

THE UNIVERSITY *of York*

University of York
The York Management School
Working Paper No. 51
ISSN Number: 1743-4041
November 2009

Building Cross Cultural Competencies

Heather Richardson and Philip Warwick
University of York

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INTRODUCTION

The Building Cross Cultural Competencies project was developed with the aim of equipping undergraduate students at the University of York with skills to work in the globalised world, while at the same time assisting with the induction and orientation of international students, new to the institution and to study in the UK. The inspiration for the programme dates back to 2006, when one of the authors visited three Universities in New Zealand and Australia. These Universities were perceived to be further down the route to internationalisation (as defined by Knight 2003) than was the norm in the UK at the time. Innovations observed at Massey and Waikato Universities in New Zealand and the University of Sydney, Australia, were redesigned and redeveloped for use at the University of York, with the agreement of the staff involved at those institutions. In particular, a cross cultural communication module and two distinctive peer mentor schemes provided the nucleus of the idea for a new initiative at York that would span the employability and internationalisation agendas

This paper identifies how the project redesigned and developed ideas taken from Australian and New Zealand Universities for use in a UK context. It makes links to the literature on student adjustment and institutional adaptation; peer teaching and cross cultural communication skills. It will also consider the problems and difficulties experienced as the project progressed.

LESSONS FROM DOWN-UNDER

Australia has been recruiting large numbers of students from South and East Asia since the early 1980s, initially from Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, S. Korea, Indonesia and Hong Kong and, more recently, from China (Bennet 1998). Perhaps because of an earlier start, Australian academics have made a significant contribution to the literature on internationalisation of higher

education (Caruana and Spurling 2006). New Zealand higher education had a 58% increase in international student numbers between 2001 and 2002 (Ministry of Education NZ 2009) and perhaps as a result, Universities appear more internationalised than their UK equivalents (see for example Elkin et al. 2005). Given this context, it is fair to assume that many of the internationalisation issues affecting UK Universities may have often already been played out at Australian and New Zealand Universities. Therefore, as far as internationalisation is concerned, lessons from down-under, both good and bad, are very important for UK institutions.

ADJUSTMENT OR ADAPTATION?

On arrival at University, whether as an undergraduate or postgraduate, school leaver or mature student, international or home student, all learners take some time to adjust to the demands of study at their new institution. This period of adjustment can be more problematic for international students than for school leavers studying in their home country (Leask, 2006 Carroll and Ryan 2005), mainly because their prior learning experiences can be very different to those of the home students. Ward and Masgoret (2005) found that 41 percent of international students in New Zealand did not feel at home in their institution. Many of the students felt lonely and homesick and 70 percent said they wanted more 'Kiwi' friends. Students who find it most difficult to come to terms with their new surroundings are described as sojourners by McCallum (2004) and Coates (2005). Coates suggests that the sojourner *...does not become assimilated, but experiences an alternative cycle of adjustment, which can be summarised as accommodation, isolation and unassimilation* (p.5). Like migrant workers, the international student sojourner lives abroad for a few years to improve their social and economic position at home, returning with a qualification that will, they hope, lead to a more prosperous future. Like

migrant workers, many international students tolerate their temporary surroundings without attempting to adjust to the host culture.

How should Universities respond to these issues of adjustment? Zepke and Leach (2005) identify the main choice to be assimilation or adaptation. Either international students are expected to assimilate into the dominant culture by conforming to the learning styles of the institution, or the institution itself has to make some adaptations to reflect the increasingly diverse backgrounds of the learners. Zepke and Leach (2005) found that students who leave without completing their studies tend to be those who had been least successful at assimilating into the culture of the institution. Adaptation, on the other hand, is identified as an institution changing its approach to teaching and learning to reflect the diversity in the student population, explicitly welcoming and valuing learners from different backgrounds and becoming more international and inclusive in orientation. In short, the University culture develops to reflect the student population, rather than the student population having to change to fit-in to the University's culture. With a growing dependence on international students, this latter approach is arguably more prominent in New Zealand and Australia than in the UK, where the rhetoric of internationalisation is often symbolic rather than embedded in the operations of the organisation (Bartell 2003, Turner and Robson 2008).

Ramsey et al. (2007) set out a typology of cross cultural adjustment strategies for international students in New Zealand. They used this typology to consider how their international students were coping with the adjustment to studying at university. Typical adjustment strategies range from resistance, to assimilation, as follows:

- *Resistance*, students cling to the values and practices of their home culture and tend to repeatedly perform badly in formal assessments.

- *Marginalisation*, students withdraw from contact with home or receiving cultures retreating into themselves
- *Assimilation*, students reject the values and practices of their home culture and substitute them with those of the receiving culture.
- *Coping*, students make a temporary adjustment, doing enough to get by in their receiving culture.
- *Balanced adjustment*, students grasp the opportunity for personal growth and learn to act freely and successfully in their receiving culture, whilst remaining grounded in the values of their home culture.

Many international students opt to study overseas with the specific intention of developing their language skills and experiencing life in a different culture (Ridings and Pokarier 1998). Even when this is the case the heavy workload, language barriers, misunderstandings, false assumptions and poor experiences of group work can have detrimental and lasting impact on their learning experience (Holmes 2005). Ramsey et al. (2007) set up a programme at Massey University which aimed to reduce the number of international students having the type of experience that might lead them to adopt a *resistance* or *marginalisation* strategy (arguably similar to the sojourner approach described above). Their aim was to help these students cope with their new academic surroundings working towards a *balanced adjustment* to their new environment.

THE YORK APPROACH

Some of the previous attempts to aid the process of international student support at York have been well intentioned but ill conceived. As a result they did not achieve their aims (Warwick 2007). However there is clearly still a need to do something to help international students make appropriate adjustments to aide their transition to studying at the University of York. This paper details an initiative that unlike previous efforts was informed by best practice elsewhere. The resulting *Building Cross-Cultural Competencies* programme took ideas from Ramsey et al. (2007) at Massey University, and peer support at Sydney University (University of Sydney 2004). The aim was to develop a programme that like those at Massey and Sydney was peer led.

Initial proposals for a York version of the Massey *Kiwi-Friends* programme (Ramsey et al. 2007), were rightly criticised for placing too much emphasis on assimilation and making the programme appear be a how to be British course. This trap was avoided by linking the new initiative to the York Award (the University's non-credit bearing certificated programme of personal development)¹ and by placing the emphasis on exchanging of information about different cultures.

Exploration of the literature around peer learning identified that a peer teaching model would enable the facilitators to develop useful 'employability' skills (Beasley 1997; Donaldson & Topping 1996; Wallace 1999), whilst providing an effective support mechanism for the orientation of new students (Goldschmid & Goldschmid 1976). This led to the development of two distinctive elements; a 10 hour training course, *Building Cross-Cultural Competencies* (BCCC) based on a cross-cultural communication module at Waikato University (Holmes 2005) and the peer-led *Understanding Cultures* workshops. In an attempt to incentivise the

¹ For more details of The York Award programme, see <http://www.york.ac.uk/services/careers/skills.cfm>.

programme, participation in both elements can be counted towards The York Award (Ramsey et al. 2007).

The *BCCC* course was piloted in the summer of 2007, with the Understanding Cultures workshops taking place at the start of the following autumn term. At the time of writing, the programme is just entering its third year.

RECRUITING THE FACILITATORS

Students on the *BCCC* course were recruited from across the university with the aim of having a good cultural and disciplinary mix. In the pilot year the target was to recruit 20 students. Whilst there was a lot of initial interest only 12 students submitted letters of application and just 9 attended the course. In the second year, the marketing was more focused on gaining skills for future employment. The course was rebranded '*Skills for the Global Market*' to better encapsulate these ideas.

This change did lead to more interest, however disappointingly only 5 home students participated in the programme out of a total of 21. The promotional literature for the third year places even more emphasis on the development and importance of facilitation skills in the workplace and how cultural understanding is becoming increasingly valued in the hope of engaging with more home students.

TRAINING THE FACILITATORS

The *BCCC* course aims to help students to develop an understanding of culture and how it affects different people, coupled with an introduction to developing and delivering workshops. The course also includes a theoretical introduction to culture, culture shock and the model of

balanced adjustment (Ramsey et al. 2007). As the participants would take on the role of 'peer teachers' the training also included an introduction to learning styles and different approaches to learning as suggested by Beasley (1997). The exploration of cultural and diversity issues helps to prepare students for working in the global market, whilst the training around facilitation skills helps them develop key interpersonal skills and better prepares them for their role as peer facilitators. Key skills required for peer teaching, such as active listening, giving and receiving feedback and reflective questioning (Brockbank and McGill 1998), were not formally incorporated into the training programme, but the nature of the delivery, being participatory and discursive, ensured that these skills were developed throughout the training.

The types of exercises and mechanisms that were used to engage the students were chosen carefully, as it was likely that the students would try to emulate these facilitation methods (McKellar 1986). This proved to be the case, as the facilitators used many of the theoretical frameworks and exercises from the *BCCC* course as the basis for their lesson plans and exercises the following autumn.

DEVELOPING THE FACILITATORS

In the pilot year, the *BCCC* participants were mentored by one of the authors. Although time consuming, this proved to be an effective way of maintaining momentum and morale. The mentoring focused on finalising the workshop content and the practicalities of delivering a course. It also had the added benefit of giving the facilitators an experience of being mentored (Fowler & Muckett 2004), which the mentees were then able to pass-on to their own mentees.

In the second year of the programme the mentoring was provided by two of the facilitators from the previous year. This tiered system successfully supported the new group of

facilitators however they were rather over reliant on their mentors, expecting them to take on much more of the organisation and decision-making.

DELIVERING THE WORKSHOPS

The programme of *Understanding Cultures* workshops aims to help new international students orientate themselves to living and studying in the UK. Easing their path to a *balanced adjustment* and ensuring they are better equipped to make the most of their time in the UK. Hopefully, by encouraging them to take full advantage of the opportunities for skills development and language acquisition available to them at university, they will also increase their future employability.

The workshops were designed and delivered by the student facilitators who also chose the topics. This was slightly risky but was important to ensure that the facilitators had ownership of the content. There was gentle encouragement to make sure that the following major topics (suggested by a literature review) were covered:

- Pastoral care and accessing support services (Ho et al. 2007)
- Differences in modes of study and the relationship to staff (Ottewill 2006)
- Names, greetings and cultural practices (Ramsey et al. 2007).

The facilitators also chose to cover, living with others, socialising, studying in the UK system and making the most of your time in York. Mirroring Ramsey et al. (2007) the programmes culminated with a social event, planned by the facilitators.

Recruitment of new international students to the *Understanding Cultures* workshops programme was disappointing (18 in year one and 45 in the second year). Interestingly, in the

second year, a number of second and third year students joined the programme and, having observed the benefit that these students gained from the workshops, the third iteration of the *Understanding Cultures* workshops will be open to all students, home and international in any year group, who are interested in sharing their cultural experiences.

EVALUATION

Evaluation information has been collected through feedback forms and focus groups. The *BCCC* participants are also required to submit a short reflective essay at the end of the course detailing what they learnt and how this will support them in their role as future *Understanding Cultures* facilitators.

Feedback on the *BCCC* programme has so far been very positive. All of the students feel that being involved in the programme has been a really good experience, both in terms of developing employability qualities and skills² and meeting new people. Participants found it ‘inspirational’, ‘effective’ and ‘very enjoyable’. The only items they identified as missing are how to actively engage quiet students, how to deal with awkward miss-use of language and managing disruptive behaviour.

Feedback on the *Understanding Cultures* course has also been very positive. Participants were supportive of their student peers as facilitators (they were considered to be ‘well prepared’, ‘approachable and friendly’ and ‘enthusiastic’). All of the respondents have been satisfied, or very satisfied, with the workshops. Interestingly, and somewhat ironically, some of the

² Participants said they had developed: leadership skills, self confidence, appreciation of different learning styles, a broader outlook, increased cultural sensitivity, presentation skills, facilitation and team working skills.

international student participants said they wanted to learn more about British culture while others were happy with a more general aim of learning about other cultures and making friends.

The student facilitators felt that many of the *Understanding Cultures* participants were not really the ideal 'target' group. They considered the majority of participants would reach *balanced adjustment* quite quickly with or without the *Understanding Cultures* course and that more needed to be done in future years to encourage those who are at risk of resistance or marginalisation adjustment strategies, rather than the more confident, outgoing students who participated in the programme.

DISCUSSION

The project met many of the original aims by providing a mechanism to promote cross-cultural awareness whilst at the same time developing key employability skills. The project has also confirmed that peer teaching provides excellent development opportunities for the facilitators, not only improving skills, but also increasing their confidence and general awareness of the needs of others. Ideas taken from New Zealand and Australian Universities were transplanted into a UK context with some success.

Feedback from the *Understanding Cultures* participants confirms that the programme provides a valuable support mechanism for new international students helping them to adjust to their new learning environment. However, the small number of participants means that the impact of the programme is very limited and it cannot be claimed that it represents the sort of institutional adaptation advocated by Zepke and Leach (2005), or that it has made a significant impact on the internationalisation of the University.

It is disappointing that over the first two years the initiative does not seem to have reached those international students who are finding it most difficult to adjust to their new surroundings. The attempt to incentivise participation does not seem to have been successful; so more work needs to be done to find a way of engaging those who could get the most benefit from this type of support. Opening-up the *Understanding Cultures* workshops to a wider audience might help increase cross cultural dialogue, but it might make it even more difficult to reach this target group.

Also noticeable by their absence at the *BCCC* course and later facilitating the *Understanding Cultures* workshops are the 10,000 plus home students at York., This is despite the popularity of the York Award programme and the promotion of the clear links to the acquisition of transferable employment skills. York is not alone with this issue, problems engaging home students in internationalisation and the reluctance of home students to mix with their international peers have been noted at other institutions (Flowerdew 1998, DeVita 2001, Cathcart et al. 2006). Before internationalisation can be said to be embedded in the organisation, it is important to find a way to overcome this resistance.

CONCLUSION

So whilst the workshops themselves have worked well, and the peer led approach seems to have much to offer, it is still very early in the development of this initiative and much work still needs to be done before it can be claimed that the initiative has transformed the University's relationship with its new international students.

The authors believe that the programme could provide a model for moving new students towards *balanced adjustment* and, even though the number of students participating were

relatively small, it is clear that they did enjoy and benefit from it. However, the University as a whole recruits around 1000 international and EU students per year, with 21 percent of the student population being from overseas. This being the case, it is difficult to see how this type of small scale programme can be an effective way of easing large numbers of international students into the institution. In autumn 2009, in parallel the two courses referred to in the paper, and in common with many other Universities, York will offer a week long orientation course to all new international students. This approach to helping all international students to adjust to living and studying in the UK does raise renewed questions about whether, as an institution, we are asking our students to assimilate into York; or are we adapting what the University of York does to reflect the fact that more than 20 percent of our students come from outside the UK?

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