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Teaching politics through inquiry: the international student voice

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Abstract

The relationship between inquiry-based learning (IBL) and international students is of rising importance in the UK in the context of a growing focus on the connection between research and teaching and the increasing number of overseas students. This article explores this relationship, drawing on the findings of research undertaken in a Department of Politics at a research-intensive UK university. It concludes by suggesting some possible ways forward for both students and staff in meeting the challenges of inquiry-based learning programmes.

Introduction

This article presents the findings of research undertaken on inquiry-based learning (IBL) and the international student in a Department of Politics at a research-intensive UK university. It discusses some of the main themes and issues raised by students in relation to adapting to the demands of an IBL-informed teaching and learning environment at postgraduate level, drawing explicit comparisons between home and overseas students. The next section explains IBL and why the relationship between IBL and international students is becoming more important. Section three provides information about the case study and the data collection process before section four presents the main findings. In addition to reflecting on these findings, the conclusion suggests some small ways forward in assisting both students and staff in meeting the challenge of inquiry-based learning programmes.

IBL and the international student

The term inquiry-based learning (IBL)¹ is used to refer to various forms of active, self-directed learning, where the student has ownership over their learning and development. The process of inquiry is at the heart of these forms of learning (Deignan, 2009, 13). The role of the teacher is to facilitate this process of inquiry, for example by giving a group of students a research task or aim: ‘the tutor is there to guide rather than dictate’ (Whowell, 2006, 5). IBL

¹ Some of the literature uses the term enquiry-based learning (EBL). Here we use the term IBL but we regard the two terms as interchangeable.

can also be conducted on an individual basis, for example through dissertations or projects, where the student sets the parameters of their investigation. In short, at the core of IBL is the idea of ‘learning through discovery rather than instruction’ (Levy, 2009). The term IBL encompasses problem-based learning (PBL) approaches, but is by no means restricted to them (Deignan, 2009, 13). IBL has informed teaching across a range of academic disciplines particularly in the sciences and medicine (Oliver, 2007), and its proponents have suggested that it offers a means to greater integration of teaching and research (Brew, 2003; Justice *et al.*, 2007). As Hale (2006, 86) has argued, ‘politics, with its established focus on learning through discussion, critical thinking and analysis, and independent research, provides very fertile ground for the successful implementation of a problem-based approach.’ While some innovative examples can be found for the use of IBL in this discipline (for example Craig & Hale, 2008; Kaunert, 2009), there is considerable scope for further explicit adoption of IBL in political studies.

A persuasive pedagogical rationale therefore underpins the use of an IBL approach. As Spronken-Smith *et al.* (2007, 2) suggest, it is ‘a pedagogy which best enables students to experience the processes of knowledge creation’. Given the centrality of critical thinking and independent inquiry to political studies this is appropriate at all levels of university education, but is particularly the case at postgraduate level where students push towards the boundaries of the discipline. At higher levels IBL evolves ‘from more directed forms of enquiry to more self-directed or group-directed forms’ and ‘comes closest to replicating genuine research, and is its ultimate power as a learning method’ (Hutchings, 2007, 20).

The convergence of two strong currents in UK higher education has elevated the importance of the relationship between IBL and the international student. The increasing number of international students in UK higher education, particularly at postgraduate level, has prompted greater reflection on strategies for teaching multi-cultural classes, leading to the production of various ‘check-lists’ of good practice in this context (on this see Hyland *et al.* 2008). At the same time, there is a growing focus on the relationship between research and teaching at all levels of study, and the need to construct links between the two (Jenkins *et al.*, 2007). As yet though, there is relatively little research on IBL and the international student. In a rare contribution, one small scale study of first year international undergraduate students’ experience of learning through inquiry concluded that:

‘this particular group of European and African undergraduates’ ways of understanding learning and inquiry, and of experiencing the first undergraduate year, had much in common with their UK-national counterparts. Factors relating to personal epistemology, disciplinary pedagogy and institutional context, were all important in shaping their experiences of the first year, alongside factors of prior educational and cultural experience’ (Levy and Petrulis, 2009, 18).

Similar issues are also found at postgraduate level, and are perhaps all the more pertinent given the fact that most master’s courses are of only twelve months duration (giving master’s students less time to adapt to new forms of learning than undergraduates). While we draw comparisons between international and home students in this study, we acknowledge the need for caution in attempting to generalise about particular student groups, which tend to be far

from uniform. As Hyland *et al.* (2008, 4) have argued, 'International students are no more a homogeneous group than any other group of people or students' and their diversity can have cultural, economic, social and linguistic dimensions (Ryan and Viète, 2009, 303). This is true of students from within, not just across, nations. For example, easy assumptions about the (Confucian) learning experience of Chinese students should be avoided in the context of a changing domestic higher education setting in which an increasing number of lecturers have studied overseas and 'whose teaching approaches have been influenced by the education philosophies of Western nations' (Tam *et al.*, 2009, 148). Moreover, this example highlights the need to 'recognise the potential for similarity across cultures as well as difference' (Levy and Petrulis 2009, 18). In sum, while seeking to treat international students as one group for broad comparative purposes, we recognise the many caveats that need to be acknowledged in doing so.

International students are identified as having a range of academic and non-academic needs at the beginning of their time overseas, which Stier (2002) has categorised as academic, social, intellectual and emotional. Others simply distinguish between academic and social needs, while a number of studies of international students give primacy to academic support requirements (see Bartram 2008, 660). More specifically, Ryan (2005) suggested that international students can experience three types of 'shock' when they first study overseas: culture shock, language shock and academic shock. Of course, the diversity among international students influences the nature and degree of shock experienced by any individual, but this three-fold categorisation summarises neatly the broad challenges faced when studying overseas. The process of adaptation to an inquiry-based pedagogical approach has the potential to contribute to all of three of these shock categories, and we reflect on this further below.

The case study

Our case study focuses on a research-intensive Department of Politics in a UK university in which both of the authors have both studied and taught. While the term inquiry-based learning has only recently entered into the lexicon of the Department studied, the principles of IBL are ones that have long-guided the Department's approach to teaching and learning. This commitment flows from a belief in the benefits for students of developing inquiry skills and empowerment as independent learners; recognition of the conduciveness of political studies to IBL approaches; and the harmony this provides with its culture as a research intensive department. The Department's undergraduate programme progressively develops IBL skills through placing a greater emphasis on independent inquiry at each successive level of study. By level three, 50 per cent of the final assessment of single honours students is through individual student projects (20 credits) and individual student dissertations (40 credits) that have IBL at their core. At master's level, IBL principles are even more firmly embedded, with there being no formal lectures and student inquiry being central to the production of all assessed work.

Based on our own experiences in the Department and on scholarly contributions on both IBL and on international students, our assumptions were that at all levels of study students begin their degrees with quite different levels of IBL-related skills. However, while at undergraduate level, the intake is generally over 90 per cent UK students, amongst taught

postgraduates this figure drops to around 50 per cent, providing a much more culturally diverse group of students and a greater range of IBL skills at the point of entry. Moreover, while variations in IBL-related skill levels can be addressed over a three-year period at undergraduate level, with a one-year master's programme (as in the Department studied), the challenges facing students and staff in developing the necessary skills are that much steeper. The purpose of our research was to highlight some of the key issues facing master's students in adjusting to inquiry-based learning and, in doing so, to assist students and staff in meeting this challenge.

Data collection

The research focused primarily on the 2008-09 cohort in which the Department had 94 students enrolled on its master's courses, six of whom were part-time. Of these, 45.7 per cent (43) were home (UK) students and 54.3 (51) per cent are international students (from outside of the UK). While for funding purposes, European Union (EU) students are treated as 'home' students rather than 'overseas', for the purposes of our research (focusing on students from cultural and educational backgrounds different from the UK's) they are included in the category of 'overseas' students. This also helps us to respond in a small way to Bartram's (2008, 657) point that there is very little research that addresses EU students as a distinct group, despite the fact they are the biggest group of international students in the UK. Overall, the cohort was highly diverse, with students from 30 different countries (14 EU countries and 16 non-EU)².

Interviews were conducted in October 2008 with 18 students from 14 different countries, including 4 from the UK. The same cohort of students was interviewed again in May 2009 (students were offered an incentive of £20 for participation in two interviews, with payment made on completion of the second interview). As discussed above, a key aim of our work is to recognise and investigate this student diversity, which is well illustrated by the fact that two of the overseas students involved in the interview process had previously studied in the UK. Also in May 2009, a questionnaire survey of all master's students took place, achieving a 77 percent response rate. This data collection was augmented by analysis of the departmental module evaluations, which are completed by students at the end of each semester.

Research Findings

Based on the findings of our initial focus groups we organised the interview schedule and subsequent survey questionnaire around themes identified by the student participants as relevant to IBL: independent learning; seminar participation and diversity; seminar activities. Here we present the findings under these headings in turn.

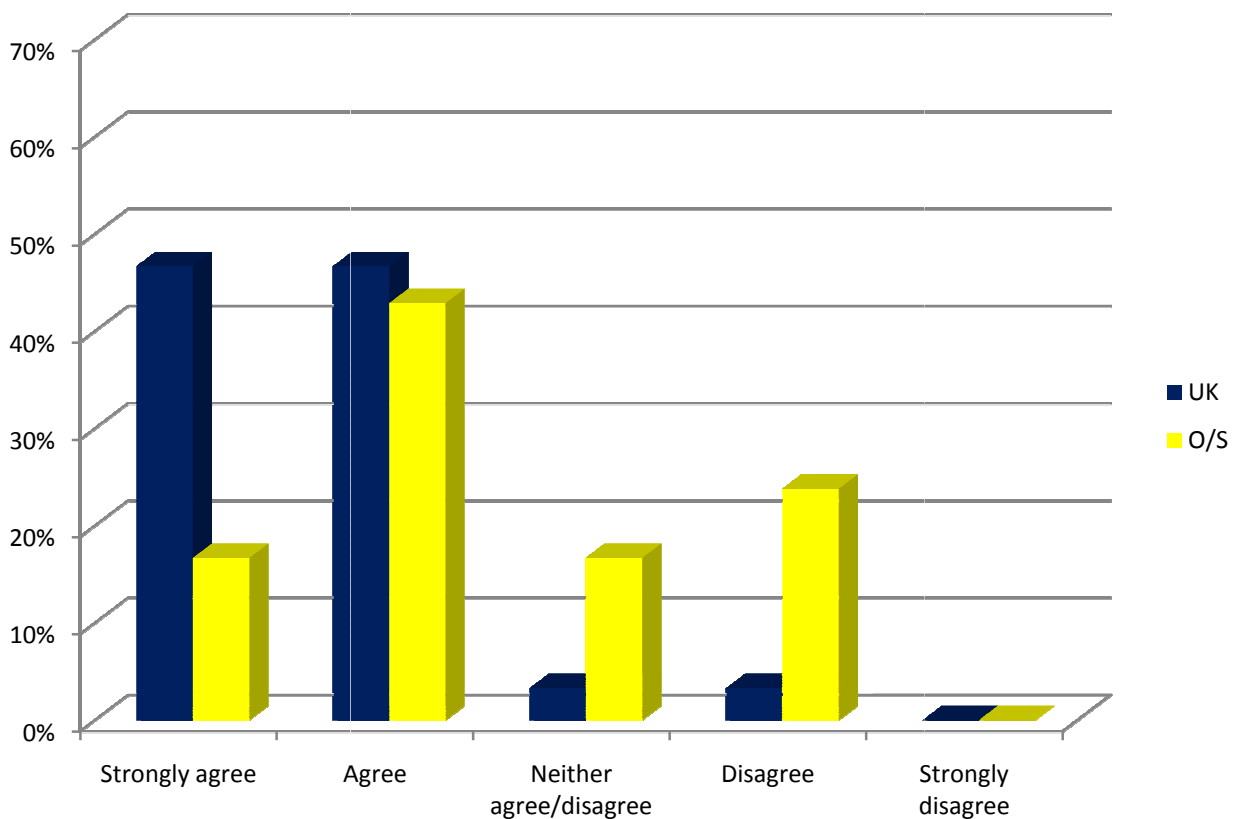
Independent Learning

Independent research and inquiry is at the heart of the master's programme in the Department, and students perceived themselves to be well prepared to meet these demands –

² The 30 countries represented were: Afghanistan, Britain, Canada, Chile, China, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Malaysia, Netherlands, Nigeria, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia South Korea, Sweden, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, and USA

although this opinion was felt more strongly by home students. As illustrated by Figure 1, 94.3 percent felt that their previous educational experiences had prepared them well (46.7 per cent ‘strongly agreed’ and 46.7 percent ‘agreed’ with this statement). A total of 76.2 percent of overseas students were of the opinion that they were well prepared, with 16.7 percent agreeing strongly. This suggested a sound base from which to cultivate IBL. A more marked difference was seen when students were asked specifically about their preparedness for the emphasis on independent study. Amongst UK students, the positive response was again 93.4 per cent (and again 46.7 percent in strong agreement, with a further 46.7 percent in agreement). By contrast, a total of just 59.6 percent of overseas students agreed they were well prepared for the level of independent study expected (16.7 percent agreed strongly, while 42.9 percent).

**Figure 1: Percentage of students agreeing that:
‘I was well prepared for the emphasis on independent study in the master’s programme’**



One of the UK students noted that although much of the material being studied was different, ‘in terms of the independent research and seminar setup my undergraduate experience prepared me well’. By contrast, at the start of their course one overseas student commented:

It’s quite difficult for me to cope right now as the style is totally different. In my country it is more about spoon-feeding, you just attend the lectures and make as many notes as possible. Now what I am experiencing here is that I have to read, then come to the class and discuss

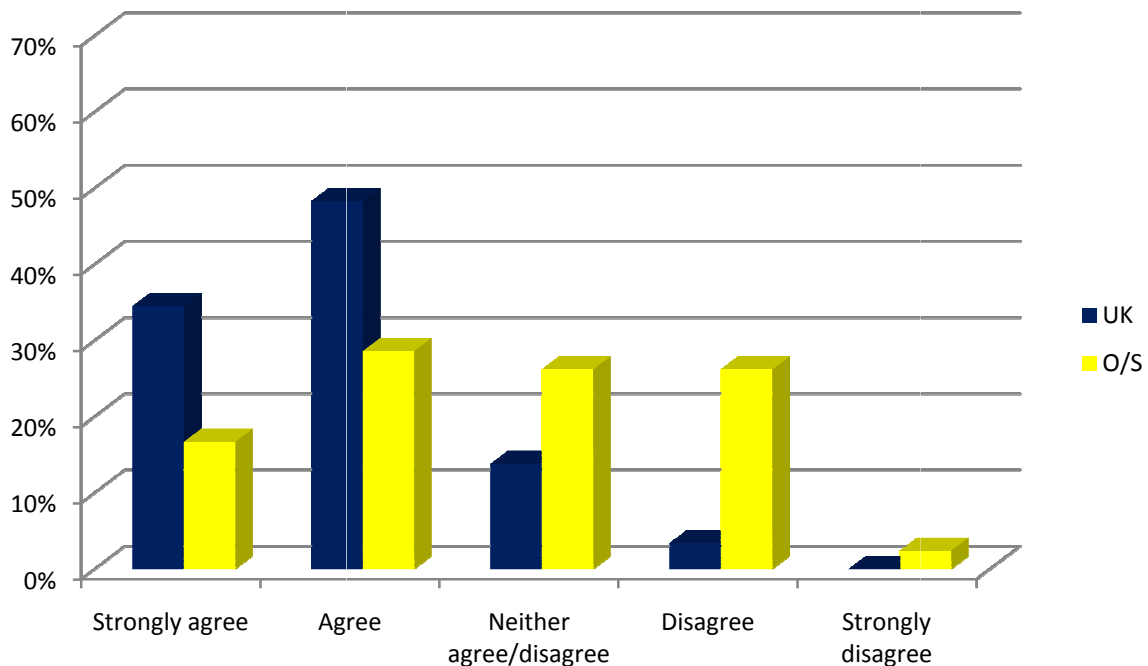
about it, and then after that I get a handout about the topic. That is totally upside down for me!
I am really struggling to be honest, but on the other hand it is a challenge.

Several international students contrasted the teaching style in the Department with their previous experience, which for some had been strongly tutor-led rather than inquiry-based. As one commented on their undergraduate studies: 'Most of the time the lecturer gave us a lecture and we took notes, perhaps with a short question and answer session afterwards, but we didn't really have seminars... For me, seminars are new.' A further international student recalled that: 'The tutor would stand at the front and we would sit behind desks, whereas here it is more of a roundtable discussion, so that's pretty different as you can't escape!' Others echoed this, agreeing that the emphasis on discussion and debate during their master's course was both novel and striking.

Seminars: participation and diversity

Seminars are a key component of the independent learning structure of master's courses in the Department. As Bogaard et al. (2005: 116) have noted in their discussion of the widespread use of seminars in politics, the 'rationale behind this is the perception and the conviction that small group teaching is a particularly useful device to encourage critical learning and understanding of complex issues'. As such, seminars provide a framework which lends itself towards an inquiry-based pedagogical approach. Both UK and overseas students generally agreed that seminars were helpful for their learning, although the proportions strongly agreeing were low. 13.8 percent of UK students and 16.7 percent of international students strongly agreed that the seminars were helpful for their learning, although a further 65.5 percent of UK students and 50.0 percent of overseas students agreed. A more striking difference between UK and overseas students emerged in response to the statement: 'It has been easy for me to participate actively in seminars' (Figure 2).

Figure 2: ‘It has been easy for me to participate actively in seminars’



Whilst 82.8 percent of UK students concurred (34.5 percent strongly), just 49.3 percent of overseas students felt that this applied to them (16.7 percent ‘strongly agreed’, and a 28.6 percent ‘agreed’). Put more starkly, a majority of overseas students surveyed did not find it easy to participate actively in seminars. As well as (lack of) familiarity with the seminar format, a key aspect of this difficulty was the language barrier. As anticipated by Ryan’s (2005) above classification of shocks encountered during study abroad, studying in a second language was acknowledged as an important challenge for non-native speakers by most of the overseas students, and this applied as much to seminars as to written work.

The language issue was the biggest challenge for a number of students. Some felt that it limited their ability to participate in seminar activities and that they were not fully understood by other students, home and overseas. As one recognised, ‘the biggest thing I have to adapt to here is the language – getting used to working in English’. Another noted that this reduced their own participation in class: ‘my English is not that good so I worry people won’t understand what I want to say’. A further international student claimed that ‘some of my classmates have a problem with their English, and struggle to express themselves, and sometimes I feel that it’s quite a strain to understand them’.

Consequently language issues seem to inform a greater desire for tutor input and tutor-led discussion on the part of international students, whereas UK students tended towards a more enthusiastic view of more widespread participation. However, other overseas students emphasised the ‘facilitating’ role of staff. For example: ‘I think the major role of the staff here is to facilitate discussions, and to not let silences go on too long.’ One argued: ‘The tutor should force international students to participate more by asking them more things directly. You need a bit of pressure!’ Another suggested that: ‘It’s important for lots of students to participate in class - it’s a class for all the students not just for several’. Consequently, ‘tutors

needs to encourage everyone to participate, people might not be doing so because of a lack of confidence - a fear that what I have to say might be wrong’.

The impact of language issues on seminar quality were also a significant concern for some UK students. One noted ‘surprise’ at the make-up of seminar groups:

Of about 17 students, all but two were international, and I had never imagined there would only be two British students on the course... the language barrier, and I guess to an extent the cultural barrier, meant that it was a one-way discussion much of the time... I wasn’t annoyed or anything like that, but I couldn’t go straight into the learning as I might have imagined.

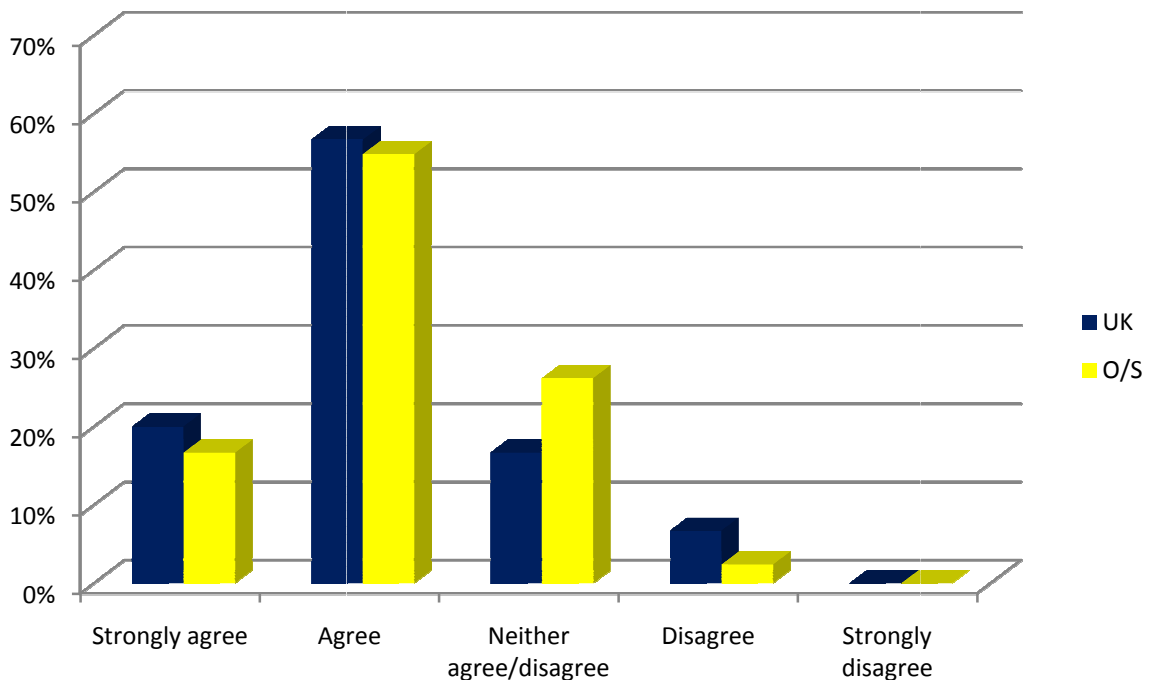
Another UK student felt that the diversity of the seminar groups had done little to enhance their learning experience:

How are we supposed to have a good academic discussion when people don’t have a basic grasp of the language we will be having it in? There are good sides of it, particularly the fact that you get other people’s viewpoints, but I think they only come out from the stronger people in the class...

This student said they liked the idea of having an ‘international feel’ to the course, but thought that this should not be achieved at the expense of teaching and learning quality, and that there was a widely held view amongst home (UK) students. These opinions suggest that home students can also encounter a form of culture shock when embarking on a degree programme alongside a high proportion of overseas students, and explicit consideration of the needs of both groups when devising IBL programmes is vital for their success.

Despite these differences and difficulties, it is worth noting that a clear majority of both UK and overseas students felt they had developed well as independent learners from starting the master’s programme. 73.3 percent of UK students agreed that this was the case for them (20.0 percent strongly) and 64.3 percent of overseas students agreed (26.2 percent strongly). Another indicator of this was levels of preparedness for the dissertation. At the end of the taught element of their course, over 70 percent of both student categories felt well prepared to undertake the independent inquiry required for the dissertation (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Having (almost) completed the taught element of my master’s course, I feel well prepared to undertake independent inquiry for my dissertation



Seminar activities

The use of seminars does not in and of itself offer any guarantee that learning will be inquiry-led and student-centred. As Hutchings has noted, in IBL the role of the tutor is as a facilitator of student-led inquiry, and ‘to facilitate... is to create conditions propitious to carrying out of a task’ (2006: 4). In this respect the structure of seminars, and the activities undertaken during them, are of fundamental importance. Students were asked to comment on whether particular seminar activities and structures helped their learning. Different opinions about how they learn inform a variety of views about how seminar time is usefully spent. The overseas students had a mixed view of participative learning. Some saw it as valuable, despite often being challenging, and some regarded it as inhibiting the transfer of knowledge from the teacher. One suggested, ‘to my mind in class it should be 80 percent teacher, and 20 percent student discussions.’ In their view the tutor was best placed to contribute to their learning:

My fellow students are equal with me. They are not 'Dr.' If they have experience in the EU, for example, they can talk, but my other classmates are all on my level. Maybe they can teach me something, but not like the module leader, it is not equal.

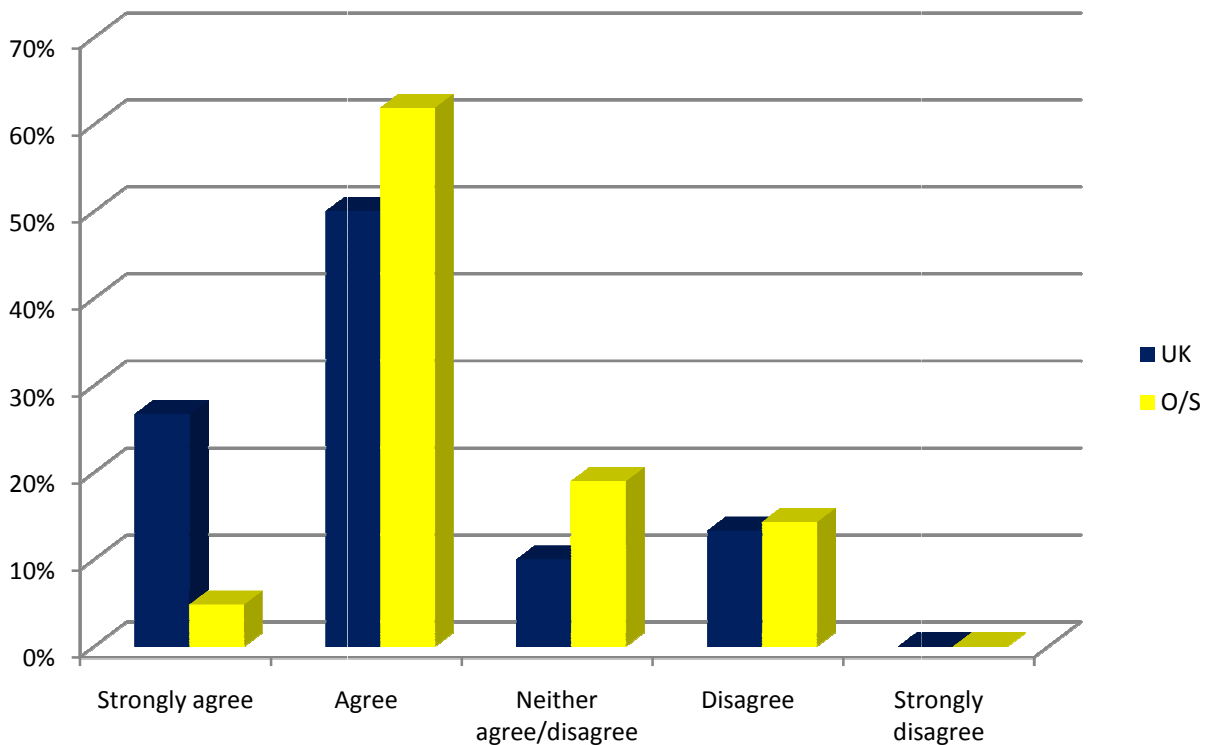
Clear majorities of home and overseas students regarded mini-lectures by the tutor at the beginning of seminars (of around 30 minutes) as helpful: 80.0 percent of UK students agreed (30.0 percent strongly) and 92.8 percent of international students agreed (47.6 percent strongly). As one overseas student simply stated: ‘My favourite style is when they [staff]

come in and give a 20-30 minutes lecture, and then we talk'. Another noted: 'In some of the courses a lecture would help give us more background information and I would appreciate a bit more guidance and information from the lecturer'. Another agreed that staff 'should be more than just a facilitator. You need someone to contribute some ideas, experience and practical discussions. Not everyone has that knowledge – the professors have, so they should bring it to class.'

However, depending on the content of lectures, their use can either facilitate or displace independent learning. So while they might be welcomed by students, they may not be complementary to an IBL-approach to learning. One overseas student argued that having the lecture first raised the overall quality of the rest of the seminar that followed, so 'It's better if small-group discussion follows a lecture'. However, another acknowledged that the lecture could simply act as a substitute for independent study outside of the seminar room: 'If I read enough, the mini lecture isn't necessary'. One UK student went against the grain of mainstream opinion, and questioned the value of lectures for master's students: 'A lot of people say they wish we had lectures, but I think at this level we should not really need to be spoon-fed material'. An international student admitted that although they initially expected lectures to be part of the course, they probably didn't need them 'as I am doing my own personal reading and research, so I understand the basis for not having them...'. Consequently overreliance on (mini) lectures may risk undermining other efforts to promote a philosophy of independent learning amongst master's students.

A general consensus of opinion also existed with regard to small group discussion (between 2-4 students) in seminars, which was seen as useful by approximately 3 out of 4 students. Amongst UK students, 30.0 percent strongly agreed that small group discussion was a valuable seminar activity, and a further 43.3 percent agreed. Amongst overseas students the figures were 28.6 percent and 45.2 percent respectively. However, as interview data demonstrates, the use of small group discussion is accompanied by a number of attendant issues. As some of the interviewees highlighted, the quality and value of small group discussion can vary dramatically. One international student noted how seminars can sometimes lack clear structure and direction, and for them this stemmed from the fact that 'you just go in there and talk. It is a political *taught* course but there isn't much teaching going on, just lots of discussion...'. However, for another overseas student, 'small group work is 'probably the best part of the politics seminars'. A further international student commented: 'small group work is very useful, as I can listen to the opinions of other students and explain my own'. One problem with small group work relates to how the groups are decided, and the tendency of certain groups of students to cluster together. As one noted: 'We international students usually sit together, and the home students sit on the other side'. A home student also commented that 'if you are going to do group work it makes sense to sit next to people who you know are going to contribute', and suggested that this explained the propensity of UK students to work together, if given the choice.

Figure 4: Large group discussion (whole group)



Attitudes to large group discussion amongst the whole seminar group also highlighted differences between home and overseas students. In general, overseas students seemed to favour more structured participation, including out of the seminar room. While 26.7 percent of UK students *strongly* agreed that large group discussion was a helpful seminar activity, just 4.8 percent of overseas students felt the same way (a further 50.0 percent of home students and 61.9 percent of overseas students agreed that it was a helpful activity). This may reflect a greater confidence amongst UK students, related to the language and ease of participation activities referred to above. It may also be partly cultural – as one overseas student observed:

Asian students are in general the most passive. That is partly cultural, but it's also about the teaching and learning style in Asia... They often participate in small group discussion, but won't be very active in the whole group discussion.

Another international student was more scathing about poorly organised whole group discussion: 'Free-for-all open discussion – basically arguing with the tutor – is a waste of time, and reflects a lack of plan/structure by the tutor'. The use of this seminar technique therefore needs to be carefully planned, and should not be an unthinking default position as this student suggests can be the case. To some extent these attitudes reflect the prevailing view of the tutor as an authority figure able to impart knowledge to the class. When asked to distinguish between tutor-led and student-led discussion, both home and overseas students demonstrated an unambiguous preference for the former. Whilst 70.0 percent of international students and 90.0 percent of home students agreed or strongly agreed that tutor-led discussion

was helpful to their learning, just 35.7 percent of international students and 50.0 percent of home students agreed or strongly agreed that student-led discussion was similarly valuable.

Finally, students were asked to comment on the value of presentations as a seminar activity. Although these are one of the most widely utilised seminar tools in the Department, students remain unconvinced of their effectiveness. Amongst international students, 45.2 percent agreed that presentations by individual students were helpful (including 11.9 percent who agreed strongly) compared to 36.7 percent of home students (6.7 percent strongly). International students had a greater enthusiasm for presentations by groups of students, with 50.0 percent agreeing they were helpful (including 11.9 percent who agreed strongly) compared to just 23.3 percent of home students (3.3 percent strongly). Interview data reflected these mixed views. On the one hand a number of students acknowledged that presentations were good for them in terms of preparation, whilst on the other they could be of limited value to students not involved in presenting. One home student commented that ‘actually having to orally present something made me understand it’, and this was echoed by an overseas student: ‘Doing a presentation forced me to learn the material... most people did an OK job’. However, another candidly admitted that:

If I have no presentation that week I will just listen to the other students. But as it isn't a formal presentation most of the students including me don't prepare that seriously, and some of us don't have very good English. Sometimes it is difficult for me to understand other overseas students' presentations.

From an IBL perspective, the difficulty here is how to deploy a technique which might be one of the most effective in terms of getting students to research a topic independently outside of the seminar room, without impacting unduly on the learning approach of other students during (or in preparation for) the seminar. In a sense this is the dilemma at the heart of any attempt to devise IBL strategies: that is, how can the varied needs of a diverse student body be accommodated in a way that enhances the learning experience of all? We offer some possible answers in the concluding section.

Conclusions

In many ways our research findings do not contain any great surprises: rather, they have confirmed many of our initial assumptions in relation to student views on aspects of teaching and learning on the Department's master's programme. However, we now have clearer information about the varying views of different groups of students (our focus here being on UK and overseas categories) and, most importantly, on the basis of this research and analysis of module evaluations, are able to make more informed judgements on features of good practice in delivering IBL at the masters level.

By and large home students were positive about the teaching and learning experience in the Department and were more familiar and comfortable with IBL. They did, however, have some concerns about levels of participation and preparation, class sizes, and the impact of language difficulties of other students. Overseas students generally had less experience with IBL and more desire for learning by ‘instruction’ rather than ‘inquiry’. However, the interview data paints a nuanced picture of wide-ranging expectations and past experiences

amongst international students, and differing levels of adaptation to, and enthusiasm for, an IBL approach. One international student noted how their perspective on the teaching and learning experience in the Department changed over time: ‘Now, in the second semester, I can feel the discussion and group work becoming more and more successful...’ To some extent the dissatisfaction that existed amongst a minority of students (particularly international students) with their master’s provision related to perceptions of value for money, and the desire to receive more in return for their tuition fees, most commonly expressed in terms of taught contact time, but also in terms of other Department-organised activities.

Some of the IBL challenges raised by this research might be addressed if students have more accurate expectations of the teaching and learning environment and experience in the Department. This might involve more advance information on module structure, teaching hours, requirements for private study, and assessment methods. In particular, more explanation before arrival, during induction and throughout the programme might be given about the teaching and learning philosophy that underpins the approach.

Some thought might also be given to classroom techniques. Small group work appears to be generally beneficial, enabling students to take greater ownership of their learning both as individuals and collectively. However, some steering of group membership might be helpful to ensure interaction between different students and thus to promote inclusive engagement and wider participation. Mini-lectures within seminars may be useful, but may inadvertently give students the impression that preparatory reading for seminars is not essential, or suggests a top-down mode of instruction rather than the learning through inquiry. One way to use the mini-lecture to promote IBL might be as a structured introduction to the topic and guide to reading at the end of the previous seminar, possibly accompanied with a handout on the reading with key questions to direct independent inquiry.

As other empirical studies have concluded, ‘inquiry is a potent pedagogical tool in higher education, encouraging students to become self-directed and engaged learners’ (Justice *et al.*, 2007, 201) and, as we suggested at the outset, it forms a vital part of the masters teaching and learning experience in the Department studied. Our research illustrates the range of challenges this presents for both students and staff, and suggests that reflection on these is vital for teachers in their mission to design and deliver inquiry-based courses, and for students in their effort to become independent learners. It has also highlighted the importance of recognising the linguistic, cultural and academic challenges facing international students studying in the UK and the issues these pose when facilitating IBL; as well as serving as a clear reminder of the diversity of bodies of international students and of their educational needs.

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