What is Higher Education For? Shared and contested ambitions

Proposal for conference paper:

Research Domain: Student experience

TITLE:

Challenges and benefits: valuing the experience of international postgraduate students at a new university in the UK

Part 2 Outline:

Whilst there has been a large scale strategic approach since the 1980s to internationalisation in UK universities (Humfrey 2011), the scale of national and institutional policy making might tend to preclude consideration of the experience of particular groups within that international cohort. The recent report on postgraduate provision (Smith et al 2010) noted that whilst China and India remain the largest source of postgraduate students for UK universities, the numbers from other non-European countries such as Nigeria and Pakistan have increased dramatically since 2001 (Ibid, 28). It is a small group of students in that category which are the subject of this research.

Broad socio-cultural or psycho-social models of adaptation might be developed (Coles and Swami 2012, Russell et al 2010, Tran 2011) but the increasing diversity of the category of international student calls for a keener focus on sub-groups to gain better understanding. Meanwhile the latest changes in university funding have only increased concerns that international students are being treated simply as an economic resource (Leyland 2010). There are also associated ethical issues which arise, for example, out of post-colonial contexts of some of these countries of origin (Coate 2009). This research explores how these converging factors present in individual student experience.

The university in this study is one of the newest in England, university status having been granted in 2005, and full research degree awarding powers achieved in 2009. Whilst the university has undergone a period of radical change in terms of its drive towards higher academic status and research-centred activity, the Faculty of Education remains its largest, with both initial and continuing teacher education still an important part of its portfolio. The relatively recent granting of full university status has prompted the rapid development of postgraduate provision in the Education Faculty, with the creation of a distinct Graduate School.

In 2010, the Master's in Education Programme was re-validated, allowing for students to follow either a generic Education route with a relatively free choice from a range of taught modules or to follow one of six named routes, which provide for specialisation in particular areas, one of which is International Perspectives. Student numbers on the programme have risen significantly in successive years, with approximately double the number of postgraduate MA Education students in 2011-12 than in the previous year, and an expectation that this trend will continue. A significant group of MA Education students are full-time international students from a range of European, Asian and African countries.

Certain characteristics of the international student body can create challenges of engagement and community, with the majority unable to attend taught sessions in working hours and many juggling family commitments either in the UK or in their home countries. Social and cultural differences between home country and the UK can also produce obstacles, as various recent studies have documented (Guilfoyle and Harryba 2009, Tarry 2010). The students being interviewed for this study all came from countries where attitudes to teaching and learning are very different from those in the UK. On this MA education course they were confronted with both a curriculum content and a mode of delivery which were unfamiliar and sometimes challenging. Having been involved in schools education in their home countries, they were engaging critically with their own vocation, and often experiencing a tension between the theory they study here and their previous pedagogic practice. But this is not to adopt a deficit model with regard to these students, since that difference of prior experience itself helped create an exciting learning environment within the classroom. Difference was instructive and tension was creative for both international and UK students in classes, and indeed for the teachers themselves.

Our experience with these students exemplifies the need to move beyond not only a deficit model in addressing the needs of international students, but also beyond broad generalisations about what those needs are. In short, their expectations and aspirations might not always match up with the unsubtle profiling of recruitment and marketing. This study seeks to bring to the surface some of that complexity in the motivations, hopes and expectations of a select group of students.

There are pragmatic pedagogic aims for this research too. A vital part of the international student experience, as Humfrey (2011) has noted, is the quality of the teaching provision. Luxon and Peelo (2010) have likewise stressed the importance, with the focus typically on policy and strategy in this area, of paying due attention to teaching and learning, and the implications for curriculum design. Such a caution is particularly resonant in the context of Master's students who, as Luxon and Peelo point out, have limited time or opportunity to avail themselves of any extra study skills support which international students on longer term undergraduate courses might access. This means that suitability of course content and delivery are of particular importance, and it is hoped that the exploration of individual students' experiences will guide us towards produce better designed courses which meet the needs of a diverse cohort. And in this context the attitudes of teaching staff are of great significance: as Barron et al (2010) suggest, placing value on international students' cultural

capital is a constructive approach which mitigates the tendency to see them as a burden or a problem.

Reference list:

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