal with the ever increasing numbers of students, the school was made to increase the number of students attending classes. This in effect brought about several challenges that the school is trying to manage by introducing several teaching techniques i.e. technology or group work, among others.

### *Unit presentation*

The unit attempts to present a range of issues surrounding the changing environmental nature of organisations related to external and internal influences; the nature of management and leadership which in effect is affected by the environment; models of organisational effectiveness and development which can be employed by managers/leaders to lead a company to success; and implementation of effective management practices.

## **Methodology**

The study is based on both employment of literature, which enables to highlight and discuss the main issues arising from large class teaching and empirical data that the author has gathered within the Business School. A qualitative, epistemological, interpretive

approach was followed since I consider knowledge to be socially constructed, and I acknowledge the existence of many views on a single subject. For me interpretations of reality are not fixed unlike the positivist paradigm of a 'fixed reality' that corresponds to 'truth'. The research approach is a hybrid study which is based on content analysis, participatory methods to collect the data (interviews with both students and lecturers and participant observation) and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to analyse the findings. Thus hoping to identify the main issues related to the formation of large classes and suggest ways and a final theory of how to tackle the matter of large classes within the Business school. This study employs a qualitative approach, since it aims to "...understand the phenomena under study in order to develop conceptual insights rather than test a hypothesis" (Minichiello *et al.* 1995:164). Qualitative research allows a personal approach to the data, familiarisation with all participants in the research, and the keeping of records regarding their actions and conversations (Mintzberg 1979). Further, the employment of a qualitative approach enables the views of participants to be included (Easterby-Smith *et al.* 1991).

Given that this specific research is inductive in nature, a qualitative approach, and especially the employment of participatory methods were considered imperative, because they enabled the collection of data through interviews (both one-one and, focus group) and through observations, either direct or as a participant (Jennings 2001) engaged in conversations with students and lecturers. Content analysis was equally implemented since I wanted to analyse existed papers regarding the way the issue of large classes is dealt with in other institutions and if the way I approached the issue, it was also dealt with in a similar manner. To comply also with the participatory approach to research the data are going to be fed back to the lecturers and students alike on a seminar that is to take place on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March in the Business school. Acknowledging that within qualitative research there are several research traditions, including phenomenology, ethnography, case studies, and grounded theory, which may be employed in relation to the interest and disciplinary background of the researcher (Hardy and Bryman 2004); grounded theory was used because of its inductive nature and its ability to build theoretical propositions and a core theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Additionally, it can be incorporated with other research methods, when handling and interpreting data. However, in this study, it was used partly to collect and mainly to analyse the data.

For the selection of the interviewees (lecturers) the purposive snowballing sampling was selected. This choice allowed the solicitation of help from respondents in identifying the population under study. Besides as Gilbert (2001) argues snowball sampling can only be employed when the target sample members are engaged in some form of network with others who share the same interests. This principle suited the study since the information required needed to come from those people who already taught in the school for many years. With regards to selecting the students to form focus groups I used convenience sampling, which even though it may be considered that it does not have an academic vigour, in this case the students that formed the focus group have attended the 'managing people' unit and therefore were the most appropriate to discuss about the topic.

An alternative to my approach would be to study the phenomena as a case study but that would limit the generalisability of the findings because the study is bounded by time and space. The author hopes that these findings will be applicable also to other schools within the university and other universities in the UK since this is a widely faced challenge. Firstly I will reflect on the reasons that I chose this subject and then I will present in more detail the main problems the Business school is facing, (the account is based on interviews with both lecturers and students) and then I will proceed to discuss the literature review in relation to the particular unit I taught in the first semester and the problems I encountered and how I tried to resolve them.

### ***Reflexivity***

Ladson-Billings (2000) states that in the neo-Weberian anthropological tradition it was considered essential for a researcher to reveal his/her own social origins as well as motivations for the research project because knowledge and human activity are interrelated and therefore the reflexivity of the researcher enhances validity and credibility of the research.

By the same token, Jenkins (2002:25) argues that one of the central themes of Bourdieu's work is the attempt to understand the relationship between:

“subjectivity-individual social being as it is experienced and lived from the personal inside out, so to speak- and the 'objective' social world within which it is framed and

towards the production of which it contributes. This theoretical project is a key aspect of Bourdieu's attempt to develop a sociology which can transcend the subjectivist/objectivist dichotomy..."

In essence, Bourdieu's (1996) definition of reflexivity is about combining a functional rationalisation of the world and epistemological reliability, because this way a researcher can combine his/her knowledge as an insider while he/she is externally detached. Thus any subjective position of those observed supplements and balances any objectivity of the observer, allowing the researcher to take the role of both the insider and outsider. His/her role as an outsider allows room for a clearer picture of the subjective reality while having the advantage of possessing the implicit knowledge of the insider. It enables researchers to think seriously of their own position, based on their beliefs, attitudes, preferences and experiences in life since these internal structures might influence their objectivity in the sense of distorting or exerting prejudice to it. However this is a rather difficult task because the researcher has to exercise his/her consciousness to the extent that he/she avoids narcissism and subjectivity (Ruby 1980).

Reflecting on my own experiences I can state that the research came as a result of my having to teach the unit 'managing people' in the Masters' programme: Management, Management/Marketing, and Management with Human Resources. My class consisted of 52 multicultural students which made it difficult to address their individual needs due to the number coupled with different educational background and level of knowledge.

The practices I have employed to manage these issues came predominantly from my experience as a language teacher. I have taught English and Greek to both, adults and children. I have taught English in Greece in the private sector; I have taught English in a Russian public school as part of my University placement in the University of Surrey where I was studying for a degree in 'Russian and European Studies'; and Greek to Colleges in England.

My classes were large and the students at times were unruly. The most demanding one was the one that I taught English to Russian children in Russian. The class consisted of 63 pupils and my Russian at that time was not at an advanced level, however, personal contact and use of regalia such as pictures and objects were a way of me to deal with the

class at that moment. Regarding the adult classes I used to teach in England: I learned all the names of the students so that they feel comfortable in asking anything in my class and I formed groups and employed peer teaching as tools to support my teaching. These are some examples of my experience as a language teacher and some of these techniques I employed and I adjusted them accordingly to serve the needs of this particular postgraduate class.

### **The main issues connected with large classes in the Business School**

In the business school there are mainly three issues that are related to large classes: limited financial resources; lack of training and education which in effect leads to the third issue; quality of feedback.

Both the students and lecturers commended on the issue of financial resources.

Characteristically one of the students said:

*'...but then again large classes might have to do with limited resources isn't it?'*

A rhetorical question that reveals students' awareness that the operation of educational institutions is directly linked to the availability of funds, which in turn determines the delivery of the material taught in terms of quality.

This view was also supported by the lecturers' following statements:

*'The university has to hit certain student numbers to cover expenditure if not then it does not have enough resources in terms of hiring new staff to deal with large classes. So resources and numbers are linked. As a result classes can be as large as 250 invariably.'*

*'...here is an increase pressure because the large cohort is a cash cow, it pays salaries to executives from undergraduate fees.'*

*'In the past in order to deal with the issues of large classes they used to have seminars every week, now they are organised every two weeks since the resources are fewer. The limited resources are attributed to the fact that mainly the undergraduate degrees are*

*attended by British students who pay home fees, which are substantially less than the overseas fees'.*

*'...the issue is both financial and operational, which leads to confusion because it was supposed to be more pedagogical. There is no description of how many hours per lecture or seminar, how many hours of contact'.*

Consequently, it could be argued that it is a common knowledge among lecturers that it was the limited financial resources, which led to the creation of large classes. However this could be detrimental to the reputation of the school since it compromises the pedagogical aspect of education which directly refers to the provision of quality of education. Therefore more pedagogical research is needed to underpin the decision of what and how the units are taught. More training is also needed to identify the lecturers' unit learning needs, however this can be quite challenging because that might be perceived by some lecturers as an indication of their inability to deliver efficiently a unit.

Further, it is a common consent that at the moment the school is understaffed and as a result lecturers are facing a workload in terms of delivering more lectures and having to correct more papers. There is also a shift balance from teaching to research and that makes it harder to provide a detailed feedback. The quality of feedback is also compromised by the '3 weeks' turn around limit, where lecturers have to correct and submit the assignments. A solution to it would be outsourcing, for example hire retired people who have no time constraints to give detailed feedback. One lecturer said:

*'In this way the lecturers could be second markers and check the quality assurance'.*

But it is not easy to get these people. However if many students are failed then that would have an impact on the lecturers because it would reflect on the quality of their lecture. Therefore it could be argued that there is correlation between the quality of the feedback and the lecturers' time.

Another problem associated with large classes derives from the fact that lecturers are overburden with considerable amount of administrative work. Therefore Gibbs and Jenkins (1992) argue that teachers should be confined to teaching and more administrative staff



should be employed to deal with student inquiries. Nevertheless this can be to the detriment of the lecturer since some queries can only be dealt by lecturers.

Having discussed the main issues faced at the business school regarding large classes I will proceed by employing literature review and compare and contrast it with my own observations while teaching the unit 'managing people' coupled with suggestions and observations that were made by students who were attending the particular unit.

### **Discussions**

Having used the grounded theory to analyse the data the author came up with the following prepositions:

#### ***Variety of teaching methods can provide a solution to large classes***

A way of motivating student to participate was to introduce many teaching methods apart from lecturing. Forsyth and McMillan, (1991) cites that role playing, debates, brainstorming, discussion, demonstrations, case studies, audiovisual presentations, guest speakers, or small group work breaks the routine and encourages integration and motivation. "Effective learning in the classroom depends on the teacher's ability ... to maintain the interest that brought students to the course in the first place" (Ericksen, 1978, p. 3). Meaning that, the personal effort of the instructor is a major contributor to the successful delivery of a lesson. Sass (1989) cites that there is no perfect method to attract the interest of students however a desire to bring out the best in students, to increase their self esteem and confidence combined with persistence and patience can contribute towards students' motivation in the lesson. Thus the size of class ceases to be a problem since still students they feel comfortable to express their view regardless of the size of class.

In the particular class I have introduced groups work; I used technology; I encouraged brainstorming and wide-class discussions; I promoted constant student feedback on the way I am presenting the material in order to make it more interested and suitable to their needs; and I have also introduced peer teaching.

### ***Group work might be a solution to large classes***

Melton (1996) cites that lecturing large classes creates an impersonal atmosphere which more often than not dwarfs the lecturer and in effect limits students' success. While Coleman (1989) perceives large classes as problematic, unruly and disruptive which also creates problems to the lecturer who delivers the lecture. In relation to that and according to both my teaching experience and participant observation of the specific class, I noticed that students responded better when they were put in groups and were assigned to discuss certain topics and then talk about them. I considered group work to be beneficial because students could share ideas and brainstorm better.

However, when it came for them to form groups to complete an assignment for assessment they insisted that they should be allowed to choose the group they are about to be part of so that they feel more comfortable since they would know that all its members are going to contribute towards the completion of the task. Experience in the past indicated that when students are forced to form a certain group then some members in that group put more effort on an assignment than others and that causes problems within the group. Since some students depend on the performance of others and that leads to an unfair treatment of some members within the same group.

Further during seminars where the large class was divided in three smaller ones I would create even smaller groups and I would have them discuss a case study that they had already studied at home. This gave them room for sharing views since they were feeling even more comfortable because they had to discuss in a group of 4-5 people. Then I would coach each group separately and I would encourage participation by all members. I would also ask one member or more if they wanted to present their thoughts in class. This is something that was met enthusiastically by the groups and all students were actively participating.

### ***Dealing with students' different educational backgrounds and level of knowledge might be more important than the class size per se***

The class I used to teach was 99 percent consisted of overseas (non-European: Thailand, Turkey, Russia, Korea, Libya, China, Venezuela, Bulgaria, Jordan), and European students

(non-British) students. Only one of them was native British. In effect that refers to the fact that they came from different educational and cultural backgrounds altogether. For example the Thai, Korean, Chinese, students are the quietest ones since the way they learn at home does not encourage students' active participation. Besides their culture is such that they are always respectful to their lecturer and they never ask a question in class. If they did not comprehend something they would take a note of it and they would come to me to clarify certain points, or to give them suggestions on the way to study and write assignments after the lesson was finished. The rest of the nationalities were more actively engaged in class discussions.

This is an issues that was also commended upon from both, students and lecturers alike

*'Personality is also an issue; some nationalities are more extrovert than others and they tend to be more debatable than others; it is difficult to facilitate individual learning'*

In order to deal with this issue I would try to learn as many names as I could to create a friendlier atmosphere and I would speak as slowly as possible so that I am better comprehended. Further when I placed a question I would go nearer to the student who expressed an interest in answering the question. This enabled the student to share his/her views with me at a lower voice and then I would transmit the answer to the rest of the classroom at a louder tone. This way even the shy Chinese and Thai students would raise their hands to say their opinions and their intimidation to speak in class was reduced since they felt that they only speak to one person rather than to 52 people at once. Additionally I encouraged them to send me emails and come and see me in my office if they had more queries.

Another issue in the class was related to the fact that not all students had the same level of knowledge which made it difficult for some of them to follow the lesson. This was due to the fact that the majority of students were coming to study Management from totally different disciplines. Therefore they lacked even fundamental knowledge of managerial concepts. Characteristically some lecturers said:

*'The level of students varies some students are better or have more knowledge than others'.*

While an overseas student said:

*'...this is an issue that has to be thought of the management because some of us are really struggling'*

In order to deal with this issue in my first lecture I had them all introduce themselves and tell me a little bit about their nationality, their educational and work background. That enabled me to determine the level of their knowledge and to adopt my teaching material accordingly in order to cover most of their needs. Further I would provide them with as many examples as possible so that they comprehend how the concepts are applied in practice and also try to explain as simpler as possible complex issues. Additional material apart from the lecture notes was also made available to them and once again my out of classroom availability was utilised to solve any further queries. The lecture notes were also posted on the web so that students had the chance to study in advance and keep pace with the lecture.

Biggs (1999) denotes the importance of alignment which refers 'to the integration of teaching and learning activities with assessment practices to achieve the stated curriculum objectives' (Housego and Freeman 2000:3). Therefore emphasis should be put to the appreciation of students as learners and the diversity of students and not only to classes as size per se.

### ***Technology might assist lecturers and students to overcome the issue of large classes***

Web-based learning solutions such as web-based course materials and course outlines to cover inadequate library resources, and web-based workbook that delivers randomly individualised problems with accompanying solutions could address the problem arising from students not attending lectures, printing delays or any other personal queries (Biggs 1999). My Observations and focus group discussions I have had with students attending the particular unit indicated that technology helps but then again not to the extent that provides any substantial solutions to the problem. Students thought that technology would

be beneficial only when the lecturer deals with classes of more than 300 students. The particular class was consisted of 52 people and therefore not an issue for the students. Personal contact was considered more important than technology. For some students technology was perceived as being even 'scary' since they are not used to its extensive use and they much prefer the traditional mode of teaching where the lecturer is available to answer queries.

Therefore in order to deal with the issues more training is needed for students to use technology. Taken that the students in the particular unit were foreigners with limited or non-existent IT knowledge specific courses should be introduced that would teach students on how to use effectively and efficiently the information and the knowledge that is provided online. Participant observation indicated especially during seminars that students when assigned to read material that was available online more often than not had problems accessing it and therefore were coming unprepared in class. However when I started giving them printed material for seminar preparation students tended to come to class well prepared.

Given the fact that students are against passive learning and trying to make the lesson as 'lively' as possible the use of technology in the form of presentation of videos was also introduced. Students liked this medium of learning. However that much depends on the content of the video and its length as well. Given the multicultural environment in the class some students find it difficult to keep pace with the British language. Some students find the language too fast to comprehend, others do not understand certain accents, or the vocabulary is far too complex for them to comprehend.

However web-based and technology in general solutions, should not be taken as a panacea since a holistic approach is needed to overcome the problems and enhance the learning process. Biggs (1999) supports the significance of planning which goes beyond the alignment of objectives. Barkham and Elender (1995) state that effective teaching is associated with planning and therefore the successful management of a large class could be the result of detailed and organised efforts to collect the right material and deliver it in a way that it covers the needs of a non-homogenic in terms of previous knowledge of the subject. Biggs (2003) cites that teachers and educational institutions should encourage dissemination of research regarding strategies on ways to teach and manage large classes.

### ***Wide-class discussion could be a solution to large classes***

The social constructivism theory of knowledge can support arguments of the students' successful learning through the teachers' effective teaching (Selly 1999 and Terwel 1999). According to the social constructivist view of knowledge, the interaction among individuals leads to the construction of learning. Consequently knowledge is socially constructed through the means of dialogue (Crouch and Mazur 2001) and learning takes the form of sense-making rather than the acquisition of knowledge that is communicated by the teacher. Social constructivist teachers assist their students comprehend that they are part of the construction of knowledge, that they can interpret and make sense of ideas and concepts themselves, and that they have the ability to search for knowledge and endeavour to understand the world. Students in social constructivist classrooms apart from just consumers become also producers of knowledge.

Further Crouch and Mazur (2001), Dufresne *et al.*, (1996) and Lave and Wegner (1991) argue that there are many benefits to be derived from class-wide discussions because it enables students 'to select, identify, and defend their choices of concepts and principles' in dialogue with other students and the teacher' (Nicol and Boyle 2003:9) while at the same time motivate them to learn. Having taught for many years languages I developed a student centric approach and as a result of that I tried to engage as many students as possible in my class. I tried to encourage participation by learning as many names as possible; being friendly with students; respecting all students opinions; pacing up and down in class; and providing as many examples as possible in order to make lectures more comprehensible and bring them to life. One student said that he liked discussions in class otherwise he 'switches off'. Another way of motivating students participation in class was to inform them that the material we covered in class especially the one discussed during seminars is going to be on the exam. Forsyth and McMillan (1991) cite that this gives students an extra incentive to attend and participate in classes.

However, Nicol and Boyle (2003) also argue despite the benefits of wide-class discussion it is still not quite clear (since it is an under searched area) the way that students themselves understand the learning methods, and which part of the learning setting plays the most major role to the development of their learning. Additionally, Mazur (1997) and Dufrense *et al.*, (1996) cited in (Nicol and Boyle 2003) state that lack of literature makes it

difficult to determine if wide-class discussions is the best medium to transfer effectively and efficiently knowledge.

Putman (1993) argues that large classes are neither positive nor negative while Melton (1996) supports this argument by citing that large classes do not affect the quality of teaching, and lecturers can still effectively deliver and transfer knowledge and skills. The fact also that students more often than not do not acknowledge of having any problem with the size of class might also lead to the conclusion that lecturers are of high calibre and they meet their own personal needs and requirements, and as a result any occurrences of dissatisfaction and dullness are improbable (Louisel and Descamps 1992). Additionally (Papo 1999) argues that students themselves do not react negatively on the size of classes because what they are really concerned about is the quality of instruction. Their prime aim is the acquisition of knowledge which, they will receive through books, the content of what is taught and the lecturer himself/herself, rather than what is the best class size for a certain programme.

### ***Constant learning feedback***

Another way to improve the lecture was through receiving feedback with regards to the material and the style that I presented as an ongoing process from the very early stages of the semester. This way a positive and open atmosphere was created which enabled me both to verify that the material was valued and comprehended by all students and the way I taught was appropriate to meet the needs of a large class. Lucas (2006) cites that encouraging students to recommend ways of solving a problem can be a way to find ways to increase motivation and participation. Additionally Sass (1989) cites that the majority of students respond well to a unit that they feel are part of and that promotes learning.

### ***Peer feedback***

After a few lectures I realised that some students are more advanced than others and therefore when I formed groups I made sure that one of these students are part of the groups formed. This way when an issue was put for discussion these students would coach the others on the way to proceed with the issue under discussion. This is something that the

students embraced and they followed it even after class when they studied to sit for the exam or to write their assignments. McKeachie (1999) suggests peer assisted learning programmes could alleviate the work load of lecturers. Couchman (1997) cites that peer assisted learning is successful because they form a more informal and intimate atmosphere where students feel freer to ask questions and get 'simpler' and less complex answers thus also promoting the development of communication skills.

## **Conclusion**

The development of large classes has put an end to the traditional form of interaction between students and lecturers which enabled a more personal approach on both parts in the learning process. A smaller more traditional classroom setting encouraged engagement of the student in the teaching process and at the same time facilitated the need of the tutor to be more accommodating to the students' needs. Nowadays there is also a tendency to shift the teacher centred approach to student centred one. However, a large class setting can be an obstacle to achieving a student centred approach to learning because it limits instructional variability and detailed feedback which would ideally assist students to better their performance.

However lecturing is not the only method of teaching large multicultural classes. Nevertheless it becomes a challenge and a major factor to criticise both lecturers and departments alike for not succeeding to transfer knowledge and skills to students. In the particular unit the use of teaching techniques such as formation of groups; taking into consideration the multicultural environment of classes and level of knowledge; use of technology; constant feedback; peer feedback; wide-class discussions were used to the best of my ability to communicate complex concepts to students.

Nevertheless the most important factor to handle large classes is for staff to have the right institutional support since it is the institution which decides about resource allocation for training, the employment of extra staff, the extensive use of web based solutions, the purchasing of technical equipment, increase the budget allocating for printing or even hire an educational consultant. Therefore heads of schools should be more actively involved in this process and more seminars and workshops should be initiated on dealing with large classes (Booth and Watson (1992).



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