

A qualitative investigation into the reasons for low academic achievement of international students in a private college

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Keywords

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Although several academic studies have explored international students' academic issues in the host country, most explored either academic achievement or improving learning, teaching and assessment practices in isolation, not in concert. This study triangulates students' academic issues, learning, teaching and assessment practices used by their lecturers, and the service provision at the host institution in tandem. Specifically, we investigated the factors affecting the academic performance of first-and second-year international students studying at a private higher education provider in London, UK. To establish the extent of Low Academic Achievement (LAA), briefly, where students do not meet the learning outcomes in any summative assessment, examination board data were examined. Two student focus groups were established, and eleven lecturers involved in teaching international students were interviewed. Data were analysed using Nvivo8. The results revealed that international students experience language, socio-cultural and financial difficulties, and they must adapt to a new educational environment and find it difficult to adjust to the teaching style of their host country. Nonetheless, learning approaches of the students can be mobilised, developed and utilised in a constructive environment. Student-centred approaches are preferred by the students in the classroom and use of alternative assessments was recommended by the lecturers, especially in the transitionary phase.

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Introduction

This study aims to investigate the reasons for Low Academic Achievement (LAA) of first and second year international students studying at a private higher education college in London by examining (a) factors that influence international students' academic behaviour (SAB), (b) students' and lecturers' perception of learning, teaching and assessments practices used at the institution, and (c) professional services at the institution.

The academic achievement of some first- and second-year students was not strong, and many were struggling to complete their programme of study. The non-completion of programs by first- and second-year students was significantly affecting the overall progression and achievement rates at the College and this was a serious concern for the College's senior management team.

LAA is a complex and multifaceted concept; there is much debate as to the factors which may influence it, and as a result no single definition of LAA exists. Every stakeholder in higher education (e.g., students, government, professional bodies and various providers) has its own view of LAA and sees the issues through their own particular lens. For the purpose of this study the LAA is defined as: 'When

students fail to meet all the learning outcomes of the modules studied and therefore do not pass all the modules in an academic year and therefore do not complete their programme'.

College, Staff and Student Body

The institution where this research was carried out has a 200-year history. The institution began as school and developed into an English language College; however, since 1998 it has grown into a large higher education provider with a strong international student cohort. At the time of research, the College was teaching Pearson Higher National Certificate and Diplomas at undergraduate levels, and bachelor's and master's degrees in partnerships with 4 UK universities in subjects such as Business, Hospitality, Healthcare, Technology, Fashion and Law.

In the best interests of the students, College, and the awarding bodies, the College employed teaching staff who were competent and qualified, as stipulated by both the College and the awarding bodies. Hence most staff employed by College had at minimum a master's qualification and many possessed doctoral qualifications from various UK universities. Eighty per cent of the academic staff were full time and 20 % part time; most had been teaching at the College for over 5 years.

College diversity extended far beyond its variety of academic programmes. The student body included students recruited from 52 different countries. International students comprised up to 80 % of the student population, 10 % were from the EU, and 10 % were 'home' students from the UK. Most international students came from Nepal, Pakistan, India, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Malaysia, Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

Literature Review

Educational Approaches: This section explores teaching, learning and assessment approaches.

Teaching Approaches

Good teaching is based on constructive alignment, that is, teachers can support a student's deep learning by aligning their teaching methods and assessment processes to the overall learning objectives (Biggs, 2003). Teaching, learning and assessment are related, and their alignment has always been crucial for achieving the goal of education. Different teachers adopt different approaches to teaching. Trigwell & Prosser (1996) have ascribed this to constitutional attributes of the teachers themselves: to different styles of lecturing, styles of thinking and/or personality characteristics. However, others (Kember & Kwan, 2002; Norton, Richardson, Hartley, Newstead & Mayes, 2005) have argued that different approaches to teaching reflect different underlying conceptions of teaching.

Kember (1997) and others proposed that two teaching approaches may be used, i.e. lecturer-centred (or content oriented), and student-centred or learning oriented (Kember, 1997; Prosser & Trigwell, 1991; Entwistle & Walker, 2002; Baeten, Struyen & Dochy, 2013). In lecturer-centred methods students are considered as a passive recipient of their information. However, in student-centred methods, transmission is a component, but not an aim, as the focus is more on the student and her/his learning. Many (e.g. Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Saldo & Richardson, 2003; Richardson, 2005) assume that lecturers' conceptions of teaching in higher education change with experience, usually from being more teacher-centred and content orientated to being more student-centred and learning orientated, and that this will inevitably have consequences for the lecturers' performance in the classroom.

Learning Approaches

Learning approaches can be defined as the intentions and motives a student has in undertaking a learning task, as well as the corresponding strategies by which these intentions and motives are accomplished (Diseth, 2007). Student learning approaches depend on contextual factors that include teaching methods, teaching design, assessment of students' learning, and the way the curriculum is organised (Entwistle & McCune, 2009). Marton and Saljo (1976) introduced two approaches to studying:

surface and deep. Ramsden (1979) identified a third approach, labelling this the 'strategic approach' to learning. Educational discourses generally follow these three approaches (Entwistle, Mccune & Walker, 2001).

A surface approach is characterised by a reliance on rote-learning and passive memorisation (Ramsden, 2003). Students who adopt a surface approach to learning attempt to rote-learn material in order to subsequently reproduce it (Trigwell & Prosser, 2003). A deep learning approach attempts to provide an environment for students to understand the concept of learning through the support of the lecturer (Entwistle & Walker, 2002; Trigwell & Prosser, 2003). Students adopting the deep approach seek meaning to understand the subject fully. Deep approaches to learning lead from an intention to achieve conceptual analysis and, if carried out thoroughly, generally result in a deep level of understanding (Entwistle et al., 2001).

The strategic approach is a learner-oriented learning approach, which involves organised study methods and effective time management, and the learner always aims for the highest possible grades (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983). Students adopting a strategic approach to learning have the intention of achieving the highest possible grades by using organised study methods and effective time management.

Assessment Approaches

A plethora of evidence (Falchikov, 2005; Boud & Falchikov 2006 & 2007; Burksaitiene & Tereseviciene, 2007; Garside, Nhemachena, Williams & Topping, 2008; Libman, 2010) supports the usefulness of alternative assessment, which helps to develop a deep approach to learning. Alternative assessment is applied in various disciplines such as the arts, engineering, teaching medicine and training in foreign languages and statistics (Birenbaum et al., 2006; Nasri, Roslan, Sekuan, Baker & Puteh, 2010; Libman, 2010).

Libman (2010) highlighted that assessment is a powerful force in schools, as well as in a tertiary education framework, that influences the way students learn, as well as the content and the extent of their learning. Assessment also affects the way teachers select and teach various types of content and, indirectly, the way they decide what not to teach. There is growing evidence that students' perceptions of assessment tasks are strongly related to their approach to learning (Struyven, Dochy & Janssen, 2005). Each learner learns differently, and partly for this reason, Brown and Knight (1994) argued that the use of multiple techniques, in effect a mixed diet, is essential for good assessment practice, thereby avoiding advantaging any one learner. No single assessment can hope to evaluate a student's learning fully; it is often necessary to devise an approach ensuring that a range of strategies are employed through a curriculum (Garside et al., 2008).

Several studies (e.g. Biggs, 2002; Frank & Barzilai, 2004; Norton, 2004; Libman, 2010) support the usefulness of alternative assessments for learning and assessment. Alternative assessments can motivate students to take responsibility for their own learning. If alternative assessments are used then learning becomes an integral part of the students' experience, as students begin to engage in the classroom which leads to motivation; this may not be possible if only a teacher-centred approach is used. Lecturers embed the activities in the session, which stimulates students' ability to create and apply a wide range of knowledge, rather than simply engaging students in acts of memorisation and basic skill development (Hargreaves, Earl, & Schmidt, 2002; Harlen & Deakin-Crick, 2003).

International Students Issues

A major focus of educational institutions has been academic transition as many HE providers, private and public in the UK, attract international students and students from different regions within the UK. Academic transition is defined as the process of moving from one set of circumstances to another (Nash & Sacre, 2009). Although transition is unavoidable, the degree of adjustment to the new academic

environment and academic pressure are significant predictors of students' academic success (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000).

In general, for international student's English language is a major issue in the host country (UK) (Bollag, 2000; Barron, 2007). In academic and social environments, the second language issue is perceived as a problem for international students (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). The language difficulty can affect international students when writing their assignments, understanding lectures, taking written and oral examinations, and in their ability to ask questions of their peers and lecturers in the classroom (Thomas, 2002). Poyrazli and Kavanaugh (2006) established that international students studying in the USA had LAA due to their lower level of English proficiency and greater overall adjustment strain. Several other studies also demonstrate that the academic performance of international students was also affected by their poor English proficiency (Zhang & Brunton, 2007; Baron, 2007).

Furthermore, a combination of paid work and academic study leads to stress among international students since they have to manage the competing demands on their time very carefully. Manthei and Gilmor (2005) believed that to satisfy the demands of life at home and abroad students may have to work part time, leaving less time for study, which adds to students' burdens. According to Jogaratnam and Buchanan (2004) students who were balancing a full-time academic load along with a part time job were likely to suffer stress. Further practical difficulties such as accommodation and transportation are also highlighted in other qualitative studies (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

College and Staff Issues

Service Quality

Students are considered the primary customers in higher education (Hill 1995; Sanders, Stevenson, King, & Coates, 2000; Gremler & McCollough, 2000). This view does not mean that other perspectives may not be valid and important as well. Thus, the underlying assumption is that for students, the qualities and behaviour of lecturers have a significant impact on students' perception of service quality. Higher education is arguably a service industry, which emphasises the importance of the quality of service contacts between students, lecturers and other staff of the institution. Pieters, Botschen, and Thelen (1998) suggest that the "*extent to which customers attain their goal depends partly on the behaviour of service employees (Lecturers)*". This proposition is heavily supported in the service literature.

Quality in higher education is a complex and multifaceted concept and a single definition of quality is lacking (Harvey & Green, 1993). Every stakeholder in higher education (e.g. students, government, professional bodies) has its own view of service quality due to needs. Browne, Kaldenberg, Browne and Brown (1998) and Guolla (1999) showed that students' perceived service quality is an antecedent to students' satisfaction. Service providers will only be able to deliver service encounters that will satisfy customers if they know what their customers want. If academic institutions know how their students perceive the offered services, they may be able to adapt their services to a certain degree, which should have a positive impact on students' perceived service quality and their level of satisfaction. In discussing the role of service quality in higher education, Shank, Walker and Hayes (1995) note that, "*Higher education possesses the characteristics of a service industry. Educational services are intangible, heterogeneous; inseparable from the person delivering it, variable, perishable, and the customer (student) participates in the process. Additionally, colleges and universities are increasingly finding themselves in an environment that is conducive to understanding the role and importance of service quality; this environment is a fiercely competitive one.*"

Non-efficient administrative services, such as admissions and support services, and poor IT facilities, possibly combined with low quality contact personnel in these departments may affect the impressions of service quality. The ability of lecturers to recognise students as customers with particular needs is particularly important in the current, HE environment. Academic staff are required to switch to a

more empirical and personalised approach in order to meet their students' expectations. Thus, empathy (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988) is an important dimension of perceived quality in HE providers.

Role of Lecturers and Caring Teaching

There is growing consensus that high quality teaching is not just about high quality presentation of content, nor just about the implementation of high-quality teaching skills. High quality teaching is fundamentally about affording high quality learning for students (Ramsden, 1992) in a caring environment (Cooper, 2004; Walker & Gleaves, 2015). Pozo-Munoz, Reboloso-Pacheco, and Fernandaz, (2000) stated that '*teaching staff are key actors in a university's work*' and students always prefer those teachers who they think care for them. The importance of caring is well documented in the literature. Caring appears as a central factor in almost all studies of excellent and outstanding teachers, teaching and academic work across all educational sectors, some rather more than others. In the early years of education, caring is associated with high levels of attachment and nurture (Swick & Freeman, 2012).

Although the concept of caring is a well-founded idea, there are many constraints for teachers in providing caring teaching (Nodding, 1992; Teven & McCroskey, 1997; Walker & Gleaves, 2015). These constraints are created, to a large extent, by economic and competitive considerations and many factors impinge on teachers' behaviour which prevents them from providing caring teaching. Cooper (2004) established that the key factors were class size, time, curriculum, policy and management. The system and the conditions under which teachers work disrupt the caring approach of the teacher.

Nodding (1992) asserted that time is needed for real caring relationships to develop, not only through the taught curriculum but through normal conversation and interaction that takes place between people. Sometimes these may be lengthy conversations but at other times they may be simple interactions that affirm and recognise students as valued people. Teachers also must cover the syllabus in limited time and they generally tend to dominate the delivery and struggle to find time for personal dialogue and interaction, which is important for facilitating caring teaching (Cooper, 2004). McCroskey (1992) states that it is best if a teacher cares about the students but notes that it is difficult for any teacher to care a great deal about every student, particularly when teaching very large classes. Hence it is very important for a lecturer to learn how to communicate in such a manner that students will perceive that he or she cares about them.

Teachers have endless work beyond the classroom which also eats into their chances to speak to learners. Many have little time to mark work in as much detail as they would prefer, nor to share understanding with other staff members. Furthermore, managers and particular policies may also either support or become constraints in providing caring teaching. Uncaring managers who are commercially driven, do not interact as equals or show clearly that they care about their staff, make the staff feel undervalued and are powerfully demotivating (Cooper, 2004).

Learners with different abilities in a class also affect the teacher's ability to provide caring teaching (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006; Walker & Gleaves, 2015). Some learners need more attention than others and this takes time, which means less time available for others and in these situations, teachers struggle to meet students' needs. In large classes, especially in HE, where lecturers may teach a class for only a few hours per week, it is difficult to build an environment of caring teaching. Teachers must spend more time in articulating and enforcing rules and managing classes (Cooper, 2004). The size of class and pressure of the curriculum leads to teacher domination where the teacher models not listening and shows disinterest in individuals for much of the time (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006).

Academic Leadership

Effective education institutions must have competent senior management leadership and committed teaching staff. Effective educational institutions in a positive and caring environment expect

high academic achievements of their learners, which is supported by their committed and caring teachers and support staff (Levine & Lezotte, 1990). Bollen (1996) in support of Levine and Lezotte, contended that an effective educational institution is the one that sustains "... the climate and culture in which an effective teaching/learning process will flourish". The dynamics of successful leadership in education and its direct influence on students' academic achievement have been studied at the level of school as well as higher education. It is evident from these studies that the personal and managerial leadership skills of the College Principal can dramatically improve students' achievement.

Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz and Levy (2006) established that lower academic achievement could be the result of ineffective leadership in an institution. Worse still, ineffective leadership may also lead to instability and staffing issues, a negative attitude by students to academic work and discipline, and an unsatisfactory college system and climate (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). Failures of leadership in a college can have disastrous consequences. The values of college leaders are important. They have a positive influence on their institutions. In an educational institutions' context, values and norms are in fact, the heart of the institution's culture (Greenfield, 1986).

A successful leader employs qualified personnel to assist her/him and work together to make tangible progress and achieve the organisation's goals. Torrington, Hall and Taylor (2005) have reported that a successful leader knows how to balance meeting the human aspirations of the staff and achieving the set strategic goals of the institution. Several authors (Greenfield, 1986; Duke et al., 2006; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008) have stated that efficient leaders are at the same time effective human resource managers and that the latter attribute played an important part in delivering that overall efficiency. Educational leadership is defined by the way a leader guides teacher, students, support staff, and the local community towards active learning and higher academic achievement by the learners (DuFour, 2004).

Methodology

The focus group technique was selected as it provides participants (students) the possibility to develop ideas collectively and bringing forward their own priority and perspectives so that theory may be grounded in the actual experience and language of the students (Williams and Katz, 2001). Furthermore, we believed that the focus group will promote a comfortable atmosphere of disclosure in which students collectively will share their experience with regards to learning, teaching and assessment practices used by their lecturers and ideas about the enhancement of their educational provision.

The international students in the two focus groups were selected from the Hospitality School. The focus group discussions were planned to comprise 8 to 12 students along with an observer and moderator. However, on the scheduled day, nine students out of twelve from Year One and five students out of eight from Year Two attended the focus group.

Eleven semi-structured interviews with lecturers from 4 different Schools (Hospitality, Business, Health and Social Care, and Computing) were conducted. The semi-structured interviews were selected because they provided the opportunity to generate rich data. Furthermore, the language used by the lectures was considered essential in gaining insight into their perception and values on students' issues and the learning and teaching provision at the institution.

A list of questions on teaching, learning and assessment was prepared and e-mailed to participants in advance. The semi-structured questions were asked around:

- Planning and delivery of the lecture
- Assessment method used and their views on using alternative assessment
- When and how feedback is given to students
- Common issues students face while doing their assessments
- Students' time management skills

- How they plan to deal with LAA.

Data analysis

Both focus groups lasted for approximately 45 min and interviews with lecturers lasted between 22 and 35 min. The interview data resulted in 280 min of audio recording. The data analysis was performed using Nvivo8 after each interview was complete; the recordings were listened to, transcribed into 77 pages of single-spaced text, and studied to identify emerging themes.

Coding of the data was done in Nvivo8; open (free nodes), axial (tree nodes) and selective (relationship) coding were applied to the data (Corbin, 1994). During free nodes, transcripts of each interview were reviewed many times. The audio recordings were listened to and reviewed many times and the data reduced to tree nodes. The nodes found to be conceptually similar in nature or related in meaning were grouped in categories. Nodes and categories from interviews were compared with nodes and categories from other interviews for common links. Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate the final tree nodes used in Nvivo8 for students' focus groups and lecturers' interviews, respectively.

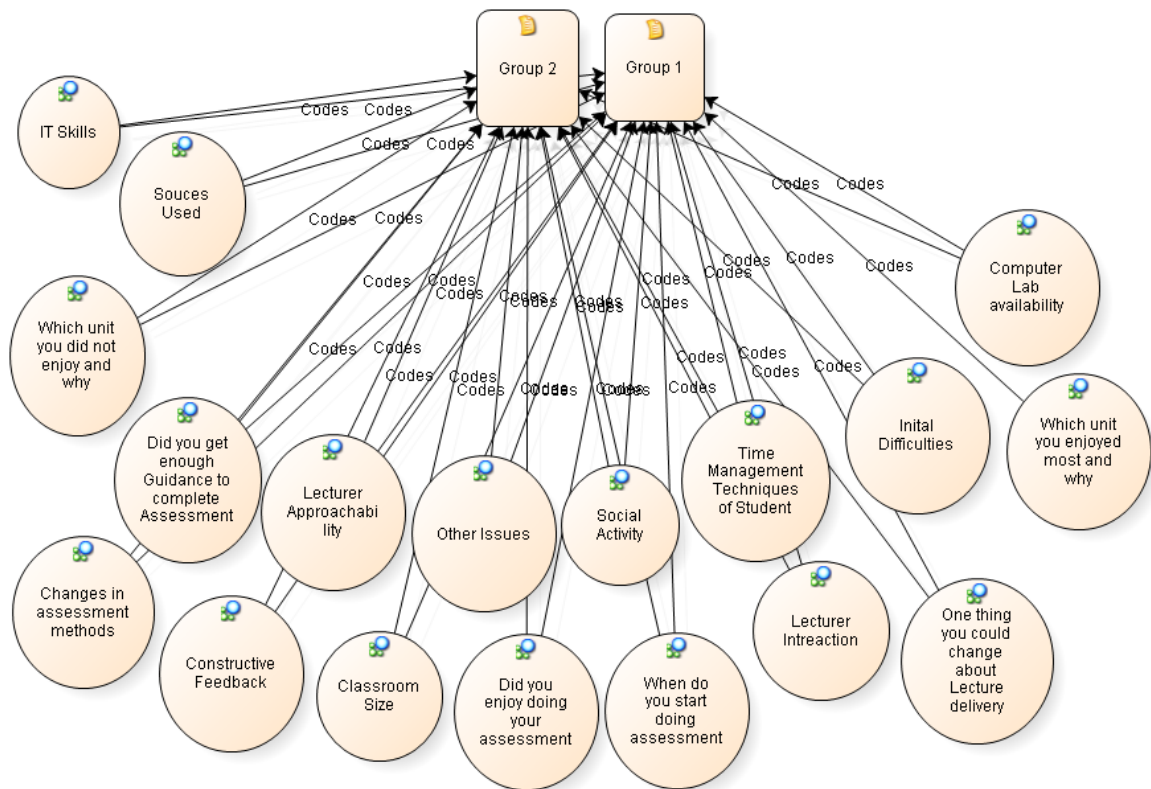
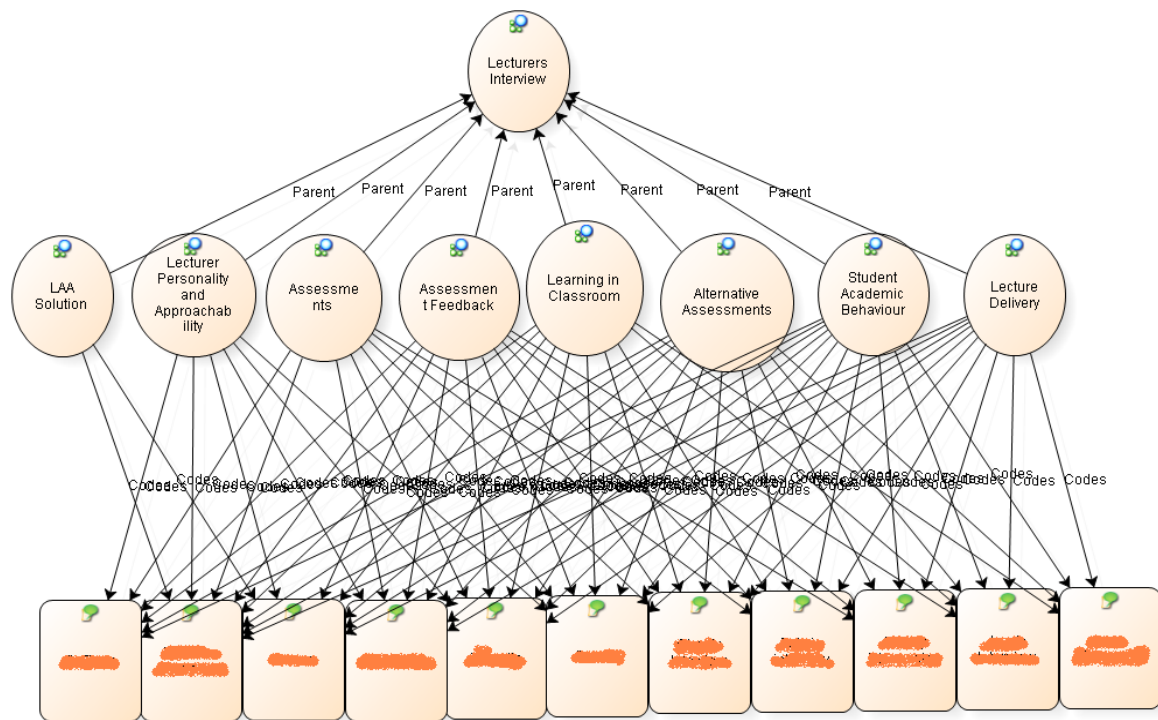


Fig. 1 Nodes used in Nvivo8 for students' focus groups



The lower leaves of the diagram have been blocked out for the ethical reasons i.e. to preserve staff anonymity.

Fig. 2 Nodes used in Nvivo8 for Lecturers' interviews

Results

Students' focus groups and lecturers' interviews data were coalesced into three broad themes, presented below: student perceptions and preferences; assessment, feedback and time management; and student issues and dealing with LAA.

Student perceptions and preferences: units students liked/did not like and reasons for this, class interaction, lecturers' approachability and planning and delivery of lectures.

The unit's students enjoyed most and the reasons why

Students enjoyed units for several reasons, these varied from *new knowledge, application of knowledge, working as a group and doing an activity to lectures demonstrating application of knowledge*. Students also liked the units where the lecturers *created an opportunity for them to engage in activities*.

Student E1 mentioned, that under the Food and Beverage Operations unit they were asked to plan and implement a catering event. *"We learned how to apply restaurant management theories in actual business situations, and also the whole day real catering event was good and the whole class worked as a team"*. Further, student D1 said, *"I like the unit as the lecturer used helpful teaching methods and the lecturer was interesting."*

The unit's students did not enjoy and the reasons why

Most students did not enjoy a unit where they found *disassociation between the unit contents and assignment, or confusion over the requirement in a unit and an assignment*. Student D mentioned, *"There was no brief summary at the start and the topics covered in classes were very different to the assignment requirement"*. Student F1 mentioned, *"Some lecturers just read slides during a lecture. They should elaborate more and interact"*

with students in class". Student D mentioned, "There was confusion over the requirements in the unit and in the assignment". Student E1 added, "There was no link between the teaching, slides and assessments". The views of this student describe a mismatch situation between a student's expectation and a lecturer's delivery.

Interaction in the Classroom – Students' Perspective

Student B said, "If there is interaction in the class, things become easier to understand". Students also mentioned that lecturers should give more opportunities to students in class. Student I mentioned, "Lecturers should give more chance to students to give their input".

Lecturers' Approachability – Students' Perspective

Student F1 mentioned, "Some are approachable, some difficult to find or contact when needed before submission date". Student B mentioned, "Some lecturers require you to make an appointment. They cannot just stop by for five minutes to talk about something". Student C1 said, "New students generally do not feel sufficiently confident to talk to their lecturers as I myself experienced in the beginning".

The last question in this section was to ask students if they could change one thing about the delivery of lectures, what that would be. Student C1 mentioned, "I would prefer more practical application in the classroom as this helps me understand the subject better as theory-based units are more difficult". Student E said, "Work in the classroom is not always related to the assignment, I would prefer that it is related to assignments".

Planning and delivery of the lecture – Lecturers' Perspective

Some of the responses to the questions on the planning and delivery of the lecture are mentioned below.

C "During the planning session before the term starts and looking at each outcome, the activities are planned before the lecture takes place. I keep my verbal teaching input to 20% but students' input is 80%; that is done by incorporating activities."

A "Strategies is having a lesson plan and scheme of work available for students; planning is important and then so is having resources available for students."

S "I do not know, maybe 20 minutes or half an hour of lectures and then some kind of activity around that and then students' feedback?"

H "Direct teaching should not be more than 60 minutes. If you are teaching more than that, you are wasting your time, as students tend to stop listening to you as they lose interest."

Lecturers were asked to explain how they ensure that learning is taking place in their classrooms. The responses were once again mixed.

M "I like to look around as I am teaching, I look around and observe and if I do not think someone is getting involved then I will address him or her. I try getting them involved, drawing them out. Even if they are shy, quiet, and the retiring type".

C "I move around the groups and ask questions to the passive ones just to try to see that everybody is contributing equally. I make sure that everybody has an equal chance to answer. It is important that not only those in the group who are willing to answer, but those who appear to be hiding, are also encouraged to answer".

Lecturers were asked how they helped slow learners understand a topic, as each learner learns differently and there are various types of learners in the classrooms. The lecturers' responses to the question were as follows.

A "I put them in a group, because they will engage, they will participate and be involved with each other".

H "Let's say there is a slow learner. I try to ask him or her to join the students who already have understood so it will help him or her to understand through peer support".

T *"I often seek active participation from the students by giving examples and asking them to solve the problem in groups"*.

Lecturers were then asked how they generated students' interest in their lecture. Most lecturers believe that one must be approachable and friendly with the students. However, one lecturer had a very different approach to create interest among the students in lectures. He mentioned, *"If you say I am strict and policy-centred it might be difficult to engage them. It is very important I think to be interesting. This is very important, if you can build your credentials as an interesting person whom they want to listen to, only then can you make lectures heavy and low on interest. Therefore, my first target is to get in their good books as an "interesting lecturer" so that they really come back"*. The lecturer added, *"My lecture has to be my lecture alone and it should reflect my personality, otherwise there are a lot of books in the world, and the internet that they can always go back or refer to. Therefore, I try to bring my personality into the discussion so that they actually are there for something that is unique"*.

Assessment design, guidance and quality of feedback from lecturers' and students' time management.

Assessment Design – Lecturers' and Students' Perspective

It was evident that students in their second year were more comfortable as compared to those in Year One. Student C1 who was in the second year stated, *"I did not enjoy the first year at all – I did not understand the procedure – I found it very hard to begin with, but now I am comfortable"*.

Most international students in their native countries were following examination-based assignments. Student F mentioned, *"I did not understand the assignment requirements"*. Student H added, *"It was unclear to us what we had to do"*.

Most students admitted that they start writing their assignment late, especially when they were in their first term in College. Student A stated, *"In the previous semester I started just before submission and did not get a good result but this semester I started earlier"*. Student A's statement met with general agreement from other students. Student G said, *"I start immediately when the assignment is given, and I try to complete in time for draft submission so that I can get feedback if I need to improve it"*.

Guidance and Quality of Feedback – Lecturers' and Students' Perspective

Students mentioned that some lecturers were giving enough guidance, and some were not. Student G mentioned, *"Got enough guidance in only some units"*. Student C said, *"Feedback was completely different to the initial guidance, hence – it was not much help to improve"*.

In contrast to the students' focus group, lecturers mentioned they make sure that students understand what is expected of them in completing the assignment. One lecturer mentioned *"The whole idea of the assignment is to test the understanding, knowledge and technical skills of the learner. The very first thing is that it has to cover all the learning outcomes and secondly it should be an enjoyable assignment."*

Most lecturers expressed the view that an assignment should be enjoyable, and it should be based on a real-life scenario. One lecturer mentioned, *"Students do not read and understand the assignment question properly, they read half of it and they think they know it, when actually they do not and they simply copy and paste the information from the internet without even reading or understanding it"*.

Some of the responses from lecturers on the feedback were as follows.

M *"I try to be realistic. A student submits it in the evening and wants the feedback next morning. Have you looked at it? I set a target of five working days. I will sit down with them. I give them feedback in formal sense, complete the feedback form but I will also sit down with them, explain, and discuss"*.

T *"I believe in continuous feedback"*.

J *"When it is class activities it is verbal but when it is very specific to the outcomes, they have a draft where written feedback is given"*.

In contrast, the focus group discussions revealed that some lecturers were giving feedback which was encouraging as compare to others; as student B said, *"Lecturers are very helpful with coursework guidance, very clear, on what is expected"*, although this was not the case for all lecturers. As student E mentioned, *"The lecturer needs to give advice on how to improve, but sometimes it is not detailed or helpful, just one line of feedback"*. Furthermore, student B mentioned, *"Feedback should be encouraging"*. If the feedback is not encouraging, this may de-motivate the students, which will further contribute to the LAA of the students and depress institutional reputation.

Students' Time Management – Lecturers' and Students' Perspectives

Most lecturers agreed that students find it difficult to manage their time during their early period in a new country. One lecturer mentioned, *"There is pressure on them; it may be pressure about accommodation, financial pressure or there may be a relationship pressure"*. Another said, *"The time spent doing one thing more than other things, they have issues being youthful"*, and then added, *"They try to delay the work all the way to week thirteen or twelve, by then it is late for them to do anything"*.

Students' responses to time management were: Student G mentioned, *"I try to complete in time for draft submission so that I can get feedback if I need to improve it"*. Student D said, *"Some lecturers now help with time management whereas they did not previously do so"*. Student E added that, *"Time management is discussed in class, but hard to achieve in practice"*.

Students' engagement in social activity, students' common issues and dealing with LAA

Students' Engagement in Social Activities – Students' Perspective

The newer students find difficulties in adapting to UK life. Student E1 said, *"I experienced communication issues, and language difficulties in the workplace, I felt like an outsider in the beginning"*. Student C1 said, *"It is very hard to find a part time job; it took two months for me to get a job"*. Student C added, *"It was quite depressing at first – hard to adapt – but I feel better now"*.

Student Common Issues – Lecturers' Perspective

Most lecturers mentioned that the most common problems students were facing concern were reading skills, writing skills, speaking skills, referencing skills, and finance. Almost all the lecturers felt strongly about the students' lack of reading skills and for them this was a serious issue. One lecturer mentioned, *"English language ability and therefore being able to understand the teaching and learning that has been delivered"*. This lecturer added, *"So you have students whose first language is not English, listening to lecturers who sometimes have quite a strong accent that makes it even more difficult for them"*. Hence, the tone of voice, speed of lecture and the vocabulary used by lecturers become very important for students. Finance was the most common difficulty recognised by all the lecturers.

Dealing with LAA – Lecturers' Perspective

Lecturers were then asked how they plan to deal with LAA. Most lecturers stated that it is important to give students support and confidence as they often lack confidence and they are poorly motivated in the host country. Lecturers were asked their opinion on using alternative assessment for their students instead of only using a report or essay. Most lecturers were in favour of using alternative assessments. Many believed that the students perform better in different assessments. Some of the responses of the lecturers to this question were as follows.

S *"I was very keen to move away from essay, it was like 4000 to 4500 written words for each of them, which is a very heavy assessment burden"*.

C *"For example, a formal presentation may be appropriate. Another outcome could be a case scenario and another one a report of let's say 1000 words"*.

H "I would cut the writing to not more than 1500 words for one or two learning outcomes per module and the remaining learning outcomes might be assessed through presentations and group work".

Most lecturers believed that use of alternative assessments would be better for the students especially during the early stages of the course. This will help enhance the skills of the students in addition to developing their writing skills.

Discussion

LAA is a very complicated issue, as became evident from the focus groups with students and interviews with lecturers. The perspective of the students, their personal circumstances and the teaching, learning and assessment approaches and environment of their academic institution must all be considered when evaluating the students' academic achievements, which explains the difficulties inherent in coming to an all-embracing conclusion.

Initial issues and students' transition

Cultural issues, financial issues, adjusting to life in a new country and academic institution, and not being familiar with the Western teaching style were the major issues that had an impact on the students' academic performance as was evident from the student focus groups. Several studies have shown that international students experience challenges in adjusting to different food, weather, financial arrangements, healthcare, accommodation and the local language (Lin & Yi, 1997; Tseng & Newton, 2002; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). The findings of this study are also in line with those of Doble and Supriya (2011) who stated that international students encounter culture shocks, language difficulties, diversity of experience, a sense of changing financial pressures, and different food. These stress factors often lead to a feeling of inability to cope, which in return contributes toward international students' LAA (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

In this study second year students seemed to have adjusted well to the culture of the UK, but first year students were still finding it difficult to adjust. Some students recounted that they felt homesick in the early period of their stay in the UK. Most second-year students mentioned during the focus group discussions that they also had experienced difficulties at the beginning of their study in the host country. However, whereas the second-year students were now settled, which helped them focus well on their education, this was not the case with many first-year students. Adjusting to a new culture and environment is challenging and stressful for international students (Berry, 2006). Furthermore, academic demands, added to the challenge of adjusting to a new culture and environment, put international students at a greater risk.

Academic preparation is one factor that students identify as key to their transition. Having appropriate study skills eases the transition (Walker, Matthew & Black, 2004), as does an appreciation of the independent nature of learning in HE. Furthermore, barriers to academic transition are created when students perceive a mismatch between their own learning style and that which is required in, HE (Rhodes, Bill, Biscoomb, Nevill & Bruneau, 2002). Although several institutions provide academic preparation by teaching study skills, and social preparation by making students familiar with the campus and by meeting other students (Walker et al., 2004), details of the effectiveness of these initiatives requires the correlating and mapping of students' academic performance.

Furthermore, understanding by academic staff of the educational background of their students will improve the overall experience of students and in turn mitigate mismatches between student and staff expectations (Gill, 2007). The introduction of extra academic support such as interactive workshops, peer learning, and support groups can reduce failure rates, and is beneficial to all students (Beasley & Pearson 1999; Cathcart, Dixon-Dawson & Hall, 2005). Billing (1997) emphasised the importance of an induction programme as a means of ensuring the smooth assimilation of new students into HE. Most UK

universities have an induction week, commonly known as “Fresher’s Week”. New students are introduced to the institution’s *modus operandi* including the library, information technology, and student support services. In addition, students are provided with information regarding the social and academic life of the institution. However, Laing, Chao, and Robinson (2005) argue that “*the effectiveness of these sessions [in fresher’s week] in helping the students to adjust to higher education may be limited*”. This is because of the wide variation in some students’ level of understanding and retention of information at this crucial transition stage, possibly exacerbated by their state of mind due to the stress caused by their arrival into the host country, travelling to the institution, accommodation problems etc. New international students tend to play a passive role and often the information they receive is rather dull and too comprehensive, which makes it hard to retain (Edwards, 2003).

Given that considerable distress has been associated with the transition to university (Fisher & Hood, 1987; Pratt, Tedder, Boyask, & Kelly, 2013), it often is suggested that programmes to minimise the effects of the disruption to social support systems should be implemented in order to improve the chances of successful transition. Pratt et al. (2013) suggested that such programmes allow students to evaluate their cognitions in relation to expectations concerning university, as well as help them integrate and re-establish their social support networks.

Lamothe et al. (1995) found that students participating in social support groups reported they were better able to adjust to university. In contrast to Oppenheimer (1984), these differences were found to be present for all students, regardless of their level of vulnerability, which supports the idea of intervention as a primary prevention programme providing benefits to all students, not just those vulnerable to problems of adjustment. It is evident that major changes occur during the transition to HE, and it would seem desirable to dissect programmes that help minimise these effects to determine cause.

Most international students participating in this study, like many other international students (Manthei & Gilmore, 2005), were working part-time to assist their financial situation. Though some students believed that part-time work had not had any impact on their studies (Watts, 2002), others believed that if they were not working, they could have done better. The lecturers believed that due to part-time work commitments most students missed some lectures or were not able to manage their time between College and employment. A combination of paid work and academic study leads to stress amongst students since they must balance their time carefully (Robotham, 2009). Nevertheless, this research reiterates that students’ work/life balance is an issue when the student must simultaneously manage academic matters, family and work (Baron, 2007).

Teaching and Learning issues

In the focus groups most students expressed the view that they experienced didactic teaching and learning in their own countries, and moreover that they followed the contextual constraints of examination for assessment. International students often must adapt to a new teaching and learning style and have to adopt strategies such as putting extra effort into their study, and doing extra reading, which they find difficult to do (Biggs, 1999). Furthermore, international students were required to master very quickly issues such as plagiarism, referencing, and working in groups, of which they had no experience, in order to succeed. Most international students find it difficult to build these skills sufficiently early in their time in the UK and this was highlighted by the lecturers in their interviews.

Students did not enjoy the transmission of knowledge through power point presentation, especially if the lecturers failed to build enough dialogue with the students during the delivery of the lecture (Voss & Graber, 2006). Teachers adopt different approaches to teaching, due to their own individual attributes: different styles of lecturing, different styles of thinking, or personality characteristics.

Deep or Surface Learning

Students enjoyed the units where lecturers helped build new knowledge, created group work or demonstrated application of knowledge, or where the lecturers created an opportunity for students to engage in activities in the classroom by using a student-centred approach to teaching to develop deep learning (Chi-Ng, Murphy, & Jenkins, 2002).

The literature on learning in HE concludes that apart from obvious exceptions where rote-learning is needed (Biggs & Tang, 2007), deep learning is preferable. However, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) claimed that a truly learner-centred approach does not really exist as learning takes place within an institutionalised system and it is difficult to see how a deep learning approach could be taken. A deep approach is based on the principle that learning is totally determined by the learner. As a teacher, one can influence what one teaches, but what the learner learns is determined by learners alone.

Students like to be engaged in class activities where they get the opportunity to build knowledge. Class activities stimulate learners to interact with other students and their lecturers and this helps learners to develop their social skills as well as building their knowledge (Kember & Kwan, 2002; Nanclares & Rodriguez, 2016). In order to manage effective learning learners, need to engage meaningfully with others in the classroom (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Nevertheless, O'Sullivan (2003) established that applying a student-centred approach is not always possible or economical in large classes.

Alternative Assessments

Students indicated that they were new to the assessment and teaching methods used in the College. This phenomenon concurs with the findings of Barron and Arcodia (2002) and Barron (2002) who suggested that international students studying in the West adopt a learning style preference that is at odds with their domestic peers. Participating students highlighted that they also experienced a range of learning problems and issues in the early period of their study in the UK that affected their overall educational experiences (Hughes, Zhang, & Hill, 2006; Doble & Supriya, 2011). Students' poor English proficiency and writing skills made it even more difficult for them. Unclear assessment requirements and insufficient guidance and support further contributed to their LAA.

Students preferred assessments where there was an opportunity to learn something new. They liked the application of knowledge in the assessments that is the link to deep teaching and learning approaches. Students also preferred practical activities in the classrooms as they saw those activities as meaningful, and these activities and tasks help them construct knowledge rather than simply reproduce the information (Kember & Kwan, 2002).

Both students and lecturers in this study were also in favour of using alternative assessments as opposed to a single method such as report or essay writing. A plethora of evidence (e.g. Norton, 2004; Garfield & Ben-Zvi, 2007; Burksaitiene & Tereseviciene, 2008; Libman, 2010) supports the usefulness of different assessment methods for learning and assessment purposes. It was suggested that the report writing could be substituted for portfolio-based assessment or assessing students through Power Point presentations, group work, self-evaluation, simulation or in-class assessments (Libman, 2010).

Lecturers' Role and Approachability

Early during their stay in a foreign country student depend a great deal on their lecturers, as they are the only trusted source they have (Parpala & Ylanne, 2007). Students in the focus groups mentioned that they had trouble adjusting to the College social network and were stressed due to inter-personal relationships with their peers and lecturers. These findings were like the finding of Hughes et al. (2006), although over the first or second semesters stress is reduced as students build their relationship with their peers and lecturers on their own terms.

Lecturers influence students' academic performance and they are also instrumental in the success of the first-year transition. Given that tutors are the front-line for student contact, they are central to student engagement and transition (Rhoden & Dowling, 2006). As the first few weeks are critical to students' learning experience, it is vital for tutors to adopt effective tutoring strategies to engage them. This is beneficial for students' studies, but also helps them adapt to the institution's learning environment. Hill (1995) established that first-year undergraduate students' personal contacts with lecturers are more important as compared to those in the second year. This personal contact may help first year undergraduate students develop positive relationships, which may facilitate learning.

Students preferred the lecturers who they thought were easy to understand, encouraging, helpful and sympathetic, and caring of students' individual needs. Sanders et al. (2000) found that students at the beginning of their university education desired lecturers who have good teaching skills and who are approachable, knowledgeable, enthusiastic and organised. Shevlin, Banyard, Davies, and Griffiths (2000) mentioned "*Lecturer Charisma*", and Anderson (2000) pointed out that students desired lecturers who were caring, enthusiastic, and strongly interested in their students' progress.

Effective academic leadership, caring teaching and a positive interpersonal relationship between students and lecturers is essential in building a learning community in which the lecturers can influence the learners and provide support to them (DuFour, 2004; Torrington et al., 2005; Walker & Gleaves, 2015). Only when there is caring teaching and a good interaction between lecturer and learner can the lecturer begin to influence students' approach to learning and instil change. However, in most private education providers the emphasis is on teaching, much of which is conducted on a highly cost-effective basis where lecturers engage with students in large groups (Frank, 1996; Cooper, 2004). Rigid curricula, large class sizes, and lecturers' workload are all obstacles in providing caring teaching. In the real world, lecturers face many constraints such as time, resources and institutional financial issues. It can be difficult to provide caring teaching while balancing these conflicting demands.

Research Limitations

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the students in the focus groups were only selected from the Hospitality School, though international students were also taught in other schools (Computing, Business, Healthcare and Fashion), where experiences may be different. Hence, students' views and perceptions reported in this study are not representative across the College, or indeed of other private or public HE providers. Therefore, due to the explorative nature of the study in general and the scope and size of the sample, the results are tentative. Nonetheless, the present results may be of value to other private HE providers that are recruiting or aiming to recruit international students.

Should further studies be conducted using similar data collection and analysis methods at other research sites with more disciplines involved, comparative data may yield useful inter-site and inter-disciplinary differences improving the understanding of the issue of LAA in international students.

This study was done at one point in time but the use of longitudinal studies, using an action research approach, repeatedly measuring LAA factors, students' and lecturers' perceptions, students' study approaches, lecturers' approachability, lecturers' delivery and assessment methods could offer significant additional insight.

International students in the present study were taken as a homogenous group whereas, in reality, all the international students involved in this study were from different regions of the world and, therefore, have different abilities, cultures, and learning experiences. Little is known about the factors affecting the academic performance of international students studying in private HE providers and this area requires more effort from those directly involved in teaching and learning activities in this field. Substantial research remains to be done.

Conclusion

The primary conclusion is that moving to a foreign country to study brings many potential challenges, and international students experience a raft of different issues. International students face academic issues due to language and socio-cultural issues. They have to adapt to a new educational environment and they often find it difficult to adjust to the teaching style of their host country. Students from countries that focus upon rote learning find it particularly difficult to adjust to the importance placed on critical thinking in Western HE institutions. These adjustment problems are significant in the early months and impact heavily on students' academic performance. Depending on their ability, most students are able to deal with these issues. Once these issues are overcome, students generally start doing well in their education.

It is confirmed that approaches to teaching are related to students' learning approaches and subsequently to students' learning outcomes. Teaching is perceived as an activity aimed at guiding students towards learning and is the foundation for many educational processes.

This study confirms that in teacher-centred methods students are considered as passive recipients of information. However, in student-centred methods, although transmission is a component, but not an aim, the focus is more on the student and her/his learning. Also, in teacher-centred methods students are more likely to adopt a surface approach of learning and focus on reproduction of knowledge while in a student-centred approach students are more likely to adopt a deep approach to learning and focus on deeper understandings of the phenomena they are studying.

This study found that students preferred a variety of assessments, especially when they lacked the necessary academic skills at the beginning of their study in the host country. Furthermore, opportunities to work in groups and presenting their findings to the class gives them opportunity to develop their academic, social and interpersonal skills. The most common forms of alternative assessment suggested by lecturers were portfolio-based assessments, self-evaluation, student presentations, and simulation.

It is evident that the teaching staff are key actors in HE works and their behaviour and attitude can influence students' perception. Hence, it is very important that they demonstrate positive behaviour and attitude so that students can approach them with confidence. Students often approached their lecturers for help or advice. This relationship can only be developed when the lecturers are responsive to students' situations or needs. Lecturers who answered students' questions patiently and in detail, and who showed concerns about the students' progress, were more likely to cultivate a positive relationship with their students.

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