

Conference Review

Acculturation and Internationalisation: Reflections from a Symposium at Kingston University

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As internationalisation and widening participation have become embedded in the provision of British universities, student experience of acculturation becomes an important part of the learning process, for both home and international students. This experience can be an acute process 'grounded in an understanding of the cognitive, social and linguistic demands of specific academic disciplines' (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons 2002), requiring huge behavioural, cognitive and linguistic adjustments. In addressing the needs of international students in this process, it is helpful to emphasise two issues:

- That the international experience can be enhanced by being a two-way process of transformation between home and international participants;
- That language needs of students coping with new academic contexts are not experienced in a vacuum, but are inextricably linked to and embedded in the process of becoming part of a new academic community.

These issues therefore raise the pedagogic questions, first of what is meant by 'internationalising the curriculum'? Secondly, how do current trends in EAP language support address issues of acculturation in academic preparation and support?

A symposium was convened at Kingston University on 18 September 2014 in order to bring together diverse colleagues to share understanding of the international student experience and raise awareness of areas of expertise and good practice within UK Higher Education, with an overall focus on '[ensuring] the academic success of international students through a holistic and informed approach' (Ryan, 2013). Speakers, who included academic staff, a senior policy researcher, and student representatives, were:

- David Killick, Head of Academic Staff Development, Centre for Learning & Teaching, Leeds Metropolitan University
- Ursula Wingate, Department of Education and Professional Studies, King's College London: Academic literacy and student diversity
- Siân Lund, Academic Literacies and EAP Programmes, Richmond University.
- Steve Woodfield, Associate Professor, Vice-Chancellor's Office, Kingston University.
- Roberto Di Napoli, CHERP, Kingston University.
- Sarah Horrod, Senior Lecturer, English Language Unit, Kingston University.
- Shreya Paudel, International Officer, NUS and Denza Gonsalves, President, KUSU.

In what follows, symposium organiser Siân Lund and plenary speaker David Killick share their reflections on the day's discussions, and Ursula Wingate summarises her contribution on inclusive pedagogy.

The two concepts from the title of this symposium clearly present the desire for the forum to create a bridge between two often unconnected activities in HE institutions. When the economic expediency of encouraging international students into UK universities is put aside, discord is often heard between those 'trying to get on with the job of teaching their subject' and those in supporting capacities attempting to bridge the gap between home and international participants. The two concepts in the title therefore aimed to highlight the urgent need to address internationalisation in terms of the cultural and social engagement on both sides of the participation process. For this reason, speakers were invited to comment on internationalisation from a broad institutional position as well as the specific needs of all students on a daily basis.

As the HEA has been developing its internationalisation framework, many involved in supporting International students have been eagerly anticipating the focus on integration and intercultural engagement which moves beyond the economic benefits and a one-way deficit model of the need for international students to 'catch up'. The speakers for this symposium were therefore chosen for their input on the ways in which institutions are either being required or are attempting to address the needs of both home and international students and faculty in the development of a genuine two-way internationalisation. As Steve Woodfield spoke of the recent publication of the HEA framework for Internationalisation, he highlighted the key 21st century graduate requirements of an inclusive ethos where intercultural engagement is fostered and cultural diversity is promoted (HEA, Woodfield, 2014). He showed how the impact of diversity (both cultural and linguistic) and the creation of a global community are being acknowledged at policy level where the need for shared responsibility among all staff is also addressed.

The acknowledgement in policy statements of the need for issues of acculturation to be addressed in the future led effectively into David Killick's focus on the heightened need for recognition of this in the curriculum. He spoke of the challenge of universities to avoid ethnocentrism and instead address cognitive and behavioural skills development so that all students are prepared to encounter diversity and benefit from it. In connection with this, he reviewed universities' approaches to marketing support to students in segregated ways, separating international students and home students. In this way, he suggested, cultural hegemony is established from the outset, when a university provides information on its website under tabs of 'undergraduates' 'post graduates' and then 'International students', for example.

The bridge between such institution-led impact on cultural diversity and communicative experience was initiated with Roberto di Napoli's consideration of the features of academic practice and how these are taught within universities.

Ursula Wingate and Sarah Horrod provided the linguistic perspectives on the realities of developing communication skills through integrative and inclusive practices. Having heard the institutional context in which this is attempted, it is clear that this task is indeed a complex one. On one level, HE institutions are grappling with issues of social engagement and global requirements for graduates while at the same time language practitioners are trying to assert their direct experience and vital role in this developing landscape. Sarah Horrod emphasised the holistic approach of EAP practice which incorporates intercultural and discourse analysis with communicative competencies required in membership of academic communities. Ursula Wingate suggested that this necessitates equal collaboration

between subject specialists and language practitioners and that this is inextricably linked with Academic Literacies needs of *all* students.

Ursula Wingate

In her presentation, entitled ‘Academic literacy and student diversity: Towards an inclusive higher education pedagogy’, Ursula highlighted weaknesses in the current English language support provision offered to international students. These weaknesses include a preoccupation with teaching academic writing, which neglects other aspects of academic communication such as academic reading, presentations and classroom discussions. Furthermore, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes are often generic and do not prepare students sufficiently for the epistemologies, discourses and literacy conventions of their discipline. The provision represents a deficit approach by targeting specific groups such as ‘international students’ who are deemed to be non-native speakers of English and therefore to have linguistic deficits. This approach ignores the fact that academic literacy comprises more than linguistic competence, and has to be learned by all students new to a discipline.

Ursula reported the findings from a recent study in which 10 lecturers and 10 international students were interviewed about their perceptions of English language policies and practices in their university. Lecturers and students expressed frustration over the existing language and literacy support. Lecturers felt unsupported by their institutions and noticed that the extra effort needed to advise and supervise international students was not recognised. Students recognised the limitations of centrally-provided English language classes and asked for a substantial increase in individual advice and feedback by their lecturers in the disciplines. These findings highlight that, despite the rapid increase in international student numbers, university policies and practices have remained largely unchanged, and that there is little evidence of institutional strategies for adequate staff and student support. Based on the frameworks of Academic Literacies and Academic Discourse Socialisation, Ursula proposed an inclusive model of academic literacy instruction, which should be an entitlement for all students, integrated into the subject curriculum and collaboratively delivered by literacy experts and subject experts. Some examples were provided from an intervention study in which discipline-specific genre-based literacy instruction and collaboration between literacy and subject experts were implemented.

Discussion following these two presentations clearly showed the complexities of accomplishing communication development for all students within institutions which may not always fully appreciate the holistic approach this requires as ‘shared responsibility’ across the university. It appears that, although genre specific, embedded approaches to communication support are clearly part of the EAP provision, they may not be as widely publicised as they could be. This may be a result of institutions which have yet to acknowledge the importance of academic literacies approach combined with EAP as well as from difficulties mentioned at the beginning of symposium: of the shared responsibility of a university-wide approach to cultural and linguistic development.

Finally, the president of Kingston Students’ Union and the international officer of the National Union of Students, Denza Gonsalves and Shreya Paudel, provided invaluable insight into issues they have encountered which affect international students. Both cited possibilities for student engagement in the wider student body as well as the wider community as key aspects of international students’ capacity to integrate into their new academic environment and become valued members of the community.

David Killick

I was intrigued by the title of this symposium when first asked if I would be able to contribute. Acculturation is usually seen as a rather long term process associated with those taking up long term residence in a new cultural milieu, though it is referred to in some literature on international student sojourning. The more I thought about, though, the more relevant the term seemed, not exclusively or even primarily for our international students, but for all our students as they move forward to make their ways in a world which is in a constant state of change, flux, or liquidity. Roberto de Napoli, in situating academic practice as having become something of an empty signifier, served to remind me that it is not only students who constantly need to (re)acculturate to new ways of being, it is also academic staff – and the institutions in which both staff and students enact their disciplinary selves. The focus on what academics *do* and what students *do* is exposed as reductive and inadequate – because acculturation is about *being* as much or more than it is about *doing*. I would style education for (re)acculturation and shifting intercultural living as an education for the global self, and for that we need both formal and hidden curricula that do not ‘other the other’, but bring everybody equally to the educational table.

Much of this sort of thinking is at least implicit, and in some measure explicit, in the HEA’s Internationalisation Framework. Steve Woodfield’s exposition of this framework was exceptionally clear. Most significantly, it made clear that if institutions were to embrace the framework, whether as an audit tool, a development tool, or a research tool, the sector would find itself unable to cling to the more reductive notions of internationalisation which have dominated much of its work hitherto. I am not entirely without hope that this might happen, but the record so far doesn’t leave a great deal of space for optimism. However, one space did open for me at the symposium, and that was with regard to the moves to establish more equitable approaches to supporting students in the development of academic literacy. Ursula Wingate situated this work as inclusive HE pedagogy, and the message sent by removing the deficit model of the international student as (i) a homogenous entity which (ii) does not use English well (iii) in contrast to the whole of the domestic student population is something I hope all HEIs will acculturate to. Sarah Horrod reasserted the significance of language in academic life, and led me back to thinking about Roberto’s caution about empty signifiers. The adjectives ‘international’, ‘domestic’, ‘home’ when applied to ‘students’ are all empty signifiers – except perhaps if these students exist only in terms of their differential economic worth and visa requirements. The work of the Students’ Union can also at times serve to isolate and categorise, and marginalise international students and students of differing cultures. Where institutions operate to deficit models, SUs have not always been strong advocates for their international members, if they have reached out to them at all. Denza Gonsalves and Shreya Paudel demonstrated commitment and exciting work at Kingston which offers a positive model to others. Overall and overwhelmingly, this day at least evidenced that individual academic practitioners and student representatives are working deliberately to be anything but empty.

As a short addendum, I note that I am writing this in Japan having just attended an international education conference in Osaka. The diverse range of nationalities and cultures represented at the conference was a rich seam to mine. Presentations from institutions as varied as a Japanese elementary school and an American university in Qatar demonstrated that internationalisation is very much alive and very much contested as an issue globally, and questions of equity in academic practice are always part of the formal or the hidden agenda.

The symposium programme can be downloaded from:

<http://www.kingston.ac.uk/events/item/1107/18-sep-2014-acculturation-and-internationalisation-symposium/>

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