

Managing diversity - issues on the coal face.

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Summary - *Crynodeb*

Welsh higher education is increasingly focused on widening access and attracting more diverse student groups, in addition to increasing globalisation of the UK HE sector. The recruitment of diverse student cohorts impacts on teaching and learning experiences by presenting a range of challenges and opportunities. This paper presents and discusses the outcomes of a workshop entitled 'Managing Diversity' that was held at the Wales NEXUS Conference 2019. This workshop had the aim of exploring the experiences of staff who teach diverse student groups. The focus was on identifying challenges and opportunities, with a view of finding strategies to reduce challenges and exploit opportunities. Staff identified several key areas of challenge – issues related to staff self-awareness and self-reflection, challenges related to the management of learning in diverse groups, issues directly related teaching and learning tools, and resource related concerns. Key opportunities included the very real possibility of staff and students learning from each other's experiences and to grow personally. Potential research was also seen as a positive aspect of diverse student groups. In addition, staff discussed a range of teaching tools able to aid the process of turning challenges into opportunities for enrichment.

Mae addysg uwch yng Nghymru yn canolbwyntio'n gynyddol ar ehangu mynediad a denu grwpiau o fyfyrwyr mwy amrywiol, yn ogystal â chynyddu globaleiddio yn sector addysg uwch y DU. Mae recriwtio carfannau o fyfyrwyr amrywiol yn effeithio ar brofiadau dysgu ac addysgu drwy gyflwyno rhychwant o heriau a chyfleoedd. Mae'r papur hwn yn cyflwyno ac yn trafod canlyniadau gweithdy o'r enw 'Rheoli Amrywiaeth' a gynhaliwyd yng Nghynhadledd NEXUS 2019 Cymru. Nod y gweithdy hwn oedd edrych ar brofiadau staff sy'n addysgu grwpiau o fyfyrwyr amrywiol. Cafwyd ffocws ar adnabod heriau a chyfleoedd, gyda golwg ar ddod o hyd i strategaethau i leihau heriau a manteisio ar gyfleoedd. Bu'r staff yn adnabod nifer o feysydd heriol allweddol – materion sy'n ymwneud â hunanymwybyddiaeth a hunan-fyfyrddod staff, heriau sy'n gysylltiedig â rheoli dysgu mewn grwpiau amrywiol, materion sy'n uniongyrchol gysylltiedig ag arfau dysgu ac addysgu, a phryderon perthnasol am adnoddau. Roedd cyfleoedd allweddol yn cynnwys y gwir bosibilrwydd y gallai staff a myfyrwyr ddysgu oddi wrth profiadau ei gilydd a thyfu'n bersonol. Gwelwyd ymchwil arfaethedig hefyd fel agwedd gadarnhaol ar garfannau o fyfyrwyr amrywiol. Yn ogystal, bu'r staff yn trafod ystod o arfau addysgu sy'n gallu cynorthwyo'r broses o droi heriau yn gyfleoedd cyfoethogi.

Key Words: Widening access, Welsh universities, diverse student groups, teaching and learning strategies

Background

In the last 20 years there has been a considerable push towards widening access and globalisation of higher education in the UK, with a plethora of policies and agendas aimed at addressing inequalities to access in higher education going back at least 15 years (Ceryn, 2019). Widening access can broadly be defined as "increasing opportunities for people from a diverse range of backgrounds to higher education" (Universities Wales, 2019).

In the Welsh context, widening access has long been a key strategic government priority (Hill & Hatt, 2012) and its importance for policy makers is reflected in the funding mechanisms. The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) uses a set of performance indicators to rate institutions against a set of widening access strategic priorities. These include all-age recruitment from deprived areas; improving progression pathways into HE; prioritising higher-level learning and skills, retention and student success;

increasing flexible learning opportunities, part time study, workplace learning and technology-enhanced learning; improving fair access to the professions, high level skills and the priority sectors contributing to economic prosperity; as well as supporting government priorities relating to tackling poverty and raising educational aspirations (HEFCW, undated).

Given the wider socio economic make up of Wales it is not surprising that Welsh universities are doing well in regards to diversity indicators. 92% of young full time undergraduate entrants to Welsh higher education are from state schools or colleges (Universities Wales, 2019); over 20% of full time undergraduate entrants are mature (i.e. over 21 years of age) and more than 16% of these had no previous higher education experience and are from a low participation communities, greater than the proportion for the UK as a whole (Universities Wales, 2019). Over 10% of part time undergraduate entrants have no previous higher education experience, and are from low participation communities, again higher than the UK as a whole. Similarly the proportion of full time undergraduate students in receipt of Disabled Students Allowance is over 7% – greater than the proportion for the UK as a whole (Universities Wales, 2019).

In addition, higher education in Wales has also become much more global, with high numbers of international students in all UK universities. Welsh government statistics suggest that 17% of all students in Wales, so nearly every fifth student, were international students in 2017-18 (Welsh Government, 2019). Consequently, student cohorts in Welsh universities are diverse on age, ethnicity socioeconomic background and national/cultural background.

There is an abundance of academic and applied research which looks into the development and design of widening access strategies. However, there is much less information on the impact of these strategies, especially from a teaching point of view, and much of what is available is written from a US perspective and in an American context. In the US, the discussion of 'diversity' is primarily focused on ethnic diversity; in the UK, this is a wider discussion which includes participation of students from underrepresented communities (which may or may not be ethnically diverse), mature first time students and returners to education.

From a teaching and learning perspective, a critical but underdeveloped aspect of these debates are the pedagogical consequences of recruiting increasingly diverse student cohorts. Once these students have been recruited, how do their different needs and backgrounds impact on learning and teaching? Literature on impact of the widening access agenda is patchy. Whilst the perspective of mature students has been explored by a number of authors (e.g. Carroll et al, 2019; Mallman & Lee, 2014), it is much less obvious how age diversity impacts on peers. Equally, there is a considerable literature on the social and academic experiences of international students that acknowledges the challenges that these student cohorts face (e.g. Cockrill, 2017; Straker, 2016; Turner, 2006), but there is much less research available on the management of pedagogies of, for example student cohorts that are multi-cultural and age diverse. This is, however, an increasingly common scenario, especially in urban post 1992 universities in the UK. A WISERD report from 2015 stated:

"Assessing the impacts of widening access strategies is essential to the development of their effectiveness. However, despite the best efforts of the professionals involved, robust evaluation is currently extremely limited, largely because of the lack of the necessary data" (WISERD, 2015).

Increasingly university teaching staff are confronted with student cohorts that are very diverse in socio-economic background, ethnicity, culture, age and abilities. There may be a significant proportion of students with additional needs, both physical and psychological. From a teaching and class room management view, such diverse cohorts require significant adjustments. This area of pedagogy is still underdeveloped, especially at applied (as opposed to policy/strategic) level.

The Workshop

The University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) is a post 1992 UK university that was formed by a merger of several smaller institutions; the University of Wales Lampeter, Trinity University College Carmarthen, Swansea Metropolitan University, with the University of Wales still in the process of merging. The institution is explicit in its commitment to widening access. In its Mission and Vision statement, it is stated that "central to our vision is the promotion and embedding of a dual-sector educational system which educates learners of all ages and backgrounds" (UWTSD, 2019). This approach has been translated into direct efforts to widening access and to recruit more diverse individuals from a wider range of communities.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the increasing diversity of the student cohort presents a range of issues that both staff and students find challenging. Thus the idea for a workshop at the annual Wales NEXUS Conference was born, with the aim to explore key challenges from the perspective of staff, and possible strategies to address them.

The workshop was attended by around 30 academic staff mostly from UWTSO and several postgraduate students. The focus of this workshop was on the staff perspective. Attendees worked in groups and were asked to identify challenges and opportunities of diverse student cohorts, together with strategies to address the challenges. This material was collated and discussed below.

Workshop Outcomes

Staff self-reflection

Firstly, staff identified a number of challenges that relate to reflections of the lecturer's self-management and self-awareness. Challenges raised in this context were:

- Unfamiliarity with teaching diverse groups;
- Being equally inclusive to all – different cultures, abilities, etc;
- Being able to recognise and manage own prejudices and cultural understanding;
- Avoiding discrimination, direct and indirect.

There was a high level of recognition among workshop participants that a key element of successfully teaching diverse groups is self-awareness – both personal and cultural. This includes the admission that all of us carry stereotypes and prejudices which may have to be acknowledged directly or indirectly. Many non-traditional students carry 'baggage' from challenging life situations, often outside of the lecturer's experience – here the teacher becomes a listener and learner. This is also true for the experiences of international students. The interpretation of life events and the requirements of university life by students from very diverse social economic and cultural backgrounds may be very different from life assumptions of the lecturer. Social, economic and political changes have challenged the objectives of traditional education and have led to considerations as to what the character of ideal teachers should be like, and how they should be prepared (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001, cited in Haamer et al., 2012). Teachers are experimenting with their roles and with re-creating their professional identities in relation to the contexts that surround them (Haamer, 2012). This change of role for the lecturer could be aided by appropriate staff development that focuses on self-reflection and recognition of unconscious bias.

Managing diverse people in groups

A second area that featured prominently in the workshop were issues related to managing diverse people in groups. These issues were not directly related to teaching and learning but were challenges that grow out of the fact that student groups throw together a range of people who otherwise are unlikely to interact with each other in close proximity.

- Being able to manage students' prejudices and cultural understanding
- Manage discrimination between students
- Manage conflict between students
- The need of and ability to be aware of the 'undercurrents' in a group

These points were a considerable cause for concern as conflict and discrimination between students tends to come to staff attention only when a lot of damage has already been done, and furthermore, it is often very difficult to resolve. Sometimes inter-student conflict and discrimination is directly personal but it can also be linked to lifestyle (older/younger), culture or even history. Such conflict can also be the outcome of real or perceived discrimination of a student group by staff, for example home students perceiving themselves to be treated differently or less favourably than international students.

There was general consensus that being aware of what is going on in a group is important to avoid the escalation of any real or latent conflict but this can be difficult when there are cultural, gender or language barriers. A key tool mentioned in this context was the use of game playing, using teaching strategies which allow students to get to know each other as individuals rather than members of (another) subgroup. This can also be aided by using storytelling and encouraging students to genuinely listen to each other's narratives.

Staff also need to be able to invest considerable amounts of time to listen to students equitably and potentially act as dispute solvers. This task is complicated by the fact that staff have to accommodate the impact that age, gender and nationality have not only as causes for conflict but also on conflict resolution strategies (Gbadamosi, 2014). Due to the complexities of trying to resolve or prevent conflict among students with traditional conflict management tools, a potentially more helpful approach may be to enable staff to attend staff development aimed at developing strong communication skills. Strong communication skills were seen as essential by workshop participants for managing any student group, but are particularly important when dealing with diverse group. Taking this further, the development of mediation skills, where staff take the role of a neutral third-party that seeks to resolve conflict by exploring mutual interests between opposing viewpoints (Bienstock, 2019) may also be a useful strategy for managing some of the challenges of diverse groups.

For staff this expanded role has considerable impact on their wellbeing and their professional life. Dealing with the challenges of very diverse student cohorts requires considerable emotional commitment, and staff would like to see more formal support structures for staff in place – most universities offer emotional support for students but staff are often far less well supported. This is also reflected in the fact that often additional time commitments arising from the management of diverse groups may not be acknowledged and therefore increase work place pressure.

Teaching and learning

Another area of challenges were very practical classroom issues, the first and foremost being the question of finding teaching strategies that engage all. There was a strong consensus that diverse student groups offer unique opportunities for student-student (peer) and student-teacher learning. Students and lecturers alike can learn from different perspectives, including different cultural narratives and from more mature students' life experiences. Workshop participants regarded a lecturer's willingness to make themselves vulnerable by contributing their own experiences and thus to lend authenticity to the teaching and learning experience as a key element to engage students and encourage them to contribute their own narratives (see also Butler, 2018; Palmer, 1997). Authenticity is valued by all learners and is particularly important if the lecturer is 'diverse' themselves. It creates an environment in which students can feel confident to share their own perspectives without fear of being judged. However, for the staff member making themselves vulnerable is about taking risks - risks of self-disclosure, risks of change, risks of not knowing, risks of failing, it is an act of courage (Brantmeier, 2013). For more risk averse or less confident staff members, taking these risks can be a considerable challenge.

Age diverse students can be particularly difficult to manage in the classroom. Their more expansive life and work experience can be an enormous asset if these experiences can be included into the required learning framework, and indeed at times mature students may have significant expertise in an area that other students can benefit from.

At the same time this very experience can lead to overconfidence and attempts to 'take over' sessions. Such attempts need a confident response by the lecturer which acknowledges the experience without devaluing it, but also sets boundaries between the role of the student and staff. While some mature students overemphasise the relevance of their experiences in the class room, others underrate the value of their knowledge and experience because they may seem themselves of low academic ability, perhaps due to poor experiences in education in the past. Staff can support this latter group by building their confidence and trust in their own abilities. This is where the line between teaching and pastoral support becomes blurred, and a sufficient staff time allowance for student support is needed.

There is an extensive debate in the literature on the challenges of culturally/nationality diverse classrooms (e.g. Cockrill, 2017; Gay, 2017; Kondo-Brown & Brown, 2017). This does not need to be repeated here, it is sufficient to say that, there can be no doubt that strong communication skills and cultural awareness are key elements in aiding successful teaching.

Being a student does not prevent the 'intrusion' of other life issues into the class room and indeed sometimes the shift of focus to studying renders some of these issues more important. This can take myriad forms – disabilities, different skills levels, different access to resources, additional needs, home responsibilities, child care, and cultural restrictions. These issues present challenges for learning and teaching but also present opportunities for the lecturer to make other students aware of these issues and thus widen their horizons. Staff at the workshop saw this as particularly pertinent in the areas of disability and cultural awareness; exposure to people with different needs (both physical and cultural) and developing an understanding were seen as important learning opportunities for staff and students.

Concluding thoughts

It is noticeable that both applied and academic research show a marked focus on widening access but that there is very little research of either academic or applied nature that explores learning and teaching when diverse student cohorts actually sit in a classroom. This workshop discussion is a small contribution to fill this gap. Teaching and learning with diverse student groups is undoubtedly challenging; however, staff generally appear to perceive diversity in a positive light, as an opportunity for peer learning, of integrating more mature students' life experience and international students' differing cultural backgrounds.

Tools used to allow these challenges to be turned into opportunities include the use of games in the classroom, storytelling, the lecturer sharing their own life experiences (authenticity), the use of assistive technology where appropriate, raising cultural awareness and raising the awareness of the needs of others. Diverse classrooms also provide a fertile ground for research in a number of areas, for example, use and effectiveness of assistive technologies as students may be experts. Key area for potential staff development were seen to be communications skills, cultural awareness and the use of assistive technology.

However, all of these mechanisms to deal with the challenges of diverse classrooms and to exploit opportunities require time and to a lesser extent, resources. Challenges can become threats to the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the teaching and learning experience when staff are not sufficiently supported. The current resource constraint environment of higher education in the UK often does not allow sufficient time for staff to deal with diverse students effectively, staff development and access to professional services support are restricted. At times these issues are compounded by physical teaching spaces that staff perceive to be inappropriate and restrictions on funding for assistive technology. Ultimately strategic decisions about resources at institutional level are a key factor in determining if diverse student cohorts are primarily a challenge for staff and students; or if the rich opportunities for personal growth for staff and students can be realised.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the contributions of all workshop participants in the 'Managing Diversity' workshop at the Wales NEXUS Conference 2019, held at the University of Wales Dylan Thomas Centre in Swansea on 10-11th July. Without these contribution this paper could not have been written.

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