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Education is at the heart of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda 2030 with higher education (HE) playing a paramount role in changing values and attitudes towards Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Education for Global Citizenship (EGC) [1]. This role is frequently linked with the concept of internationalising HE "to benefit the wider community, at home or abroad, through international or intercultural education, research, service and engagement" [2]. Currently, there is a gap in sustainable skills learned at university and those required to function at work and in society [3].

This research investigates the impact of student involvement in curricular design and teaching delivery on students' academic performance who are enrolled on transnational education (TNE) programmes. It was determined that students who are involved in the co-design of modules were more satisfied with the module and performed better evidenced by their final year module assessment. With careful consideration of the requirements of both partner institutes, the successful implementation of a student-staff partnership will lead in the delivery of tailored bespoke TNE degree programmes worldwide.

Introduction

In 2014, Queen's first international college was established and became known as China Medical University - Queen's University Belfast Joint College (CQC), located in Shenyang, Liaoning Province, China. Here, CQC delivers two Queen's University Belfast (QUB) BSc degree programmes, namely Pharmaceutical Science and Pharmaceutical Biotechnology, to over 400 registered students. While this transnational project has been successful, it has not been without its challenges such as differences in legislation, business practices, political systems, and social culture between both partner institutes [4]. Moreover, reports suggest that Chinese students are taught primarily through large group teaching, with few one-to-one or tutorial-based sessions, leading to the development of a strong hierarchical relationship between teacher and student [5]. This style of teaching is commonly referred to as teacher-centred learning (TCL) [5], and creates a dependency on their teacher, which can limit their knowledge and the ability of fostering lifelong learning skills [7, 8], such as the development of creativity and original thinking, required to address process skills in global professional practices [7, 9]. The idea of a 'one style fits all approach" is exclusionary [10] and prevents students from retaining information, applying it more effectively and becoming greater achievers [11-13]. This is confirmed by several studies demonstrating that TCL is inferior to student centred learning (SCL) [14-18]. SCL offers students the opportunity to become self-directed learners [19], which is reported to allow students to self-regulate [20], to take responsibility of their learning and become more accountable [18]. Students will be more likely to question, justify and validate arguments through open enquiry and not just reiterate the given reasons [21].

Student-Staff Partnership Project

Since CQC's establishment, its educators have innovatively provided interactive, experiential, transformative, and real-world learning [22,23], influenced by SCL [24]. However, in 2019 and in collaboration with the Students' Union, the Student-Staff Partnership was designed to recruit learners as co-designer, to promote SCL and to understand students' expectations of their degree's learning outcomes, delivery, and assessment. All the while helping to bridge the gap between cultural disparities in education and to ensure all needs are met inclusive of student background, learning styles and potential [24].

Partners in this project are both staff and students, engaging in learning and working relationships, in pursuit of common goals [25]. Together staff and students review the current learning outcomes, the delivery methods and curriculum in an effort to understand each others' expectations for the degree. Further, this project has great emphasis on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which supports the creation of flexible ways of learning, inclusive and equitable quality education, and lifelong learning opportunities. As a result, the programme's aims are aligned with the United Nation's SDGs and QUB's Innovative and Flexible Delivery education strand which states, "We will offer increased flexibility in pace, place and mode of study to meet the changing needs of students".

The main aims of the programme, with reference to the literature, is to support educators in engaging students as co-learners, co-enquirers, co-researchers, co-developers, and co-designers [26], to help create innovative solutions, new knowledge [27] and a generation of self-sufficient, critical thinkers who are capable of leading in the global workforce. Therefore, this research sees the establishment of an educational setting to enhance cognitive learning and academic skills through SCL for successful and lifelong outcomes [28].

Partnership

In 2019-20 Academic Year (AY), a low risk level 1 BSc module (Organic Chemistry) was targeted. Induction sessions with the students were arranged and staff and students began to foster a relationship with each other where the purpose of the project was introduced. Student representatives (SRs') were invited to take a key role in the project, by communicating

Focus groups held between staff and students at CQC in 2019.

with both educators and students, distributing surveys, collecting feedback, and attending focus groups sessions with academics, which were advised by the Megginson approach i.e., how to have successful mentoring episodes with best practice examples [29].

To analyse student opinion and feedback as course co-designers, SRs were asked to survey their peers in the areas of student voice, education, and academic enhancement. This was followed up by SRs and academics via focus groups to discuss the key themes arising from the surveys, which identified examples of strategic and sustainable practices of engaging students as partners in learning and teaching.

The project outcomes

The survey results in an Organic Chemistry module revealed students engagement and feedback on key elements for a module such as assessment methods, module content, delivery methods. Students wanted "more structured model-answers and feedback on quizzes" and "to be better notified about module changes". Students mentioned "Molecular interaction in nature is a very interesting lecture but is rather short" and wanted academics to "incorporate organic chemistry in English language in the Foundation Year", "to study the module in the first semester", and to "link the learning outcomes to the module materials clearer".

Discussions during focused groups resulted in modifications to the delivery of the module as outlined below. Some of these changes were major and were required to be approved by the Courses and Regulations Group (CRG) at QUB prior to implementation.

· Delivering continuous and more detailed feedback on module activities to support students' progress and performance
· Guide students better on how to construct their answers for final examinations
· Module changes to be communicated via Canvas announcements
· Highlight, through the course of a lecture, when lecture/module/programme learning outcomes are being met
· Changing selected formative assessments to summative assessments to enhance student engagement

· Delivering Organic Chemistry module in the first semester instead of the second semester to support other Level 1 modules.

Students' overall satisfaction in Organic Chemistry module improved from 79% to 84% in 2019-20 AY in comparison to the previous AY and the module overall performance increased by 5%. The project also improved SRs in the college as a first contact for raising issues, providing feedback, and suggesting changes. This promising result encouraged the authors to continue the project in 2020-21 AY and expand it to other level 2 (L2) and level 3 (L3) modules in 2021-22 AY, which has shown an increase in student engagement, course satisfaction and evidenced by the student feedback such as "the knowledge and skills gained from this partnership course will lay the foundation for my future work" and "the interaction between the teachers and students is excellent. The teaching and learning methods are suitable for my learning and progression". This is hoped to be confirmed by quantitative data upon the completion of the modules in this AY.

Challenges and future plans

Transcending a pedagogical research project to address the SDGs in China is fraught with its own set of unique challenges including an understanding of local issues, infrastructures and compliance to partner's educational regulations provided by China Ministry of Education. Moreover, within this collaborative project, academics and students often do not have a canonical reference point around which they base their own work to develop teaching content. In addition, the task of creating remote, flexible, and online (asynchronous and asynchronous) learning activities during the COVID-19 pandemic is itself cognitively and technically challenging. This may distract partners from genuinely considering student and teacher perspectives, and principles of quality learning design.

In summary, the future project will further investigate what changes can be implemented to the degree pathways that is in line with both partners' regulations, the impact of student involvement in curricular design on their academic progress to better understand expectations of students during their degrees, to explore the advantages and limitations of various assessment methods, and finally, to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education", SDG 4.

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