



Suggestions for teaching international students more effectively

Oxford Brookes University has encouraged a growing number of students to come to Oxford from outside the UK. This briefing paper highlights issues for teaching students in a culturally diverse setting. For a more detailed resource, *A Guide to Teaching International Students* by Janette Ryan is available from the OCSLD.

Being explicit

International students, in common with all students, bring ideas, assumptions and experiences with them that are very different from what they will encounter at Oxford Brookes. To learn new approaches, students must quickly pick up clues that their assumptions are inappropriate. You will help them by *explaining* rather than implying what you expect. If you are unsure what to be explicit about, ask yourself, 'What does a student need to do to be successful on this course?'

About assessment

- Decode and discuss assignments and essay titles. How is 'evaluate' different from 'justify' or from 'analyse'? Rather than an essay title that hints at the task, decode it.
- Clarify the criteria that you will use when marking (but be aware that when you explain, that explanation may also contain assumptions).
- Be explicit about the format you expect for their submitted work and share examples they can see and read. Just being told 'submit a report' is a daunting task if your only clue is a dictionary definition.
- Discuss how long the submission should be and explain why 'more' is not 'better'.
- When you mark, make clear how much weight grammar and vocabulary will have compared to content or structure of the argument. Surveys of international students confirm they often misjudge the impact of language proficiency (see below for more on language).

About planning

International students may take much longer than native UK students to produce work and to learn what you wish them to learn. Outline how they are expected to use their time, which dates are important and explain how they may use *your* time.

About interpersonal relationships

If a student offers you gifts, demands rather than requests your attention, or responds to an invitation to discussion by strongly deferring to your opinion, they are probably assuming that what served them

well in previous learning contexts will have a similar effect here. At Brookes, academics find these actions surprising and perhaps displeasing. 'Surprises' allow you to recognise your own assumptions. It will help international students to tell them what behaviour is expected in class, during office hours, and in group-based coursework. Mention how you wish to be addressed. Explain how and when they may seek help. However, it will take time and patience before many international students can act on your information.

When considering suggestions about explicitness, most academics agree that they would help students more but are reluctant for fear of appearing impolite or patronising. Many academics subscribe to British cultural conventions that discourage making personal remarks, and stress the importance of implying rather than stating things. However, perceiving in ourselves what it is like to act outside our own rules provides an opportunity to empathise with the difficulties of students asked to do exactly this. An alternative to actually stating the British 'rule' (eg 'Thank you for this present. I'm very surprised to get it because in Britain we don't bring presents to teachers') might be to offer guidance in writing. If you prefer an indirect approach, you may find it helpful to involve experienced international students in developing any briefing documents and guidance.

Safe practice and feedback

Many students entering Higher Education need to learn new approaches to learning. Most find this a challenge but for some international students, it also feels wrong. Brookes' ways may contradict some they have previously experienced or employed (eg deconstruction and judgmental review of an argument rather than seeking a holistic understanding of the issue and the context within which it is located). Complying with Brookes' ways may challenge deeply held views about, for example, consensus or respect. International students are probably willing to change – after all, they chose to come and knew things would be different – but they will not find it an easy or swift process. Formative assessment, peer review, clear and prompt feedback and lots of examples of good practice will all be welcomed.

Lighten the cognitive load

Students need time to think rather than just to understand what you are saying. This is true even for students with relatively good English, as the nature

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and complexity of language tasks in formal higher education study can be very different from what they experienced when learning English. You will help if you use straightforward terms and avoid metaphors, puns, jokes and verbal acrobatics (a metaphor!). If you complete your words, taking care to pronounce the last consonant, this will slow you down without losing the shape of the phrase. Allow silences and be willing to repeat what you said.

Discuss and decode the reading list, explaining (if you do) that you wish them to extract key information from a text rather than reading it thoroughly. Which are the key texts? Many international students will have had little exposure to the British academic convention of 'mining' texts for useful ideas, quotes, or points of view rather than reading it for recall later.

Students will appreciate help with discipline-specific vocabulary in the form of glossaries and explanations on-the-spot when they arise. Choose an accessible text or make the text accessible by explaining terms and pointing out rhetorical structures. Provide handouts and partial notes which allow more time for listening and thinking.

Speaking in class

Provide warning and practice time if you wish international students to speak in a group. This can be a short-term alert ('talk to the person next to you and decide on the question you would like to ask') or a more substantial pre-briefing ('next week, we will be discussing x so please come with y'). The faster students must respond, the less likely that international students will be willing to speak. Being expected to argue, articulate and share opinions, and exchange ideas in a second language can be very difficult, but with forewarning, international students are keen to join in.

Another possibility is to develop writing tasks that take place as online, asynchronous discussions (in WebCT for example, or using a dedicated Discussion Board, or even just using simple email). These 'discussions' allow time for students to reflect on the issues and refine their remarks.

One suggestion – welcomed by international students and treated warily by academics – is the idea of encouraging first-language discussion of concepts, ideas and theories. If you say something like, 'I want you to make sure you have understood what I just covered in the last five minutes. Please explain it to the person next to you in whatever language you both feel most comfortable using' then all students do an equally difficult task. To graduate from a British institution, students must be able to use English, but they also need content. To develop the latter, you might encourage first-language groups for discussion, literature searching, or shared reading.

Increase your cross-cultural sensitivity

When asked, experienced academics almost always say that the most important way to improve your teaching of international students is to get to know them as people and to get to know something about their life before Brookes. Asking questions and listening to the answers allows you to check out assumptions and generalisations and to increase your cultural awareness. This is not a call for you to become an 'expert' in the dozens of cultures and countries represented by your students. Rather, exploring what others think and do will help you to identify your own rules, assumptions and conventions. Because our own cultures are so implicit in all we do and think, we can only become self-aware by getting to know how others' cultures deal with the same matters. This will help you to be explicit in the way described in the first section of this paper and to teach British academic conventions as described in the next.

Teach 'Western' academic skills

The way in which we expect our students to learn and demonstrate their learning is just one way amongst many, equally as arbitrary and constructed as the academic cultures international students have temporarily left behind. Of course, we can expect students to comply with and use Brookes' 'rules'— they have chosen to study here and must accommodate to the Brookes ways. However, many of these conventions are very complex and students have only a short time to learn to use them effectively. To be successful students need to be able to:

- express personal opinions
- paraphrase and summarise others' words and ideas
- use referencing rules and conventions
- analyse and evaluate arguments and positions
- structure and order an academic argument.

The ability to carry out this daunting list of actions need not emanate solely from you. There are institutional supports available (see below) and every effort to support international students' academic development will be welcomed. The growing concern about plagiarism amongst international students makes even some effort in this direction ever more urgent. Students who arrive from UK schools find academic writing hard but international students find it very hard indeed. In addition, they may find the request to do so inexplicable and hard to accept. Given practice, extra support, lots of examples, and a good deal of empathy, many (if not most) manage it.

Stay-home students

Despite a sometimes naive hope that diversity per se will be a benefit, or general statements about the value of cross-cultural competence, academics are increasingly worried about the reactions of stay-home students to the increasing number of

international students on UK campuses. Each group brings different experiences, different expectations, and different characteristics to Brookes along with, of course, a great deal that they have in common. However, it's the difficulties that cause most discussion. UK students may be unused to communicating effectively across cultures or may have unrealistic expectations about how quickly international students will adapt to UK norms. Above all, they may see international students as a threat to their grades if asked to work with them or if they see their courses changed in any way to accommodate international students' needs.

Academics and institutions need to be realistic in considering how to deal with this situation. Instead of hoping that cultural diversity will automatically lead to a multicultural and positive experience for all, it might make more sense to work towards academic co-operation and a supportive classroom environment and accept that often, contact outside the classroom for international students will not include social relationships with UK students. This is not to say that institutions shouldn't seek to encourage encounters that might lead to social inclusion such as shared living arrangements or 'socials' as part of induction.

Group work

A common focus for tension occurs in mixed culture groups asked to work together on a group-assessed task. Groups that include a variety of cultures often find it hard to work effectively together. The research shows that it often takes considerably longer for multicultural groups than it does for monocultural ones to complete group tasks because of the time needed to adjust to others' norms and learn to communicate effectively. Unless you design projects and tasks where cross-cultural skills are an asset, or use intercultural competence as a learning outcome, mixed groups will often function less effectively than monocultural ones. In group tasks where English language skills or familiarity with British culture is an asset, UK students may view working with international students as disadvantageous to their grades. If you only assess the end result of a group's work, rather than considering both the task and the way it was achieved, the UK students may well be correct to seek monocultural groups. If you remove the assessment threat, perhaps by including assessment of the process as a significant part of the grade, it is possible to use in-class or group tasks to encourage real cross-cultural inclusion.

A final word

There is growing evidence that *not* paying attention to the special needs of international students as learners may have serious consequences. Nationally, researchers in the field talk of higher failure rates, increasing antagonism from stay-home students, rising levels of stress and unhappiness in international students, and a possible diminution in

the institution's image amongst disgruntled returners. On the other hand, if academics seek to become even more effective in teaching international students, institutions could indeed gain the benefits of internationalisation cited by the glossy brochures. In that case, the word would spread about the supportive and encouraging environment international students could expect. Most importantly, every single suggestion in this paper would be welcomed by stay-homes. If even some were adopted, everyone at Brookes would find learning here easier.

Resources

To order a copy of *A Guide to Teaching International Students* use our online booking form at:
http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/4_resource/books/bordf.html

International Centre for English Language Studies (ICELS) at <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/icels>
ICELS offers a huge range of English language courses

Student Services International Students at:
<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/international>

International Students Advisory Service at:
<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/student/services/international/ISA/>

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