A think-piece on supporting international students to adjust to academic culture in the UK.

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Over the last forty years the recruitment of international students to Western universities (including universities in the United Kingdom) has steadily increased and continues to do so. These students add diversity to university communities and provide significant amounts of income to universities. However, the students themselves often describe feeling under-prepared and over-whelmed by the initial transition to studying in the United Kingdom. Simple explanations for this, too often, blame the students themselves or blame the quality of the university they came from in their home country.

However, a more sophisticated understanding of this issue emerges, and therefore more interesting and pertinent discussions and solutions can be found, once it is accepted that the academic expectations found in any country are cultural phenomena, albeit cultural phenomena grounded in good and justifiable reasons. All the authors of this paper have led courses or training that have looked at academic expectations in this way. In our experience many colleagues and students have found these eye-opening, while some find it challenging.

A simple task we have often done that begins to explore this has been to ask international students and lecturers to tell us which of these are taught or tested in systems they are familiar with. These are all framed positively because all are potentially useful life skills. However, in the discussions we have had with students and colleagues we have found that the emphasis given to each varies greatly from country to country, culture to culture.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITY WE HAVE USED

Which of these skills does the education system you are most familiar with teach and test:

1. *Memorisation and repetition with a high level of accuracy.*

2. *Making meaningful notes from spoken live presentations.*

3. *Making notes in your own time from multiple academic texts.*

4. *Synthesising ideas gained from multiple academic texts into your own argument.*

5. *Collecting and analysing data gained from interacting with people (interview, questionnaire).*

6. *Presenting orally (class presentations, videos).*

7. *Presenting visually (e-posters, infographics).*

8. *Contributing to class discussions and working in pairs or groups.*

9. *Writing and re-writing assignments over a long period.*

10. *Writing academically at speed – exams.*

11. *Writing extended reflective or philosophical pieces based on experience rather than reading or research.*

One can imagine a student who has had all their academic training from childhood to university within an academic system that primarily emphasises the first and tenth of these skills – memorisation and reproduction via exams. For this student it is no wonder that transition to an academic culture with other expectations may be daunting. Finding these skills which they have been praised and rewarded for and that they have embedded in their identity are no longer as strongly valued or indeed valued at all, could be highly dispiriting. Yet clearly these are in fact valuable skills to have – if the dismissive term 'rote learning' is rephrased as 'high level memorisation', the reasons a student may feel pride in this skill become clearer. Similarly, a student from yet another culture – familiar with an emphasis on personal experience and reflective writing may be daunted by the need for the depth of referencing, expected in United Kingdom universities. Possibly the most frequently set text in the field of education degrees, Paulo Freire's seminal text 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' would fail for what might seem to be the technical reason of lack of references if submitted to a university in the United Kingdom.

Academic expectations are a cultural phenomena but within the United Kingdom, British academic expectations are too often presented as a fixed and implicitly global worldwide norm, which in fact they are not. However, we are not saying these expectations and parameters, which tend to emphasise – critical thinking, self-guided research, and often the incremental writing of original assignments, should change. It is simply that students from outside the United Kingdom need to be supported to adjust to these. The solution lies in tutorials, in courses, in additional materials and sessions for these students. The exact structure of which is for individual academics to design. However, even prior to this the finding of solutions involves adopting this perspective that: academic expectations are a cultural phenomena bounded in place and time.

In short: we need to talk openly and honestly about this stuff otherwise, to draw an analogy, it is as if we are signalling to international students that they are no good at sports because they don't know the rules of cricket. We do not need to change the rules of the academic game, students should still be required to achieve in line with United Kingdom academic expectations (or the expectations of whichever country they are studying in). To extend this analogy: you cannot start playing football in the middle of a cricket match and expect to win. However, we do need to teach students very explicitly what these expectations are, why they exist and we need to be understanding when this adjustment is initially challenging. As just one example: it is one thing to tell students to 'reference thoroughly', but students also need to be led through its academic and cultural purpose and significance if it is to become more than a surface level ritual. And as another: paraphrasing needs to be understood as more than just the linguistic trick of re-phrasing a sentence. Its deeper purpose of enabling students to find their own voice needs to be understood as well before it can seem purposeful.

It can be disorientating and disheartening to find that academic skills that you have been taught to value over a prolonged period of your life are no longer valued highly and that other skills now have precedence. It can be less so if this discovery is addressed openly and honestly as part of a learning community. It can be empowering if within this community one learns new and valuable skills and can build an identity as a skilled academic within multiple cultures. If people are to accept new academic norms they need to understand both 'what' and 'why'.