Surveying International Postgraduate Students

Internationalisation Group, Department of Sociological Studies (Matthias Benzer, Afua Twum-Danso Imoh, Matthew Wargent, Alexandra Kaasch)

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Summary
The project centred on a survey of international students on three social science Masters programmes in the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield. A questionnaire was used for eliciting students’ perspectives on their needs and experiences with regards to four components of learning and teaching relevant to internationalisation. A report on the findings was distributed among departmental staff, and results were presented to two departmental committees. Findings led staff to reflect on their work for and with students and to consider whether the survey results encouraged any changes to existing practices.

About the project
The project aimed to contribute to the ongoing work of the Internationalisation Group of the Department of Sociological Studies. Its main objective was to support the internationalisation of learning and teaching in the context of taught postgraduate programmes in the Department.

The project consisted of a small study focused on eliciting the views and experiences of international (overseas as well as non-UK EU) students on taught postgraduate programmes in the Department of Sociological Studies. Specifically, we were interested in respondents’ views on: their needs and preferences prior to studying with us, their experiences during their MA programmes, and aspects of their programmes that were particularly valuable or unhelpful. We asked students about their needs and experiences with regards to four broad thematic areas: teaching approaches, exposure to internationally pertinent academic content and opportunities to develop global perspectives, facilitation of the development of skills relevant in an international labour market, and interaction between non-UK and UK students as well as integration of international students in the Department.

Methods
The group of potential participants included all 2011-12 and 2012-13 international MA students in Global and International Social Policy, Social Research, and Childhood Studies. In total, 32 potential participants were identified.

1 The project ran simultaneously with an OnCampus project supervised by one of our colleagues and entitled Exploring the Experiences and Views of Undergraduate International Students in the Department of Sociological Studies.

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We obtained ethical approval of our study through the Sociological Studies Department’s ethics review process. Our initial plan was to adopt a mixed methods approach\(^2\) to engaging the small number of potential participants. The study we have designed consists of two main parts:

1. **Questionnaire:** We designed a questionnaire with 36 closed and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was aimed at all potential participants. It sought to elicit international Masters students’ views on their needs, their experiences, and on valuable and unhelpful learning and teaching components in respect of the four themes listed above: teaching approaches, internationally pertinent academic content, skills relevant for an international labour market, and interaction and integration. In order to get a sense of the relevance of the questions we had drafted, we met with two international students in the Department prior to finalising the questionnaire to discuss the survey’s content. The questionnaire was administered online through Google Docs. 10 students completed the questionnaire.

2. **Focus group discussions:** We also developed a focus group discussion scheme with 10 stimulus questions. Our aim was to hold discussions with 2012-13 international PGT students in the Department. (It would not have been possible to include the previous year’s students, many of whom had left Sheffield, and indeed the UK, when we began our study.) The aim was to collect more detailed data on the perceptions and experiences of our respondents. The focus group discussions were to be facilitated by a postgraduate research student in the Department; we surmised that the presence of a member of academic teaching staff might discourage respondents from expressing critical views. Unfortunately, we were unable to recruit enough participants for the focus group discussions.

We aim to replicate this study with future student cohorts. University of Sheffield staff who would like to obtain a copy of the survey or focus group questions may contact the Sociological Studies Internationalisation Group (see contact details above).

**Results**

To receive a detailed report on our survey findings, University of Sheffield staff may contact the Sociological Studies Internationalisation Group (see contact details above).

**Dissemination**

To date, we have presented and discussed our study as follows:

- a report on our findings to all members of staff in the Department of Sociological Studies;
- a presentation at the *Internationalisation of Learning and Teaching: Good Practice in the Faculty of Social Sciences* symposium at the University of Sheffield;
- meetings with the Executive Committee and the Graduate Affairs Committee of the Department of Sociological Studies to discuss the findings and their implications for departmental practice.

**Impact**

From the outset, we sought to incorporate components into the project that would allow our study findings to influence practice in the Department, especially – but not exclusively – postgraduate teaching practice.

Responses to our project indicate that the report on our findings has supported reflection and has had practical implications.

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In summary, the report:

- stimulated reflection on diversifying assessment and the conditions in which formative assessment might be useful;
- triggered critical reflection on inviting students to share their own culturally specific experiences in class;
- suggested that thinking about contact time should be prioritised;
- gave encouragement to existing teaching activities such as reading groups and, by revealing students’ priorities for skills development, to the provision of specific modules;
- underscored the value of emphasising academic skills support;
- encouraged the inclusion of more international substance, e.g. case studies or examples reflecting more diverse experiences; and
- gave encouragement to offer more social activities early on in the academic year and to organise more social events that speak to a diverse postgraduate student body.

The report also led the departmental Graduate Affairs Committee to work on refreshing departmental induction with a view to interaction, integration, and clarification of the teaching approaches students experience in the Department as well as to review Masters level assessment.

**Practical lessons**

The major shortcomings of the project were the relatively low number of respondents to the questionnaire (less than a third of potential participants) and insufficient recruitment for the focus group discussions. We speculate that this was partly due to time pressures. First, students’ schedules appear to have been quite busy throughout Semester 2, when our study was taking place. Second, we sought to hold the focus groups as late in the academic year as possible so as to elicit students’ views on as many components of their programmes as possible. This meant that the focus groups were scheduled for mid-June, when potential participants may have been busy with course assessments. It may be beneficial to schedule focus group discussions slightly earlier in the academic year.

*This project was supported by the Internationalisation of Learning and Teaching Fund.*

*As part of the Think Global project, we aim to provide resources to support the internationalisation of the learning and teaching environment. If you require further information, please contact us: mkane@sheffield.ac.uk*