

# ICED 2020 proceedings:

## Supporting academics who teach international students

Gabriela Pleschová<sup>1</sup>

*Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava  
Gondova 2  
81102 Bratislava, Slovakia*

### **Abstract**

This study discusses insights from literature on how learning and teaching in the context of international students differs from conducting classes for home students, and draws implications for the design of a course to prepare university teachers to effectively support international students. The article describes ways the design course team scaffolded participant learning, highlighting five main issues specific to the learning of international students with an emphasis on course participants.

### **1 Introduction**

Existing studies report on many difficulties associated with the learning and teaching of international students. International students are often considered too shy to contribute in class (Lomer & Anthony-Okeke, 2019; Hussein & Schiffelbein, 2020) and they struggle to take part in group work, due to the negative attitudes of home students (Idris, Ion & Seery, 2019) and the language barrier. Many international students experience the problem of integrating with home students and adapting to a different culture (Cosh 2000). International students acknowledge that they cannot satisfactorily communicate with teachers and each other, but instead of admitting that, they pretend to understand (Terui, 2012). First year students in particular find many aspects of their academic lives abroad challenging, most notably deadlines, workload, written coursework, presentations and the foreign language (Jones et al., 2019). These issues frequently lead to problems with academic honesty (Hussein & Schiffelbein, 2020).

Responses to these challenges include reviewing curricula to make them more inclusive and decolonialised (Tran & Reily, 2019), redesigning classes to respect the principles of an ethically internationalised pedagogy (Lomer & Anthony-Okeke, 2019) and creating groups outside university so that international students can interact with their home peers. Some institutions react by introducing foundational year programmes (Jones et al., 2018), intercultural courses or programmes to develop critical thinking, note taking and content vocabulary (Hussein & Schiffelbein, 2020) or providing written guidelines to their teachers (Arkouidis, n.d). Clearly, good practice needs to go beyond simply designing and teaching classes well in the hope that international students will benefit similarly to their home peers.

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<sup>1</sup> gabriela.pleschova@uniba.sk

## **2 Issues specific to learning and teaching of international students**

In 2019 our team was awarded a grant from the Erasmus+ scheme to prepare a course for teachers from Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia, and Masaryk University, the Czech Republic. The course is designed to help participants tailor their courses to the needs of international students. When reflecting on what we learned from the literature on the learning and teaching of international students, we found that some of the responses cited above were context specific (e.g. decolonialisation). However, many appeared useful for enhancing the learning of international students beyond the general principles of good teaching. This led us to identify the following five issues requiring attention in course design.

### **2.1 Understanding and reacting to student diversity**

Recognising the ways in which international students differ from their home peers and among themselves is an important starting point in facilitating their meaningful learning experience. This includes becoming aware of student expectations, needs, previous knowledge, how they used to learn in the past (Cosh, 2000), and their cultural and religious backgrounds (Idris, Ion & Seery, 2019). Doing this stimulates teachers to review the course content and methods so that they can make the curriculum inclusive. This can be done by considering questions like: What shared connections do I have with my students? What unconscious bias towards student groups may I have? How do I show respect to all voices? Have I thought of student groups in my content selection, learning activities and assessment strategy? What perspectives have been taken? How is the learning environment participatory? What power dynamics are generated from my approach? (Tran & Reilly, 2019). An example of a tactical step following these questions is to review the course readings, images and deadlines in terms of cultural, ethnic, gender and religious inclusiveness<sup>2</sup>.

### **2.2 Making teachers attentive to the situation of international students**

International students who leave their support networks and familiar cultures experience situations unlike their home peers'. These losses may become significant barriers to their learning. For teachers, it is therefore important to consider the challenges international students have to overcome while studying in another country (Marginson, 2014). This includes emotional and psychological difficulties such as stress, homesickness, isolation or financial hardship (Andrade, 2006).

To become empathetic to student realities, it may help if teachers reflect upon own experiences while studying in another country or the experiences of their former international peers (Volet & Jones, 2012). Also, to cope with above-mentioned feelings, students need to build a sense of belonging. This is possible through developing strong working relationships with staff and peers at university, for example through teacher encouragement and friendliness, flexible spoken and online communication, constructive feedback, and learning material shared online (Jones et al., 2018).

What is important to remember is that teachers sometimes expect international students to simply adjust to the local environment. A more viable approach is to look at the learning of international students as a process of self-formation of their own identities rather than a process of adaptation to local requirements (Volet & Jones, 2012; Marginson, 2014).

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<sup>2</sup>Lynn McAlpine is acknowledged for suggesting this.

### **2.3 Allowing students to demonstrate engagement through multiple means**

International students are often reported to hesitate to contribute to class discussions. Besides group work, where students can develop confidence through speaking in front of a smaller number of peers, they should have a variety of opportunities to manifest their engagement, for example through writing blog posts and reactions to them. International students can also become more engaged if they can learn about the topics that particularly interest them, for example by proposing the topics of their case studies (Lomer & Anthony-Okeke, 2019).

### **2.4 Encouraging reflective learning**

International students typically enter a learning context that is significantly different from what they experienced in their prior studies. They may come from environments where it is considered inappropriate to challenge another's opinions, where different rules exist for academic honesty, or where different assumptions prevail concerning the issues studied. Students can therefore feel puzzled and insecure about what they should think and how they should behave. Reflective learning, which encourages students to confront and analyse beliefs and assumptions developed during their previous learning, can be an appropriate response to these insecurities (Cosh, 2000).

### **2.5 Facilitating peer learning**

If students have to study independently of their peers, this does not allow them to capitalise on each other's uniqueness and strengths. Peer learning is a student-centred learning method which helps students to exchange knowledge because it is believed that "learning is more effective when knowledge is constructed and shared among peers" (Idris, Ion & Seery, 2019). Peer learning can thus become a powerful way to help international (and home) students to learn from each other. While engaged in peer learning, students can bring broader perspectives, develop greater awareness and generate a fuller consideration of the issues than could any individual student. Moreover, it builds friendships and eases integration with other students (Cosh, 2000). Peer learning can be stimulated, for example, by assigning home and international students to one group and creating enough opportunities for group work inside and outside the classroom (Idris, Ion & Seery, 2019).

## **3 Areas of focus of courses for academics teaching international students**

Aside from designing activities that encourage participants to consider these five issues, we decided to support teachers' learning in two other ways. First, we chose to develop the skills of online teaching, because the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed that online learning may become the main means by which international students can complete their programmes. Second, given our positive experience from past courses (Pleschová & McAlpine, 2016; Pleschová & Simon, 2018) we prepared the course in a way that it engages participant teachers in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL). Third, because our course participants are non-native speakers of English and many applicants expressed a desire to become more confident in conducting classes in English, we included into the course a microteaching demonstration in English where teachers trial a learning method which addresses the needs of international students. This is done in a safe environment where other course participants played the role of students. Each demonstration receives structured feedback from facilitators and peers. Microteaching is followed by completing a writing task in which participants reflect on how they could use the experience and feedback in their future teaching.

## 4 Conclusions

The result of our efforts is a four-semester course where teachers first attend six workshops to enhance their knowledge and skills pertinent to the teaching of international students. Then they design their own courses with a help of mentor; teach the courses while collecting data on student learning; and evaluate the outcomes in a SOTL paper. The course is being accredited through the Staff and Educational Development Association and will be offered for the first time in autumn 2020. We will undertake a study into how the course helped participants to stimulate improvements in learning among their international students.

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Webpage of the course *Effective teaching for international students*: <https://fphil.uniba.sk/impact>