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# They don't really want to know us': experiences and perceptions of international students at the Dublin Institute of Technology

*Author - Almut Schlepper*

Unless you conduct yourselves with more restraint and moderation towards them [overseas students], they will be driven into abandoning their studies and leaving the country, which we by no means desire'. <br>

King Henry III in Cambridge, 1231 ([Elsey and Kinnell 1990: 1](#))

The words of Henry III suggest that movement of students between countries is not a modern phenomenon. The internationalisation of higher education was promoted for centuries by the tradition of wandering scholars. Brennan ([2003: 41](#)) suggests that a true university cannot exist without multiculturalism, and refers to John Henry Newman for whom the university is the knowledge and genius gained from harnessing the talents of a diversity of people, from a diversity of geographical locations and a diversity of cultural backgrounds, who apply their talents to a spectrum of subjects at the same institution. Therefore I would agree with Cohen ([1995: 1](#)) who holds that multicultural societies require multicultural universities. The Irish government made a commitment to inter-culturalism in the White Paper on Adult Education ([2000](#)) which it defines as 'the need to frame educational policy and practice in the context of serving a diverse population as opposed to a uniform one, and the development of curricula, materials, training and inservice, modes of assessment and delivery methods which accept such diversity as the norm' ([Department of Education and Science, 2000: 13](#)).

It seems, however, that the benefits of a diverse student population have not been the driving factor in the recruitment of international students. Because of falling numbers of Irish students, the higher-education sector third-level institutions have become increasingly dependent on the revenue generated by international students who pay an average fee of €10,000. The Dean of Medicine and Health at University College Cork, Professor Michael Murphy, states: 'The *only* reason we have brought in non EU-students is because we would have to shut our doors without their fees. They heavily subsidise Irish students' ([Donnellan 2003, italics added](#)). Ireland follows the path previously trod by Britain, where the complaint was made much earlier that international students were seen as remedying the financial situation rather than as a significant feature of future academic development ([Elsey and Kinnell 1990: 17](#)). In the debate about international students, little importance is given to the academic or cultural benefits the universities could gain from 'internationalisation at home'.

Apart from this degrading view of international students as revenue-generators, the institutions fail to provide for the practical implications of a diverse student body. The structures and support services are not appropriate to the high fees they are paying. The literature in the UK has identified and discussed the paradox that the international students were supposed to create extra revenue while at the same time the fees had to cover the additional support they need ([Kinnell 1990: 40](#)). Irish international students have complained about the exorbitant fees and unjustified increases, while there is no system in place for loans or scholarships ([Horan, 2003](#)). According to Dr Rebecca Hughes from the University of Nottingham, admitting a wider student body involves not only 'salivating over the benefits, but also meeting the costs. It demands a mature strategy in terms of internationalisation in contradistinction to straight international recruitment' ([Hughes, 2004](#)).

## Racism in education

The death of the Chinese student Zhao Liu Tao following a racist attack in Dublin in January 2002 has shown that international students are not immune to the increasing xenophobia and racism in Irish society. Apart from reports about racist attitudes of Irish students ([Union of Students in Ireland, 2003](#)) the segregation of international students reflects the 'institutional and social tainting of "otherness"' that exists in Irish society ([FitzGibbon 2003: 48](#)). This 'everyday racism' with its patronising, marginalisation and passive tolerance is not a separate phenomenon but has to be seen in context with the institutional and ideological racism by which it is shaped ([Essed 1991: 288](#)). This racism and racialisation influence the experiences of the international students at the level of the institution and of interaction. One of the students interviewed expressed this connection explicitly 'Irish students - I cannot see myself fraternising with them if the situation outside is so bad. That is why I work alone in class and laboratory. It's inevitable.'

The lack of integration of international students with Irish students on the interactional level corresponds with a lack of policies and structures on the institutional level.

While adjustment to Irish society and educational system is expected from the international student, adjustment by the society and its institution is limited ([Sinha 2003: 83](#)).

Like many other third-level institutions, the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) has no policies addressing the issue of a multicultural university. There are no structures in place to give international students support by way of tutor or buddy system, and there are no organised places or events where they could meet with other students. There are no official channels through which they can make themselves heard or process complaints. There is no visual representation of 'non-white' students.

## The research process

The research was conducted on the Kevin Street campus of the DIT as it has the highest number of international students across the faculties of science, engineering, applied arts and business. For a number of reasons, the timing and sample were extremely limited, therefore the study has more a character of an exploratory pilot study. The fact that I am a lecturer at the college posed a number of problems as it increased the bias and the hierarchical relationship between researcher and researched – even though none of the participants were my own students. The researcher must play a number of conflicting roles in his/her organisation, so a high degree of reflexivity is necessary both during the research process and in the interpretation of the results ([Alvesson and Sköldböck, 2000: 6](#)). These methodological problems are counterbalanced by some advantages: doing research at your work place one has both formal and informal access to information. Afterwards it offers the possibility to disseminate the results to participants and college authorities in order to try and implement the suggestions for improvement. The research findings and emanating suggestions were also discussed with the president of DIT, the international student officer and the dean for international students, all of whom were appointed after the research was carried out. It remains to be seen whether they take the recommendations on board.

A mixture of methods was applied. A self-completion questionnaire was sent out to the 80 international students at the college both by e-mail and by traditional mail. Twenty-seven of these were returned and analysed. A deeper and more detailed account was obtained by interviewing 15 students. The majority of students were Chinese, reflecting their predominance among international students in Dublin. The other countries represented were Zambia, Swaziland, Nigeria, Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Japan, Venezuela and Bulgaria. To complement the picture, lecturers were asked for their comments and observations in a short questionnaire which was sent out by e-mail and hard copy; 22 lecturers responded.

## Research findings

Results from students' questionnaire and interviews

The international students are a highly diverse group, with different experiences and backgrounds. They differ not only according to country of origin, gender and religion but they also have different educational and linguistic backgrounds; a large age span, different ways of supporting themselves financially; varying degrees of contact with other students, lecturers and administration; and different experiences regarding discrimination. This illustrates what Dr Sanjay Sharma stresses in saying that 'the only thing to be certain of when teaching in a multicultural context, 'is how little is actually known about the heterogeneity of the student body... or rather, *how little should be assumed about them*' ([Sharma 2003: 24, italics in original](#)).

The following issues were raised by a large number of students (actual student quotations italics):

They are critical of fees (the amount, the method of payment and the lack of fairness), believing that the high fees do not correspond with a high level of support by the institute.  
*It should think about how to make us more comfortable and satisfied. This is a way the college could do promotion, to get students to come here.*

They have to make an effort to adapt to the different demands of the educational system, forms of assessment and different teacher-student relationships.  
*The lecturers should give foreigners extra time, the speed is too fast. I can't cope with the speed. I can't even take notes. They should give private lessons.*

While having problems with the content of studies, nearly all have problems with the English language which is often caused by different accents and specific vocabulary. The language

barrier seems to be both the cause and the result of their limited contact with home students.  
*It'd be good if they treated us as equals, not aliens.*

Many students will not ask if they have a problem it requires a lot of attention from lecturers.  
*If you don't ask they won't come to you.*

Contact and support comes mainly from other international students, especially from their own country, and to some extent from the lecturers. They complain, however, of little support from the administration and student's union.

*We come here and we know nothing and have to ask a lot of questions. They get fed up with us asking questions and also our English is not good enough.*

Although most students experienced discrimination outside college they do not explicitly refer to it within the college. However their suggestions imply that they do sometimes feel discriminated against, especially by being ignored rather than included.

*They don't really want to know you.* Contact with Irish students is very limited even in college because international students are feeling distanced and ignored. Their wish for Irish students to initiate the encounter is met by lack of interest of Irish students. *They should be more forthcoming to the international students. They have a culture which we have to learn and they can learn from us.* This is increased by language and cultural barriers, age (maturity), different ways of socialising, and even no time for socialising because of work demands. *They have a different way of communicating, different topics.*

*It is hard to get to know people other than superficially. You don't know what they are exactly thinking.*

The international students wish to overcome this distancing by uniting among themselves and by making themselves 'known', but there is a lack of structural and institutional support, no forum but even no informal get-togethers.

*I want to mingle with them, I want to make friends with them, want to let them know that I am just as human as they are, just as friendly as anyone else, give me a chance.*

## Results from the lecturer's questionnaire

Nearly all of the lecturers saw the international students as an asset to the course because of their maturity, motivation, diligence and commitment, and because they add an intercultural dimension to the classroom. They are seen as having a positive effect on the Irish students by setting a good example and by 'internationalising' those students who have little experience of life abroad. While the issue of content is not regarded as problematic, most lecturers consider the language difficulties a challenge to their teaching. They are aware that the difficulties do not merely require extra effort by the student but also that they themselves have to invest more time and effort, develop sensibility and adapt their teaching to the needs of a more heterogeneous class group.

Some lecturers feel that they require more preparation and training, more information about the background of the students. The issues of culturally sensitive course content and the opportunities of a culturally heterogeneous group are appreciated particularly by the language teachers. On the issue of fairness, a lack of equality in assessments (e.g. the need for extra time in exams and use of electronic dictionaries) is only acknowledged by some lecturers. Considering the large drop in student numbers it is remarkable that very few lecturers mention the fact that not only their employer is dependent on the income the international student but some courses are dependent on their numbers for their survival. It is interesting that not only do both lecturer and students give each other 'good marks', but their answers correspond largely with each other regarding difficulties and suggestions for improvement.

## Suggestions by students and lecturers

Suggestions often give a better insight than explicit questions about experiences regarding lack of support and discrimination, as international students might have been reluctant to openly criticise the host institution or the lecturers, particularly as the researcher was herself a lecturer. Often, terms such as discrimination or racism have to be clarified. The following suggestions emanated from both the students and the lecturers:

Fees should be reduced, or at least different forms of payment should be allowed, and scholarships should reward achievements of students.

The income which international students create should be matched by a higher level of support on matters such as dealings with authorities and administration, accommodation, induction/information, assessments and so on.

International students should get organised and engaged to have some sort of representation, maybe through the Students Union in order to make themselves known/heard.

To overcome the separation of Irish and international students, a number of structural and informal measures should be introduced such as involvement of the Students Union, international student's day/officer/centre/tutor/buddy system, organisation of social events, and holiday arrangements. Diversity of students requires additional training on all levels: students, lecturers, administrative staff, support services.

English language support should be increased and be specific to the level and the subject needs of the student.

## Discussion of the findings and recommendations

International Students as an asset

Much of the literature is characterised by the 'student problem' approach: whether it concerns language inadequacies or difficulties with teaching methods and different learning techniques, it was always seen as a problem for the students, not for their teachers or for the institution. To quote Elsey and Kinnell (1990: 2), "'They' had problems with 'our' system (of a socio-cultural, linguistic, academic or practical nature) which 'we' could help them to overcome. Ownership of the system was largely assumed to rest with the host country'. Therefore it was a welcome surprise that a significant majority of the lecturers (20 out of 22) regarded international students as an asset. Even taking into consideration the possible skew resulting from the role of the researcher, this result is remarkable.

The reasons given for this positive attitude substantiate the arguments for the educational benefits of a diverse student population and question the attitude of higher education institutions. The positive attitude of lecturers is all the more remarkable as they concede that a more diverse student body presents a challenge to their teaching. In their view, the benefits of the presence of the international students seem to outweigh the additional effort they require: teaching methods and content have to be reconsidered, while extra attention and commitment are required especially because of language difficulties. It requires a particular sensitivity on the part of the lecturer, as international students often cannot or will not request assistance.

Students and lecturers alike confirm that mastering the content of the course does not present a problem for most of the international students, who seem to be well prepared by their home education to cope with the demands. This points to the question of why the students come here to study, making considerable financial and personal sacrifices, if similar courses are available in the homeland. According to a survey of the national statistic office, nearly 90% of Chinese students in China want to study abroad (Blume 2003). A western degree is assumed to be superior and has more value on the labour market. Cohen (1995: 4) points out that many students come from countries or cultures which have been excluded from, or made the objects of, the kinds of knowledge associated with the success of Western capitalism, and they want to get their hands on this precious cultural capital and the social status associated with higher education in our society. Further exploration of the connection between political and economic dominance of the minority world on the one hand, and academic and language imperialism on the other, is not possible in the context of this paper.

## International students as consumers

The suggestions confirm the findings of previous research that, considering their high level of financial contribution, international students are not getting the service to which they are entitled. The International Student Forum hosted by the Irish Council for International Students highlighted the same issues (Cox 2003: 53). There are no practical provisions, such as support with accommodation, flexibility in paying the fees, no rewards for achievements by grants, no structures for representation. No allowances are made for not being a native speaker of English. The frequent complaints concerning administration clearly indicate that the students felt there was no one listening to them, no one they could approach with their problems. It has to be said that because the administrative staff are often the first and most important point of contact, they have to bear the brunt of the disappointment about the lack of support, grants and scholarships. Requests are usually directed at them – such as the prevailing issue of accommodation – which are within their remit anyway and should be addressed by DIT as a whole. It is interesting that because of the strong multicultural network, the students are quite aware of

what is happening in other colleges and even other countries. If DIT does not want to lose these students as consumers it is necessary to make its 'product' attractive to them. Therefore it has to make academic and other services more responsive and appropriate ([Cox 2003: 54](#)).

## Interaction between international students and Irish students

In order for international students to benefit fully from their sojourn in Ireland, not only will the academic and language support have to be increased but also the social aspect of their lives has to be organised in such a way as to enable them to engage with the home students and college life in general. While it will be important to introduce measures such as a tutor or buddy system as has been done at Trinity College, this sort of organised social support alone cannot overcome the reluctance of the Irish students to engage in encounters with the international students. The Students Union could do a lot more to give them a voice: for example, the student newspaper could play a more active role in this respect by interviewing individual students. A common theme of the students' suggestions is the wish to be recognised, to be given the possibility to express and engage themselves and to inform others about their country or culture. While an international day or an international society is an important step in that direction it does not guarantee the involvement of the Irish students as long as Irish national and international are seen as exclusionary. As the literature has shown, international students are again often isolated and among themselves at these events.

As Irish students were not included in the research we have to rely on what the international students perceive as reasons for the reluctance of the Irish students to engage with them: language barrier, cultural differences, age difference, different forms of socialising or simply not initiating encounters, which was perceived as disinterest. Interestingly it was remarked that the Irish students can overcome their insularity if they themselves have been studying abroad and can empathise with the experiences of the international students. As few Irish students study abroad, the 'internationalisation at home' is even more relevant and should be promoted by involving the international students at many levels of the institutional life ([Cox 2003: 54](#)). However, increased contact alone does not necessarily lead to understanding: there has to be an awareness of the cultural dispositions that determine both one's own behaviour and that of the 'other'. FitzGerald ([2003: 5](#)) suggests a 'cross-cultural literacy' training for communication which would enable people to deal with difference as an everyday reality.

## Language support

After fees, the next greatest problem perceived by both students and lecturers is the lack of language proficiency. To overcome this obstacle, more extensive and specific language support is needed. Students should not be penalised for lack of language proficiency in assessments, and special provisions should be made for them in exams (e.g. use of electronic dictionaries). It has to be noted, however, that the best way to improve language skills is contact with native speakers, which could be encouraged by mixing native and international students for group work. A buddy system, especially for incoming students, has proven useful elsewhere. Just how far language difficulties are both the cause and the effect of the segregation of international students as suggested in the literature should be further investigated ([Roberts 2003; Kim 1991](#)).

There were some indications that international students contribute to their isolation by keeping to themselves. This confirms research findings regarding the importance of the mono-cultural network for support and sense of identity ([Kagan and Cohen 1990](#)). The fact that multi-cultural networks with other international students ranged second on their list of priorities supports the argument that the perception of exclusion and discrimination favours the identification with other international students and the creation of another group identity ([Schmitt et al. 2003](#)). The frequent use of the 'them' and 'us' categories suggest that the students perceive themselves already as a group. An important factor which contributes to the impossibility of mixing with Irish students is lack of time, as many students have to work in order to be able to afford the fees. This would make a reassessments of the amount and forms of payment all the more necessary.

## Racism

Experiences of discrimination within the college appear to be mainly those of 'everyday racism' which, according to Essed ([1991: 10](#)), is infused into familiar practices and attitudes. The students experienced many of the incidences listed in Essed's study, such as marginalisation, Euro/whitecentrism, passive tolerance, avoiding or withdrawing from social contact, automatic in-group preference among whites, humiliation, petty harassment and denigration of their culture. According to Sinha ([2003: 86](#)) this subtle, hard-to-identify racism, 'these barely audible messages about my people as lesser' is the way racism is experienced at least 90% of the time. Apart from some discriminatory remarks about their

culture of origin the most frequent complaint is about being ignored and overlooked. Being treated as if one was not there can imply that one should not be there. As all of the international students involved in the research were highly visible as 'non-whites' they could be immediately perceived as different and as a member of a minority. Because they do not belong they become the invisible 'other'.

This invisibility of the international students is evident also in the physical environment of the college: no visual representations of diversity in the building and in the DIT literature (except in the brochure of the faculty of science), no signs in foreign languages, no acknowledgement or celebration of other than Christian feast days, no food for religious minorities in the canteen, no prayer room for Muslims. This ignoring of the international students on the level of everyday personal interactions level corresponds with the lack of policies, structures and action on the institutional level in the college. This ranges from the lack of policy statements regarding the value of cultural diversity to lack of structures for representation of the international students and lack of complaints procedures in case of for racial harassment. DIT has yet to offer formal training for staff on interculturalism or antiracism.

Higher education should cater for a student population 'that is not only multicultural, but also multilingual and multiracial' (Arora 1995: 31). In their Guidelines On Anti-Racism and Intercultural Training (2001), the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) argues that 'interculturalism suggests the acceptance not only of the principles of equality of rights, values and abilities but also the development of policies to promote interaction, collaboration and exchange with people of different cultures, ethnicity or religion living in the same territory'. And as Greene argues (2003: 6), being culturally mixed is not enough, we must change our attitudes and practices. The Higher Education Equality Unit (2002: 91) have made a number of recommendations for the creation of an intercultural campus that should be guided by a policy statement which incorporates interculturalism and antiracism, and includes a development of awareness of diversity issues through intercultural and antiracism training of staff on all levels.

## Future research

When a proper monitoring system is set up to find out exactly how many international students there are on which courses and from which countries, future samples could be more representative, and more conclusive results could be achieved about variables such as age, gender, religion, country of origin, background and length of stay. The sample should be expanded to include part-time and postgraduate students. A monitoring system should also include ethnic minorities students who are resident in Ireland, as the numbers of these students are bound to increase in future. Asylum seekers, if recognised as refugees, are eligible to free third-level education after three years and were found to have a strong educational background (Ward 2002: 33). The majority of immigrant parents have high educational aspirations not only for themselves but also for their children (Keogh and Whyte 2003: 36). It would be interesting to find out which similarities and differences, and what relationships these students have with international students.

Future research should include an investigation into Irish students' attitudes towards international students to expand on the results of the only study so far (USI 2003). As there are few comparative studies, it would be advisable to apply the components of this study to both Irish and international students. To support the 'whole organisation approach' towards an intercultural campus, all levels of in-house, administrative, managerial and teaching staff should be included in future studies.

## Conclusion

I would like to finish with the opinion of an Irish student – a voice that so far has been missing from this paper – who became aware of the challenges of a multicultural university after having spent a year in Finland:

There are boundaries and borders set up, by host students and by international students, that hinder their successful intercultural communication. What these boundaries are and how we can overcome them, I don't know. This task, I feel, is not only down to the individual but to the institutions that are encouraging multiculturalism.... Facilities need to be readily available within the university settings and time-tabling to enable these borders to break down. It is not merely enough to allow the students union to develop an international students society or to create a post for an international students officer. Creating a multicultural university is not only about increasing college places available to non-native students, or pumping more money into exchange programmes, although these are crucial factors. Development education between university staff and students needs to be addressed in accordance with issues of multiculturalism and intercultural living. The key element in multiculturalism is 'together', we can go on living in parallel worlds and cultures but learning from each other and communicating in a

multicultural set-up such as the university are crucial for the successful expansion of our globalised community.

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