

## Conference Review

# **Internationalization and the Student Experience Conference PedRIO and University of Plymouth, 18 December 2013**

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On 18<sup>th</sup> December, 2013 the Pedagogic Research Institute and Observatory, Plymouth Business School and the English Language Centre hosted a one-day conference on internationalization and the student experience in higher education pedagogy which took place in the Rolle Building at Plymouth University. Attracting 137 delegates from universities across the UK, the conference addressed some of the key factors involved with the internationalization of the higher education sector in the UK and beyond. With keynote addresses by Dr Sheila Trahar (University of Bristol) and Professor Troy Heffernan (Plymouth University), themes included; the student experience of internationalization, creating an international curriculum, Transnational Education (TNE), English language teaching and support, and also the business of internationalization: recruitment, admissions, strategies and partnerships.

The conference began with Dr Sheila Trahar's keynote speech entitled 'Are we still struggling with internationalization?' 'By embarking on a more personal journey of internationalization in higher education, lives can be enhanced through learning and teaching strategies that celebrate diversity and are respectful and inclusive' (Trahar, 2011:147). This raises further questions as to whether people want to be included and if so, included in what. Inclusivity can be fostered through the curriculum in order to promote cultural understanding and avoid cultural misunderstanding although most students (people) need to be encouraged to move out of their 'comfort zone' and engage with others. However, this issue needs to be addressed as the UK is second only to the USA in its ability to attract students from other countries and in 2011/2012, 16.8% of all students in UK higher education were defined as 'international' i.e. coming from outside of the European Union (EU). Her closing remarks focused on how becoming a global citizen is essential and how this could be fostered. The rhetoric of bland mission statements of internationalization should be challenged with less emphasis on international students and more emphasis on researchers or practitioners dealing with the cultural complexity of higher education and the necessity for reflection on their own practices in order to create environments that are more inclusive.

The second keynote address was Professor Troy Heffernan's inaugural lecture entitled 'Transnational Education (TNE): Navigating a Complex Future'. This lecture explored the past, present and future of transnational education. According to the British Council (2013) report, the general principle of TNE is that students can study towards a foreign qualification without leaving their own country. TNE is also known as off-shore, cross-border and borderless education. Presently 124 UK HE institutions are involved in delivering TNE with around 200 international brand campuses, a number which is rapidly growing. Professor Heffernan examined the competing objectives that drive TNE and its multifaceted nature. Different types of TNE include validation, partnerships, double, dual or joint degrees and

study exchanges but would not include distance education programmes as these involve a different skill set. Towards the end of his lecture, he was keen to point out that Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) are also not part of TNE, noting Feargal Sharkey's comments at the GuildHE Conference which drew parallels between universities making ever-larger amounts of their course materials available for free online, and the proliferation of online music-sharing that began in 1999 with the launch of Napster, a web-based platform that gave users unparalleled access to 'free' music. This Napster moment caused the music industry to remold itself into a new world. Professor Heffernan felt that MOOCs were unlikely to have a similar transformational effect on higher education in the long term. However, blended learning would become a key factor in comprehensive online courses, which would in turn change the lecturer's role. His final comment was that TNE can transform lives, economies and even countries and that it is our responsibility to drive it properly.

In addition to the two keynote addresses, breakout sessions included 30 presentations and workshops on a variety of strands focusing on research into international students' perspectives, their experiences of acculturation and the challenges they may face and also the interaction between home and international students. Various curriculum issues were addressed including designing assessments, embedding and encouraging intercultural communication and promoting collaboration with a cross-modular approach.

One of the most engaging sessions was delivered by international medical students at Plymouth University. Five first year medical students and two members of staff kept diaries for 12 weeks, reflecting on their experiences. These diaries were then collated and compared in order to stimulate exploration of issues and potential resolutions. Interestingly, what the tutors failed to take into consideration was the pressure to succeed felt by international students, the financial burden incurred and the pressure of representing family and country. Dealing with issues around the consumption of alcohol also played a major factor in their integration into student life.

Further details including PowerPoint slides for this session and 18 of the breakout sessions can be found online. A selection of papers delivered at the conference will be written out as 1000 word case studies and presented as part of the PedRIO Occasional Paper series in February 2014 which also be made available on Plymouth University's website.

## **References**

Trahar, S., 2011. *Developing Cultural Capability in International Higher Education: A Narrative Inquiry*. Oxon/New York, NY: Routledge