

Specialist Business Skills for International Students

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Abstract

This paper follows on from that presented at the last BEST conference in Edinburgh(Higson & Hamilton-Jones(2004)). At that stage, the authors outlined their initial research work with students studying on the year long International Foundation programmes at three local FE Colleges allied to Aston University. The research (funded by the University's Teaching Quality Enhancement Funds (TQEF) involved questionnaires and interviews with staff and students (the latter all from overseas). It aimed to identify ways to improve the learning experience of students on the International Foundation programmes, to aid their smooth transition to full degree programmes in Business and Management and to improve the progression rates of such students while studying at Aston.

The initial research findings were used to design a module for those students' progress to degree programmes in Aston Business School. This paper discusses how the module was designed, its content and the assessment methods used to help determine whether students are achieving the learning outcomes. The basic principle was to identify areas of study where the International Foundation Programme students needed help in order to improve their learning styles to assist them with the requirements of other modules that they would be studying during their time at Aston. Particular emphasis was put on the need to develop active learners who were not disadvantaged by their lack of awareness of UK culture and society and who were as comfortable performing written work under examination conditions or presenting orally as their UK counterparts. An additional aim was to prepare these students for the placement year which was a compulsory part of their degree. The module, therefore, comprises a range of inputs for a number of staff, a company visit, weekly reflective learning leading to Personal Development Plan(PDP) work, formal examinations, presentations, group work and individual case studies.

This paper also reports on the initial reaction of the students and tutors to the new learning experience with currently 30 participants undertaking the module. Provisional findings suggest that the International Foundation programme has prepared the students well for degree-level work and that as a group of international students they are much more analytical and, after studying the module, interactive than their counterparts who have come directly onto Aston degrees. It has shown them still to be quite passive learners, comfortable with facts and lecture-style learning environments, but less comfortable when asked to use their own initiatives. Continuing progress needs to be made in terms of encouraging them to develop a reflective approach to learning with the students taking some time to feel comfortable with an analytical approach to learning. In addition, an account of the students' reactions to having to work through a formal (PDP) and the results of their first assessments will be provided.

At Aston, this work is being used as a pilot to recognise good practice with regards to work with further groups of international students. It is hoped that this would have widespread application across the sector.

Key Words: International, FE-HE link, Reflection

The concept of internationalisation

Increasingly universities are designing and implementing policies that encourage an international and intercultural ethos in their institution, imbuing teaching and learning with an international dimension.

The realities of globalization and growing international interdependence are prompting educational changes in terms of what is being taught and how. Higher education institutions increasingly need to commit themselves to developing the international dimension of their campuses, curriculum and communities. An education system that prepares students to live and work in an international and multicultural society is essential to their future in a competitive market place. The challenges associated with international students are not new. Kinnell(1990) provides an account of King Henry III chastising the citizens of Cambridge for their lack of 'restraint and moderation' towards such scholars while Harris and Lavan(1992) cite the present difficulties and preoccupations with credit transfer and mutual recognition procedures.

The importance of an international education has long been recognized by governments across the globe. During the eighteenth century, Tsarina Catherine II sent theology students to study at Oxford, Leyden and Gottingen (Cross 1985). International students continued to pursue their educational studies in the UK over the next two centuries although it was not the Robbins Report (Report on the Committee on Higher Education (1963)) that any attempt was made to provide a realistic estimate of the costs involved. This approach clashed with the liberal bilateralism of the universities which presumed that overseas students gave as much to the system in a cultural and intellectual ways and they took out financially. It can be traced back to this moment that international students began to be seen politically and economically as a commercial dimension of UK cultural and foreign policy(Williams 1981). In 1967, fee differentials for international students were introduced despite opposition from universities and students themselves, but also at a time when the expansion of the system and student unrest were affecting the traditional prestige and aura of universities. However, over the next decade, the full effects of this were 'hidden' by the cheapness of sterling, the influence of existing links and the continuing prestige of British Universities. International student numbers rose to their highest level in 1979. However, the introduction of full-cost fees in 1980 brought about a reduction in student numbers and a change in the nature of student cohorts. In addition, the market focus widened to include an increasing emphasis on postgraduate training, encouraging the development of distance learning and franchising of courses.

The introduction of full-cost fees provided the university infrastructure with much needed support and provided a focus for inter-institutional competition. Accordingly, the vigorous pursuit of international students followed during the 1980's and 1990's. In 1992, the development of more universities prompted the sector to become more quality driven and price-sensitive, leading to a focus on the origin of the UK university degree. Throughout this process, little attention has been paid (McNamara & Harris(1997)) to the pedagogy relating particularly to international students. This therefore provides an ideal platform on which to base this research

International students in the UK

Student mobility moves in many directions, with an increasing number of international students coming to Britain – 240,000 in higher education (HE) (HESA 2002) and over 70,000 in public sector further education (FE) in 2001-02 (British Council 2002). This has prompted a quantity of discussion by institutional leaders

and national policy makers as to the needs of such individuals and their sponsors, and how best these can be provided for by changing patterns of FE and HE. The flow of international students to Britain and other English speaking countries looks set to continue to rise with shifting regional fortunes, the influence of the media industries and the dominance of the English language in science. There is certainly hot competition between national and international major providers and a growing global reach of higher education. This resulted in the 1990s in a range of new sites and modes of learning (a plethora of off-shore, on-line, franchised courses from public and private sector providers), new modes of partnership between universities, and (allegedly) new modes of knowledge production (involving more interactive, user-oriented processes in groups outside or in collaboration with universities) (Leonard et al (2003)). Associated with this, there has been more sophisticated marketing, publicity and new contractual agreements, and attempts to harmonise qualifications across national boundaries, such as the Bologna declaration which has focused on qualifications frameworks, credit transfer and ratings across Europe.

But despite a rhetoric of the importance of evidence-based practice, these discussions and initiatives to internationalise higher education provision in the West/UK have been based on surprisingly little research and especially little on the progress and achievement of international students and their subsequent careers and mobilities, despite some recognition that a major consequence of overseas study can be a 'brain drain'. Expensively trained graduates from low income countries often prefer to remain and to pursue their careers in the West. There certainly appears to be a lack of integrated policy on international students in the UK, and the discussions that do take place are also surprisingly separate from similar discussions and policy making around the UK's own economic, social and institutional needs. (See, for instance, the almost complete absence of discussion of international students in various White Papers (including DfES 2003), Reports (Harris 1996, Dearing 1997), and consultative and policy papers from the Higher Education Funding and Research Councils and the Quality Assurance Agency.)

Internationalisation and Aston University

Aston University has become an international and intercultural institution with its students and staff originating from a greater diversity of national and cultural backgrounds. In doing so, it has been important to recognise the issues that needed to be addressed in developing guidelines for more internationally and interculturally sensitive learning, teaching and assessment practices. These have included international and intercultural communication skills involving varying English language use and exploring different strategies in the use of virtual communication, lecture and tutorial management, accessibility of information, academic content, assessment and mobility.

Aston Business School (ABS) is an increasingly culturally and demographically diverse environment, indeed prides itself on its diversity. In 2004/5, 45% of first year Home/EU students were from minority ethnic groups and the percentage of students from lower social classes (classes 4-7) is above the benchmark set for the University (29% benchmark, 37% achieved). In addition, ABS enjoys a very diverse international student and staff population. In 2004/5, approximately 140 overseas students (29% of the total student body) joined the School, many of which are undertaking International Foundation programmes.

The UK International Foundation Programme is designed to help students who have completed 12 years of school education, and who need to develop their confidence in English in order to bridge the gap between their current studies and UK degree requirements. Students on UK foundation year programmes come from many

countries around the world, and this mix of students makes for an exciting and stimulating study environment. The course is designed to take the level of English from around IELTS 4.5/TOEFL 450 to around IELTS 5.5 or 6.5/TOEFL 550, and particularly focuses on academic and written English. Most programmes start in mid-September each year.

The Aston Business School International Foundation Programme, hosted by Aston Business School and involving three partner F.E. Colleges. As previously presented(Higson & Hamilton-Jones (2004)), during this one-year programme, students are taught for four days each week in the partner Colleges and for one day a week at Aston University, with the aim of giving students a good grounding in business, together with mathematics and statistics and English. This provides a seamless progression from pre-university level to undergraduate studies through language courses coupled with studying two Aston Business School Year 1 modules thereby providing a 'taster' experience. The business curriculum covers traditional functions of management and involves two Aston University modules: International Perspectives in Organisations and Foundations of Management, selected to be particularly appropriate for the IFP students and studied alongside first-year University students. The IFP students are taught in discrete tutorial groups to deliver an understanding of business in the UK together with an improvement in English language ability as the development of language skills has become an integral part of the teaching. Students are also supported through a programme of study skills to enrich their progression opportunities.

Module Rationale

The rationale for the module came from the recognition, in conjunction with staff in the three FE Colleges, that the cohort of IFP students possessed several distinctive features:-

- Students following this progression route displayed a high attrition rate, often due to poor attendance and lack of understanding
- These students had limited experience of taking responsibility for their studies within the UK University environment
- Several students had continuing language difficulties
- The students were familiar with studying in small groups thereby providing them with an enhanced opportunity for seeking help and being liaised with concerning their progress

Therefore, the module had several aims:-

- to encourage students to take their studies more seriously
- to remedy poor attendance
- to offer a higher level of study support in Level 1, acknowledging the experience that these students had received in the IFP
- to encourage continued liaison between the students and members of the University's teaching staff regarding the IFP students following their progression onto the Aston University undergraduate programme.
- to raise awareness among students of the need for the continuing need of the development of English language skills
- to enhance students progression and development opportunities
- to raise awareness of different pedagogical approaches with regards to internationalising learning and teaching
- to raise awareness of potential opportunities for the internationalising of the curriculum

Designing the module

In designing this module, the focus was on the development of the skills where, typically, international students needed additional help in order to enhance their learning styles to assist them with the requirements of the rest of their undergraduate curriculum. Particular emphasis was placed on encouraging the students to become more active learners so that they were as comfortable performing written work under examination conditions and presenting orally as their UK counterparts. Also, who were not disadvantaged by their lack of awareness of UK culture and society. Prior to their undergraduate studies at Aston, these students were familiar with studying in relatively small groups and their inclusion in large groups of students was recognised as potentially being very daunting for them. Also, the IFP had provided the opportunities for small groups of students to receive a considerable amount of close supervision and liaison with their IFP course tutor. The tutors got to know the students well and could sort out some of their issues concerning other modules as the course went along. This had provided them with a considerable amount of support and reassurance during their IFP studies. In designing this module, it was recognised that it would not be possible or ideal to aim to provide the same level of support. However, the transition would be staged less dramatically by offering a module undertaken only by students who had previously studied the IFP at one of the three Colleges. This would provide the opportunity to maintain the student learning within small groups, while raising their level of their study skills within a business context. Through the enhancement of all these skills, it was also hoped to provide these students with an enhanced chance of obtaining a placement during the later part of their undergraduate studies. Often, such students had found the acquisition of such to be very difficult, often due to poor communication and social skills.

Tutoring and assessing the module

Two tutors were involved in teaching this module, both of whom had had considerable experience in teaching international students and also who had both been involved with the students during their studies on the International Foundation Programme. This provided a particularly important insight into the whole development.

The module was taught over both semesters with regular fortnightly 2 hours sessions taking place in a small lecture room. Presentations were provided using PowerPoint as well as OHP's, using a blackboard to collect discussion points.

The module comprised a range of inputs for a number of staff, a company visit, weekly reflective learning leading to Personal Development Plan(PDP) work, formal examinations, presentations, group work and individual case studies. Lectures focused on topics in time management, teamwork, referencing, communication and essay writing. The Blackboard™ VLE was used to give students access to course material and to communicate with students. A debate on a current UK business topic was setup during one week, where students worked in groups to present their views. Students also undertook a visit to a local organisation (NEC). As part of the module assessment, students were asked to work steadily over a 12 week period through the Aston Personal Development Profile. This involved them in carrying out a paper-based analysis of their skills as a learner, their reflections on their learning week by week and documenting a summary of their learning at the end of the assessment. Initially, this caused the students some consternation but informal feedback to date indicates that the students are coping well with it.

Midway through the module, the students had an assessment under exam conditions to expose them to this form of assessment within the undergraduate framework, continuing the policy in the module of exposing them to as many different types of

teaching, learning and assessment styles as possible within a supportive framework at an early stage of their academic degree course. The intention was to assist and encourage them to ask questions, seek assistance and learn the correct way to achieve a satisfactory outcome to assessment.

Student progress and achievement

Initially, students indicated that they were irritated in studying this module as a separate group from the rest of the Level 1 undergraduate students. However, this feeling was short-lived as the first few sessions quickly enable them to realize that they were indeed in need of help in the development of specific learning skills. As the course has progressed, their confidence in verbal and written work has noticeably increased prompted by a tutoring policy of expecting the students to respond in class, promoting a 'discussion' type environment within each tutoring session and encouraging the students to work in groups during activities.

At the end of the first semester, students were given a timed examination comprising of twenty multiple choice questions followed by three discussion questions requiring answers of an expected length of approximately 500 words each. Performance in this examination was viewed as mediocre. Of more concern was the attitude of the students to the examination procedure, i.e. late attendance, talking during the examination, lack of preparation. This prompted further input in lecture time relating to examination preparation and etiquette which, it is to be hoped, will impact successfully in the examinations in June 2005.

Indications to date on the overall grades obtained in this module are that the students are performing comprehensively well and openly acknowledge the applicability and relevance of the module curriculum and are appreciative of the progress that they have made. (Insert information from IFP meetings here)

Module evaluation

a) Student Perspective

At the end of the module input sessions in March 2005, students were asked for their comments on the module, using a structured questionnaire. The outcomes from this highlighted that the students had found the content of the module to be very useful and to have impacted significantly on the other modules within their academic curriculum.

Question 1: What is your understanding of the purpose of the module and what you were meant to learn?

- This module integrates with other modules and is designed to support our understanding of other lectures
- I understand how I can learn effectively in university
- To help international students to study more effectively in the university
- It helps us for further study. It also provides skills that we need in our future study and career. I have learnt lots of things such as group work, presentation skills, debate, time management, written assignment, reflection and so on
- To improve English skills and presentation skills
- To have personal development and find out the positive and negative side about myself. It is always helpful to correct some of my mistakes
- This module helps us to gain some study skills and some extra business knowledge
- To set up personal study pressure in order to learn knowledge more effectively

- The purpose of this module is helping international students, especially those students who were studying in a different education system, to get used to English education system. I learned a lot of special studying skills in the class
- Learning the various aspects of Britain and the university
- The purpose of this module is to give international students extra support on language, provide useful information about essay writing, teamwork, time management and presentation. It helps overseas students to get used to the university's life.
- Improving English skills. Understanding some basic business skills
- I think it can help me to understand the specialist skills in business such as group working
- More concentration for English and group working
- To try to mix the overseas students more with the UK culture and campus life.
- I learned many study skills from this module such as time management, referencing and so on
- From this module I have learned how to write assignments, improve my business skills, such as NEC presentation, understand myself and my strengths and weaknesses
- The purpose of the class is to improve English communication and understanding to help overseas students to keep up with the local students
- This module was designed to integrate into our other lectures

Collectively, this illustrated that the students had a broad understanding of the purpose of the module and indicated that they had found the module to be useful and informative to the rest of their undergraduate studies.

2. *What were the most useful topics for your studies?*

Topic	Bad			Excellent	
	1	2	3	4	5
Reflective Learning		1	1	1	1
Time Management				8	11
Presentation			1	2	5
Company visit – NEC			1	4	3
UK History		2	2	3	3
Referencing					1
Case study			1	1	1
Debate			1		
PDP		1		1	
Essay writing				2	1

The time management lecture was delivered during Term 1 and proved to be the most popular of the module content among the students.

3. *What did you think about the reflective learning element?*

- It's quite useful
- It's useful because I tend to evaluate progress on learning
- Helps people to keep study something in normal day
- It is good for our daily learning and life
- It's good for me to make plans
- It's quite helpful in the study process and through life
- About honesty and handling pressure

- It is helpful to remind myself what I did including all the positive things and negative things in the previous week
- It's good for making plans and increasing skills
- I think it is very good, very useful
- No idea
- It is very useful for group working
- It did not suit for me
- Sorry no idea
- Reflection every week made me think about what I have done and made me feel great and successful. Also it enabled me to focus on what I will do next. My life is more organised
- To get to know ourselves, to think about what we learn and what we did not
- Reflective learning element in the beginning I did not think much of it but now I think it is a good way of analysing oneself

4. *What did you learn from this module?*

- Time management
- Motivation
- The importance of time management and reflection and how these link to effective learning
- Time management and making some more friends
- Many things I got from it such as face-to-face discussion and group work.
- How to manage time
- Knowledge about the module and life experiences through the communication
- Get the extra help on other modules
- To be a good learner, had a good understanding of UK history, have learnt good skills about writing essay
- English study skills
- I've learned every aspect in our university and how to improve ourselves
- More information like how to manage time for studying
- Term study, group presentation and lots of other specialist skills in business
- More reflection
- About university study and our lives
- I learn how to control my own time
- I have learned time management, let me to know how to manage time, how much time should be for playing and how much time should be for study. Previously, before I hand in assignment I was very busy, but now I have changed
- Time management is very important
- Reflection!!

5. *What were the best things about this module?*

- Practical nature
- I could experience the NEC company as a VIP guest, had a chance to see the presentation which is held by a real businessman
- Keeping touch with some teacher
- Having a module specifically for international students
- We had time to communicate with each other in English
- Solve the problems on time
- Best nicest tutors
- Relaxing, good knowledge

- Relaxing, helpful to my future study
- We can learned lots of knowledge about our module
- Communication with teachers. I got more useful information from them
- We can learning lots of skills
- Small groups enables the teachers to look after every student
- Mix with English culture
- I think PDP is the best subject
- We have seen the NEC and know how the big business running and we do the group work. Learning is about cooperation
- Small groups, lots of discussion, reflection
- I would say this module was the best organised module I have taken up at the business school

6. *What could be improved on this module?*

- More activities
- The assessment of presentation was a little unclear, especially the group work rate
- No idea, quite good at the moment
- Nothing to add for it so far
- Nothing
- More practical e.g a visit to the NEC
- There should be more knowledge on this
- More topics, more UK environment like economic policy, culture
- Show more short cuts for foreign student living in these country
- We suggest to have more conversation
- My English I think
- No idea
- More homework to do
- Talk about business skills more
- Sorry no ideas
- Show how more companies to visit because of presentation is really good for student, for overseas student they need more chance to see and touch English culture
- More visits

7. *Please rate this module overall*

<i>Bad</i>					<i>Excellent</i>
1	2	3	4	5	
		5	10	3	

b) Tutor Perspective

The first time that a module operates is always a nerve-racking and apprehensive time. This module has been typical in that respect. Although we were clear in the rationale behind the need and design of the module, we could not have expected the reception with which the students have openly appreciated this development. The module has focussed on those skills which we, with an overview of the undergraduate business programme, felt that the students required in order to satisfactorily progress, not only in Level 1 but through into Level 2 and 3. Despite having an undergraduate entry level IELTS of 6.0 (raised to 6.5 from September 6.5),

it has been noticeable that this does not provide a good indicator of the level of study skills that a student possesses – hence the rationale behind the development of this module. The module deliberately encompassed a broad range of learning skills and curricula activities in order to offer the opportunity for a broad range of learning potentials. Not all students involved themselves in equal depth as we would expect. The tutors were pleasantly surprised at the level of sophistication and commitment expressed in the group presentations. The involvement of the reflective element in the curriculum perhaps brought about the greatest lack of involvement on a week-by-week basis early in the course but also the greatest acknowledgements from the students about its relevance during the latter stages of input. It is interesting to note from the student feedback that they indicate that this has been of substantial benefit to them in developing their 'life' skills – perhaps the most important skill that we, as tutors, can hope to enhance in the students.

Conclusions

The success of this module has resulted in the enhancement of the necessary study skills in the participating students. Next academic year, it is intended to offer this module to all international students within the Aston Business School, thereby acknowledging the importance of investment in this type of study support. In addition, the School of Engineering and Applied Science at Aston has also sought to actively include its students within this module in order to raise the level of study skills support that it also provides to such students. It is hoped that this will become a cross-University initiative, providing Aston's international student population with a helping-hand in the initial steps of their undergraduate programmes. In doing so, it is intended to improve the retention rate of these students, enhancing the probability of them achieving their full potential at undergraduate level.

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N.B. J.K. Smedley = J.K. Hamilton-Jones

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