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Highlight:

Reflections on student diversity: the overlooked case of “the Chinese learner”

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Reflections on student diversity: the overlooked case of “the Chinese learner”

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I teach on the BSc Environment & Sustainability programme at Keele, which has a collaborative version linking with Nanjing Xiaozhuang University (NXU) in China. Students undertake 3 years' study at NXU and then come to Keele for a final year alongside students on the standard programme. During their second and third years NXU students take bridging modules taught by Keele staff, in English, either via distance learning or in person in China. These students share specific challenges in the transition to learning here in the UK that, whilst representing a group characteristic needing recognition, also risk stereotyping “Chinese learners” as a homogenous group (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006). Language barriers and being used to assessment only by exam can give a false impression from early interactions with staff of problematic engagement with learning and academic ability. These impressions risk seeding unconscious biases that may negatively affect both student experiences of interactions with staff and assessment outcomes. In the context of increasing internationalisation of higher education and connected diversity issues (see: Altbach & Knight, 2007; Andrade, 2006; Caruana & Ploner, 2011; Ennew & Fujia, 2009; Healey, 2008; Zhou et al., 2008), this raises important issues regarding student diversity. Importantly for me, there appeared in my early stages of teaching NXU students to be a gap between perceptions and achievement - with amongst the best dissertations I was marking being by NXU students.

The construct of “the Chinese learner” is widely used in the literature and presents an implicit deficit model stereotyping Chinese students as lacking critical reasoning skills and autonomy, being passive and reliant on the teacher as a transmitter of rote-learned knowledge (Grimshaw, 2007). Deficit models explain the underperformance of minorities as being due to intrinsic characteristics of learners in those groups. Work towards equality and diversity has, however, recognised that attainment gaps are due principally to environmental factors including barriers to learning and unconscious bias, as best developed for gender and race (Cotton et al., 2015). Inclusive education reforms have drawn parallels with the social model of disability central to ongoing work for equality for disabled students (Terzi, 2004). The Athena SWAN (Scientific Women's Academic Network) programme of the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) is the most prominent UK sectoral equality initiative (followed internationally as best practice; Gibney, 2017). The ECU followed Athena SWAN with a Race Equality Charter, of which Keele University is a member, and discuss in Caruana & Ploner (2011) equality and diversity issues that come with internationalisation. Yet whilst the deficit model has been overturned for gender and race, the deficit model of “the Chinese learner” is still apparent in practice and literature, typically justified as being culturally-grounded in the Chinese education system (Grimshaw, 2007; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; McMahan, 2011; Wang & Byram 2011). Whilst it is unthinkable to talk about female or BAME (black, asian and minority ethnic) as members of an

intrinsically deficient group without intersecting identities, it seems to remain acceptable within the wider UK Higher Education context to implicitly problematise Chinese students as a homogeneous group.

Superficial impressions of NXU students as needing “extra” (rather than “tailored”) support - and their group stereotyping as per Grimshaw (2007) - has implications for equality of assessment because of unconscious biases. It is conceded by staff that, whilst we use anonymous marking for written work, the idiom readily identifies assessments produced by an NXU student, even with fluent proficiency in the English language. This lowers expectations of quality and risks unconscious bias lowering the mark then given. The university’s generic marking scale and clear descriptors relating to cognitive level is useful here, and for related equality and diversity issues which might include dyslexia, by relating marking specifically to evidence of critical reasoning. From individual grades in a final year module I taught to a mix of NXU and Keele students, the stereotype is evidently wide of the mark: the performance of the majority was comparable to the non-NXU cohort, with average marks only a few percent below - and that caused by low scoring outliers. Another issue that came up repeatedly was poor paraphrasing of others’ work - academic misconduct or rather a struggle for students to express ideas in their limited English? A challenge I would face if trying to write in Mandarin and being sure to rephrase yet still make sense. In terms of language moreover, my experiences teaching NXU students has made clear to me that English language ability is not correlated to academic ability. I had a provocative reminder of the unconsciousness of unconscious bias through teaching in China in April 2018. Before going, I already held the view that English fluency does not equal academic ability, yet I still found myself genuinely surprised that the three students who were best with English actually produced amongst the poorest academic work. English proficiency is needed for engagement with English medium teaching, but we should remember that university education is to develop critical reasoning skills and that is what we should be assessing (Wild & Berger, 2016).

It is important to recognise differences between the learning environments, in particular models of assessment. All assessments at NXU are by unseen written exam - as is typical practice in China. Non-exam assessments at Keele therefore do present a challenge to the NXU students as a cohort, the overcoming of which is addressed by Clark & Gieve (2008). I argue that exams in English are unsuitable for assessment of NXU students because of primary reliance on ability to write clearly at speed without scope for corrections in, to the students, a recently acquired foreign language. When students could prepare work in their own time in non-exam assessments, able to carefully build the English and then submit, they appear much more able to access and evidence the critical reasoning skills we want students to achieve (Bloom et al., 1956; Wild & Berger, 2016). Planning for teaching in China, I was conscious of addressing the barriers to learning raised by my reflection. I felt constructive alignment to make learning outcomes and teaching explicit (Biggs, 1996, 2014) was especially important for students being taught in a newly acquired language. Constructive alignment was important to address the specific needs of this group but I argue is best practice for all learners in all teaching (along with citation and evidence, learning linked to application and/or research, building learning in steps, continuing formative feedback, and accessible resources). One final point is that NXU students apparently feel an obligation to use a chosen “English” name rather than their genuine first name. From discussions at a consultation for Keele’s Race Equality Charter it appears this is common for international students (and even international lecturers), with people often feeling obliged to use an “English” name to avoid the awkwardness of staff struggling with

pronunciation. Would using an alternative “English” name be expected of an ethnically Chinese UK home student or an Asian home student? Or a white British student with a unique name? I doubt it, so does that foster a sense of division undermining equality?

How does this fit with equality legislation and Keele’s “Equality, diversity and inclusion strategy 2018-2022” (Keele University, 2018)? I am confident we meet the first of the three obligations (“Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other acts prohibited by the Equality Act”; Keele University, 2018) in our engagement with NXU students. But we need to pay more attention to good quality teaching (and particularly unconscious bias in assessment) to better “advance equality of opportunity between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not”, the second obligation (Keele University, 2018). Supportive engagement with NXU students meets the final obligation, to “foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not” (Keele University, 2018), but is at risk if NXU students perceive an expectation to use an “English name” as setting them apart.

To summarise, we need to recognise the risks and implications of unconscious biases affecting Chinese students as per the example here of studying on a collaborative international programme. Whilst equality and diversity efforts to overcome gender and race biases in education have rightly recognised primarily environmental causes (the social disability model), Chinese students remain subject to stereotyping as intrinsically different (within a deficit model). The issues raised here are pertinent to the Equality Act 2010 and to Keele’s own equality, diversity and inclusion strategy (Keele University, 2018) - and addressing these issues comes back to modelling best practice in the scholarship of teaching, which benefits all learners. As the Equality Challenge Unit recognises, there are clearly “synergies between internationalisation and [Equality & Diversity] within a framework of inclusive practice” (Caruana & Ploner, 2011) and models of international student adjustment, such as proposed by Schartner & Young (2016), are an important part of inclusive education.

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