

The impact of departmental academic skills provision on student wellbeing

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Presentation abstract

Student wellbeing in UK higher education is of serious concern, with high rates of stress and anxiety recorded among students (Pereira et al., 2019). This is compounded for international students who speak English as a second or third language. However, international students are an integral part of higher education in the United Kingdom, comprising 40.3% of the total postgraduate student population, with Chinese students constituting 15.6 % of all international students in UK Higher Education Institutions (Stern, 2021).

Strategies that are specifically designed for international students that support wellbeing are somewhat lacking across the sector (Shu et al., 2020). Shu et al. comment that to justify the economic and academic advantages that international students bring, HEIs should improve the quality of international students' experience and identify factors that impact their successful transition. Sheridan (2011) suggests that this should include academic literacy development. We were particularly influenced by Quan, He and Sloan's 2016 four stage model of Chinese postgraduate students' academic adjustment in UK higher education. Their model suggests interventions targeted before students start, then at the point of highest stress (approximately week four), then as the year progresses allowing more time for student interaction, and finally towards the end encouraging more student-led questions and sharing their learning.

At the University of York many postgraduate taught programmes are dominated by international students. In response to this, York has recently established a new faculty-based team called DACS (Departmental Academic and Communication Skills). The aim of this initiative is to embed academic and communication skills into students' programmes of study in the form of weekly two-hour academic skills classes. This small-scale study is based on the experience of teaching MA Education students, 95% of whom are Chinese. Classes focus on developing students' understanding of critical thinking and writing, supporting their academic reading, and ensuring that they understand academic conventions in the UK, such as referencing and academic writing structure. Classes also provide another layer of support and social interaction for students which we hope supports student wellbeing. We surveyed 40 students about how the classes support their participation and interaction, alleviate anxiety, and help to develop their sense of belonging. We followed this up with students interviewing each other on their experiences of academic skills development classes. The interviews were carried out in English. The students interviewed each other to allow them to rephrase, adapt, and clarify questions so that they could communicate more fluently. Six students participated in the interviews. Members of the teaching team observed the interviews and took notes. This paper will report on our findings and make recommendations for how to further improve support for international PGTs.

Community response

This presentation explored the connection between student belonging and academic success looking specifically at a cohort of international students. This broad topic has long been a focus of interest to the wider UK Higher Education sector with over a decade of research from the Higher Education Academy (see for example their What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme), and similar research from the Higher Education Policy Institute which explores how crucial a 'sense of belonging' is to a student's overall experience and success (Neves and Hewitt, 2021). This presentation can be seen as adding to that ongoing work to understand this connection while supporting international students to develop their academic skills.

There was keen interest in the presentation, provoking reflection concerning this model of embedded, co-curricular provision affordances, something Wingate (2015) describes as

Academic Literacy across the Curriculum. There was particular interest in the pedagogic and affective implications for learning development, as the program was ongoing: 'you are seeing students on a regular basis and [are able to] build a relationship with them over time'. This mode of delivery positions learning development staff to engage students quite differently to that of more traditional LD structures, such as workshops and appointments. Colleagues observed that working with a cohort over a term would open up possibilities for developing 'belonging within academic spaces' and would thus support learning development to extend beyond academic skill development to include student wellbeing. Parallels were identified with other forms of ongoing embedded, disciplinary support such as Peer Assisted Learning Sessions (PALS).

This presentation focused on exploring these themes with a predominantly international student cohort. The audience were intrigued by particular features of the intercultural space and reflections from the speakers on their changing interpretations of the importance and meaning of silence in the classroom. One colleague noted 'the point about silence not always being passive is particularly important for us to reflect on as practitioners'.

The sharing of recent research data and inviting the audience to contribute their interpretation also stimulated a lot of active reflection:

I was intrigued by the students who 'strongly disagreed' that the classes reduced their anxiety – it seemed like such a strongly held feeling (not just disagree or neutral). I wonder what is behind this. Sometimes students say to us that their anxiety increases because they become more aware of the extent of what is involved in postgraduate level study so their sense of confidence or expectations are challenged, which can be painful.

The interaction between presenters and audience supported a collaborative interpretation of student feedback; this collective analysis seemed particularly successful as it included negative feedback, which was eagerly received by the audience and suggested an open, authentic discussion. This discussion contributes to the relatively modest literature on learning from failure in academia (e.g., Hains-Wesson, 2022) that seems particularly pertinent to learning developers who routinely move between learning development service evaluations and more scholarly enquiry. This change in mode of delivery and

context of engagement naturally requires a concomitant change in approach to evaluation.

Authors' reflection

Delivering the paper at the conference has made us work together as a team to think about what has worked well this year and what we can do in the coming years to make further improvements. The three themes that we picked to focus on – student interaction, belonging, and academic anxiety were elements that we felt were important and interesting because they were frequently mentioned in the questionnaire data from students, and they were regular topics of conversation in our weekly planning meetings. The conference keynote (Bali, 2022) and some of the sessions from the online day have inspired us to introduce new ways to try to engage students earlier in the academic year.

It was interesting that a member of the audience picked up on the point about silence being a form of communication. As teachers in UK universities, we are troubled by silence, but we perhaps need to find ways of being more comfortable with silence and encourage students to participate and engage in our classes in non-verbal ways. Over the year we have used different techniques to support students' non-verbal participation. For example, through the use of technologies such as Mentimeter and Xerte. We also ask students to work in small groups and nominate one person to report back. Like much of the audience, we found the question of student silence to be interesting and worthy of further study. This is an area of work which we will continue to investigate.

The reflection on the students who expressed strong negative emotions about the classes also prompted discussion among the team. Some students remain uncomfortable at being asked to answer questions, others perhaps have a realisation that what they thought they were good at, for example, memorisation and reproduction, is not highly valued in the UK system. Our plans for next year will include a greater emphasis on induction activities to help students to interact with each other and support them to feel comfortable in the classroom. We will also place a greater emphasis on co-curricular activities which were highlighted by students as ways in which they could interact and feel a sense of belonging. However, the students we teach are a very long way from home, and UK HE culture is very different from the environment they have grown up in. For some students perhaps

achieving a sense of belonging within a one-year master's is too much to expect: a sense of connection might be a more realistic goal.

This experience of community and shared discussion, with our team and the larger ALDCON community acted as a catalyst for our own reflections as a team on our work. It was very useful to be able to share results and feedback. Thank you to the attendees for a collaborative and collegiate discussion of the key issues involved.

Next steps

The next steps in this project are based on Quan, He and Sloan's 2016 four stage model. We plan to work with existing students to get them to share their learning to produce three short videos aimed at new students which address the three areas: participation and interaction, academic anxiety, and belonging. We know from our work with the students that they are passionate about these issues, so we want them to take ownership of the project. We will do this using a strengths-based approach (Rapp and Goscha, 2006). This means that we will facilitate the project but allow students to direct and manage their own work on it using their existing skills, strengths, knowledge, and connections. We hope that the videos will be ready to use with next year's intake of PGT students (October 2022). The videos will help us to address stages one (induction) and two (the point of highest stress) of Quan's model. We are planning to evaluate the process of co-production of the videos and to survey students who watch the videos and get feedback from them on the key aims of participation, reducing anxiety, and developing a sense of belonging. Our aim is to be able to share the videos and our students' responses to them with the ALDinHE community next year.

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