

# Inclusive Practices to Promote International Students' Participation and Satisfaction

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The Inclusive Practices to Promote International Students' Participation and Satisfaction project was awarded by the Economics Network Learning and Teaching Development Fund in 2010, for one year duration. The project was a consortium of Universities Economics groups led by Dr Margarida Dolan<sup>1</sup> with Dr Alvin Birdi, Department of Economics, School of Economics, Finance and Management, University of Bristol; Dr Michael Arghyrou, Department of Economics, Cardiff Business School, University of Cardiff; and Dr Dimitra Petropoulou, Department of Economics, University of Oxford.

Other academics who collaborated in the project were Christian Spielmann, Department of Economics, Mathematics and Statistics at Birkbeck College and Department of Economics, University College London (UCL); Dr Richard Tutin, Department of Accounting and Finance, School of Economics, Finance and Management, University of Bristol; Juliette Stevenson and Dr Carlos Cortinhas, both at The Business School, University of Exeter; Iain Long and Dr Judith Shapiro, both at the Department of Economics, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE); Dr Michael McMahon, Department of Economics, University of Warwick; and Dr Frank Witte, Department of Economics, University College London (UCL).

The second phase of The Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education was launched in 2006 and its aims included further promotion of UK Higher Education, attracting students from a more diverse range of countries, and improvement of student satisfaction and employability<sup>2</sup>. A comparison of the 2004 and 2008 Economics Network Alumni Surveys<sup>3</sup> with respect to cross-cultural issues indicates that Economics degrees were not perceived as being responsible for providing Alumni with increased cultural awareness. The findings support the case that cultural awareness may be a skill sought by present-day employers, and that it should therefore be more actively promoted in teaching contexts.

In addition, international students are at times viewed as a drain on teaching resources and not as a potential teaching resource. This can result in inadequate inclusion of international Economics students and hinder their active engagement. The project addressed the teaching of international students in Economics and, through this, student retention and diversity, different learning styles and

the development of key skills including communication in international contexts and development of cross-cultural capabilities relevant for both group work, future employability and students' personal and social lives. The project identified inclusive practices for the promotion of UK Economics students' participation and satisfaction through the active engagement of international students of Economics in:

a) their own learning- there is anecdotal evidence that international students do not contribute as much as their peers, and that learning and assessment in the English language poses a challenge. Examination results of first-year students of Economics for whom English was a second language were found to be significantly worse than for students for whom English was a first language<sup>4</sup>. This is echoed by the results of the EN2008 survey<sup>5</sup>;

b) in the learning of their peers, including academic and non-academic knowledge - there is evidence that international students do not mix fully with their UK peers, a missed opportunity when it comes to the development of cross-cultural capabilities;

c) the learning of teaching staff; for example, through the sharing of experiences or knowledge of their countries of origin that could be useful in the development of internationalised curricula. This is particularly applicable in Economics, where examples are important for student engagement with abstract or formal theory. For example, culture-specific examples are only meaningful to a subset of students. It is thus important to find ways to contextualise specific cultural examples or find aspects that are transferrable to other systems or cultures, thereby internationalising the curriculum through its scope of application.

These inclusive practices can be used to facilitate a shift in perceptions, such that international students are viewed not as a burden (a 'deficit perception') but rather as a valuable resource for motivating the development of internationalised curricula in Economics, and the cross-cultural capabilities of all Economics students (a 'value-added perception').

The methods used included small group meetings, peer observation, telephone and email interviews, and filming. Participants in this project acknowledged that in their experience, international students in general do not contribute as much as their UK peers. Stephenson refers to "students who perhaps would feel very anxious

both in terms of large numbers but also in terms of language” whilst McMahon mentions that “people from certain cultures don’t feel happy putting their hand up in a lecture of 250 and asking a question about what I meant by something.” Long comments that “A lot of international students feel very anxious when they come into a class particularly if you are going to make them talk.”, “international students who quite often are very shy, they are not 100% confident with their English” and “international students, if they are a bit anxious, they talk a little bit quietly,”.

Petropoulou reflects on two previous experiences that have enabled her to understand assumptions that teachers make and how these inform their teaching. One of these experiences was when she taught market economics to a group of diplomats from a centrally planned Asian economy only to realise that they did not understand some concepts that she assumed they knew. For example, that price reflects supply and demand, and not only the cost of production. This experience was invaluable for teaching undergraduates who had never been exposed to any Economics theory. The other experience was when she took students from Oxford to attend lectures at an Asian university and in preparation, she had suggested that they ask questions at the end of lectures to show their interest. This was perceived as rude, as asking questions is not the norm in that culture. Spielmann, also, considers that sometimes international students don’t ask questions even though they would like to, and they might not respond to questions. This lack of engagement can be a challenge that he believes is mainly due to “very obvious language and cultural barriers”. And in Witte’s experience it may take time and effort to involve and interpret international students as, for example, they may come from cultures where simply looking directly at a professor is not considered to be appropriate.

Tutin also highlights assumptions made regarding students’ previous knowledge of culturally dependent words, expressions and concepts and the need to consider international students when putting together teaching materials, delivering lectures and tutorials, and setting exams. One example he shares relates to a question in a UK Corporation Tax exam where he referred to bottles of Port given as gifts to customers, wrongly assuming that all students knew about this popular alcoholic drink in the UK. Another example that Tutin shares was in a Management Accounting class when he referred to ‘Goldilocks pricing’, assuming that everybody knew the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears when in fact none had heard of it. McMahon, mentions that he has accidentally used an expression that “is colloquial

not just in English, but it’s colloquial to being Irish, so only my Irish students would have understood.”

A number of approaches were proposed that can facilitate increased participation of international students.

Long considers that teachers who are native English speakers need to be aware of strong regional accents and pace. When he started teaching he had a strong accent from rural Northumberland in the North East of England and he had a tendency to speak fast so the students could not understand. His accent has changed and when he teaches he ensures that his speech is slow and steady so that international students in particular can understand what he is saying.

Long and Petropoulou consider the relevance of learning students names to make them feel more relaxed and involved. Long also considers the need to reiterate what students ask or say (a) so that everyone can hear; (b) because students from different countries may have learnt English in differently and they might have an accent that other students can’t understand; and (c) the way that the students phrase the question might not be clear to their peers. He adds that “Given that I have got fairly good grasp of the material the chances are that I can infer precisely what they mean and reiterate it in such a way that everybody has a good idea where we are going and then I can answer it.”

Shapiro suggests that small events where students meet around a table make it easier for students to communicate, and refers to the need for “casual mingling space” within departments where students can meet informally. She encourages more small group, informal discussions because in Economics these may not happen so often in class. Long adds that by promoting small group interaction in class, students get used to speaking in English with each other and develop the ability to interact with peers that they are not necessarily friendly with - an important skill for networking and for job interviews.

One of the ways Spielmann addresses lack of engagement is to make international students “subject specialists”. For example, when teaching Pension Systems, apart from a lecture, he further designs a workshop for the international students to report on Pension Systems in their country so that the students’ knowledge is used. The specific subject knowledge transforms a barrier due to language and culture into a strength. International students gain confidence and it is more likely that they engage because they feel more secure and confident. Similarly, in an International Economics

course Petropoulou suggests that students investigate the trade profile of their countries, which they then share in class. She considers that not only do international students participate more, but also that it gives international students some control over their learning and the opportunity to apply the theory learnt to the reality of their country giving them a sense of involvement. Such an approach is a learning tool that provides a diversity of real life examples to an otherwise very theoretical course. Petropoulou also notes that this gives some freedom to international students to “feel willing to participate, so to actively engage in the lectures.” and that in subsequent lectures international students are far more willing to contribute.

McMahon highlights that another important aspect of internationalisation is to train postgraduate teachers who are increasingly international, about the challenges of an increasingly global student body. Witte agrees that teachers need to be aware of cultural issues that come up and advises that even when one is aware of such differences teachers may be surprised when in the situation.

Regarding the examples shared by Tutin described above, he adds that being asked “What is Port?” during an exam he was invigilating made him conscious of the range of cultural assumptions that teachers inevitably make and that he is therefore careful in the way that he sets exam questions to meet the needs of international students. Regarding his ‘Goldilocks pricing’ experience, he explained that on that occasion he spent most of the lesson explaining the story to University students including Economics and Finance, so that they could understand why the expression ‘Goldilocks pricing’ is used. McMahon refers to the importance of fostering an environment where the students feel they can ask questions, not necessarily during the lecture but in person, by email or on a forum, and also making students feel free to ask what words and expressions mean. Both Tutin’s and McMahon’s contributions highlight that culturally bound expressions can still be used when teaching international students, but that it is necessary to explain the context of the expression to enable the students to learn. Long shares that he tries to get as much information from his students as he possibly can so that he can adapt what he is saying to fit their understanding.

In addition to facilitating increased participation by international students, the approaches described above, and those described next can encourage international and UK students to mix and share both academic and non-academic knowledge. International students can then actively contribute to the learning of their peers and to the

development of cross-cultural capabilities relevant for both group work, future employability and students’ personal and social lives.

Spielmann, Witte and Arghyrou refer to how much international students can contribute to the learning of their peers. Spielmann considers that the specific subject knowledge contributed by international students can be very rich and other students can gain very important knowledge about how Economics is applied in other countries and other political systems. Arghyrou adds that the opportunity to come into contact with international ways of thinking and doing, is a great asset in a globalised economic job market, and also constitutes a great social externality as the UK is a country with many ethnic communities, and exposure to different cultures at university “opens horizons”, leads to understanding and harmonious relations, and contributes to people becoming more educated. Witte says that “the world enters your classroom in more than one way” with the presence of international students. He considers that rather than being disturbing factors in teaching, the situations that affect countries around the globe including natural catastrophes or political unrest, can be used as a resource to show that the teacher and the academic community cares about what is happening, and for other students to learn. He adds that at UCL the aim is “to raise people to global citizenship” which can be achieved by having international students.

Both Arghyrou and Witte refer to how international and UK students are able to learn from each other’s skills as frequently they bring different training backgrounds. For example, many international students are very good in quantitative subjects whilst many UK students have more experience in presentation skills and essay writing.

Shapiro believes that activities that mix the students work best, including the “terrific” International Trade Game run by The Economics Network at the Orientation Week at LSE which the students really enjoy. Such initial activities need to be followed up with team meetings so there is “a bit more bonding”. The Language Centre at LSE also runs English for academic purposes activities where the students are also mixed and culture is discussed. The LSE100 course mixes not only nationalities but “even more daringly” Anthropologists with Economists, and important issues including culture and how topics are studied in the UK and internationally are discussed.

Stephenson discusses a very successful buddy scheme where international and native English speakers are paired up and have ten one hour sessions when they can talk about a whole range

of things. Cortinhas refers to how celebrations that involve international and UK students, staff and the public can be very successful. Such an event was organised where the opening of a new building was made to coincide with the Chinese New Year and involved, amongst other activities, Chinese students displaying products from their country. Stephenson adds that they also run a photography competition, where students celebrated where they come from by producing posters with photographs of their countries, and that they use an interactive virtual map with interviews of international students about their countries.

Arghyrou believes that teaching staff benefit from international students in a diversity of ways. It encourages the development of diversified teaching techniques which apply to a wider audience; international students raise issues that can lead to new research possibilities "something which has benefited many researchers"; and international students allow for a better perception and understanding of the social mentality and the social consciousness of different countries which is relevant when researchers want to make policy proposals. Witte adds that teachers get used "to living in a multicultural world very much like the students do".

Petropoulou and Spielmann both share that by giving opportunities for students to report on their countries, teachers learn very interesting insights that add value to the classes and can inform their future teaching. Petropoulou comments "I don't know the particulars of the trade flows of such a diverse group of countries and it was interesting to find disparities between what I had expected to find, and I did sometimes find some surprising examples, where you think "Why is that and what can one learn from that?" and adds that students contributions are a learning tool in itself that help to bring real examples, to very theoretical courses. These examples are more varied than the examples she might provide and contribute to diversified internationalized classes. In Spielmann's words "economics teaching becomes really alive. I gain incredible insider information which enriches my future teaching as well".

Birdi refers to learning international perspectives from international students "without necessarily thinking that that is going to happen". Particularly in internationalised courses like e-commerce that he teaches, where international sites are used as examples, it would be easy to assume that tools such social networking tools are used in a similar manner by commercial companies in different countries. However, questions from international students indicate that there are very different interpretations of sensitive issues that "are

sensitive in a different way in different parts of the world." "it is these little cultural awarenesses, little ways that people interpret the limitations and the ethical and privacy issues that is of most interest."

The project created on-line resources available through the Economics Network website, to support Economics teachers actively engage international and UK Economics students in their own learning, the learning of their peers, and the learning of teaching staff so that international students can participate and better value attendance in UK Higher Education.

#### References

- <sup>1</sup>advisor to the Economics Network; co-author of "Motivating International Students: a practical guide to aspects of Learning and Teaching" a chapter in the Handbook for Economics Lecturers, available from <http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/handbook/international>
- <sup>2</sup><http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/pmi/index.php>
- <sup>3</sup>[http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/surveys#Alumni\\_Survey\\_Economics\\_Graduates](http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/surveys#Alumni_Survey_Economics_Graduates)
- <sup>4</sup>Shanahan, M.P. and Meyer, J.H.F.(2003) 'Measuring and Responding to Variation in Aspects of Students' Economic Conceptions and Learning Engagement', *Inter Review of Economics Education*, 1(1),pp.9-35
- <sup>5</sup>[http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/stud\\_survey2008.htm](http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/stud_survey2008.htm)