

Perceptions and experiences of home students involved in welcoming and supporting direct entry 2nd year international students

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Abstract

International student recruitment into Higher Education Institutions can take a variety of forms that require tailored responses. In this case, international students arrived as a pre-existing cohort and joined an established second year cohort in the Department of Chemistry. A Peer Assisted Learning programme was set up to support incoming students. The study explores the motivations and experiences of the home students who acted as Peer Assisted Learning leaders. The home students were motivated by empathetic concerns for new arrivals in the country as well as at the university. They acted beyond the requirements of the role and they took responsibility to initiate new activities. The experiences of home students is a relatively under researched aspect of internationalisation. The study is an example of a specific response to a particular internationalisation experience that enriches understanding of internationalisation by paying attention to the specifics of local context. We argue that nuanced responses to specific situations will become increasingly important. The actions and ideas may resonate with universities recruiting particular groups of international students.

Keywords Peer Assisted Learning, home students, international students, local

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context, internationalisation

Internationalisation and international student recruitment

This study is set within the context of increasing internationalisation in higher education. Internationalisation refers to specific policies and strategies that governments and institutions undertake to add international dimensions to their activities. It can be defined as:

The process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education (Knight, 2004 p11).

Internationalisation is a critical concern for higher education world-wide (Scott, 2000; Taylor, 2010). It has a number of aspects that include: contribution to the knowledge economy, international research collaboration and rankings, enhancing the experience and employability of home students and, for many institutions, international student recruitment. There is a well-documented economic imperative for international student recruitment but the presence of high achieving international students can also contribute to all aspects of the internationalisation agenda (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2004; 2007). Again, it is well established that simply having high numbers of international students on campus does not in itself create an international experience for home or international students (Carroll & Ryan, 2006; Wright & Lander, 2003). Yet in recruiting international students universities have a responsibility to properly welcome their international students and to prepare their graduates for work in a globalising world with a need for “well developed lifelong learning skills and attitudes, including an international perspective” (Webb, 2006, p110).

The University of Liverpool has a noteworthy position vis-a-vis international student recruitment in that it has worked with Xi'an Jiaotong University in the city of Xi'an, Shaanxi province, China to establish a new University near Shanghai; Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University (XJTLU). Students at XJTLU follow a four year programme, taught in English and exactly modelled on the University of Liverpool's programmes but with an introductory first year that focuses on Chinese studies, English language skills and preparation for learning in a UK higher education system. Their second year at XJTLU is in line with the equivalent first year of undergraduate studies at the University. In

those subjects with articulation agreements XJTLU students have the option to complete their final two years of study at Liverpool and to gain a University of Liverpool degree as well as a XJTLU degree. The University benefits in receiving a steady supply of talented Chinese students who have been acclimatised to the UK system through their first two years of study in China.

In addition to welcoming international students and integrating home and international students (Hyland, Trahar, Anderson, & Dickens, 2008; Ryan & Viète, 2009; Teekens, 2007), the University also faces particular variants on the common challenges of international student recruitment. This is primarily based on the fact that students enter the second year of an undergraduate programme rather than the first as is usually the case. Apart from academic issues, it means that an existing cohort of students arrives from China to be placed alongside an existing cohort of home and sometimes mixed international students. This additional challenge of recruiting into the second year magnifies the issues of providing an appropriate welcome and support and so provides an additional imperative to find solutions. We were concerned to anticipate any problems by setting up a welcome scheme designed for this specific situation and to involve home students in the process. In order to inform future developments we were interested to explore the motivations and experiences of these home students.

In the main, studies of internationalisation have tended to focus on national and sector level rationales for internationalisation, presenting the “macro” picture (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). This approach can mask the local factors that drive any particular institution to follow its own particular internationalisation trajectory. Thus, the actions of departments, individual members of staff or indeed home students are rarely shown in these higher level studies. Marginson and Rhoades (2002) claim that there is insufficient research carried out into the detail of internationalisation practices at institutional and departmental levels. They call for studies that draw attention to the local level: “We need work that attends to local response and reality, explores local institutions, and considers local practices” (p286). This study is an example of how research at a departmental level can contribute to a richer understanding of an aspect of internationalisation.

Background to the study

Prior to commencing this study we had conducted focus groups involving home students from different departments in the Faculty of Science and Engineering in order to learn something of the prevailing experience of home students with respect to internationalisation. Findings from these focus groups indicated interest in contributing subject and pastoral support to international students, including those coming into the second year from XJTLU. This led us to believe that there was likely to be a similar interest from home students in the Department of Chemistry.

In order to provide further background data, students from the incoming cohort of Chinese students from XJTLU were invited to take part in a focus group and were surveyed by questionnaire on their perceptions of the welcome and support provided in the Department of Chemistry.

The study

This paper reports on a study carried out for the Department of Chemistry on the arrival of their first cohort of XJTLU students and specifically on the response of a group of Chemistry home students. The study set out to explore the perceptions and experiences of the home students involved. This is significant because the views of home students with respect to the arrival of international students is an area that has received surprisingly little attention (Peacock & Harrison, 2009). Once known, their views can be used to shape further developments of the scheme.

Support for international students transition to a new culture

International students are those described as students who have moved to another country to study (Biggs, 2003). They may experience a range of challenges in a new culture such as adapting to new learning and teaching patterns and new socio-cultural norms. Also, they may experience additional difficulties with language and changed support systems (Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008; Nilsson, 2000; Wang, 2012).

International students will have to make similar adjustments to many home students to

the higher education environment and in addition will have needs relating to moving to a new country (Kelo, 2007). Most host universities make provision in some way for their international students and there are numerous reports and guides on good practice in the literature (Carroll & Ryan, 2006; Hyland et al., 2008; Trahar, 2007).

The Peer Assisted Learning programme

The University provides a standard range of support for international students that include: orientation to the city and university, induction, optional tailored English classes and personal tutoring. However, it was felt that the department could be doing more and from this we set up a Peer Assisted Learning programme (PAL) for supporting incoming students that was based on a Peer Assisted Study Scheme at the University of South Australia (Leask, 2009). Peer support programmes tend to be either pastoral; mentoring to help with adjusting to life in the UK and at University (Lassegard, 2008; Ryan, 2005) or academic; specific study support (Miller, Oldfield, & Bulmer, 2012; Murray, 2009). The PAL programme was designed to provide both early welcome and pastoral support and then on-going study support. Whilst these two goals were originally organised separately they tended to merge as the international students addressed their changing needs.

PAL leaders were recruited from second or third year home students in the Department of Chemistry. They received training in both mentoring and subject support. Each PAL leader was the first point of contact for a small group of incoming students, usually three or four students. They contacted their students prior to leaving China in order to discuss any issues regarding travel and arrival. The PAL leaders met with their designated international students during the University's 'Welcome Week'. Once term started they met their group of students primarily for mentoring/pastoral support. Subject support sessions were timetabled on a weekly basis around specific topics so that the international students could select those relevant to their needs at the time. These topics included: study skills, academic integrity, note taking and using the library. Later in the first term, international students suggested topics for inclusion or extension in the weekly timetable, for example key skills and practical skills. These sessions were held in a large room set up for small group discussions, facilitated by the PAL leaders. Sessions ran throughout terms one and two. The home students also voluntarily organised social activities.

Methodology

The research took a constructivist methodological approach. This is a perspective that views meaning as being constructed in the interaction between subject and object; people interpret their world and create meanings in their interactions with the realities of the world (Crotty, 2004). The social world is constructed and as such “knowledge about the social world is always knowledge in context” (Moses & Knutsen, 2007, p194). The methodology involved the use focus groups in order to generate data on experiences of the PAL programme. Focus groups offer the opportunity for the sharing and comparing of experiences, thereby generating understandings; as such this method is consistent with a constructivist approach to research (Cousin, 2008).

We carried out a focus group with nine home students from the Department of Chemistry who had all been involved as PAL leaders. The aim of this focus group was to learn more about the home students’ experiences as PAL leaders and whether or not they had suggestions for improving the programme. They were specifically asked about their motivations for getting involved, the ways in which they had provided support, the impact on themselves and what they might have gained or lost (given up) from being involved.

We secured ethical approval following the university’s guidelines for this type of study. The focus group was conducted by one of the authors who is not a member of the Department of Chemistry and who did not know the students. The participants’ attendance was voluntary and all the home students who acted as PAL leaders chose to attend. The session was audio taped and transcribed. The students were assured of their anonymity, their right to withdraw at any time and were given the opportunity to review the transcript prior to it being analysed.

We used a Thematic Analysis approach to identify patterns in the data and to develop themes or categories for further interpretation; one of the bedrocks of qualitative analysis. Thematic analysis explicitly recognises that analysis can be both inductive and deductive; developing themes from the data or analysing in terms of themes derived from the ideas inherent in the interview questions (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun &

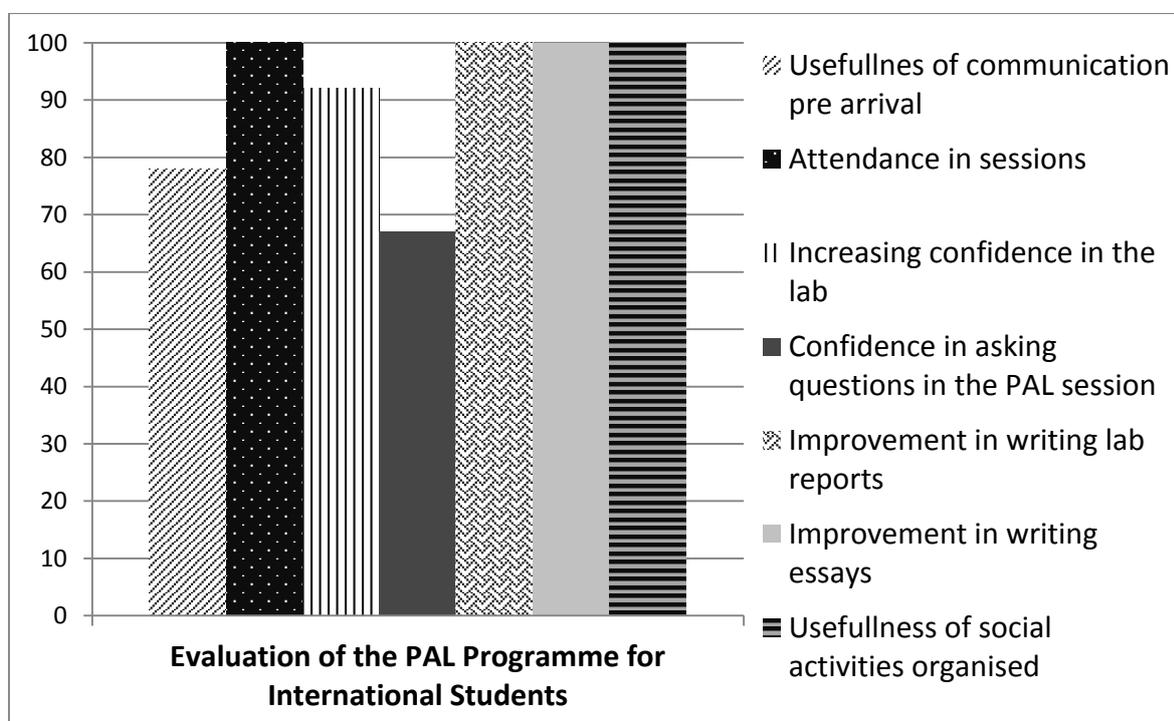
Clarke, 2006).

Findings

International students response to the PAL programme

The survey and focus groups with the international students from XJTLU that were carried out as background to the current study showed that these students were overwhelmingly positive about the PAL programme:

Figure 1. Evaluation of the PAL Programme for International Students



This is in line with studies that show that international students highly value efforts to provide social and academic support (Bartram, 2007; Hyland et al., 2008; Owens & Loomes, 2010; Zhai, 2002). Following from the success of the PAL programme some of the international students volunteered to act as PAL leaders in the future:

The most important reason that I'm interested in becoming a PAL leader is because I really got lots of help from the PAL leader this year, no matter in the study or livelihood. Therefore, I hope there is an opportunity for me to help other people as well.

The PAL programme and the efforts of the home students were appreciated and were effective from the perspective of the international students.

Home students' response to the Department of Chemistry initiative

It is worth repeating that the views of home students have received surprisingly little attention in the literature (Peacock & Harrison, 2009). Whilst we cannot make any claim that the views of this group of students are representative, nevertheless the tenor of their responses was thoughtful and positive. It suggests that working with certain home students may well provide a fruitful avenue for enhancing welcome and support activities for international students.

The fact that the Department of Chemistry had explicitly set out to implement and evaluate new practices had an impact on the home students:

You do a bit of stuff on your own, maybe, but the fact that the opportunity has been presented it makes you say yes, I'd like to do that.

In all honesty if this help wasn't being organised by the department I wouldn't have sought out to get to know lots of international students ... for us, in second year, when you've already got loads of friends, I don't think that I would think oh I'll go and meet some new international friends... but certainly it is amazing that this has been organised because it's helped me realise that they would appreciate more friends.

It appeared clear that there are a number of home students whose essential good will was mobilised in response to the departmental action. Some of their responses will have been readily apparent, seen in their volunteering to lead in activities; other responses will be unseen, in the small gestures of support for their international peers:

Little smaller things come to mind. I remember once I held the door open for an international student and said have a good day or something and she was stunned. I've never seen anyone so shocked (laughter) I wouldn't be surprised if little things like that made a big difference.

On the whole we probably do not know much about these 'little things' and the difference they can make, but it is reasonable to assume that if the department is seen to be fostering an environment of concern for its international students then numbers of

home students will be encouraged to act in those little ways that can make a big difference.

Use of social media

The findings on pre-arrival communication from the background study with XJTLU students and the current study with home students indicated that email is not as effective as social media as a means of communication. The PAL leaders voluntarily used their existing social media, primarily FaceBook, to connect with their student groups in China instead of using university based email. However, there are cautions about using private social media for a university project; for example the University cannot require the use of private social media, there may be issues of access in different countries and not all students have FaceBook accounts. These issues will need to be resolved prior to the next intake. However, other studies have shown that International students valued the use of technology as a means of gaining some initial familiarity with new people and their new department (Bartram, 2007; Ribchester, Ross, & Rees, 2014). One unexpected outcome of these pre-arrival connections was that on their own initiative a number of home students organised social events and became more conscious of supporting their international peers in many different ways, both academic and social.

Empathetic responses

Travelling overseas and experiencing the feeling of being a bit lost in another country enabled some home students to empathise with international students as visitors to the country:

I think I have quite a different perspective on the different types of things that they might need to know about because when I went over there I flew out by myself, so I was worried if there was going to be someone there to meet me at the airport, how I'd get to my accommodation, how good or bad my Japanese would compare to theirs, whether they would know any English

I think that it would be nice to help somebody in that situation because I thought it was quite scary coming to University and I only moved from Manchester!

It was refreshing to hear these home students building from their own experiences and

transferring them to the situation faced by international students and being willing to act on it. It is reasonable to assume that there will be a comparable group of students on other programmes who can be mobilised through departmental leadership to support their international peers.

The welcome in Britain

Following a similar pattern, some home students were simply concerned on a human level that international students, as visitors to Britain, are not being welcomed in ordinary ways to the country:

They're so interested in the country and when they come here they're probably quite disappointed in the fact that British students don't seem to pay them enough attention as human beings. I've been guilty of that and I'm trying to get into the right perspective this year. If there are thousands of international students ostracised or feeling like they don't belong then it's just not right and doing things to change that would be great

This comment captures the human concern for others who may be feeling left out and the sense that 'it's just not right'.

Learning from international students

It was clearly recognised that the international students were not simply a group that needed support. Their presence on campus was also seen as an opportunity to learn. One other study reported that 75% of home students thought that meeting international students "was a valuable part of the student experience" (UNITE & UKCOSA, 2006, p7). This view was articulated by home students who had little prior experience with international students:

... through my entire life of school, primary school and college there has been no international students. And so I've never had an appreciation of other people's cultures, and it would be nice just to get to know the international students and see how their lives were, how they work and [it would be a] great experience in life.

I think they have a lot to offer us as well, like their work ethic, I think we could take a lot from them, like they work a lot harder than most of us (laughter)

Whilst this fits with the rhetoric of an education for a globalised world it is not expressed in the more instrumental language of global employability, but simply the opportunity to learn something new and not just for credit. Evidently this will not be the view of all students all of the time, but it may represent one way of engaging a particular group of students. Home students are not all equally motivated and efforts to engage home students will require a multifaceted approach. For some students just helping out and learning about others is sufficient motivation.

On the dangers of stereotyping

During the focus group students discussed the dangers of stereotyping, triggered by perceptions of international students 'hogging the library':

I think as a country we have an issue, for example if you are a new student and it's revision time and you go to the library, ... and all you ever hear of is that they are hogging the library or they're taking all of the computers and even without knowing them, you start to stereotype them,haven't actually talked to them but just assumed what others have said is correct

The discussion acknowledged that this is not a one way lens and that stereotypes of British students may be equally prevalent.

The comments illustrate an awareness of a tendency to treat international students, as an undifferentiated category, whereas "international students' are no more a homogeneous group than any other group of people" (Trahar, 2007, p6) and this observation can be equally applied to home students. Whilst this was a small part of the discussion the students displayed a reflective capacity that lends support to the idea that many of our home students will be perfectly capable and willing to contribute to the welcome and support activities.

On getting involved

In finding ways to include home students in welcome and support initiatives we will need

to recognise the likely multiple motivations:

I think it depends who you are, I think it depends what you've come to University to be

I don't know, I just generally have a curious mind and I just like to experience new things really,

These comments speak of motivations beyond gaining credit or building a CV, which are of course perfectly respectable motivations that can also be invoked in endeavours to welcome and include international students. These motivations are likely to resonate with most people working in higher education and they are motivations that could be more explicitly drawn upon by including home students in the planning and running of welcome activities.

Conclusion

Recruitment and support for international students is an increasingly pressing issue for many universities. Marginson and Rhoades' (2002) call for studies that focus down to the actions of the professionals who initiate activities in support of internationalisation at the local level. This research goes beyond the professionals involved in internationalisation and includes the actions and motivations of home students.

The findings suggest that there are home students ready act in ordinary ways to welcome fellow students from overseas. What is required is that their goodwill is mobilised and that this is done in a variety of ways that can appeal to a variety of motivations. In this study the motivations included: empathy for peers in a challenging transition, a desire to welcome visitors to Britain, curiosity and a wish to learn.

Neither home nor international students are a homogenous group, so universities will need to develop increasingly nuanced approaches. In this study we focused on departmental efforts to set up a framework for the welcome of a cohort of Chinese students into an existing cohort of home students. Whilst this is a very specific situation we argue that it represents the type of nuanced challenge that will be replicated throughout the sector and that it is possible to draw conclusions that can be applied

elsewhere. Similar situations are likely to occur where there are international articulation agreements and concentrated recruitment efforts from specific countries.

The background research had confirmed that the international students had positive views of the practical support provided. The PAL initiative was shown to be an effective mechanism for supporting international students entering the second year of a degree programme and we suggest that it could be adopted for use in comparable contexts. The PAL programme was seen as valuable by both home and international students. Key elements to its success included the engagement of home students in its design and delivery and the flexibility afforded to home students to respond to emergent needs of the international students.

The use of social media to support student transition to higher education is a developing area of study (Ribchester et al., 2014). However, the focus is often on first year students in transition from school to university and their interactions with staff. The use of social media as a means of communication between international students and home students with specific support roles is an area for further investigation and implementation.

The research also illustrated something of the motivations of a number of home students and their capacity and willingness to engage with the department's welcome and support activities. Importantly, there are likely to be home students in other universities who will respond positively to departmental initiatives and all universities can create opportunities to involve them. It is worth emphasising that internationalisation initiatives are not accomplished by 'the university' and certainly not "by university edict alone, but only through the creative utilisation of the imagination and agency of those who comprise the university" (Webb, 2006, p117).

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