Engaging International Students

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Effective and meaningful student engagement is integral for enhancing student learning experience and outcomes. For international students who move beyond their cultural comfort zone and navigate through cross-border experiences, it is essential to conceptualise their engagement through the formal and informal curriculum. International students' engagement should be viewed in relation to multiple interrelated dimensions. These may include their engagement with the learning content and learning process, the bonding between teachers and students, the interactions between international and domestic students themselves and their integration into the relevant networks, the community and the society that they are living in. These dimensions of engagement are anchored in the intersections of international student personal agency and personal experiences, educational practices, cultural boundaries and the broader social and political context shaping Australian international education.

International students' lack of engagement in learning is often cited as a challenge for teachers in all educational sectors. There are various approaches to engaging international students in learning. These may centre on facilitating student participation in group work and collaborative activities, providing personalised learning, making students feel included in the process of knowledge development and adjusting the pedagogic practices to cater for students' diverse and intersecting identities. Teachers' efforts to increase their understanding of students' personal issues that may support or hinder international student engagement in learning are fundamental to effective international student engagement. My research on the teaching and learning of international students in the vocational education and training (VET) sector suggests that international students often feel more engaged and motivated in learning if teachers have some understanding of their socio-cultural backgrounds and are able to include what is connected and meaningful to them into the learning process. It is therefore important for teachers to embed knowledge of students' learning characteristics and cultural backgrounds in course design and link these sources of knowledge to the selection and adaptation of the teaching and learning content to adequately engage students. In this regard, international student engagement is intertwined with the development of inclusive practices that accommodate the diversity of the student body.

Importantly, intercultural pedagogy that centres on recognising the cultural values, skills, knowledge and prior experiences of international students as valuable resources for learning contributes significantly to engaging students in the learning process. This approach is empowering for international students because they see themselves as playing a role in enriching the knowledge and skill development of those involved in the learning process. This in turn assists with the engagement and nurtures the interest in learning. Engaging students in drawing on such cultural and intellectual resources demonstrates features of inclusive and empowerment pedagogies. Such engagement pedagogy also extends the scope of student-centeredness beyond simply making students feel respected and accommodating students' learning needs to situate and validating their experiential and scholastic knowledge through the formal curriculum and enriching their professional knowledge.

Providing international students with the opportunity to integrate their cultural resources in learning raises student awareness of each other's existing strengths and 'hidden' resources that need to be shared. In particular this approach makes explicit to local students the values brought by international students and the society that they are living in. These dimensions of engagement are anchored in the intersections of international student personal agency and personal experiences, educational practices, cultural boundaries and the broader social and political context shaping Australian international education.

Fostering the interaction of students from multicultural backgrounds and between domestic and international students is a key dimension of student engagement in both the formal and informal curriculum. Language, communication style, cultural empathy and a common ground are amongst the primary factors that come into play in influencing the engagement between different groups of students in tertiary education. Ice-breaking exercises and improved activities have been cited by teachers in my research as effective engagement approaches which focus on minimising cultural distance and language barrier. Teachers in my study reflected that not only the teacher-student relationship but also the bonding amongst students themselves is at the heart of high quality teaching and learning in VET. This is because such relationships contribute to enhancing shared learning, community of practice, social and emotional support and cultural belonging particularly when students undertake their study in a foreign land.

A notable engagement pedagogy that emerges from my study is centred on the "Ubuntu" or 'humanness' principle. As humanness is the core feature of the Ubuntu approach, building a sense of humanity as a personal, institutional and the community and the Australian culture is accorded great emphasis in the teaching practice of teachers who advocate this approach. In light
of this approach, teachers saw their own responsibility as well as their institute’s responsibility as extending far beyond just helping students develop professional knowledge, skills and attributes within the formal classroom to value-adding their international students’ educational experiences in Australia and helping students develop the connectedness with the social environment they are living in. Teachers in my study demonstrated various practices that contribute to enriching both personal and cultural experiences of international students and extending their social network and social life in Australia. Fundamental to this network is the connectedness to the class. The metaphor of classroom as a family has captured the sense of ‘close-kit’ belonging that can make international students feel included and enhance their engagement in learning. The ‘Ubuntu’ engagement approach also involves the understanding of international students’ welfare needs, the multiple dimensions of life away from home and other commitments outside the institution. These are seen as being intimately connected to learning. The ‘Ubuntu’ principle is also conceptualized in relation to teachers’ recognition of their ethical responsibilities, as a member of the host institution and host community, to take into account the human needs of international students and treat them as playing an integral role in the learning of international students in the host country.

Ly will be speaking in the upcoming National Student Engagement Conference, 29-31 October 2012 in Melbourne.