Integrating multi-national cohorts

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The University of Sheffield welcomes almost 6,000 international students to our courses and programmes. This presents an opportunity and a challenge to the learning environment both in terms of creating a positive experience for all groups and for breaking down some of the misconceptions that may exist around social and academic interactions between domestic and international students.

In order to take most advantage of the internationalised environment, the Faculty of Engineering includes both informal opportunities along with planned learning activities to build links between domestic and international students. Activities such as the Global Engineering Challenge are part of the Faculty’s effort to internationalise the curriculum, allowing students to tackle real-world problems from a global perspective while building group work skills from the outset of their studies.

As part of ongoing efforts to increase understanding of the advantages and challenges of multi-national cohorts, the Faculty’s Staff-Student Committee looked at some concerns and possible solutions to increasing interaction. The following has been adapted from discussions that took place among the student committee members.

- Build connections **before** students arrive in Sheffield. Consider creating a **pre-course online forum** for people to meet and share ideas in advance. Early opportunities to chat virtually can build bridges to interaction on arrival.

- Bring international and domestic students together from the outset. Some international students arrive a week before Induction Week with some departments arranging welcome meetings over this period. Where possible, include home students in these events too. These sessions are where students make their first contacts with classmates.

- Try not to overwhelm new students with large formal gatherings on their first days but create opportunities for them to meet and mingle.

www.shef.ac.uk/lets/thinkglobal
• Look at opportunities to foster interaction within and outside of the classroom. Having a common space where students can chat with fellow students and staff can help build a sense of community.

• Student societies are important means to build social and academic connections.

Remind students of the value of student societies and other Student Union activities. Encourage representatives to speak in class at the start of year to explain purpose and events. Students may not be familiar with the Student Union and available opportunities.

INTEGRATION IN THE CLASSROOM

By giving examples of the benefits of interaction in terms of group work, career development, building contacts, possibilities of study or research abroad, you can set the scene for a positive classroom experience.

Following are some examples of integration issues in the classroom. We look at possible symptoms and causes of poor integration.

Student reluctance to join in on group projects or select groups based on nationality.

Possible causes

• Language skills or lack of understanding of task
• Preference for familiarity on the part of both international and domestic students
• Lack of incentive in marking scheme
• Lack of familiarity with working in multi-cultural groups and skills to deal with issues
• Human nature to work with people from a familiar culture who speak a familiar language

Possible solutions

• Select groups which are designed to be diverse to encourage interaction.
• Make the first assigned group task straightforward to allow students to gain confidence in the processes.
• Students might not appreciate the need to being assigned to a particular group. Clearly explain the rationale, benefit and roles of team members to alleviate some concerns. Give an example of good group work and outline why it works.
• Assign roles within groups so that all students are active. Rotate roles in future groups.
• Direct students to resources on group work such as Learn Higher prior to first group assignment.

www.learnhigher.ac.uk/groupwork/index.php
In a lecture, students from same country all sit together.

**Possible causes**

- Students find it easier to relate to students from similar backgrounds and tend to sit together.
- Perception that British students are difficult to approach and by the same token, perception that home students do not feel welcome to join international students.
- Groups of friends may walk to lectures together and then end up sitting next to each other.
- International students may share resources such as dictionaries or be concerned about language abilities so might feel more comfortable sitting with a supportive group of other international students.

**Possible solutions**

- Encourage teaching staff to undertake training on how best to teach a diverse cohort.
- Ask students to introduce themselves at the start of the lecture, particularly in early weeks of Level 1.
- If feasible, mix up lectures by asking students who usually sit at the back to move to the front.
- Try to establish a level-playing field for students by acknowledging the various backgrounds of new students. Provide sources of support and provide background materials on MOLE, such as reference list of commonly used terms.
- Post PowerPoint presentations in advance but explain that more information will be provided in lectures to ensure that students attend lectures.
- Ensure a mix of country origins in groups. Explain that the more students work together, the easier this will become. This may establish greater interaction in lectures too.