An Exploration of Diversity in a UK Postgraduate University

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Abstract

The global trend towards internationalisation in higher education has been endorsed in the UK by the Prime Minister through two initiatives in 1999 and 2006. In response, universities have developed and implemented internationalisation strategies, which have been successful in terms of student recruitment. During 2005-6, a third of postgraduate students (131,580) were from overseas. A growing literature about the educational needs and experiences of overseas students in the UK has accompanied this trend. This paper contributes to the topic but from the context of an established, international, postgraduate UK institution. Cranfield University is unusual, but not unique, within the UK higher education sector in being entirely postgraduate with a focus on applied knowledge in engineering, management and the services. Of 3000 current students, one third pursue research degrees and the remainder follow taught course Masters programmes. Over 100 nationalities are represented on campus with around 1300 UK nationals. The research study was internally commissioned to address a goal of the institutional learning and teaching strategy. The aims are to develop an understanding of the educational implications of the diverse student body and of student needs in order to translate this into practical means of improving the student experience and educational provision.

An exploratory, inductive case study was adopted as the methodological model because of the risk that a more deductive approach, based upon predetermined variables, might fail to capture accurately the reality in the setting. Data were collected in two stages. In the first, academic and support services staff were consulted about their views of the influence of diversity upon learning and teaching. The findings from this stage guided sampling rationales and the enquiry process in the next stage in which data were collected from students in face to face and electronic, individual and group interviews. Concurrently, a nested study of disability was conducted in which individual disabled students were interviewed about the challenges they faced and their views on educational support provision. Additional data sources included the results of internal survey evaluation questionnaires and Registry statistics on the student population. The findings from the staff consultation emphasised the different lives and experiences of taught course and research students and the consequences for educational needs. For the former, competence in the English language, particularly written skills, was a major concern. Students' preparedness for the autonomy and self-reliance of UK Masters studies was another issue which was attributed to cultural differences and the variety within undergraduate education. Although the latter issue arose in relation to research students, staff attached greater significance to research students' isolation arising from the lack of an immediate peer cohort in both social and research community terms. Staff saw diversity as offering educational opportunities and placed a positive value upon it. Disability and diversity concerns intersected on the topic of dyslexia, posing complex problems for the support of language development and disabled students in universities with overseas students.

Introduction

The global trend towards internationalisation in higher education has been given government endorsement in the UK through two prime ministerial initiatives in 1999 and 2006. In response, UK universities have developed and implemented internationalisation strategies, which have been successful in terms of student recruitment (HEA, 2006). These changes have taken place against the ongoing expansion of UK undergraduate education, which is now impacting on the postgraduate sector (Zimdars, 2007). In 1999/2000, data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show that the total number of postgraduates studying in the UK was 408,620 of whom 23% were from overseas. For the year 2005/06, the comparative figures are 545,370 with 31.5% students from abroad. As well as expansion, there have been changes in recruitment mechanisms for taught postgraduate courses, such as the European Double Degree award which allows existing EU students to enrol on selected UK Masters courses and gain two degrees, one each from the host and exchange institution. HESA statistics do not identify this group of students so the numerical impact of these programmes is unknown.

The internationalisation of higher education literature has been growing, particularly in countries with prominent internationalisation agendas such as Australia and the UK. Research conducted in academic development departments focus on overseas students' acclimatisation to the host country's educational culture or report how the curricula of host countries may be adapted for the broader cultural student intake. A common approach in the literature reports the experiences of a single national group of students studying abroad (Peelo et al, 2007; McClure et al, 2007). Research concerning the impact of internationalisation on home students is far less common, as are reports from institutions where national and cultural diversity is so random that it cannot be easily separated into host and overseas categories. Of course, there are comparatively few institutions where the latter holds true but, as the trend in the UK figures indicate, the UK postgraduate

student population is becoming increasingly global. The literature on student diversity, particularly in the UK, is strongly linked to the political discourse of equity of access. This is especially true at undergraduate level where it goes under the banner of widening participation. In this paper, however, we use the term diversity in its more literal sense. The choice springs from the particular characteristics of the setting for the study.

Institutional Context

Cranfield University is a wholly postgraduate UK university with a strong focus on the application of knowledge. Instead of traditional academic disciplines, the university is organised into five Schools; the Schools of Applied Sciences, Defence, Engineering, Health and Management. In consequence, psychologists can be found in the School of Engineering and ethnographers rub shoulders with material scientists in the School of Applied Sciences. The rural location of the campuses is unusual for a UK university and encourages a strong sense of community, as students are reliant upon themselves for social and extracurricular activities. The institution is currently undergoing restructuring as three campuses become two, which are seventy miles apart. Measured against the prevailing categories of diversity, such as age, gender, nationality, ethnicity and disability, the Cranfield student population is undeniably diverse. Around 110 nationalities are represented amongst the 3200 students registered during 2006/07 of whom, 42% are from the UK and around 23% are from the EU. 66% of students are studying full time, including 500 students who are studying on taught course transnational programmes in India. The ratio of taught course to research students is 3:1 and 28% of students are women. In terms of age, the range is broad but 40% of students are under 25 and another 20% are aged between 25 and 30. The figures for ethnicity are unreliable because there is no obligation for overseas students to provide the information and the categories are inapplicable to a global population. Similar considerations apply to the incidence of disability which, at 4%, is lower than in the rest of the higher education sector. What these figures are unable to capture is the relatively random variation of nationalities within courses and between different cohorts that can substantially affect teaching and learning. On some courses, it is not uncommon for UK students to be in a minority and for there to be significant majorities from a single nationality of non native English speakers. As these configurations do not necessarily remain constant from year to year, classroom diversity also varies from cohort to cohort. Nor is competence in the language of instruction reflected within currently available statistics.

There is sufficient variation in practice amongst UK taught Masters programmes to justify a brief description of Cranfield courses. The design of one year taught course Masters programmes at Cranfield is remarkably similar across subjects and Schools, with the exception of the Masters of Business Administration (MBA). Courses are modular in structure, with module length varying between one and four weeks. Typically, in the first term, teaching takes place largely through the medium of lectures and practicals; in the second, students undertake a group project and in the final term, they embark on an individual research project and thesis. Assessment takes place after each module and examinations are normally scheduled in January and April. Students have only short leave breaks at Christmas and Easter and the customary summer holiday period is spent on individual research projects. Class size varies with the course, generally between 10 to 80 students.

The MBA programme departs considerably from this model. Although the course is intensive and comprehensive in the coverage of topics, a strong emphasis on personal development is reflected in the course outcomes and processes. Learning is generated by discussion of case studies in learning teams of five or six students and later consolidated through discussions in lectures. Each case study fits a 3-day cycle and concludes with a report written by each group. The composition of learning teams is designed to exploit diversity of culture, nationality, language, professional background and work experience. The MBA student intake is larger than other courses, usually over one hundred students and the age profile is slightly older. The institution, as an employer, has already invested time and effort into the diversity and inclusion agendas. In 2003, the University Executive commissioned a research survey about staff diversity which it continues to monitor as progress towards inclusion. Although the present study arose in response to the institutional Learning and Teaching Strategy, it is also a natural successor to the staff initiative. The specific aims of the Learning and Teaching Strategy which the research addresses are the development of an improved understanding of the educational implications of the university's diverse student body and the identification of mechanisms to transfer this into practical guidance for teaching staff.

Study Design and Methods

An exploratory, inductive case study approach was chosen as most appropriate to the aims and setting of the research for several reasons (Yin, 2003). As outlined in the Introduction, there is little research evidence in the literature from internationally diverse postgraduate settings that might help to guide and focus the research

enquiry. Secondly, the need for rich descriptive data that respects and accounts for features of context favoured inductive, qualitative research methods. Those same methods are also more likely to identify unexpected insights than deductive approaches based upon predetermined categories. While qualitative data collection methods were preferred, the study did include the results of existing survey data, gathered in student evaluation questionnaires. These data provided support for students' positive attitudes towards diversity but did not illuminate behaviour and action. As a result, the focus for the study became the educational interactions and learning processes of taught course students at Cranfield University.

Staff Consultation

The research was divided into two stages. In the first, members of staff were consulted about their views on the influence of student diversity on learning and teaching. It was judged that their experience could produce data that would then inform, and frame, a subsequent study of the student perspective. Those contributing, amongst the academic staff, included Course Directors and Learning Support Officers as well as the Managers of Student Services, the Student Union and representatives of IT and the library, from support services. Data collection methods varied, according to opportunity and convenience, from individual semi-structured interviews to more free-flowing discussions at larger meetings. None of these meetings were audio-recorded, notes being taken at the time. All meetings took place between January and April 2007.

An important emergent finding was the distinction, made by all members of staff, between the lives of research and taught course students. Superficially, this is self-evident, but the underlying reasons for the difference highlighted social rather than educational features of the context. In preference to an emphasis upon the different characters and purposes of research and taught course programmes, members of staff saw the presence, or absence, of a peer cohort as a fundamental contributor to social and educational integration and academic success. For example, peer cohorts for taught course students may provide support but also act as a standard with which individual students may compare themselves. The point here is that comparisons with the peer group may be either favourable, or unfavourable. Conversely, research students, who lack immediate peer support groups, may be more prey to isolation but, on the other hand, lack the demands of regular assessment and the constraints of short time scales experienced by taught course students. In consequence, the second stage of the research was divided into two independent studies; one for taught course students, the other for research students. As the latter study is ongoing, only the taught course student data is reported in this paper.

Taught Course Student Perspective

Focus groups were chosen as the main method of data collection in this phase of the research because the format would provide an appropriate discussion platform for students to develop and elaborate their ideas on diversity. Six focus groups were conducted between March and May, 2007, in which 41 taught course students participated. The groups were arranged according to campus and School affiliation and a description of students attending is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Students attending focus groups								
Focus group	School	Numbers attending	Gender M	F	UK students	Overseas students	Part time status	EU Double degree
1	Health	2	1	1	0	2	1	1
2	Engineering, Applied Sciences	11	7	4	5	6	1	2
3	Management	12	11	1	1	11	0	0
4	Engineering, Applied Sciences	5	4	1	1	4	0	2
5	Management	5	3	2	4	1	0	0
6	Engineering, Management	6	5	1	4	2	1	1
Totals		41	31	10	15	26	3	6

Email invitations to attend focus groups were sent to all taught course students from Registry. The email invitation explained the purpose of the study and granted confidentiality for all participants. Based upon the topics identified in the staff consultation, a focus group schedule was drafted that explored students' expectations of postgraduate study at Cranfield, the challenges they faced, their experiences of group work and the benefits of diversity for teaching and learning. Five students who were unable to attend on the day but who wished to participate were interviewed individually during the same period. Three interviews were conducted face to face, the remaining two by telephone (Table 2). The interview schedule explored students' expectations of postgraduate study at Cranfield, comparisons with undergraduate study, the challenges they faced and their views on whether, and how, student diversity influences learning and teaching. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed.

Table 2: Student Interviews

Number	Interview	School	Gender	Nationality	Full/part time status	Age
1	Face to face	Health	M	Overseas	Part time	36
2	Face to face	Health	F	UK	Part time	29
3	Telephone	Engineering	M	UK	Part time	32
4	Face to face	Defence College	M	UK	Full time	40
5	Telephone	Engineering	M	UK	Full time	46

In addition, four disabled students on taught Masters courses were interviewed individually between March and May 2007 (Table 3). Although integral to the study, these interviews served the additional purpose of auditing institutional disability services, in response to some adverse open comments in the existing survey data. Students were selected and approached for their consent to participate in the study by the Disability Learning Support Officer. None declined to participate. The interviews explored their experiences of postgraduate study, the challenges they faced as disabled students, as well as their views on diversity and learning and teaching.

Table 3: Disabled student interviews

Number	School	Nationality	Gender	Age	Disability category	Full/Part time status
1	Applied Sciences	UK	F	32	Dyslexia	Full time
2	Engineering	UK	F	23	Other	Full time
3	Engineering	UK	M	31	Mental Health	Full time
4	Management	UK	M	33	Sensory impairment	Full time

The staff consultation, half of the focus groups and all the disability interviews were conducted jointly by the Disability Learning Support Officer (HO) and a researcher based in the Cranfield Centre for Postgraduate Learning and Teaching (GL-J). The remaining focus groups and interviews were conducted by the researcher alone.

Findings: Staff Perspective

In common with the student survey data, staff expressed very positive values and attitudes towards student diversity, regarding it as their raison d'être. At face value, such a finding is unsurprising but serves as a reminder of the peculiarity of institutional context in which globalisation is a fact of life. Nevertheless, staff recognised that internationalism is not without problems. The two most frequently cited issues were English language competence and the cultural adaptation to the UK higher education systems. Staff concerns about English language proficiency focused on standards of written language which they judged to be declining. Currently, admission practices in relation to English language testing vary according to the tests employed, the cut off scores and the use of interviews but there was neither consensus about actual practices nor satisfaction with their outcomes. Similar variations were displayed towards the need for, and nature of, continuing academic English provision. Staff views on linguistic competence were not confined to non native English speakers, however, as writing standards are falling amongst UK, as well as overseas students. Staff speculated that the cause may lie with the massification of UK undergraduate education. A further complication is the impact of dyslexia, particularly on one-year programmes where the diagnosis occurs mid-course, so allowing insufficient time to implement suitable adjustments. Another prominent concern voiced by staff was the readiness of some students for postgraduate study. Staff expected students to be ready for the self-reliance expected of postgraduate study but had noted that younger students in particular, required more "hand-holding" than previously. Again, in relation to UK students, staff attributed the phenomenon to changes at undergraduate level. Conversely, staff fully accepted that patience had to be exercised for students who were unfamiliar with UK higher education. Once acclimatised to postgraduate study, these students regarded the adjustments demanded of them, very positively. More general cultural attributes were thought to be less significant for taught course students but could occasionally give rise to misunderstandings and tensions. Other examples of educational practice affected by student diversity included the management of process in group work, variation in policies and practices between Schools and incoming students' poor expectations of the international student body.

Findings: Taught Course Student Perspective

The student response to participate in the diversity study was marked by strong variations between Schools and courses, which remain unexplained. In spite of that, participating students were reasonably representative of the student profile as a whole with regard to gender, nationality, professional background, age and the inclusion of European Double Degree students. A fear that part time students might be excluded because of availability was not realised (Tables 1, 2 and 3). Overall, students shared the positive attitudes of staff towards diversity, although, as staff had correctly surmised, many students had not anticipated that UK students would be in a minority. As one student, who was the sole UK national on his course, commented:

> "It's even more than I expected but it's just made it all the more fascinating."

Four major themes emerged from the data analysis which will be discussed under the following headings: mature students, academic challenge, language diversity and educational process.

Mature Students

This was an unexpected finding, appearing uniquely within the interview data and without dissent amongst this group. All of the interviewees were mature students, some with several years of working experience behind them (Table 2). The view of this group, who were all native English speakers, is that neither cultural nor national diversity influences teaching and learning. However, this does not imply that diversity can be disregarded but rather that the students interpreted diversity unconventionally, perceiving themselves as distinct from younger students in terms of attitude, motivation and participation. They consider that experience of work gives them substantial advantages in understanding the relationship between knowledge in theory and practice as compared to younger peers. Armed with experience and ability, they report active, participatory and enquiring roles in educational settings, as shown in the following extract.

Extract 1: Male, School of Health Student, Interview 1

> *Interviewer:* "What were the actual experiences that prompted to you think about the diversity and learning?"

> *Student:* "It wasn't the ethnic diversity that I was talking about. It's what I feel is the lack of experience of the students. I expected people to be from all corners of industry doing this postgraduate. People from pharma, from the

biotech industry, from medical industry like myself. Seeing it was postgraduate, I expected there would be more experienced people from here. But it seems that the majority are fresh from university studying a Masters."

Interviewer: *"How is that reflected in teaching and learning situations?"*

Student: *"I don't know if it's just me saying this but I think I have a lot of things to put in to what lecturers are saying. I have comments to make and my own opinions whereas I don't think others are saying or doing that, they just keep quiet. I don't get any feedback from what they're thinking because they keep quiet. I think others benefit from what I say, firstly because I'm not a person who holds back. Secondly, because I've been out there, I know what it is, and so if I have an opinion on it then I'll say it even to supplement what someone is saying, with like anecdotes from real experiences."*

The data delineates clear differences between undergraduate and postgraduate study and the enabling influence of work and life experience upon the motivations and practices of undergraduate and postgraduate students. As such, it relates to, and supports, staff concerns about approaches towards postgraduate study, in particular, the qualities of autonomy and self-reliance. Mature students characterise their approach to study as serious, a view that they feel is not always shared by students who have no experience beyond formal education. In the following extract, the student reflects upon her motivation and contrasts her experiences of UK undergraduate and postgraduate study.

Extract 2: Female, School of Health student, Interview 2

"My undergraduate course was a while ago now. It's all about how you feel really. For me, I've come back to learn about this industry area whereas when I did my undergraduate course, you know, you have to pass your GCSEs, you have to pass you're A levels; you have to pass your university course to get a job. That was the whole point of it. Whereas, for me now, it's me who's taking the time. You do the bare minimum to pass. You're thinking about those end exams and you know you've got four questions and as long as you answer two of them you'll be fine so you disregard information all the time and focus enough to get you through. Get that pass so that you can move onto the next thing whereas this is more about me learning about that industry that I want to move into. So I'm out to get a good feel for it, I've realised this is a nice safe environment where I can make lots of mistakes and it doesn't matter. So I'm personally approaching it in a different way whereas I've heard people on the course make comments like as long as I pass and as long as I get that certificate by the end of it I don't care I will have the degree. Whereas for me, I suppose I've not been concerned about whether I pass or fail, I mean about failing it's more about trying to understand what areas of bioinformatics I would like to get into basically."

The same distinctions in approach between undergraduate and postgraduate students arise in the disability interview dataset but these students believe that national diversity is influential upon learning and teaching, citing differences in knowledge and abilities between different national student groups within their peer cohorts. The data is interesting in shedding a different light upon mature students who are frequently portrayed in the literature as relatively disadvantaged in academic settings. In this study, the emphasis is more positive, stressing what they can bring to the classroom in terms of knowledge, approach and attitude. Although limited, the consistency within the interview dataset warrants further investigation in different postgraduate settings.

Academic Challenge

More predictably, overseas students from the Schools of Applied Sciences, Engineering and Health agreed that their greatest challenge lay in acclimatising to the UK higher educational system and culture. As student responses were personal and related to their prior educational experience, there was a good deal of variety in the reported examples which can only be touched on in this paper. Many students found assessment formats, marking and grading practices, strange and difficult which the short modular structure exacerbated, especially in the early weeks. Those students accustomed to oral exams and easy access to examination papers and examiners found the UK practice of written feedback less helpful. Extract 3 is a typical passage in a discussion about ideal feedback from Focus group 4.

Extract 3: Focus group 4

Italian student: *"The best form is when they make you aware of your mistakes whereas in an exam often they give you a number and that's it."*

Moderator: *"What do you feel about the number?"*

Italian student: *"The number is good because it's clear and you cannot discuss, argue about it and probably with a course of 60 people it's the only way otherwise everybody will go and complain and want one more so I think it's probably the best way to run the assessment but for learning it's not the best solution."*

German student: *"In Germany we had the option of looking at our exams. I'm not sure we can here."*

Moderator: *"Did you see your papers?"*

German student: *"Well not the assignments but actually the exams you do. So I mean I got some of the results where I was pretty disappointed or where I felt oh this exam I should have done better and this one I was not expecting quite so much. And you just don't understand where you went wrong and things like that and it made you a bit unsure of yourself because sort of subjects that you were enjoying and thinking ok I'll get a good mark in that. And after the exams you felt yeah, you'd answered the questions well to find that you'd just got something like 55% or so, which was disappointing. I don't know if we have the option of looking at them or asking to have a look at exams. Probably not, I don't know. I haven't asked."*

Moderator: *"In Germany, are you able to take your paper to a lecturer and say well look I don't understand why I've got this mark?"*

German student: *"Oh yes, that's how I passed my degree."*

In common with their overseas peers, UK students cited the unfamiliar as challenging, and included problems encountered in changing disciplines and the isolated experience of individual research projects. There are also reminders in the data that cultural diversity may be accompanied by a heritage that defies easy categorisation and that expressive forms of cultural diversity may be subtle and difficult to articulate. In the next extract, a student from Mozambique describes the difficulties he encountered when trying to adapt a prose style to UK educational requirements:

Extract 4: Focus Group 2

Student: *"The first thing is the system. My country was colonised by the Portuguese people and we just got rid of them quite recently, so we have that Portuguese system of teaching and the marking system and writing and all these kind of things … and you know it was really challenging to move to a way that is more straightforward. Whereas Latin ways are more prosa, you know, we play around and around until we get to the point. We don't have, for instance, like limitations in terms of words, or something like that, you know. Whereas in this case, they can say just 500 words and you have to be you know, sort of objective. There's nothing wrong about the system, it's different, you know. It took me ages to adapt to the system because, you know, obviously, when we have assignments, we are supposed to write 10 pages and they can just give you like a margin for you to, I would say play around with it. Now, I think I'm getting used to this system and I find it really good but in the beginning it was really hard. I'm not saying it's wrong, it's different from what I've been used to, you know, it's really hard. I'm not saying it's wrong, it's different. I did my degree, my primary school in that kind of system and you cannot just swap (clicks his fingers) in 2 months, something like that."*

This attitude, that educational systems are qualitatively different, indeed cultural constructions, is commonly voiced by overseas students in the data.

Language Diversity

For non-native English speakers, acquiring linguistic competence is, of course, integral and crucial to enculturation, an additional benefit of student and linguistic diversity. However, this section focuses on some of the reported consequences of mixed language proficiency upon students. Non-native English speakers value the acquisition of English language proficiency very highly and are strongly motivated to improve their language abilities. They welcome correction in assessed work and regard it as accepted practice that assessors perform this function. Indeed, they view the possibility that their English language competence escapes assessment with some alarm. There are other traps for the unwary as described in Extract 5.

> **Austrian student:** *"I want to improve my English. As there are many nationalities, I sometimes have read that my English gets even worse when I am here (laughing). Yes, really. Because if I ask people from Hungary, from Poland, my English is actually better than theirs and when I talk to them sometimes I get used to their mistakes and use the wrong things."*

English speakers, on the other hand, are full of admiration for their non-native English speaking colleagues and are willing to support and help them. The nature and degree of this help is wide ranging and occurs in educational and extracurricular settings. In the latter, there were several reported instances of native English speakers giving informal advice on letters and CVs. In the former, there were anticipated examples of advice on vocabulary, idiom and corrections of misconceptions and misunderstandings but, more significant than these, for native English speakers, were the proof reading of assignments and the management of group work. In one case of reported proof reading, a student who volunteered to help his peers, found himself reviewing the English of several assignments of students in his group. What passes for proof reading is unclear from the data but there is the strong possibility that the task is more demanding than is implied, involving structuring, correcting grammar and editing, as well as translation. In group work, native English speakers frequently undertake the editor's role in preparing written assignments, seeing this as their responsibility. Engagement and participation within group work, however, may be more problematical. MBA students, regardless of mother tongue, discussed the difficulties of ensuring equitable commitment within learning teams at the start of the course when some members were struggling to express ideas coherently in English.

Apart from the MBA learning teams, there are no reports of the adverse influence of linguistic competence in group discussions. The student data supports and elaborates upon staff concerns about written English, although only from non-native English speaking perspective. It is supported by the views of one of the student Executive Council representatives who had experience of teaching academic English as a foreign language elsewhere. He favoured stricter assessment of written English, a review of current admission criteria and the provision of ongoing academic English tuition.

Educational Process

The MBA focus group data contrasts quite remarkably with all other data. Despite the intensive nature of the course, MBA students do not find the course academically challenging, nor do they raise issues concerning assessment or feedback. The interactions and processes of group work dominate their experience, provoking much reflection on learning and team working in nationally and culturally diverse groups. This finding aligns well with the course objectives and the students' declared interests in personal development. However, students learn that there are no easy or straightforward answers, as they negotiate the tricky balance between individual and team goals. The highs and lows of the learning team approach provide a rich stock of experiences that can stimulate greater self-awareness and challenge assumptions but that may, less frequently, lead to reinforcement of stereotypes. Despite difficulties within learning teams, all students recognised and valued the opportunities that diversity of team membership gave them.

Extracts 6 and 7 exemplify some of these features.

Extract 6: Focus group 3

> **Male Indian student:** *"Because in the situation where the learning team dynamics are great you realise that you don't have to do much when exams are approaching because you will have done your reading on your own, done it with your team and got it summarised in class. I think if the learning team works for you, preparing for exams was like an easy piece of cake. In term 1, I think I found things quite easy when my learning team worked quite well compared to term two when there was no learning team. I'm sorry, there was a learning team but it didn't function."*

> **Moderator:** *"So what happened?"*

> **Male Indian student 2:** *In my term 2, the learning team was, I think it was down to the individuals, I think everybody was selfish. May be after the experience from term 1, people thought they could do this thing on their own but by the time we got to end of the term a lot of people realised well maybe we should have, as a group, got more out of it but it was too late then."*

Extract 7: Focus group 6

Male UK student 1: *"And also, nowadays, with multinationals they have very diverse staff and it's a good chance to really cooperate and try to work with a lot of people from different countries. And to try to, not only to understand, but maybe also to absorb to some extent their culture, try to adapt yourself to their culture because we all have different pace, we all have different understandings of time and understandings of what's important and what's not important, like the group, what's really important for this. We had a number of projects and we also worked in groups, especially during the first and second terms and in each it was really quite a challenge because as I said, different attitudes and we had to contribute quite quickly and we didn't manage straightaway to do that but it was a good experience."*

Male UK student 2: *"I kind of agree with what everyone has said. I think it's just an awareness that people are different. It's very easy being a white British male to think that everybody in the world thinks like a white British male and to suddenly realise that frank, open feedback is not appropriate in India and you need to work around that. And to realise that your idea of meeting on time for a meeting is very different here to Nigeria and to South America and to have that understanding is frightfully important to me going forward and working with people from different nationalities around the world. And although I might not be working with someone from a nationality on the MBA, to have the awareness that people are different, to know that people are different and to realise that I have to match their expectations with my expectations is a massive learning point and really, really valuable."*

Two focus groups with women participants raised gender issues. Both groups highlighted the male gendered dominance of academic staff in the School and the perception that women academic members of staff were located in the softer, less well received disciplines. In one of these focus groups, an overseas student described how a male student in her learning team had persistently ignored and interrupted her and the measures necessary to stop his behaviour (Extract 8).

Extract 8: Focus group 5

Female overseas student: *"Another thing I want to say is the cultural thing. I have only had two really uncomfortable situations here and both of them are from a person from the same nationality. I will not say, but the thing that made me really upset is that I found that they have real issues when women are talking and when women are participating. I found that some of them, if a woman is talking, it's nice to interrupt and we will continue and for me it was really hard to learn how to say you'll have to wait, I'm talking. It was hard because I noticed that it was not personal, it was just cultural. It was a shock for me. They couldn't even understand. If I raised a point they wouldn't even listen until a man supported what I was saying so it's really uncomfortable. In team dynamics, I think cultural diversity is an issue. It can build relationships but at the same time it's rare to work as a team."*

Moderator: *"When you raised the issue, how did he respond?"*

Female overseas student: *"Yeah, it took me a while. I've been learning to be more assertive here. At the beginning I was pretending not to realise but I noticed that every time a woman was talking so I just learnt to say you know I'm talking, please wait and they stopped. Yeah, I was strong. I really wanted to. As soon as they realised that you have to keep saying I'm talking. And yes, I've done this research. It was quite hard."*

Male UK student: *"It's strange. You would think that people would be slightly more enlightened coming to do an MBA."*

Female overseas student: *"I was really surprised and coming to a different country. My argument is, if you're going to country, a developed country, and you're trying to get out of your country and your culture I agree you will not be denying everything and you will not be able to change and maybe in your country you treat women in a different way. I can respect that. But if you are trying to get into a different culture you have to be open and if you are really trying to work in a business level of a global multinational the type of company MBAs are targeting, you have to learn to deal with different types of behaviour."*

Although gender related, this extract is consonant with several other comments from UK and overseas students who are attempting to find some ideal, middle ground between different sets of cultural assumptions and customs. In so doing, students evoke a resigned acceptance that this is an ongoing, learning process, with no clear end-point.

Conclusion

Given the nature of the data in terms of a case study and the approach to seeking the views of staff and students in their educational context, caution must be exercised in drawing anything more than tentative conclusions from the research. Nevertheless, as an exploratory study, it has achieved the goal of identifying fruitful directions for future academic development as well as opening up new avenues for research. As an example, there is a clear institutional need to attend to English language in terms of student admissions and selection and ongoing provision. However, staff disquiet about the standard of UK students' written English reveals opportunities for collaborative research across UK HEIs to establish whether this is unique to the research setting.

One outcome of the study is that the consequences of national and cultural diversity are pervasive. They are not simply confined to one or other category of student, as research focusing on particular groups of student might suggest. The impact of non-native English speakers on native English speakers, the mix of mature and younger students and the search for middle ground by the MBA students are cases in point. Minorities have the capacity to impact on majorities. Although these conclusions might be dismissed as features peculiar to the setting of the study, the trend towards internationalisation in UK higher education means that they cannot altogether be put aside as unique or irrelevant.

A second, unexpected outcome is the demarcation that mature students with relevant work experience make between themselves as students and their younger counterparts who have little or no experience outside formal education. It serves as a reminder that prevailing categories of diversity derived from political or managerial imperatives may not necessarily reflect the totality of classroom reality and justifies the research approach taken in the study (Neame, 2006). Students are quite able to characterise themselves and others from amongst their own chosen dimensions and attributes. The consistency of the finding amongst the relevant student group suggests it is robust. The study also highlights how important purpose and aspects of context can be in different educational settings. The contrasting experiences of the MBA and non-MBA students demonstrate how educational objectives and curriculum implementation can dramatically influence student experience and learning. Students' notions of diversity also bore some relationship to the learning environment. MBA students considered that there was insufficient national diversity represented amongst their cohort in which the largest contingents came from three countries. In fact, 25 nationalities are represented on the course. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates that the notion of diversity is contentious and relative to context. A German student in one focus group remarked that overseas students were not necessarily typical of their country by virtue of their desire to seek wider horizons.

The methodological approach in the research provide significant insight into the ways in which students understood their actions and experiences. The exclusive appearance of mature students' views within individual interview data draws attention to the fact that disclosure varies with the setting and format of data collection. These unexpected insights may reflect the feelings of students who regarded themselves as minority voices within their cohorts and who might have been unwilling to engage in more open discussion. Similarly, the sampling and focus group format may also have discouraged students from discussing how minority or majority national groupings influence learning and teaching. Changing the sampling rationales and including different methods, such as observation, may help to explore these ideas further.

In relation to the current internalisation agenda, this study has shown that national and cultural student diversity has an impact on all students, not solely upon foreign nationals. There is a sense in which neither staff nor students can opt out from the ramifications of increasing student diversity and HEIs engaged in internationalisation could do well to consider its broader impact upon learning and teaching. Students and staff valued the opportunities and challenges arising from the heterogeneity within the student population, despite associated problems. Students' concepts of diversity, although often initially rooted in national identities, are dynamically responsive to experience and subject to revision. Research which targets educational process in preference to outcomes is valuable in gaining different perspectives on the influence of student diversity upon learning and teaching.

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