

Article

Bridging academic differences between China and the UK

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ABSTRACT

The paper shares a pioneering example of a faculty-based induction programme for an all Chinese learners' group and evaluates the effectiveness of the intervention from the students' perspective. The programme is designed to aid transition and to develop the students' understanding of UK academic requirements. Student feedback was sought through a number of different means (a questionnaire, focus group, students' further engagement and their academic achievement) and was positive. In particular, students recognized the benefits of using exemplars to contextualize analytical writing as part of the induction experience.

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Background

This article discusses an example of a faculty-based induction programme; a 'Bridge Programme' (BP) for a group of direct entry Chinese students studying undergraduate final year programmes at the University of Bradford (UoB), Faculty of Management and Law (FoML). The article will outline the curriculum design of the BP and then examine to what extent the programme aids transition. Evaluation will be based on student feedback, their continuous engagement, and academic performance.

The BP is designed and run by the Effective Learning Service (ELS). ELS is part of the FoML's academic offer. In addition to organising the BP, ELS provides formative feedback on assignment drafts and runs embedded lectures and additional workshops. The BP was embedded into the UoB's offer in September 2011. Students are recruited through admission agreements between the UoB and partner institutions in China where students have completed two years of finance-related degree courses. The Programme runs for two weeks prior to the semester. It is designed for students who have met the English entry requirement of IELTS 6.0 and who are entering the final year. Over 150 students have attended the BP. It is important to note that the BP is not a replacement programme for English language pre-

sessional courses. It does not address English language ability, but instead focuses on demystifying tutors' expectations and clarifying British academic conventions.

Academic Cultural Differences between the UK and China

For students coming from China and the Far East, good teaching practice means providing clear instruction and guidance (Hu 2002; Ryan and Louie 2007). However, in UK education, critical thinking and independent learning are the keys to academic success. These concepts are often demonstrated in the form of assessment (i.e. evidence-based, analytical writing), ways of studying, (i.e. wide reading), and students' classroom behaviour (i.e. taking part in tutorial discussions). The differences between the two teaching approaches contribute to the academic culture shock which many international students encounter when they first arrive in the UK HE. Direct entry students have very little time to adapt to the new academic culture. The general consensus in HE is for education providers to facilitate the adaptation process, and many providers have agreed that this should be part of the induction experience (Saravanamuthu 2008; Gu and Maley 2008).

The Bridge Programme Curriculum

An understanding of the educational differences and the pressure to adapt as quickly as possible has informed the design of the Bridge Programme. The BP's aim is to articulate students' understanding of independent learning. Plenary sessions in subject areas are integrated into the design of the programme. Another important component in our approach is to encourage individuals to take an active part in learning.

The programme includes three core elements: academic skills development, modular lectures and tutorials, and directed independent learning. Figure 1 provides an overview of the programme design.

Figure 1: Programme Structure

<p>Week 1</p> <p>Focuses on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• academic skills development• exploration and discussion of the educational differences between the UK and China <p>Students are required to conduct group reports on their assigned educational elements, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• essay writing• group-work• referencing• reading
<p>Week 2</p> <p>Begins with plenary lectures and tutorials on subject areas, leading onto discussions about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• pre-class preparation• note-taking• revision <p>Analysis of two sample essays from past students is also planned to provide clarity on assessment criteria.</p> <p>Feedback on group reports is provided by ELS and a language tutor. This is to develop students' understanding of appropriate writing style through reflection on their own mistakes.</p>

‘Directed independent learning’ underpins the design of the programme and students are given time each day in class for group discussions and research, facilitated by teaching staff. For example, during the first week, students are put into groups to investigate strategies for adapting to the new academic traditions and are required to produce presentations and a written report.

Students are given class hours to work on the report, independently of our instruction. We believe these periods act as an in-between space for students to appreciate and practice the new way of ‘doing and being’, i.e. independent learning, through actively participating in a supported environment. Our approach also aligns with the belief that “assessment is integral to effective directed independent learning” (Thomas et al., 2015 p. 5).

To further consolidate students’ understanding of essential academic skills for successful study, a ‘Putting Yourself in the Tutor’s Shoes’ session is run towards the end of the programme. In this activity, students are given two essays to ‘assess’, individually and in groups; one with an ‘A’ grade and one with a ‘D’ grade. Students provide feedback on each essay with comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the essays, followed by a tutor-led discussion to capture the key learning points and clarify issues raised in students’ feedback. This facilitates a deeper understanding of academic conventions, including the marking criteria, and encourages students to think critically. Learning activities using exemplars are believed to be effective as they provide clarity on tutors’ expectations (O’Donovan et al., 2008).

Evaluation and Discussion

Evaluation of the quality of the BP learning outcomes will be based on questionnaire and focus group feedback from students, a record of their continuous engagement with ELS, and their degree results compared to the UG programme mean.

Questionnaire Feedback

Questionnaires were circulated at the end of the BP (in 2014-15 Academic Year), with a completion rate of 95%, resulting in 43 qualitative questionnaires. A focus group with three students was run at the beginning of the second semester, allowing time for students to reflect on their Semester 1 results and their overall learning experience.

When asked to rate the course overall, students consistently rated the usefulness of the BP between 4.5 – 4.9 (on a scale from 1-5).

Further results from the questionnaires are aggregated in Figure 2:

Figure 2. Aggregated Survey Results

Question 1. What was most useful? (from a provided list)	
• <i>Essay activity – Putting Yourself in the Tutor’s Shoes</i>	72%
• <i>Received formative feedback on group reports</i>	42%
• <i>Group projects on educational cultural difference</i>	31%
• <i>Directed independent learning</i>	28%
• <i>Meeting ‘senior’ students</i>	26%
Question 2. What did you most enjoy? (open question)	
• <i>Group projects (for the development and practice of soft skills, such as communication and negotiation. This also includes group discussions in modular lectures and tutorials).</i>	47%
• <i>Assessment of written reports and group presentations, and subsequent feedback.</i>	26%
• <i>The essay activity (Putting Yourself in the Tutor’s Shoes). Help with understanding of the assessment criteria and what an essay should look like.</i>	26%
• <i>Subject experience, i.e. modular lectures and tutorials</i>	21%
• <i>Friendliness and supportiveness of staff and their engaging, active teaching style</i>	17%
Question 3. How could the course be improved? (open question)	
• <i>More practical sessions and guidance on essay writing</i>	31%
• <i>More subject experience, i.e. modular lectures and tutorials</i>	24%
• <i>More opportunity to meet British students and other international students, including ‘senior’ students and ‘new entry’ students</i>	12%
• <i>More research skills</i>	12%

Students' comments in Question 2 and Question 3 were grouped into similar themes. Activities about assessment (including feedback on their own work and analysing exemplar essays) were considered particularly useful. Examples of comments in the open box in Question 2 were:

“The essay writing activities (getting feedback for our report and the ‘Putting Yourself in the Tutor’s Shoes’ session) are very useful. I understand better now what teachers are looking for in essays”.

“I really enjoyed the classroom debates of ‘independent learning’. I learned that as far as I have evidence and provide reasoning for my opinions, teachers would accept them”.

“I most enjoyed the free discussion between tutors and students (in subject lectures and tutorials). It encourages us to speak out, nothing matters wrong or right. In addition, we can get feedback quickly through these classroom discussions.”

Comments made by students in Question 3 show a wide range of concerns around practical essay writing skills, understanding lectures and social issues. Comments raised in the open box in Question 3 included:

“More sessions about academic writing would be great. These are really different from what we learned in China, i.e. essay structure, references, how to use linking phrases etc.”

“I want to learn more about how to do group work and essay writing. I also want to know how to make notes effectively in lectures”.

“More introductory lectures and tutorials please as they are quite different from how lectures are like in China”.

“More sessions on research skills and how to find the right stuff for our essay”.

“We don’t know how to talk to local students/people, not so much about the language, but what (topics) to talk about”.

“I enjoyed learning from local students, and it would be great to also study with other nationalities too during the programme”.

Focus Group Feedback

Feedback from the focus group is summarised below:

- Students stated that they had developed an appreciation of educational differences, including essay writing, classroom discussions in tutorials and group work.
- Students seemed to suggest that whereas learning information such as formulas of different accounting related ratios is still the case in Chinese institutions, there is a strong emphasis in the UK on sharing case examples, work practices, and presenting grounded reasoning when writing reports.
- Overall, the consensus was that Chinese students do need to learn new ways of studying, and that university teachers need to help students better understand the assessment requirements.

Students also reported that:

“It (Bridge Programme) helped me develop an understanding of educational differences in writing essays and working with others. So it was really useful for us to come earlier for that”.

“I think I am more aware of the need to be actively participating in classroom discussions ... I can now see the benefits of group work beyond simply getting good marks for our (group) assignment”.

Feedback from the questionnaire and the focus group agreed with the literature that education providers need to be explicit about assessment criteria (Thomas et al., 2015).

Engagement with ELS

In reviewing the usage of ELS for the 2014-15 Academic Year, 40% of the BP students requested formative feedback on their assignment drafts (some more than once), in comparison to the average of 26% of their peers in final year programmes. BP students were also more likely to utilise drop-in surgeries, ELS lectures and workshops. This continuous engagement suggests that BP students recognise the benefits of learning development interventions.

Students' Degree Results

Around 70% of the students on the BP enter Accounting and Finance Programmes at FoML. Therefore, we compared the Accounting and Finance degree award results of students who graduated in 2014 as part of the evaluation. A higher percentage of good honours were found amongst BP attendees, compared to the programme average as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Comparison of students' awards in the Faculty's UG Accounting and Finance Programmes in 2013-14

Degree classification	Bridge Programme Mean from 38 students	Programme Mean from 138 students
First Class Honours	47.4%	29.7%
Second Class Honours First Division	36.8%	38.4%
Second Class Honours Second Division	13.2%	14.5%
Third Class	0%	5.1%
Ordinary Degree	2.6%	8.7%
Other Exit Awards	0%	3.6%

These findings show that students on the BP achieved a higher performance score/ rate? than the rest of the cohort, although it has to be recognised that there are many factors at play, for example students on the BP were high achievers in their classes in China. These students tend to be more motivated than most, as they consider the Bradford degrees a stepping stone to postgraduate courses. Therefore, they could naturally be attracted to the benefits of extra help and effort, especially at an early stage.

Conclusion

This article has presented an evaluation of a pioneering induction programme for an all Chinese learners' group which recognizes academic cultural differences and has the aim of accelerating their transition into study at a British university. The Programme examined differences in assessment, contribution in class, and different ways of studying and learning,

such as the importance UK HE places on critical analysis.

Student feedback and their further engagement with ELS suggests an appreciation of the benefits of learning interventions around contextualized academic skills. There is also the suggestion, from looking at the students' degree results that the BP may have contributed to the students' academic achievement.

Several changes have been made to the BP as a result of students' feedback. One major change is that FoML is looking into expanding the BP to include all direct entry and exchange students in the 2016-17 Academic Year, aiming to encourage a more intercultural, social experience. The success of the programme has triggered the development of ELS delivering a Pathway Preparation Programme in Utrecht and in China.

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