

## From English to Undergraduate, the international student experience

### Abstract

At Northumbria University, researchers have conducted a number of projects investigating the needs of diverse student groups. For example Newcastle Business School (NBS) have an increasing number of international students entering their programmes, particularly those originating from China, many of whom attended the ELAN (English Language) summer school prior to NBS entry. Over the last few years, a number of questionnaires on learning and teaching experiences have been distributed to all Northumbria students including ELAN students. This paper will draw upon these questionnaires to give a snapshot of international student experience whilst at Northumbria.

### Introduction

International students bring into the classroom a different educational background and cultural knowledge from their UK peers. In 2005/06 more than 3,300 international students studied at Northumbria with over 70% originating from the Pacific Rim region. Significant numbers of these students choose programmes within Newcastle Business School (NBS), therefore much of the narrative relates to students from the Pacific Rim regions who have chosen to study NBS programmes.

International students can enrich academic life through sharing their culture, giving the potential for the development of globalised curricula and of students' intercultural skills, increasingly valued by employers (Ryan, 2000; Wisker, 2000). While there are many reasons why international students wish to study outside their home country, in choosing a university, primary considerations are academic reputation and content of the programme (Bamford et al., 2002; Barker, 1997; McNamara & Harris, 1997). This demonstrates the importance that staff have an understanding of other cultures and a willingness to adjust teaching to create pedagogies that are culturally fair, inclusive and meaningful for all the participants in the education process.

Cronin (1995) neatly summarises some of the main issues which may affect international students during their study in the UK. These include

- understanding accent and intonation of lecturers;
- adjusting to new ways of thinking and of presenting material;
- overcoming fear of making mistakes or losing face;
- becoming confident in speaking up, participating – and asking questions – in class;
- unfamiliarity with critical thinking decision making and independent thought;
- wanting to uphold Confucian traditions such as respect for teachers,

These along with the other generic teaching and learning issues such as assessment and blended learning have been addressed by a number of combined qualitative and quantitative studies. One study which drew upon the issues identified by Cronin (1995) was distributed to students who were on English Language studies at the University. A few months later a similar but extended questionnaire was distributed across the University. Demographic data enabled comparison of NBS students across the time frame covering their English Language study and their subsequent academic programme. As a result of the large scale study a number of recommendations were made in a guide 'Diversity: What's the Problem' which was distributed to all academic staff at Northumbria with the objective of enhancing teaching and learning practices, not only to improve international student experience

but also to improve the experience of students with disabilities, mature students and students from differing socio-economic backgrounds. After a suitable period to allow lecturers to make adjustments based on the guide, the most recent study undertaken utilised survey methods, interviews and focus groups to establish whether students agreed with the recommendations made and to assess the extent to which they believed these were now being practiced. Once again demographic data allowed the extraction of data relating to international students on NBS programmes. In all surveys, sample sizes were large enough to validate any statistical comparisons made.

## Findings

### Lecture Sessions

In an increasingly competitive market, universities are generally required to raise student numbers often without a concomitant rise in staffing levels. This often results in decreasing face to face contact with students and increasing reliance on instruction and information in a written format plus didactic formats such as lectures as the main forms of communication.

In lectures, international students can encounter problems if the speed of delivery is too quick and if the lecturer has a pronounced regional accent. The use of colloquial English and unfamiliar terminology leads to an inability to determine what is relevant and impacts on note taking (Shakya and Horsfall, 2000; Beaven et al., 1998). In the Northumbria study, language and, in particular, accents and pace of delivery did cause some difficulties for international students ( $p < 0.01$ ) when compared with UK students. Thirty per cent of students on NBS programmes felt their teachers talked too quickly, a percentage which was double that of those reporting the same thing on ELAN course. Regional accents were not particularly problematic with only 19% of students once in NBS reporting this as a difficulty. Focus group participants observed that those used to working with international students obviously reduced pace of delivery whereas those unused to working with international students tended to ignore the group dynamics. However, they felt that too slow a pace would not be advisable as their UK counterparts would either be bored or resent being "*spoken to as if they were children*".

In light of students' comment, rather than suggest pace of lectures was made slower it would seem more sensible to suggest that lecturers could allow students to make recordings of lectures. Perhaps unsurprisingly international students showed a greater desire ( $p < 0.05$ ) to be allowed to take recordings of lectures. However, overall a high proportion (68%) of all NBS students claimed that this would be useful. When asked what occurs in practice around half on NBS students said this was rarely permitted. This could be simply because students may assume that this would not be allowed. Therefore lecturers could be recommended, at the outset of a module/course to state that it is permissible to record their lectures. Some international focus group participants reported cases of lecturers refusing this practice when asked. Indeed one student indicated that they felt that being able to do this was so important that they had surreptitiously recorded lecturers. The reasons why lecturers are reticent in allowing recordings to take place may merit further investigation.

Other recommendations were that lecturers include an overview of lectures; and insert obvious reflective pauses into lecture sessions. and these were reported as being very useful by all NBS students. 45-50% students felt these recommendations were **extremely** useful and a further 40-45% of students felt the suggestions would be **fairly** useful. In practice it was gratifying to note that virtually all lecturers (94%) provided an overview at the beginning of a lecture. However, in the opinion of all

students, those lecturers who incorporated obvious pauses for catch-up formed a much lower percentage with only 12% reporting this occurred regularly.

Research evidence suggests that note taking during lectures is problematic for international students. Dunkel and Davy's (1989) study revealed significant differences existed in the perceptions of the Western students and those from other cultures concerning note-taking while listening to lectures. Beaven, Caldensi & Tantral (1998) agree that their Pacific Rim students were unable to simultaneously listen and take notes, finding after classes that they could make no sense of those notes they had managed to make – further stressing the viability of the previous recommendation to allow students to record lectures.

When the Northumbria study asked about note taking during lectures, there was a distinct difference between responses from international students from the ELAN course and those on NBS undergraduate (UG) programmes. During the ELAN course 59% believed it was difficult to listen and take notes at the same time. This reduced to 48% when asked during undergraduate study. Upon further investigation of this reduction it became clear that the integrated use of the BlackBoard virtual learning environment (VLE) to support classroom contact within NBS was a major and positive contributing factor. In ELAN, although handouts and set texts are regularly used, as yet little use is made of the VLE. Eighty per cent of respondents agreed that the availability of lecture notes via the VLE helped their study and focus group participants supported this view:

*“The VLE does make me feel that the knowledge I am getting is equal to others in the class because the transparency is much higher than traditional methods”*

*“It was really interesting to see presentations on VLE (which we were supposed to use later in the class) as reading them prior to class made it easier for me to come up with comments during the class. Comments and discussion within the class are important to have a clear understanding of concepts.”*

### **Seminar Sessions**

For other forms of classroom contact, such as seminars it is inevitable that, for international students, language fluency confidence can also be exacerbated by a change in familiar practice where many international students are unaccustomed to classroom interactivity. For example 57% of UK students, when asked about previous experiences, said they were used to interactivity and classroom discussion in comparison to 46% of international students ( $p < 0.01$ ). Focus group students who had attended ELAN classes said that seminar topics were given to them by their ELAN tutor to read up on beforehand and then discussed in English, although they reverted to discussion in Chinese if they lacked understanding. There was a sense of comradeship because they were all struggling with the English language.

All speech related responses from Northumbria surveys indicate that many international students have less confidence with their speaking ability than their UK counterparts. Confidence associated with language fluency can have a major impact on the establishment of relationships with peers. Focus group students on NBS UG programmes reported that, in some seminar sessions, the majority of students are Chinese, and it would be useful if some UK students joined the class to redress the balance.

This issue was initially investigated by eliciting responses to the statement ‘I like being in a classroom with a cultural mix of students’. Table 1 illustrates the

responses from the international students when studying their ELAN course, results from the same question once the UG programme was underway and the responses from the UK students to the same question.

**Table 1: Responses to ‘I like being in a classroom with a cultural mix of students’**

%	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree
ELAN	69	20	10	2	0
NBS International	28	48	20	3	0
NBS UK	9	30	41	13	6

Although international students respond positively to this statement there is a marked shift in opinion from the strongly agree category to the agree category. UK students certainly appear to exhibit a more mixed response to the statement. Ledwith (1997) found international students working in groups with home students regarded them as exclusive, unfriendly and unwelcoming, with students whose English language skills were perceived as poor being either ignored or excluded from group processes.

This lack of mixing, and associated feelings of not fitting in the local culture, according to Rifkin et al (1996) confounds academic staff’s efforts to get them to ‘speak up’ in class. When confronted with the statement, ‘I participate in class discussions, only when someone asks me a direct question’, whilst on the ELAN course a healthy 80% of respondents disagreed with the statement. Responses to the same statement for the international UG programmes reduce dramatically to 30% in disagreement. This would seem to indicate that, once international students enter a mixed group, there are more inhibitions in relation to speaking up. Indeed during the focus groups international students revealed the extent of this inhibition – they have to overcome the hurdle of getting the language ‘right’ plus the hurdle of being confident their subject knowledge is correct.

A number of practices were suggested that lecturing staff might adopt to encourage the establishment of relationships, particular between students of different cultural backgrounds:

- Early in module seminars students are given a chance to introduce themselves to other students in the group
- For group work, the lecturer carefully selects the group members (e.g. Two UK and two international students)
- Ground rules are set for group discussions e.g. only one student speaks at a time
- Students are given a few minutes before group discussions to jot down an outline of what they might say.

Table 2 indicates how useful international and UK students felt these recommendations were. For both student groups percentage response indicated that high proportions found all the recommendations useful

**Table 2: NBS Percentage Responses to the usefulness of recommendations for seminar practice by Nationality**

Statement	Extremely useful		Fairly Useful		No preference	
	UK	Int.	UK	Int.	UK	Int
Early in module seminars students are given a chance to introduce themselves to other students in the group	27	32	39	49	34	18
For group work, the lecturer carefully selects the group members.	14	28	33	54	51	19
Ground rules are set for group discussions e.g. only one student speaks at a time	14	25	48	55	39	20
Students are given a few minutes before group discussions to jot down an outline of what they might say	43	48	46	48	11	5

Apart from the final statement, significant differences were found between the preferences of the UK and international student groups. International students had a greater preference ( $p < 0.01$ ) for the careful selection of group members and the establishment of ground rules. International students also showed slightly more preference ( $p < 0.05$ ) for introductions to be made amongst seminar group members at the start of a programme. Although no differences were found in relation to allowing time for jotting down notes before a group discussion, it is noteworthy that 90% of all NBS students said that they felt this would be useful. Therefore it was pleasing to find that 45% of the sample reported that some lecturers do this, with a further 29% saying this is the case the majority of the time.

Focus group students reported that, in ELAN, the sense that they were all on the same level as far as their grammar, speaking and aural skills were concerned, made them feel comfortable with each other. While group allocation by the lecturer might result in their being taken outside of their comfort zone, the international students in the focus groups felt that this would be more beneficial in terms of improving their English language skills.

However, although 81% of international students felt that careful group selection would be useful for them, 53% of the total NBS sample said that this rarely occurred with 44% also reporting that it was rare for ground rules to be set for discussions. Shakya and Horsfall (2002) comment that many international students have difficulties joining culturally mixed groups and are rarely assisted in doing so by staff, as many assume that all students have equal social skills. One possibility could be through the use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) for initiating or extending classroom discussion.

*Using the VLE beforehand make it easier for me to understand lectures. English is not my native language plus I'm not extremely comfortable with accents so having a prior knowledge is helpful for me.*

By using a VLE students can be given time to prepare for and think through their responses to an online discussion (Freeman & Capper, 1999; Graziadei, 1998).

Ellis et al (2005) also noted that the idea of peer mentoring was praised by international students as a method of overcoming early dilemmas. Peer mentoring programmes in which an international student is matched with a home student can be of value in promoting interaction between international students and home

students (Poyrazil et al, 2002; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Northumbria University does indeed run a welcome scheme for international students but this is at a central rather than at programme level, which may be more beneficial for assisting student relationships at the seminar level.

## **Learning Culture**

Studies concur that international students entering the Western academic system, are required to change their cultural identity with regards to ways of thinking and writing. Bamford et al (2002) found that the international students acknowledged differences between the learning styles in their home countries and in the UK. Eighty six per cent of international student respondents in the Northumbria survey agreed (49% strongly) that in the UK students are encouraged to be more independent. Additionally, 79% of the international students believed that different study skills were required for UK study.

Many international students displayed a tendency to get the most out of seminars by conducting preparatory reading before seminars. Thirty one per cent in the Northumbria survey said that they spent a lot of time preparing for classes. This is significantly higher ( $p < 0.01$ ) than UK students, where only 17% undertake preparatory reading. However, in terms of reading and writing skills, there is a general Western academic perception that Pacific Rim students are rote learners (i.e. they simply memorise text rather than understand and critique it). This notion originates from a partial truth: memorisation is a teaching method but this is only the primary stage in their learning process. Only when Pacific Rim students feel they have mastered the subject and have accurate recall of texts do they then progress on to creative thinking. Numerous studies indicate that, contrary to perceptions, Pacific Rim students achieve higher academic levels of understanding than Western students (Gow et al., 1996; Volet & Renshaw, 1996 ;)

As the accurate recall of texts is not a requisite of the Western academic system many international students are required to change their reading strategies. For example they may think that all books on a reading list have to be read cover to cover and fully understood. Furthermore, some are unlikely to be evaluating the contents of the books due to the respect that they have for academic authors. They are also unlikely to know that they are expected to go beyond the reading list and find other sources of information. If they are unaware of this last point, it is less likely that they will have the skills to be able to differentiate between core and peripheral material and may lack the skills to judge the authority of a source.

Beaven, Caldensi & Tantral (1998) report that international students find topics such as Accounting particularly difficult because they have to learn the concepts and specialised language simultaneously. Other studies corroborates that unfamiliar, discipline-specific terminology can be a major problem (Flowerdew and Miller, 1992; Burke and Wyatt-Smith, 1996).

One question in the Northumbria survey addressed the issue of whether international students could read English academic texts with understanding. While the international students felt they had no real problems in reading, respondents seemed less sure in the NBS UG environment than whilst they were on the ELAN course. These findings were probed further by asking whether they felt there was too much specialised language and too many unfamiliar concepts during reading. Around half of the respondents felt that indeed they did come across specialised language with a slightly lower percentage (41%) reporting they came across many unfamiliar concepts. Whilst on ELAN 63% of students felt they could clearly express their ideas in writing with only 31% agreeing with this statement in relation to their NBS UG

course. These data could illustrate a compounded difficulty between the specialised language and unfamiliar concepts students agreed they came across when reading.

This was further corroborated in focus groups where one student reported how difficulties increased as level of study progressed, where during the first and second year more reliance was placed on textbooks which tended to be more descriptive with pictorial and diagrammatic explanations. Final year texts were far more demanding and more stress is placed on the use of journal articles (which they were generally required to find for themselves) which they found difficult to understand ability.

A number of recommendations, to alleviate changes in learning culture were made in relation to both directed learning and classroom practice:

- Reading lists are distributed early
- Reading lists identify which materials are essential or core and which are just recommendations.
- Lecturers provide a teaching & learning plan at the start of each module with precise guides for directed learning and seminar preparation
- Materials such as handouts and PowerPoint slides are made available on the VLE a few days before lectures.
- In lectures any key or unfamiliar concepts are explained
- In lectures global or international examples are used to illustrate topics or concepts

Table 3 illustrates that the students felt that (all but one of) these suggested practices were **extremely** useful. It is particularly noteworthy that, although these recommendations were principally made to address potential need of the international student group, no statistically significant differences were found between the UK and international student groups.



**Table 3: NBS Percentage Responses to the usefulness of recommendations for adapting to a new learning culture**

Statement	Extremely useful	Fairly Useful	No preference
Reading lists are distributed early	79	17	3
Reading lists identify which materials are essential or core and which are just recommendations.	80	19	2
Lecturers provide a teaching & learning plan at the start of each module with precise guides for directed learning and seminar preparation	87	13	1
Materials such as handouts and PowerPoint slides are made available on VLE a few days before lectures.	89	10	1
In lectures any key or unfamiliar concepts are explained	73	26	1
In lectures global or international examples are used to illustrate topics or concepts	62	30	9

The most popular of the recommendations (i.e. provision of notes on the VLE) was reiterated in focus group discussions:

*“We will make a good preparation for the class if we can get the information beforehand. You can prepare some questions about each class, understand more about each session, and solve problems through asking the tutor in class”*

*“Please upload lecture notes before the lecture so we are ready...for international students sometimes we can’t really catch what we have been taught because some tutors told us too fast”*

For the remaining recommendations, students, in most cases, reported high levels of practice amongst their NBS tutors, 74% of students reported that the majority of their lecturers used extensive teaching and learning plans. Around two thirds of lecturers distributed reading lists early and noted which texts were essential. For the final two recommendations relating to lecture practice there was some mismatch between student desire and practice. Therefore although 73% of NBS students felt that an explanation of key and unfamiliar concepts would be very useful this occurred on a regular basis only a third of the time. Similarly 62% of respondents felt the use of global and international examples was extremely useful but 29% of respondents felt this rarely happened.

### **Managing Assessment**

The original Northumbria surveys addressed the issue of assignment work in a number of different ways from questions looking at management of study tasks relating to assessment, sources of information used on assignments through to investigating students’ understanding of plagiarism - an increasing area of concern for many academics.

Introna et al (2003) point out that the assertion that international students are more likely to plagiarise than their host peers raises an issue of potential discrimination since detection of plagiarism may be easier in respect of their work than in that of a home student. A high rate of plagiarism, or neglect of referencing, among

international students is frequently a reflection of other cultures' differing academic practices. In some cultures, knowledge is considered to be in the public domain while other cultures believe that alteration of an authority's original words is disrespectful (Ladd and Ruby, 1999).

One of the top ten reasons students give for plagiarism is lack of understanding of what they are expected to do to avoid it (Carroll, 2003). This may be owing to their lack of experience in Western academic writing. As Introna et al (2003) point out, in the UK, a significant part of the assessment of a course is some form of written work, such as a critical review of reading material or an essay. The consequent pressure and anxiety of dealing with this unfamiliar process is often manifested in the student's insistence on the identification of the exact text, reference or books that are important or relevant.

Some of the basic issues surrounding the perception of plagiarism were addressed within the original Northumbria student questionnaires. Students were asked whether they understood the need to use referencing and quotation marks; that work submitted for assessment must be their own; and the need to explain ideas in their own words.

**Table 4: International NBS Responses to Questions on Understanding Plagiarism**

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I understand the need to use referencing and quotation marks	21	56	20	3	0
I understand that assessment work submitted must be my own	43	43	11	3	0
I understand the need to explain ideas in my own words	20	49	27	2	2

It is clear from Table 4 that international students are aware of the main basic issues of what constitutes plagiarism, with over three quarters of respondents agreeing with all three statements. This was also confirmed by international students taking part in focus groups who also noted that plagiarism was something which was not particularly mentioned until entry into NBS programmes where in fact University policies in regard to this was perhaps overstressed, *'It is the first thing we heard on every module!'*

Focus group participants noted how writing was very different in the UK from China and felt unsure about academic writing. This extended to the ability to summarise particularly larger articles as they felt that there are a number of things they needed to understand in an article and they needed to understand it ALL before it could be summarised. Other examples quoted were how hard it was not to use the same words as an author through lack of confidence in using appropriate alternatives, i.e. finding the apposite synonym.

Issues surrounding assessment arose with all students. Therefore a number of generic recommendations were made in regard to assignments:

- There is an element of individualisation to assignments
- For large assignments, lecturers break the work up in to tasks each with its own deadline.

- Lecturers expand on assignment tasks, e.g. explaining the purpose, what the title is really saying etc
- Lecturers give clear instruction on the format and structure of reports and essays
- Lecturers give guidance on how to judge the authority of information sources, e.g. web pages
- Students are given examples of texts offering alternative viewpoints and explanations
- Lecturers provide examples of good work and work which could have been improved
- Lecturers provide opportunities for students to show them work in progress

In all cases around 90% of respondents felt that the suggestions for practice made were useful. No differences in opinion were found between the international and the UK group indicating assignment practices suggested are indeed inclusive. The most popular recommendation made was in relation to lecturers giving clear instruction on the format and structure of reports and essays with 82% of all NBS respondents feeling this was **extremely** useful, followed closely by the recommendation for lecturers to expand upon assignment tasks, which 78% of respondents stated as being **extremely** useful. This is commensurate with some opinions expressed in focus groups where some students noted the apparent differing requirements of different lecturers. For example two lecturers might ask for a report but their preferred styles would differ. It was pleasing to note that 75% of respondents felt that NBS lecturers were now attempting to expand upon assignment tasks. Some international students described how a seminar session will be dedicated to the full explanation of an assignment task.

Other recommendations which three quarters of NBS students found extremely useful were for lecturers to provide exemplars of previous work, as well as opportunities to show work in progress. One international student cited an example where her lecturer had posted assignment drafts and tutor feedback from the previous session's students on the VLE. She found this particularly useful since the assignment topic was 'very abstract'

*"I easily got the answers from this feedback and the examples in the VLE. It not only saved me time but helped me solve my difficulties. It cultivated my capability of independent study without somebody's guidance"*

However generally these were recommendations that around 50% of students felt rarely occurred in practice. In the case of international students this could be a mismatch in perceptions. Lecturers may think of this as an "open door" request whereas students may not think to make such a request.

*"In Hong Kong the tutor will say: 'you can e-mail me, or come to my office', but no-one has said that here. So we don't know if we can or not.... In Hong Kong, we even have their phone number, not just their office room number, so we can call them. In Hong Kong, we can access them in many ways, but its not so easy here."*

In focus group discussions some students noted that lecturers tended to discourage this, although the students remarked that many lecturers asked students to email them for an appointment they interpreted this as a subliminal "do not disturb" message. Students realised that a fully open door policy was not practical but did express a preference for a set of drop-by office hours to be made available. Therefore, it is suggested that lecturers' willingness to look at work in progress along

with set office hours could be made explicit on assignment briefs and/or teaching and learning plans.

In the focus groups, the desire for exemplars was further stressed. One international student noted how they and their peers were shocked by marks for their first assignment. Despite, in their view, excessive reading and research, they were receiving marks in the 50s accompanied by comments such as 'too descriptive'; 'use more argument' etc. They felt that illustrations of higher scoring pieces of work (past examples was inferred) would have helped put what was required into context for them.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Sherry et al (2003) have discussed the management of expectations of international students and the gap that exists between student expectations of a HEI and their perceptions of services provided by the HEI they are attending. As said in the introduction, international students' choice of a UK university is likely to be based on its academic reputation and the content of the programmes on offer. Findings from the literature indicate international students expect quality teaching, good staff-student communications and prompt feedback from tutors (Billing, 1998, Peterson et al 1999, Andrade 2006). In Sherry et al's (2003) research, the international students' perceptions in these areas did not meet their expectations. As Sherry et al (2003) say, this has important implications for an HEI that wishes to attract and retain international students. Like Sherry et al's (2003) this study shows that there is room for improvement, although lecturing staff would appear to have taken up some of the recommendations made after the first round of research projects. Sherry et al (2003) stress the importance of taking home students into consideration as well as international students but, from this research, it would appear that many of the recommendations made as a result of the first round of research projects are endorsed by, and would be beneficial to, home students as well as international students.

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