

New approaches to teaching and learning: improving the international student experience. Observations of practice at the Howe Writing Initiative, Farmer School of Business, Miami University, Ohio, USA

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Summary of outcomes

This PMI Overseas Study Visit enabled practitioners from two similar centres for academic writing support to exchange views of best practice. It was found that although the infrastructure and learning cultures of the UK and USA are very different, there were many parallels in terms of pedagogical practice and initiatives. New approaches to teaching international students have been identified. In particular, the implementation of the model of universal design in order to inform the writing of module documentation, as well as the potential to provide a more varied assessment portfolio which aims to value cultural diversity. Strategic aims in terms of funding initiatives could be modelled with reference to US practice, where industry standards and expectations are linked closely to pedagogy and curriculum development.

Introduction

The predominant model of writing centers established in US universities facilitates composition and rhetoric (academic writing) courses for the majority of Freshmen (year1) students in their institutions. This is supported by peer-tutoring organised at a centralised level. In the UK, the mainstream model for teaching academic writing is also centralised provision. Contrary to this, the University of Huddersfield has a devolved model for learner support.

The European Writing Centers Association (EWCA) brings together practitioners in teaching academic writing from the US and Europe. It was at the EWCA conference in May 2010 that the authors met the Director of the Howe Writing Initiative (HWI), based in the Farmer School of Business (FSB) at Miami University (MU). It was immediately apparent that there was a great deal of synergy between the work of the HWI and the Learning Development Group (LDG). Here were two centres which focussed on skills embedded within a Business School setting. For the US this is almost unique and it remains unusual in the UK.

The FSB currently has around 4,000 students enrolled which mirrors University of Huddersfield Business School numbers. Both Schools have experienced a significant increase in international student enrolments over the last 2-3 years. In 2009/10 6.2% of students at the FSB were international AACSB (2010). In the same year at the University of Huddersfield Business School, international students represented 14%. Both institutions are working towards targets to rapidly increase these numbers.

In the US international student recruitment was adversely affected by the events of 9/11. According to the Open Doors Report (2010), a steady recovery began in 2006/07 with increases of 7% and 7.7% in 2007/08 and 2008/09. In 2009/10 the recovery settled at 2.9%. The total number of international students in US HE was 690,923 which represents 3.5% of the student body. In the UK between the years 2008/9 and 2009/10 the percentage increase for international and EU students was 12% and 11% respectively. The actual figure for non UK students is 339,700 or 21% (HESA (2010)). The US has a long established history of international student recruitment as documented by the Institute of International Education since 1919.

Key findings

The overarching aim of the visit was to understand best practice within a parallel context to that of the LDG, with a focus on pedagogical development, particularly in terms of international students. It was found that although significant differences between UK and US provision exist at an

institutional level, the pedagogical similarities were surprising. The FSB has a dual approach to the international student experience. The students are supported in accessing the US educational culture through curriculum development which aims to value prior learning. Secondly faculty and domestic students are encouraged to incorporate internationalisation into their teaching and learning experience. These approaches are manifested in the following ways.

Due to the **course management structure** of the US system, students undertake broad-based study in year 1. This contrasts with the UK system where specialisation is inherent through the A-level route of access to HE. At MU, year 1 students can undertake a foundation level module entitled Business 102: Writing for Business. This has a generic focus on the process of writing rather than the end product. The resources are contextualised within the business curriculum. Here, industry standards are used to inform module guidelines and benchmarking for assessment. Students are credited within modules for speaking, listening, writing and 'teaming'. The challenge set by the augmented numbers of international students in the University of Huddersfield Business School has required a curriculum response in terms of teaching and learning. No longer can it be assumed that students have the inherent academic skills required for successful achievement in the UK due to the nature of the diversity of the cohort. The explicit teaching of skills including the writing process is integral to achievement. The above formalises this teaching process and is a model which could have significant impact on the work of the LDG.

LDG tutors through virtue of their central role in the Business School engage with students across the school to support them in planning and writing for assessment. Students often report that they find it difficult to target their writing to the relevant audience. This can be exacerbated in the case of international students for whom the cultural references are unfamiliar. This impacts on learning on a number of levels. At MU faculty identified that the type of hybrid academic writing/business writing which is often required at university lacks validity in terms of employability. Students are now expected to produce real-world texts and academic texts separately. Both are assessed. In order to address the familiarity issue, international students have the opportunity to use their experience as models of practice, thus giving them authority. They are expected to present their experience to class and this is integrated into teaching and assessment. **Technology** is also integrated into module assessment. This provides students with a vehicle for assessment that is not pure writing and yet incorporates the skills of criticality and producing an argument. Students are able to produce a narrative starting with the visual and then moving to textual. Examples of this are FSB modules 1.11 and 1.12 in Interactive Media Studies. Not only are UK methods of assessment often culturally specific, they tend to be narrow in nature. The incorporation of technology gives students the opportunity to be assessed through a broader range of skills.

At a general level students often indicate that instructions for completing **assessment** lack clarity. At MU, module documents/syllabi have been written in a student-centred manner. The model of universal design has been used to communicate outlines and expectations of teaching and assessment. This is supported by audio/visual resources created by faculty and posted on the VLE which describe expectations of student work and point out common errors. Universal design for learning is a technological approach to curriculum and assessment design that was developed in response to increasing diversity in the classroom (Gradel, K. and Edson, A. J., 2010). It seeks to design out obstacles to engagement incorporating '*multiple goals, methods, tasks, materials, and assessments to meet students' needs*' (Gradel, K. and Edson, A. J., 2010, p112).

These adjustments, whilst made with specific students in mind, such as those with physical disabilities, can have the benefit of enhancing accessibility for all (Gradel, K. and Edson, A. J., 2010). A universal design approach is as applicable to SEN as it is to students with a language barrier or those making a transition from one educational context and culture to another. A culturally inclusive approach is also advocated for the benefits it can have, not only for international students but others too (Ryan and Carroll, 2005). The concept described here could be transferred across module documents within the UK context in order to ensure accessibility for all. The aim would be to break down barriers to understanding of the educational conventions that international students have to grapple with in a short time frame when they first arrive in the UK.

Current changes to the British HE funding will probably necessitate creative methods of drawing in funds to institutions. The University of Huddersfield is consistently ranked within the top ten institutions for delivering sandwich degree courses and has close links with employers and professional bodies. MU and the FSB use industry contacts to enhance student projects. Students are expected to create a marketing plan for a company, write a report and present their findings to the business in question. There are also industry-funded, faculty-led, teaching and learning projects. This has a focus for implementation of industry requirements into education.

A two-week **Bridging Course** exists for international students. Students have 'taster' lectures in subjects from across the university curriculum. They are exposed to a broad base of information relating to their future study. The course outline is detailed below.

Goals for students:

- make a smooth transition in the first semester at Miami
- practise and improve English speaking, listening, reading and writing
- learn to navigate effectively within the Miami system
- increase comfort level and understanding of American culture and customs
- identify some available resources at Miami, in Oxford and nearby areas

Student learning outcomes:

- articulate differences between your culture and language and the culture and language of the US
- contribute to class discussions in large lectures as well as small group formats
- identify the main points of a lecture
- synthesize the main points of a text
- recognize and respond effectively to test questions in various formats
- revise written work in multiple drafts: respond to feedback on written work from the instructor, peer reviewers and other readers

Faculty acknowledge that international students' prior learning cultures may not include some of the participatory methods used in the US. Tutors make the active learning model explicit and thus have developed confidence from students to take a questioning approach to learning.

At the University of Huddersfield, the LDG instigated a Bridging Course for postgraduate taught programmes in the Business School in 2010. This was a new departure in terms of support for international students. There is a pedagogical synergy between the outline above and the UK Bridging Course. It is hoped that the course will become a standard part of the international student experience in the Business School. As international student numbers grow it is anticipated that the Bridging Course will be further embedded into the School's curriculum.

At MU, international students are given English opportunity events. These are peer-led conversation groups, are voluntary and are a university wide resource. A series of generic, voluntary workshops aimed at international students are also provided at a centralised level. There is a writing group as well as an International Student Group and a Chinese Student Group. The FSB aims to provide all students with an international experience. To date 60% of students study for one term outside the USA. Typically, these students will create a marketing plan for a product launch in their host country. Faculty are also encouraged to teach abroad. There is an MU campus in Luxembourg. At the University of Huddersfield, lecturers teach across the globe, delivering modules validated by the institution. The LDG is ideally placed to facilitate English opportunity events as described above in the Business School.

Learning points for UK institutions and policy drivers

In terms of reflections on learning points for other institutions, the following are directly linked to national policy drivers, essentially funding changes and increased internationalisation of the British HE sector.

Three themes have emerged from the study visit:

- the need for creative thinking for funding initiatives, particularly establishing links between industry and pedagogical and curriculum development
- the provision of an inclusive and varied assessment portfolio which aims to value cultural diversity
- the adaptation of universal design principles in order to promote internationalisation

The opportunity for the exchange of ideas reinforced the original aims of the visit, particularly the improvement of teaching and learning provision. As a single entity, the University of Huddersfield highlights the current reality for many British universities which are responding to political drivers at an institutional level. The internationalisation agenda extends to the whole student cohort with an emphasis on giving them credible transferable skills within a global context. Using an inclusive approach which seeks to internationalise both the curriculum and the student experience enables cross-fertilisation of cultural experience and access to new learning.

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