

Queen Chioma Nworgu & Elizabeth Achinewhu-Nworgu

Cultural Challenges Facing Teachers Working with International Students – A Case Study of QAHE

Abstract

Leaving home countries to study in another country can impose a big cultural challenge to students and teachers in the classroom. This study will aim to share the experience of teaching and interacting with international students, with main focus on Romanian students studying at QA higher education in partnership with Northumbria, Ulster, Roehampton and Middlesex Universities based in London. The main purpose for this study was to compare our previous studies that focused on Nigerian students' experiences studying in the UK intuitions. The students concerned for this current study are both on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in Business Studies. QAHE has over 3,000 foreign students on their Business programmes comprising Romanian, Bulgarian, Italian, and others from Mexico, Columbia, China, Vietnam and few from the UK. Majority of the undergraduate students are from Romania studying undergraduate Business programme and the rest studying postgraduate Business programme are mainly from other foreign countries.

Keywords: challenges, education, students, teachers, support, culture and language barriers, internationalisation

Introduction

The study provides a qualitative analysis of some of the issues surrounding the international students and teacher at QA higher education in London, UK. The qualitative research uses semi-structured interviews and focus group. The findings indicate that there are some cultural challenges faced by teachers in classroom contact with international students as well as the students in terms of cultural awareness and language problems, particularly teaching Romanian students. From the analysis of the findings, recommendations are made to enable those who come to the UK from other educational backgrounds to adapt to the culture of the institution to enable effective teaching and learning process for their career development. These challenges require QA higher education to develop effective strategies to support both the students and the teachers, particularly the newly recruited teachers. It is also important to implement effective recruitment and induction strategies to enhance cultural awareness of international students coming to study in UK.

Literature

There are several research and literature on problems faced by students in their studies; cultural challenges are clearly seen facing international students studying at higher education institutions in the UK (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2015; Bamford, 2008; Tinto, 1988; Martinez, 2001; Spencer-Oatey, 2012). These challenges also affect the teachers who have direct classroom contact with students and hence can affect

effective teaching and learning. Most of the major challenges confronting international students' life in UK universities are related to cultural shock and language barriers (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2015; Martinez, 2001). These challenges require the institutions to develop effective strategies to support both the students and the teachers. QA Higher Education Business School in partnership with four UK Universities (Northumbria, Ulster, Roehampton and Middlesex Universities) based in London campus has a good recruitment of international and EU students, who account for approximately 80% of the overall number of the students of which about 40% of the students in the Business School come from Romania. Many literature have explored the increase number of international students engaging in academic studies in the UK classroom and the problems faced, integration (Tinto, 1988; Martinez, 2001; cultural barriers (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2015), internationalisation (Asteris, 2006; De Wit, 2002; Knight, 2006) in higher education, coupled with personal experience teaching international students, has resulted to this research to share both the views of the students and teachers on their experience studying and working in a diverse cultural environment; also comparing the views of previous Nigerian students to the EU students at QAHE.

One of the big challenges facing the international students studying at QAHE London Campus is linked to cultural awareness particularly the Romanian students (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2015). Language barrier is another identified factor having impact on international students. Bamford (2008) indicates that one of the big challenges confronting international students concerns English language ability, which is predominantly found in non-native speakers of English. There is a minimum language requirement for entry which for international and European students would normally consist of a TOEFL or IELTS score. However, even when students more than meet these entry requirements, they may not be familiar with the technical terminology for a specialist subject area (Bamford, 2008). This is also evidenced at QAHE with majority of the international students having language difficulties which can frustrate them as they find it difficult to understand the teacher. In return, they start to exhibit some unacceptable behaviour and hatred on the teacher which is a big challenge to deliver effective lesson particularly with some of the Romanian students.

The EU students who have low level English and now having to study in English at a postgraduate level can be problematic to other students and their teachers. Most of the undergraduate students came from foundation, yet still find it difficult to speak or write effectively in English. However, there are those who are fluent and do not have language problems, but have cultural barrier which affects their classroom behaviour (Bamford, 2008). Teaching international students can be seen as an inconvenient challenge, given the language barriers and the limited preparation that their academic backgrounds have given them to adapt to life in the UK as evidenced in our previous research with the Nigerian students and the current research with the EU students. However, with the internationalisation of UK HE, the onus is on universities and colleges to take responsibility for adapting to the students' behaviour and diverse culture (Murphy, 2015).

Cultural understanding is another challenge and important in teaching the EU students. Culture consists of patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive

achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 181). Culture therefore can be very difficult to erase from human nature.

Culture responds to changes in internal and external environment, new technology, new products, new customers, new personnel, introduction of new systems and new procedures, as well as macro social and political trend and therefore can affect what we do and how we perceive things around us.

Spencer-Oatey (2008, p. 3), defines 'Culture as a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour'. The EU students at QAHE are not different from what you would expect from what research findings present about cultural understanding and interpretation of the values attached to the way we are and perceive things around us.

Due to the busy workload of teachers, little time is spent in addressing the more specialist support required by these students in relation to cultural understanding of the QAHE education environment, although some of the cultural understanding topics are embedded in some of the modules, but a lot still need to be done to ensure good understanding of how things are done here and what is expected of them in the classrooms. Cultural understanding is obviously an issue that needs addressing as not providing the necessary support can frustrate the students as well as the lecturers who may not understand their specific language and cultural needs (Bamford, 2008).

The first and foremost challenge that every international student has to face is the cultural shock that they have to cope with while adjusting to life in a new environment such as in the UK. The education system in UK is obviously different compared to other countries in the world which requires the international students to adapt to the systems and ways of doing things in the country of their studies. This can be difficult for the International students particularly students from Romania. The difficulties faced by international students to adjust to the educational culture in the UK impose a big challenge for the teachers who come in contact with the students in the classroom. However, it is our responsibility to try to make an understanding of these differences in culture and tailor our teaching to accommodate international students' expectations and language barriers faced in their studies.

In the case of the Romanian students at QAHE, it is obvious that most of the students still find it difficult to accept the fact that it is not very easy to find life in the UK education system, they rebel through exhibition of some unacceptable behaviours, which can disrupt the class hence, affecting effective teaching and learning taking place. What follows, rude and blame the teacher who is trying so hard to deliver effective lesson in such a culturally diverse group. It is observed that regardless of the level of education instilled in certain people, their rigid culture can dominate their understanding and perception of the world around them. This obviously imposes a big challenge to the institution and teachers, hence the need to find effective strategies to re-enforce cultural acceptance of the way we do things in the UK educational system and on the other hand, teachers to respect the diverse culture of the students we aim to educate. Having explored the views of relevant

literature and research, the proceeding section will aim to explore the research methodology and findings on what the QAHE students and some staff said about the cultural challenges faced in studying and working in UK.

Research methodology

In order to ascertain best way forward to effective implementation and supporting the EU students' cultural understanding, a focused group interview was used to find out what students say about their cultural understanding. Most of the students interviewed were 18 and above and did not need consent from parents to participate in this initial mini studies. The participation was voluntary and the researchers ensured that the research was anonymous to protect identity and confidentiality. One of the reasons to adapt to this method was the easy access to the students as one of us had direct contact as their Lecturer and also teaching related cultural programme in the partner Universities. It was easy to link in the research in their seminar discussion on cultural awareness. Secondly, because of the classroom behaviour and disruption perceived while teaching and sharing the experiences of other colleagues, it was an opportunity to utilise the period to find out from them how they view the British education culture compared to their home countries. Students were actively involved in given reasons to why their behaviour may be perceived as disruptive or ignorance of studying in a diverse cultural community of QAHE.

Students' and teachers' comments

Well, we cannot change the way we are, this is the nature of Romanian students. Everyone think that we talk too much in the class, this is our nature. We are not rude but we talk and speak our language. Teachers should not see us as rude. We also listen and do our work. (S3)

I had a big shock about how racist the British are to Romanian students. They have already labelled some of us as disruptive people because they do not like our behaviour. This is us and we cannot do anything about it. Teacher, you are an African woman, have you stopped speaking your language? We cannot throw away our identity which our language is one of them. If people think that I have to forgo my language for English, the answer is no. It is ok for my learning because we have to learn in English but shouldn't make us not to speak in our language when we meet. In any case, I respect that it should not be spoken in the class, but sometimes these things happen. Perception and interpretation by teacher is what matters. (S8)

I came here to make a change and it is my first time in UK even though I came from Romania. I like QAHE and enjoy studying here. However, most teachers think that we talk too much in the class; it is not the case with all of us. I am very quiet and respectful to my teachers. But one person's fault should not be used to judge others. We are very nice and some of us may exhibit some challenging cultural attitudes due to circumstances outside our study environment, it does not apply to all of us the most import thing is cultural understanding and respect for others. (S10)

When we talk about culture, we need to look at the individuals within the culture. How responsive are we all in respecting individual culture? Everyone should be responsible in shaping the culture here. Maybe, more should be done from the induction to create serious awareness and to let students who come newly for the first time on how to behave and respect the culture of the institution, including the

rules and regulations. I do know that some of the males in my class do not have respect for the female lecturers but, the teacher has to be very strict with such students and make them to realise that we are in a different culture that needs to be respected. (S12)

Some of the teachers also lack understanding of the nature and problems students face in studying overseas. I could not speak a word in English when I came over here. I learnt English when I came and still struggle understanding and writing in English language. I know my subject but interpreting it in English sometimes can be very frustrating. I talk in the class to my friend to help me interpret things in English. This is my only reason using my language in the class sometime. I am not disrespectful but facing language barriers. (S19)

I have come here for the first time to study. Things are done differently in my country so I have to change my style of behaviour because I want to learn. It is good for me to come to UK to see the difference and respect for people even though I don't like the way they regard us here from Romania. We are all EU people and should be treated same. I am learning the system and with one of my modules understanding self and others which you teach, I learnt a lot and now I understand myself and others. Extra support to improve my English has also helped my communication skill. However, it is not easy to change the way you do things. (S22)

I have no major problems teaching international students. The only problem I have is the talking in the class sometimes. I have a large class comprising mainly Romanian students, nice students but cannot stop talking. I noticed that it is a cultural problem and there is nothing I can do about it. I believe that they have to be culturally equipped with the knowledge of working in a diverse community of London and with respect for people. Some have not understood what it takes to behave appropriately in the classroom. You can tell the difference teaching other students from places like China and other countries. QAHE needs to do more during the induction to equip the students with the knowledge of working in a diverse culture of UK intuitions. (T2)

Working with international students can impose cultural and language barriers, hence needing strategies to cope with the situation. One of the strategies to help international students is creating cultural awareness. QAHE has effective induction strategy they use for implementation as well as helping students to understand cultural diversity and continuing with the good practice will surely help, if possible with enrichment activities built in inducting students. (T4)

Conclusion and recommendations

Working with international students imposes cultural and language problems, hence needing strategies to address issues. Research and literature point to language and cultural barriers as key challenges facing international students and teachers in the classroom, however implementing effective induction strategies will help create cultural awareness and understanding; in turn minimise the problems faced by the lecturers teaching these students.

We would recommend that QAHE embarks on a strict induction programme to support students' understanding of cultural awareness and importance of working in a culturally diverse community. Providing additional support for key skills such as English support classes will also help develop language skills and thereby minimising frustration encountered as a result of lack of understanding. This is an on-going research which in future, will aim to explore how QAHE is effectively

implementing its induction programme to support the international students adapt to the diverse culture of their partner universities, Northumbria, Ulster, Roehampton and Middlesex.

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Dr. Elizabeth Achinewhu-Nworgu, Northumbria & Ulster Universities, United Kingdom,
elizabeth.achinewhu-nworgu@northumbria.ac.uk

MA Queen Chioma Nworgu, London Metropolitan University / Focus Learning Support, United Kingdom, focuslearningsupport@googlemail.com