

MANAGEMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

Despite the wide meaning of internationalization and the range of activities and strategies it includes, the coreactivity which promotes internationalization still is student mobility. Mobility means important educational and social benefits, though, in order to gain the benefits, it is significant to study international students' academic adjustment to foster academic achievements. The case study conducted at the University of Latvia, Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art examined the challenges of students' academic adjustment. The findings indicate that students' low English proficiency, involvement in extracurricular activities and wrong course selection criteria eventually leads to lower performance and achievement in academic studies. In the framework of the study practical suggestions are worked out to improve the management of the international students' academic adjustment. The suggestions include adaptation week, peer support programme, study course modules and preparatory courses for international students to foster their academic adjustment at the university.

Keywords: Internationalization, international students, management, academic adjustment

Introduction

International student mobility has become an increasingly significant and indispensable part of the higher education in the framework of internationalization.

According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS), international students are defined as those “who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purposes of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin.” The trends of growing student mobility according to the OECD data are that the movement of students can be characterized as a mass movement, and the global population of internationally mobile students was close to 4.5 million in 2011, with the tendency to grow up to 5 million in 2014.

In a broad sense Knight (2004) has defined *internationalization* as the “process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institutions”. Knight (ibid.) talks about a *process* meaning that internationalization should be an ongoing and continuing effort and should reflect the particular priorities of a country, an institution, or a specific group of stakeholders.

Internationalization in higher education might embrace a broad range of issues, thus it is significant to note that there are several activities and themes most often labeled as belonging to internationalization (Wächter, 2008; Knight, 2004):

1. Academic programmes: student exchange programmes, foreign language study, internationalized curricula, work/study abroad, joint/double-degree programmes, cross-cultural training, faculty/staff mobility programmes and visiting lectures;

2. Research and scholarly collaboration: joint research projects, international conferences and seminars, published articles and papers, international research agreements, research exchange programmes;
3. External relations: domestic and cross-border. Domestic external relations include: community-based partnerships with nongovernment organization groups or public/private sector groups, community service and intercultural project work meanwhile cross-border: international development assistance projects, cross-border delivery of education programmes, contract-based training and research programmes and services;
4. Extracurricular: student clubs and associations, international and intercultural campus events, liaison with community-based cultural and ethnic groups, peer support groups and programmes.

Yet it is usually at the individual, institutional level that the real process of internationalization is taking place. During the past decades, the strategies of internationalization were mostly characterized as separate activities taken by “enthusiasts” rather than a process (Knight, 2004).

Student mobility

Despite the wide meaning of internationalization and the range of activities and strategies it includes and is achieved through, the most visible, even a core international activity which promotes internationalization still is student mobility (Wächter (2008), Teichler (2012), Van Damme (2001)).

The Bologna Declaration states general aims of mobility such as “we call upon each country to increase mobility, to ensure its high quality and to diversify its types and scope. In 2020, at least 20% of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training period abroad”. Meanwhile, there are no particular descriptions or suggestions for implementation and management of the process of mobility. Thus, it should be concluded that each institution and even each department in an institution manage the student mobility following their own strategies and approaches. There is no single format for international strategy (Taylor, 2010), therefore, the strategy an institution adopts might put emphasis on one or more selected themes from the wide range of internationalization activities: international students, cross-border programmes, curriculum, research and knowledge exchange, staff development, support services and other.

Though, it should be admitted that there might still be a living misconception that having many international students in the classroom equals internationalisation (de Wit, 2011).

Similarly, Sahlberg (2011) is convinced that Internationalization is not measured by the number of mobile students or teachers, nor international projects at the institution. The ultimate criterion for advanced internationalization of education is its influence on student and teacher attitudes, values and habits of mind related to other cultures and countries.

International students’ academic adjustment

The international mobility of students, the promotion of internationalisation in general are important elements of higher education policy. Nevertheless, how international students feel, whether their learning needs are met and their adjustment to the academic environment are as important issues as the benefits student mobility provides.

Academic adjustment refers to the degree of a student’s success in coping with various educational demands such as motivation, application, performance and satisfaction with the academic environment (Baker and Siryk, 1999). It is a process involving psychological and behavioural change as individuals try hard to regulate themselves to achieve balance in their

new academic environment and to meet the new learning requirements of a university (Feng & Li, 2002 in Quan (2014)).

Presumably, many students experience culture shock upon entry into a new country and culture. Just as students might experience homesickness, sadness, fear and frustration, they also might have difficulties integrating into the academic environment as international students face multiple challenges. In most universities it is expected that international students perform in and are assessed against the conventions of the host country's educational values and practices (McLean and Ransom, 2005). Students are expected to handle the same academic demands, to develop relationships with lecturers and professors, to get used to teaching and curriculum differences. Another adjustment concerns for international students are different study techniques, test taking strategies, classroom instruction, and oral communication (Rienties et.al, 2012; McLean and Ransom, 2005).

Academic information of the University of Latvia

The academic year begins in September and is over towards the end of June. As a general rule, it comprises 40 weeks of lectures, seminars and practical work and is mainly divided into 2 semesters. Latvian credit point is defined as a one-week full-time study workload. An average workload of a full-time study year in most HE programmes is 40 credit points. Latvian credit point system is compatible with ECTS. The number of ECTS credits is found by multiplying the number of Latvian credit points by a factor of 1.5.

Semester Examinations

Examination sessions take place at the end of each semester (i.e. in January and in June - July). Students are usually given 3 - 5 days to prepare for each examination. Students are examined separately in each subject and the total number of examinations in a semester is usually between four and six. Candidates who fail in a course (semester) examination can generally try to sit again during the session or afterwards.

Assessment of Knowledge

In Latvia's higher education a ten-point grading system prevails, where 10 is the maximum and 4 is the pass mark.

Table 1. Explanation of the grading system and comparison to ECTS grades.

Meaning of the Grade	Comments	Estimated corresponding ECTS grade
10 (with distinction)	Knowledge of the student is substantially higher than the estimated normal level.	A
9 (excellent)	Knowledge of the student is higher than the estimated normal level.	A
8 (very good)	Knowledge corresponds to the highest expected level. The student has mastered the subject deeply and with understanding, is progressing within the expected limits, but makes minor mistakes.	B
7 (good)	The student has generally succeeded in the course within the required limits, but he or she is either merely reproducing the knowledge rather than actively using it, or making more substantial mistakes	C
6 (almost good)	Awarded to students, who are progressing within the limits of their individual abilities, generally are not behind the appropriate age group, but make substantial mistakes and reproduce the facts rather than analyse them.	D
5 (satisfactory)	The very last positive grade. Awarded to students, who do their best but still make grave mistakes and just reproduce most of the relevant material.	E
4 (almost satisfactory)	Marks of different levels for students whose records are below the expected.	E/F
3-1 (unsatisfactory)		Fail

The Case Study

The purpose of the case study was to explore the international students' experiences at the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art, Teacher Education Department, University of Latvia; to address the issues concerning the academic adjustment of international students, find out the challenges of both international students and faculty staff, and work out suggestions for better international students' academic adjustment management. The focus of the study are the challenges faced during the student mobility period, especially concerning academic adjustment at the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art, Teacher Education Department, University of Latvia.

During the 2013/2014 academic year there were 20 incoming students from Europe, China, South Korea, Russia and Turkey.

The case study was carried out at the University of Latvia, the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art, Teacher Education Department. Data was collected by the means of a questionnaire to incoming students (n=20) studying at the department in 2013/2014 academic year and semi-structured interviews to lecturers (n=3).

The questionnaire to students consisted of questions concerning their motivation for the student mobility, learning needs, adaptation challenges to the new academic environment, academic workload and course requirements, availability of support and administrative services.

The data were collected by the means of content analysis of the questionnaires and interviews.

The findings from the questionnaire indicated that

- most of the international students do not express special learning needs: they expect to gain academic knowledge on the chosen study courses and be awarded the credit points;
- students appreciated the friendly atmosphere of the faculty and the new experience of meeting new students;
- students found the faculty academic staff to be welcoming, patient, and qualified;
- students did not find it difficult to understand the system of education of Latvia;
- students appreciated the creative and effective methods of teaching;
- students found the University library to be very good and databases valuable;
- students benefitted from doing their school practice (English and German language teacher programme) during their mobility;
- students learned a lot from the possibility to present their research paper at the International Students Research Conference (annual conference held at the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art)

When asked about the motivation/ reasons for mobility, most frequently students named:

- experience new educational and cultural environment;
- improve the English language skills;
- gain new knowledge in the subject area;
- study without tuition fees for a semester or a year;
- gain life and professional experience;
- personality development: become more independent and confident;
- travel and make new friends;
- challenge oneself;
- to have the best time of life.

While language studies, expansion of academic knowledge, cultural experience prevailed as the main reasons, students admitted that travelling and personal interests were strong factors affecting the choice as well.

From the interviews with academic staff it was found out that there are students who are “always away”, in other words, students take the advantage of the mobility and travel. For those students most interests are not related to academic studies, they do not attend classes regularly and experience difficulties in fulfilling the course requirements.

Thus a conclusion can be drawn that students who are more involved in extracurricular activities may devote less time to academic activities, which eventually leads to lower performance and achievement in academic studies. In contrast, students who are less involved in extracurricular activities may demonstrate higher academic achievements/ learning outcomes.

This coincides with the students’ challenge of getting along with others and admitting of having no time for doing the university assignments.

The challenges the students faced were

- adapting to new academic environment and university culture, collaborating with the academic staff;
- for some, especially Russia and Turkish students it took time adjusting to the 10 point grading system;
- heavy academic workload;
- strictly set requirements/demands for the study courses that are expected to be met and fulfilled;
- having course materials in advanced level, especially in such courses as *Foreign Language Teaching Methodology*, *English for Specific Purposes Methodology*, *Interpretation of English Texts*, *English for Psychologists*, *Integrated English Language Course for Teachers*;
 - the expected English language knowledge level: advanced;
 - feeling not able (or smart enough) to participate in seminars or accomplish the assignments;
 - students experienced difficulties dealing with administrative questions (registration for the study courses at the beginning of the study semester, receiving assessment paper after the session)

It can be seen from the findings that student have very different course selection criteria: while one chooses the subjects close to those studied at the home institution, others take such criteria as amount of ECTS awarded regardless the course content and the intended audience. For example, the course *English for Psychologists* (6 ECTS) was chosen by 4 students as it gives many creditpoints, though the content was not appropriate for the particular students to study, thus creating a situation that students were struggling to pass the examination. Another example could be the course *English for Specific Purposes Methodology* meant for the English language teachers: students who do not study to become the English language teachers rather often have a vague idea of the content and have low study achievements due to the reasons that they have not acquired the foreign language teaching methodology, are not familiar with terminology used during seminars and, moreover, have not studied lesson planning before.

As lecturers indicated very often the lack of English proficiency might lead to low academic achievements thus making the adjustment process even more complicated as students hardly follow the classroom instructions and cannot fully participate in oral discussions or seminars where students have to discuss particular issues and questions.

Although, the autumn semester starts in September, there might be students who arrive to the university or start attending classes only in October which also might be one of the factors influencing student study performance and achievements. In such case, professors must spend extra hours with *latecomers* in order to explain the course requirements and assignments.

Suggestions for better management of the international students' academic adjustment

1. International students and also academic staff members need a comprehensive published guide which would include information about the core issues concerning the student mobility;

2. All international students might be asked to arrive during university registration week (one week before the semester starts) which would be adaptation week during which international students are acquainted with the faculty (building) and academic staff, having a chance to discuss the course requirements and content together;

3. Preparatory courses for international students. It is suggestible they take a remedial language course; besides, students from non-European countries would benefit from having a course on academic adjustment issues: to get acquainted with cultural differences, education system, understanding departmental lectures;

4. A module of study courses separately for future English language teachers and students of other programmes (non-language specialists, e.g. primary school teachers, art teachers) as the content of specific courses might not be appropriate for all students who have selected it;

5. Though international students experience difficult period of adjustment and come from different cultural and educational background, they should have equal demands as their host students thus understanding the procedures and practices of course work and assessment;

6. Students-mentors or peer support programmes ("*buddy*" groups) to enhance relationships and help exchange students adjust to the new academic environment and understand the practices of course work and assessment better. Moreover, peers could help international students with fostering their English language skills. The researches in the field suggest the International Peer Programmes have had a significant impact on international students' adjustment. In addition, host students could be trained to teach international students about academic skills and resources needed to succeed (Abe et.al., 1998)

7. The international student coordinators might check on students' achievements/challenges; provide support for both students and academic staff as at the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art coordinators are working part-time, not always available for students. There should be coordinated actions among the department within one institution in order to gain most benefits of student mobility.

Conclusion

Increasing student mobility has reinforced the conviction that one of the most effective means to prepare future graduates for the needs of an increasingly international professional life in a global economy is to study abroad. Mobility means important educational and social benefits: acquiring new and cross-cultural knowledge and competencies, improving foreign language proficiency, establishing international personal and professional networks, familiarisation with other countries and cultures (Van Damme, 2001). Though, in order to gain the benefits, it is significant that the university draws on students' experience and ensures positive academic adjustment, in other words, international students' challenges should be eliminated to the minimum to foster academic achievements.

Internationalization is characterized as a way to:

- engage in international cooperation;
- gain financial advantage;
- strengthen research and knowledge;
- enhance the curriculum with international content;
- establish English medium programmes and degrees;
- promote student exchange.

Even though internationalization includes many activities, one of the most prominent is student mobility.

Academic adjustment of international students refers to their learning outcomes and fulfilment of course requirements; that is, academic adjustment predicts study-performance in terms of obtained credits.

Different measures can be taken to support international students and manage their academic adjustment: having adaptation week, peer programmes, more unified actions among faculty departments and international coordinators, and worked out modules for students to become English teachers and non-language specialities separately.

The case study has certain limitations. First, data collected were student subjective reports, and, second, the students questioned were those studying at the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art, Teacher Education Department, University of Latvia, thus no generalizations can be made. This study was focusing on academic adjustment only, therefore, further studies could be examining the international students' social, personal and attachment adjustment management.

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