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Student Engagement in Internationally Diverse Student Groups

Using Group Work to Address Student Engagement Differences

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The Problem Statement

Student engagement can be defined as “*students’ cognitive investment in, active participation in and emotional commitment to their learning*” (21:168).

Student engagement is an important element in HE teaching (12; 15). It is directly and positively related to student performance (3), and leads to an increase in social capital (6) as well as the development of ethical values (11), self-esteem and identity (7). However, different students (and student groups) react differently to engagement strategies (14; 15).

As students at UK universities are becoming increasingly internationally diverse (13), engagement strategies have to take this diversity into consideration (4; 9; 19), in order to respect the individuality of learners and learning communities (5; 20).

Research Questions

1. What are the advantages and challenges of working in a culturally diverse student group?
2. Which factors support and/or hinder a “good” outcome of group work in internationally diverse groups?
3. How do students overcome these challenges?

Method

- Dedicated **Engagement Strategy** developed and implemented in an internationally diverse MSc programme at Queen's Management School in 2017
- Anonymous online survey with open-ended questions (10)
- Response rate was 22% (1), but adequately reflected the international nature of this MSc programme
- Text data was analysed using thematic analysis (2)

The Engagement Strategy

- Creation of internationally diverse groups (4-5 students) with the aim to prepare an oral in-class presentation
- Each group presented on a unique topic, however, all presentation topics related to an overarching theme.
- Presentation of theoretical background, secondary literature and own empirical primary data (40 minutes)
- The pedagogical aims of the strategy were to:
 - Help students to create and improve dialogue within an internationally diverse group (22)
 - Allow students to autonomously manage (and lead) an internationally diverse group (16; 18)
 - Allow students to act as “learning partners” (8) that share and profit from culturally diverse knowledge and skills sets (19)

Findings and Discussion

- All students recognised the importance of international teams, but saw that they had to adapt own behaviour

[If you] “modify your own way of approaching a task, so that the project is carried out properly, [this] can be eye opening” (NI2)

- All students felt that there were challenges...

“I would say that international students sometimes feel difficulties to come up to the same standard of e.g. analysis and depth of argumentation” (EU1)

- ... which, however, could be overcome over time

“Although some difficulties were still existing at the early stage, the patient and kindness of each group members significantly reduced the uncertainty and encouraged every group members to solve problems” (Asia1)

- Local students focused on and saw little short-term benefits...

“In my case, I think it brought me down, perhaps not due to a lack of care from international students, but instead simply a lack of knowledge about what was appropriate/expected of them in terms of an acceptable standard of work” (NI1)

- ... while Asian students focused on longer-term benefits

[The project] “provides me another chance to identify the problems and improve myself after comparing with hard-working group members” (Asia1)

- Nevertheless, all student groups felt equally engaged!

“when I finished group work, I felt self-satisfaction and attainment” (Asia2)

“[c]ertainly the project was something that spoke to everyone so we all could think ourselves into of what the challenges would be of working in [a similar setting]” (EU1)

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