

Starting Out: Engaging with International Partnerships

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Diversity

- Background of students
- Mode of enrolment
- Previous qualifications
- Previous teaching experience
- Different reasons for enrolling in the course
- Different pathways through the course

Implications

- Diversity means that there isn't a 'typical' student
- In that respect seeing either local or international students as 'distinct' groups with common motivation, interests and needs is simplistic.
- However, international students face a number of issues that have been reported in the literature: moving and settling in the host country, understanding the culture of learning in the institution; language issues; socialization; and, for many, the return back to their home country.

Underlying assumptions

- The course is informed by the philosophies and principles of Special and Inclusive Education.
 - The importance of meeting individual needs using an inclusive pedagogy, and
 - An inherent international dimension of the content of the field.

Inclusive Education

- *Inclusive education* is about an educational institution's culture that welcomes and acknowledges differences and recognizes individual needs, and
- *Inclusive pedagogy* is centred around the processes and practices that can make this education available in the classroom in a meaningful way for our students.

A partnership: critical friends

- Two former international students (Student 1 from India and Student 2 from Singapore)
- Their role:
 - Firstly to provide feedback on their experiences, and
 - Secondly to give feedback on a later stage on proposed changes to the program.

The questions:

- To what extent the Master of Education (Special Education):
 - Considered issues of international interest in terms of special and inclusive education?
 - Was of relevance to you (as an international student in Australia)?
 - Took into account the needs of international students and provided support?
 - Assisted in your inclusion in the course/faculty/academic community?

Initial thoughts:

Reviewing a course of study is an endeavour fraught with danger.

On the one hand the reviewer is likely to be swept away with nostalgia and forget about drawbacks that in the near past seemed so critical. And on the other hand one might tend to dwell on petty shortfalls, to the exclusion of significant benefits (Student 1)

Induction

New students with superficial knowledge of course content and structure may choose electives [units] without awareness of available pathways to research, options for choosing special projects or an elective from a discipline other than special education. Such students may benefit from guidance during the first semester to ensure a wiser selection of electives (Student 1).

Possibly responses:

- Use of a proforma for students to map their overall enrolment. This proforma will assist in deciphering the Postgraduate Handbook and as aid for future decisions.
- The same student recommends also student/alumni mentoring as a process of assisting new students in their course selection.

Skills and Expectations: Academic Skills

...If there is a grading to this...then it would be high distinction! It was a very challenging first semester for me, having come from an engineering background I have never written long essays and definitely didn't have any idea how to write literature reviews, how to critique. That was a very steep learning curve for me.

I didn't think I would be able to make it past the first semester if not for your reaching out to me and support. I felt that I could ask for help without being judged and I really appreciate the comments given for all my assignments, which always pointed out the ways I can improve in a positive, constructive and objective way (Student 2).

The Faculty deserves special thanks for offering in-depth feedback for first efforts. This was particularly helpful as international students initially not only grappled with the stress of a slightly heavier study load, but also the uncertainty of not knowing whether their efforts had hit the mark.

It may be noted here, that this failure to hit the mark did not stem from ambiguity in assignment outline or marking criteria but was a function of the sheer number of new processes and new 'rules' that needed to be remembered and applied for each written assignment. This multiplicity of 'rules' would have been overwhelming apart from the scaffolded support of checklists and feedback.

Possible responses:

- Continue with the main existing practices:
- Information about the courses run by the Library and the Learning Centre. Reminders in written feedback.
- The 'checklists', i.e. scaffolds used in assisting in the development of assignments outlining steps to be followed.
- Both students also commented on the incremental increase of the weighting of the assignments and formative feedback.
- These practices have also considered positive by local students that return to study after a long break.

Skills and Expectations: Discussions and Group Work

The other primary modes of classroom interaction was via discussions and presentations. Although the latter was largely familiar to students from other educational backgrounds, the former presented a unique challenge to international students. Students brought up in more directed educational systems, found it difficult to participate enthusiastically in class discussions, especially during the first semester.

The combined effect of an accented voice, limited language skills and past educational experience based on passive learning served a significant deterrent to voicing an opinion (Student 1).

Possible responses:

- More awareness of our own practice.
- Supported introduction in discussion (e.g. written questions, preparation before sessions).
- Supported introduction of group work (with breaking down of tasks and provision of scaffolds).

Content: International Dimension

- ...each of us got to present special and inclusive practices in 3 countries that we chose so in a way we got to learn a lot of international practices in a relatively short amount of time (Student 2).
- An interesting mix of Faculty and students, drawn from different nationalities resulted in a truly international rather than a merely Australia specific perspective of educational successes and conundrums (Student 1).

Content: Practical component

As an international student I would like to have some work attachment stint in the special schools or the mainstream schools [...]I guess it could be due to my learning style as well. I learn better if get to see (observe) and lots of hands-on.

...In Singapore special education teachers need not have mainstream background and hence no foundation and in a way no anchor but I guess the issue lies with the situation in Singapore and not the Master of Education (Special Education) (Student 2).

...the major drawback in the course content for an international student in Australia was the limited time allocated to practical experience. A half day visit to a local school for a one-on-one student assessment could hardly be termed international exposure.

This was noteworthy as local students admitted to a part-time course could readily innovate and implement new learning within a classroom setup, whereas international students were left to memorise their learning and save a limited number of relevant articles as they returned home after a year long hiatus from teaching. (Student 1).

Possible responses:

- Existing partnership with schools may allow for an increase of the exposure of international students to actual practice in schools.
- Consideration of possible partnering between local students working in schools and international students.

Examples of practice

- The examples of practice bring together issues of an inclusive and international curriculum.
 - Production of international knowledge
 - Using local specific knowledge to elicit diverse experiences
 - Using international knowledge to explore local knowledge and experiences

Examples of Practice: Example 1

Research projects with an international dimension (2009)	
Title	Sample
Parents' attitudes on inclusion	22 parents, Australia, 20 parents, U.S.A and 3 parents from other countries
Parents' attitudes on inclusion	15 parents, Hong Kong
Parents' attitudes on inclusion	23 parents, Singapore
Attitudes towards students with intellectual disability	15 Chinese postgraduate students and 15 Australian postgraduate students
University students' sense of being included	10 Australian students and 10 International students

Examples of Practice: Example 2

- Using extracts from the television program *Summer Heights High* to explore different understandings of behaviour.
- A local example is used to elicit discussion in small groups on different experiences of behaviour and inappropriate behaviour.
- Students compare their experiences in different contexts, periods of times, different types of schools.
- Guiding questions are used for groups to record their discussions.

Examples of Practice: Example 3

- Teaching about language; a reversal.
- A research student that examines early literacy acquisition in Thailand presented to the group of retraining teachers (all local students) her work, including them implementing an assessment task in Thai.
- One of the aims of the presentation is for students to explore their own understandings of language, literacy and the experiences of Non-English Background students in their class.

International Partnerships

- Get feedback on possible responses by the two critical friends.
- Engage current international and local students in the process.
- Continue working with students that want to develop their practice and research after graduation.
- Develop website with resources for keeping in touch with graduands.

UN (2007) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Article 24 Education

State Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an *inclusive education system* at all levels and lifelong learning directed to

Implications

- The content of the Special and Inclusive Education Master of Education is informed by international issues in the field.
- The composition of the students enrolled in this course allows us to explore this international dimensions.
- Inclusive education both in compulsory and Higher Education are debated and contested at local contexts.
- By ongoing engagement with our inclusive pedagogy and practice in the course we can put the foundations of building international partnerships.