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Pre-sessional Teacher Induction: Diversity in Higher Education

Evaluation of a Diversity Awareness Induction Session

Jane Bell and Jane Richardson, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh



‘Diversity is enriching – we can learn from our students’ [one teacher’s reflection after the session]

The aim of this blog is to evaluate the usefulness of a Diversity Awareness session comprising part of the teacher induction for the Heriot-Watt Pre-sessional Programme. While it is acknowledged that many Pre-sessional inductions are too short to include continuous professional development, we argue that inclusion of the workshop in our week-long induction helped to facilitate teacher collegiality, through development of shared, negotiated values.

Rationale for the Diversity Awareness session

In the past two decades, Higher Education has evolved in two significant ways: an increasingly diverse student population and institutional changes that have occurred as a result of the gradual shift from public to private funding (Taberner, 2018). The role of teachers of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) continues to evolve to reflect these changes and besides awareness-raising, another workshop aim was to expand the EAP definition of student diversity to include, for example, mental health and neurodiversity. Universities are obliged under the Equality Act (2010) to combat discrimination and to reduce barriers to participation. However, research suggests that more needs to be done to improve student well-being. For example, demand for student counselling has risen sharply and UK student suicides increased by 79% between 2007 and 2015, from 75 to 134 (Thorley, 2017:4).

What is a ‘normal’ student?

At Heriot-Watt, 45% of students self-identify as having learning difficulties (HWU, 2018), which raises the question: What is a ‘normal’ student? Approximately 10% of the UK population is

neurodivergent, in other words cognitively different from the 'neurotypical' majority, for example those with Dyslexia, Dyscalculia or Autism. 'Different' is not a euphemism for inferior: many neurodivergent individuals possess strengths that neurotypical people do not (CIPD, 2018). However, 'diversity' tends to be portrayed in an EAP context as variation in first language or previous academic culture. Some neurodivergent students are diagnosed for the first time at university, perhaps due to low awareness or the risk of stigma in the student's previous culture. Moreover, some neurodivergent students choose not to disclose their status at university, fearing discrimination after being bullied at school (Van Roeckel et al, 2010).

It is commonly assumed that bullying is a type of behaviour that people 'grow out of' after leaving school, but research suggests bullying is not uncommon in HE and may even be pervasive (Keashly & Neuman, 2010; Metzger et al., 2015; Thomas, 2005; Everett, 2014). Some years ago, a serious case of mobbing or mass bullying at HWU led to a student becoming suicidal. This event led us to begin to develop and trial materials intended to prepare students for assessed group work.

However, research by Morrish (2015) and others raises the question of how well equipped HE staff are to facilitate a safe, respectful learning environment. For example, a study by the EHRC (2019:6) found that of the quarter of all ethnic minority student respondents who had experienced racial abuse at university, 'a large number' had experienced it from teaching staff. This may be partly due to the continuing lack of diversity in senior positions in HE. For example, of c.19,000 professors in the UK, only 400 are BAME women (UUK and NUS, 2019).

These issues, and the need to expand the traditional perception of student diversity in EAP, prompted us to develop a Diversity Awareness workshop for HWU Pre-sessional staff.

Heriot-Watt Pre-sessional Induction

Heriot-Watt runs three credit-bearing pre-sessional courses (14, 10 and 6 weeks) which are BALEAP accredited with c. 300 students taught by c. 30 teachers. Each course has one or two course directors and two assistant course directors (ACDs). Assessment requires students to research their own fields and reflects HWU assessment types.

Teacher Induction takes place over five days, with ACDs arriving two days earlier to update syllabi and help plan induction. Sessions cover pedagogic principles, lesson content, assessment, teaching and learning (T&L) technologies, campus orientation and, in 2019, diversity awareness.

The Diversity Awareness Induction session

Aims:

- Raise awareness of student and staff diversity in higher education (HE)
- Develop a community of practice amongst teachers
- Enable Ts to share their extensive, varied intercultural experience and knowledge
- Consider how teachers could plan to accommodate student diversity
- Expand EAP working definition of 'diversity' beyond first language (L1)/ previous academic culture
- After session, collate key insights from teachers' written reflections and share with all teachers

To stimulate reflection on their professional and cultural identities, teachers completed unconscious bias tests before the session. The session began with a short presentation exploring diversity (or the lack of it) in HE and issues of discrimination and inequality. Teachers then discussed how these issues might affect teaching and learning, including discussion of authentic scenarios where cultural misunderstandings had occurred.

After the session, teachers wrote a 500-word reflection on aspects of the session they found interesting or useful and on ways of accommodating diversity in the classroom and fostering a safe and respectful learning environment.

The reflections

A close reading and analysis of the thoughtful reflections revealed a number of themes: Teacher Diversity, Teacher Roles and Values, Student Diversity, Implications for T&L and Future Pre-sessional inductions. Some comments seemed to reflect longstanding viewpoints, others were perhaps prompted by the session. There were strong endorsements of the session and a small number of more critical comments. The following is a summary of the reflections with some direct quotations from teachers, indicated by T#.

In many of the reflections, teachers highlighted their own diversity, for example in terms of cognitive differences, varieties of English, recognised biases, teaching approaches (TEFL vs EAP) and the fact that their identity may change depending on their teaching context, *'I am not the same 'I' across groups, institutions, syllabuses, lessons'* [T6]. While these differences were clearly held to be important, teachers also reflected on what they felt they had in common: as *'like-minded liberals'* we *'share a common perspective on diversity'* [T5]. This interpretation of the values embodied in the role of an EAP professional went further to include a more political responsibility: we are *'front line "promoters" of a hegemonic language'* [T14]. Sharing research and practice, awareness-raising of diversity issues and discussion of the *'multiple cultural assumptions'* embedded in our practice [T12] and how this new understanding could be brought into the classroom, led to a sense of *'singing from the same hymn sheet'* [T12].

Concerning student diversity, they questioned prevalent stereotypes about, for example, mature students being more motivated and autistic students choosing Maths subjects; and they observed that students may have a different understanding of concepts such as autonomy and may not always value a *'student-centred classroom'* [T1].

A sense of wanting to celebrate our diversity more emerged from the reflections, for example by supporting students to maximise the benefits of working in diverse groups and by devising tasks and assessments which take into account learning differences. For one teacher this emphasised the importance of negotiating a class agreement about behaviour and values. A need to make the rationales for student activities more explicit was also expressed.

Regarding future pre-sessional inductions, teachers expressed a need for more information on how to identify students who may need support, the nature of available wellbeing services and university policies and guidelines on issues such as bullying. Although one teacher felt a diversity session was unnecessary, others wanted *more* time to discuss their experiences and approaches to diversity, in smaller groups because of the sensitive nature of the issues raised. Finally, one teacher reflected that *'diversity is a perception and a viewpoint'* [T25], a useful reminder of the subjective, contextual, relational nature of diversity.

We learnt a great deal from the reflections and shared them with our teachers. Our goal of expanding the definition of diversity seemed effective in that several teachers called for more input

on how to accommodate neurodivergence or mental health issues in the classroom. The teachers particularly welcomed the opportunity to share their rich professional experience during discussion of the authentic scenarios. A significant number commented that the session contributed to development of collegiality in each of the three groups, and to development of a community of practice.

Plans for next year's induction include requesting input from the Student Disability office. A second key aim will be to set aside more time for teacher discussion of ways of planning lessons to maximise the benefits of student diversity and ways of supporting students where needed.

The conference was inspiring and offered food for thought in terms of how to develop our understanding of student needs; from Sara-Jane Cromwell's assertion that not all identities are obvious and visible, to Karl Kitching's descriptions of the micro-aggressions (e.g. the question 'where are you from?') that students often face. For us, the conference confirmed the need for increased self-awareness among HE staff, in order to reduce barriers to participation and to facilitate development of a negotiated classroom culture based on mutual respect. The context of teaching and learning in HE continues to change, and a system can only truly be described as meritocratic if all participants have equal opportunities to succeed.

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