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China Queen's College (CQC): excellence and innovation in teaching

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The Queen's University Belfast (CQC) 2017-2018 fresher students, September 2017

During the past two decades, many UK universities have expanded their internationalisation activities in volume, scope, and complexity, introducing initiatives such as borderless higher education, study abroad programmes and student exchange programmes.

As part of vision 2020, Queen's University Belfast has made a commitment to expand its internationalisation activities. In 2014, QUB established its first joint college with China Medical University (CMU), one of China's premier medical universities, located in Shenyang, People's Republic of China. CQC delivers two QUB degrees programmes, namely Pharmaceutical Science and Pharmaceutical Biotechnology to over 400 registered students across four levels (foundation, level 1, 2 and 3). The team at CQC has undertaken the extremely challenging task of embedding the QUB experience, including its core values, into a student body located within China where English is not the first language.

Delivery of highly technical QUB modules to CQC students who are non-native English speakers has proven exceptionally challenging, requiring the team to devise, lead and deliver initiatives that have positively impacted student learning. Successful initiatives include the integration of blended learning approaches, creation of technical dictionaries, weekly quiz and feedback sessions, Moodle intranet site

and student peer mentoring schemes, amongst many others. These have enhanced the core content developed by the School of Pharmacy and have led to a marked improvement in academic performance, as well as increased student satisfaction and wellbeing.

The CQC team has been involved in the delivery of a number of initiatives which developed in response to numerous significant, and previously unexpected, challenges posed by the delivery of QUB courses to a cohort of students within an international branch campus. These challenges have included issues, such as technical English language and cultural differences, including students' lack of familiarity with UK university teaching approaches, assessment techniques, and educational ethos. It was recognised that each of these challenges could have a significant impact on the ability of the students to successfully undertake QUB courses, and, if left unresolved, would undoubtedly lead to a failure to maximise the potential of the student cohort.

During the first semester of the inaugural year of undergraduate

teaching, a traditional teaching style was employed for students, all of whom were studying for Bachelor's degrees in Pharmaceutical Sciences or Pharmaceutical Biotechnology. Academic assessment at the end of this semester clearly indicated that the use of such an approach failed to bring about satisfactory student performance. This outcome led to the employment of a solely flipped classroom approach, which was found to bring about outcomes which were considerably more favourable. The flipped classroom pedagogy employed here involved students watching short recorded lectures in preparation for in-class activities, and the use of active and interactive learning approaches within the classroom. However, a number of educational issues were still apparent on completion of the transition to this educational approach. Considering that a growing body of literature confirms the benefits of team-based active learning, it was decided that it may be beneficial to expose students to a novel blended Team Based Learning (TBL combined with flipped classroom) approach during their second year of undergraduate study. Class time

was mainly spent carrying out various active learning activities, including those where students worked with each other to solve problems, answer group questions, watch short demonstrations and listen to and discuss key concepts. Students taught with blended TBL achieved learning outcomes that were superior to classes taught using flipped classroom approaches exclusively, as well as those taught using traditional methods.

The transformative use of the blended classroom may be magnified by creating designed interaction treatments such as blended TBL or group assignments that purposefully draw students into collaborative conditions, and have an encouraging effect on students' engagement with higher learning outcomes. We recognised that Chinese students may require participation in active learning practices more than the UK students, due to their previous passive learning experiences. Moreover, anecdotal evidence shows that Chinese students feel uneasy when speaking English, which is often reinforced by students' anxiety to speak well and some educators' error treatment approaches.

We believe the blended TBL strategy provides efficient contexts for students to develop oral English skills and use these skills in active learning roles in the classroom. Further work will apply the TBL strategy more significantly within components relating to students' coursework such as practical sessions, where students' interaction and communication are crucial techniques related to satisfactory performance.

Another key example of how the team worked together was the development of tailored "end of week tutorials" – these classes allowed students to develop their language skills, as they worked with the educational team to more fully understand technical terminology that they would encounter during their studies, as well as developing their examination skills via administration of multiple choice tests. These assisted the students' ability to understand and recall knowledge, and ensured that they were able to complete QUB-style multiple choice examinations. Again, the combined skills of the team were utilised in the delivery of this initiative, as the varied subject knowledge of each of the

academic staff allowed holistic training to be delivered, whilst the exceptional administrative skills of the CQC administrator allowed for the seamless delivery of these classes, guaranteeing a positive student experience.

The examples stated above, in addition to a number of others, have led to a significant impact on the CQC students, including student satisfaction and examination performance. These outcomes would not have been possible without the combined skills of the CQC Team, as they allowed for the development of robust and effective teaching methodologies. In addition, the exceptional work ethic of all team members allowed these initiatives to be delivered seamlessly, thus allowing CQC students to partake in the full Queen's educational experience. Moreover, the strong team relationship allowed for the staff themselves to be supported, ensuring that all members were able to work to their full potential.

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