Improving integration in the Learning Environment: Student and Staff Perspectives

A report on a seminar held on June 12, 2013 at the University of Sheffield as part of the HEA Workshop and Seminar Series 2012-13

The University of Sheffield has put significant energy into internationalisation of the curriculum through institutional-level initiatives and through direct work with academic departments and faculties. Sheffield is proud of its diverse student body, but student satisfaction of integration between domestic and international students is not as high as it might be – a problem shared by many institutions. Whilst integration has been addressed in recent concerted efforts across Student Services and in the Students’ Union, investigating integration issues in the learning environment are also considered important.

Using a student ambassador-led research project on students’ experiences of integration in the learning and teaching environment as a starting point, the seminar looked at implications for participants in their own practice through small group conversations and profiled examples from across the disciplines, including Engineering, Social Sciences, and Arts and Humanities, to draw out issues and approaches.

PRESENTATIONS

“You don’t have to hate burgers to love Russian soup” – Bridging the cultural divide in international higher education

Dr Viv Caruana, Reader in Internationalisation of Higher Education
Leeds Metropolitan University

In her keynote presentation on Resilient Thinking, Dr Viv Caruana, Leeds Metropolitan University, (Caruana et al., 2012) challenged participants to look at what pedagogies work for students. Caruana acknowledged that while multicultural group work is seen as the gold standard, there is not a lot of evidence that it is working. She highlighted that crossing cultural boundaries is psychologically intense and many students feel ill prepared for it. We need to look at ways to get students working together and to examine ways of opening our teaching mindset to other pedagogies. The use of personal narrative as a means of breaking down barriers, for example, was discussed as an enhancement to the curriculum, applicable in many disciplines.

This document is based on a report of the seminar to the HEA. For more information on HEA seminars, visit: www.heacademy.ac.uk/events
The Student Voice: Findings of the Student Ambassadors for L&T research project

Lead Ambassador, Chris Maidment and ambassador team, Sarah Browne, Rito Dipto, Kerry Dragon, Thomas Fisher, Meanna Yeung,

The Student Ambassadors for Learning and Teaching reported on their research project on students’ experiences of integration in the learning and teaching environment. Their presentation generated much discussion particularly around convincing teaching staff to take on board some recommendations without driving a wedge between academics and students. Some conversations also took place around using the student voice to comment on the learning and teaching environment rather than a top-down approach.

The Global Engineering Challenge (GEC)

Dr Rachel Horn, Faculty of Engineering

The GEC involves 900 students from across the Faculty of Engineering working in multicultural teams in a week-long interdisciplinary globally-themed project. Time is divided equally between facilitated sessions and project working. The best thing about the experience for students was “team working and meeting new people” (over 50% of responses) with “working on real problems” being the second most significant response.

CASE STUDIES SHOWCASE

The Case Studies Showcase profiled examples of current practices to draw out similar issues and approaches in participants’ working environments. These sessions included:

Owning and sharing space: the impact of the physical environment on intercultural mixing

Dr Andrew Cox, Information School

- the impact of physical space and how a creative approach to group work could have a bearing on promoting a sense of belonging and have the greatest impact on integration (Cox, Chiles & Care, 2012)
Geographies of encounter
Dr Lucy Mayblin, Interdisciplinary Centre of the Social Sciences
- how students and staff experience their cross-cultural contact and how university campuses have the capacity to bring very disparate groups of people into contact with each other (Andersson, Sadgrove & Valentine, 2012)

Globalising the parochial
Dr Richard Steadman-Jones and Dr David Forrest, School of English
Christina Healey, English Language Teaching Centre
- the development of a module bringing two groups of learners – level-3 students and advanced English as a Second Language students – to work together on projects exploring the cultural dimensions of everyday life from a comparative perspective

Changing dynamics of postgraduate multi-cultural group work
Dr Malcolm Tait, Town and Regional Planning
Cilla Hollman-Sykes, English Language Teaching Centre
- the changing dynamics of postgraduate multicultural groups and how to help students overcome divisions along nationality lines in order to stimulate co-operative learning by all students within multi-cultural cohorts

KEY MESSAGES
Following are some highlights of messages developed from the presentations and discussions:

- We need to look at ways in which we can build space in the curriculum to reflect and recognise the transitions that students are experiencing to help build positive relationships with students.
- From a pedagogical perspective, we must look at how to enhance the outside learning environment and the use of informal spaces, particularly in the case of students with low contact hours.
- Self reflexivity – an important aspect of critical thinking – can be used, particularly in intercultural encounters.
- Discussions around internationalisation efforts in the learning environment have gained traction in the last few years with the result that teaching staff are much keener to explore innovative approaches.
- There is a need to explore how we design curricula to invite interaction into the classroom.
- It is important to examine the holistic picture of diverse groups interacting together, not just specific student groups.
- Be aware of student needs to build relationships with co-nationals, e.g. from employability networking perspectives.
WHAT NEXT

The day's deliberations highlighted the need for flexibility and adaptability in our delivery while recognising the complexity of today's learning environment. It also underscored that teaching staff are no longer working in isolation but are generating creative approaches to support inclusion and a greater sense of common identity across the disciplines.

From a student perspective, the need for reflexive practice emerged as a common theme throughout the day with the caveat that this should enhance and not dilute academic content. Students writing creatively about their own experiences can offer a starting point for integration and inclusion.

The event signals the need for more research on providing physical and creative space in the curriculum to enhance interaction, including approaches such as personal narrative as means to break down barriers. Discussions with participants also emphasises the need to look at what others are already doing in our institutions, for example, English Language Teaching Centre staff regularly employ many of the approaches advocated to encourage interaction e.g. group work, working in pairs, personal narratives.

The overriding lesson of the day is the recognition that engaging with students in the integration agenda is essential. The University of Sheffield, for example, is demonstrating innovation in its approaches, including a strong consultative process with the student community, particularly through the work of the flagship Student Ambassadors for Learning and Teaching initiative. The importance of student engagement in the process is highlighted by the knowledge that this day may not have taken place without the drive of Student Ambassadors for Learning and Teaching in their project development. Using that energy to constructively present a message to inspire and engage staff is an important means to foster integration in our academic communities.

If you wish to discuss your efforts to increase interaction among students, please contact:

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REFERENCES AND RESOURCES


Think Global

The University of Sheffield’s website devoted to the internationalisation of Learning and Teaching. See www.shef.ac.uk/lets/strategy/resources/thinkglobal

Inclusive Learning and Teaching

The University of Sheffield’s website, to support staff and students in assessing the effectiveness of the inclusive learning and teaching environment in the university.