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**Highlight:**

Reflections of the Annual Learning and Teaching Symposium 2017

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**This highlight contains the reflections of two individuals who attended the 2017 Annual Learning and Teaching Symposium and volunteered to offer their thoughts here.** The focus for the annual teaching symposium this year was “Teaching International Students” and the intention, through collaboration and dialogue, was to generate new understandings and develop confidence in professional teaching practice among the event participants. The event showcased two prestigious keynote speakers:

- **Supporting international student success: teaching and assessment strategies that work**  
Professor Sally Brown, Leeds Metropolitan University
- **Inclusive curriculum: creative approaches to making online spaces and resources work for all students**  
Dr Megan Lawton, University of Wolverhampton

**Dr. Rachel Berkson**

Lecturer in Bioscience  
Keele University School of Medicine  
Keele University

**Reflections from a Lecturer in Bioscience from the School of Medicine**

Like all the best internationalisation events, this year’s teaching symposium on ‘Teaching international students’ was really about teaching all students. Overseas students have no monopoly on issues, and anyway all students are international students, destined to live and work in a globalized world.

Prof Sally Brown and Dr Megan Lawton have very different styles, but put across a common message: inclusion needs to be built in from the beginning. It’s no good reacting to a problem by trying to change something in an inflexible course or make a special exception for a given student. Inclusion in the sense of not just having one assessment tool (typically a long written exam), or one style of feedback (marginal notes in an essay), and not making teaching a slave to one particular element of technology. A positive approach to inclusion could involve designing learning activities around methods and outcomes rather than being fixed to particular examples that only draw on one cultural context.

Prof Brown talked very compellingly about the idea of *cultural humility*. When teaching in an international context, or rather, when teaching in a university full stop, asking students to provide examples from their own contexts may mean discussing examples that as teachers we are not fully familiar with. But we still have discipline expertise to guide the students through analysis and discussion of the examples they bring. At the same time, students from different backgrounds may have very different expectations of the relationship between student and teacher, and the idea of student co-creation of learning which is fashionable in UK HE can itself be a barrier to many. These cultural differences can be approached respectfully and incorporated into a flexible teaching system.

Dr Lawton explored further the idea of how student knowledge and even expertise can be incorporated into teaching. For example, students may come up with some examples related to a given concept that are specific to their home country, and these can be reused for a course offered in the UK or via a different international partner – now the whole curriculum is more diverse without having to be rewritten top-down. Or a cohort of students who struggled with self-assessing their level of ‘digital literacy’ prepared a visual essay about what they understood by the term. That

helped those particular students to get to grips with the idea, but also provided material for future classes to use as a starting point. Students don't just have one identity, and want to be respected as individuals but not singled out as a person from a particular group.

The discussions sparked by these two keynote talks also had some good insights. Of course, we talked a lot about pedagogic problems we've encountered teaching very mixed groups, but we tried to be solution-focused and bring up practices that help. Very few of the suggestions were specific to overseas students, of course. Better explanations of everything from the meanings of academic terms of art, to information about what is expected in a course or assessment item and being transparent about the reasoning behind educational choices are helpful to students from any background. Existing students may be best placed to explain the subtleties of UK academic (and general) culture, and institutions can encourage and support this rather than trying to push students into official channels while losing any control over what students may be learning from their peers.

There are big challenges here but the symposium was taking a very encouraging stance around encouraging better teaching, based on both research evidence and personal experience. Rather than trying to fire-fight and address problems that arise when students for whatever reason can't engage with education as we would want them to.

#### **Dr Adam Moolna**

Teaching Fellow in Environment and Sustainability  
School of Geography, Geology and the Environment  
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#### **Reflections of a new Teaching Fellow in the School of Geography, Geology and the Environment**

With the strapline "Teaching International Students", this seemed a particularly important day for me to take part in. Not only am I a new Teaching Fellow here at Keele but a substantial part of my role is working with international students - in particular, students from Nanjing Xiaozhuang University in China with which we have a partnership. Students in the scheme take the first three years of their degree in China and then come to Keele for their fourth and final year.

The symposium began with a keynote presentation "Teaching International Students" by Professor Sally Brown of Leeds Metropolitan University. The follow on session, before group discussions in a World Café format, was a call by Dr Megan Lawton of the University of Wolverhampton for an "Inclusive curriculum: creative approaches to making online spaces and resources work for all students" [my emphasis].

Because the wider context is our responsibility for maximising the success of all individual students, considering individual students through the lens of group identity reveals structural issues in pedagogy that only become apparent in group comparisons. The focus issue for the symposium was how to close the attainment gap of international students – as a group; they do less well in degree outcomes. Considering international students as a group highlights aspects of our pedagogy for improvement not only to close that attainment gap but also benefit individual learners across the whole student body.

Sally Brown called for a change in perception, a plea to recognise that international students are not a problem but an underused rich resource to enhance the learning of domestic students and our own pedagogy. The attainment gap is not because of individual international students but because

of structural factors that we can and should be addressing in our approaches to teaching and learning.

*“Internationalisation is not about taking money from around the world to prop up our higher education system... it’s very different, it’s about changing our lives and the lives of others for the better”*

Drawing on her international experience, working around the globe in usually 7 or 8 different countries each year, Sally pulled out issues identified with international students and how they are applicable to the whole student body. Students in different countries come from different contexts of expectation, for example. In some countries, the expectation is that learning is passive and not at all like the construction of knowledge and understanding expectation in the UK and at Keele. Would it offend your professor to talk to them afterwards and ask questions because that implies they failed to teach you properly in the lecture? Is it unacceptable to disagree with your tutor? What are the barriers to learning for a student with that frame of reference when dropped into a seminar where discussion is key? That’s relevant to the diversity of UK students too – and for individual students, not just considering groups like Black & Minority Ethnic (BME) and Widening Participation. Is explaining our expectations, for example of a seminar, something we talk about doing for international students and should we not be doing that for UK students too?

Sally asked “do you make it possible for students to draw on their own subject, cultural and country backgrounds and experience?” Isn’t that what we should be doing to enable higher taxonomic levels of understanding, developing relational and then extended abstract learning, for all students?

Megan Lawton built upon this by asking us to think about a current module we teach and imagine we were asked to head to a university overseas and teach it there. What would you need to change and how? Megan used an example from her own experience of taking a module to Sri Lanka – discussing what went wrong and why inclusivity by design rather than reacting to individual needs would both avoid this issue teaching abroad and enable access to learning for international students here in the UK.

How accessible would my own environmental science modules be taught in Sri Lanka if I use a UK reference framework for, say, biodiversity conservation and environmental assessment? I could instead make the learning content draw, as Sally Brown says, on the students’ own country experience. So why not use that approach here at Keele by default when I am designing a module taken by international students and a wide diversity of UK students?

Megan stressed that you need to be comfortable as a teacher that you do not know things in order to draw on students’ own subject, cultural and country backgrounds and experience. An inclusive curriculum should be transparent so that students see why it is designed as it is – and why independent learning and drawing on your own experience is valuable. We have the frameworks such as constructive alignment and outcomes-based teaching and learning to structure this communication with students.

The annual Keele Teaching Symposium is not just about that one day in June when academics across the university gather for enlightenment by invited external speakers. Rather, it focuses our thoughts and gives a forum for transformational concepts to take root. This year, the 2017 symposium fitted within a wider week of pedagogical development sessions that formed the core of Keele University’s first annual Digital Festival - a week of collaborative activities focused on digital tools and exploring how to incorporate them in your own practice to benefit student learning. Sally Brown followed up

her symposium keynote with a seminar the next day on streamlining assessment as part of the Keele "DigiFest".

The symposium and related activities have been a refreshing emphasis on pedagogy and scholarship rather than the "research first, and teaching naturally follows" still too common in the Higher Education sector. A timely seminar one week later with The Higher education Network Keele (THiNK) wrapped up my experience of the Teaching Symposium and its ripple effects. External speakers Professor Glynis Cousin and Professor Gurnam Singh brought us a seminar on "Critical Explorations of Differential Degree Outcomes: through and beyond 'race'", addressing the structural reasons for the attainment gaps of both BME and international students. They stressed the social relationship of teaching and learning, how trusting relationships with all learners is key to overcoming barriers, and that we need to recognise the singularity of the individual within "groups" such as international students. Bringing us full circle, homogenising individuals as group members does a disservice to "white British" students too.

Lots of talk but what do we actually do about it? Following the Teaching Symposium, my frame of reference for engaging with my next year personal tutees from China has shifted and my practice with it. As Sally Brown explained, "the students who are experts in country X are the students from country X". What do my tutees consider to be the environmental science issues and career opportunities in China? How can I take advantage of their knowledge to develop my teaching for them? What do they think is important for them to be able to do when they return to China next year? What do they want from one year in the UK Higher Education context?

The challenge now is putting these pedagogical discussions into practice.