Research

Perceptions of faculty in health care and social sciences on teaching international students

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Abstract

Background: Increased cultural diversity of higher education (HE) students has created both learning opportunities and teaching challenges for vocational health care programs. An internationalized curriculum reflects sociocultural issues in professional practice and enhances intercultural competency amongst students. However, the literature is limited in seeking the key perspective of those delivering the curriculum. This study explores the awareness of health care teaching staff on issues related to internationalization, perceived responsibility in supporting international students, and teaching practices toward an inclusive curriculum.

Methods: An anonymous questionnaire was developed, consisting of different types of questions (Y/N, Likert scale, and multiple choice) with opportunities for free text on each main theme. The questionnaire was sent to all 205 staff members with a teaching remit at Cardiff University Schools of Postgraduate Medicine, Healthcare Sciences, Pharmacy, and Social Sciences.

Key findings: In all, 102 responses were received. Despite 70% of respondents feeling that the responsibility for an improved learning experience for international students lies beyond them—with the University, their School, or students themselves—inclusive teaching practices that consider cultural diversity are widely reported. Some individuals feel unprepared to teach international students, citing a lack of cultural knowledge and training. The proportion of international students is perceived as the most important aspect of internationalization. Other key components of national and institutional HE strategies, such as "internationalization abroad", appear to be relatively unimportant. Findings from this study provide a basis for all higher education institutions educating health and social care professionals to reflect critically on the realities of engaging with the internationalization of vocational programs.

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Keywords: Internationalizing higher education; Staff perceptions; Inclusive teaching practices; Preparedness for internationalization

Introduction

Continued professional development in health and social care practice over the last decade has seen a shift in approach from the individual professional to the multi-disciplinary team, with the patient at the center. Greater diversity within health care professionals and improved cultural competence of health care providers have been

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highlighted as key strategies to improved patient outcomes.[1] Implications related to issues of cultural competency for pharmacy have been explored in both the United States (US)[2,3] and the United Kingdom (UK),[4] with an emphasis on internationalizing higher education (HE) provision, and specifically pharmacy education, to prepare graduates to meet emergent patient needs.

US universities have piloted and evaluated a range of teaching practices[5–8] that emphasize cultural sensitivity and respect of diverse patient backgrounds. Such diversification of curricula aims to create opportunities to broaden students' intercultural perspectives, and ultimately impacts positively on patient health needs. Cultural diversity within the classroom is the other main approach toward internationalizing learning in higher education, seen by many educationalists and policy makers as being of critical importance to the future health of HE in the US and the UK.[9–14]

A critical element of the likely success for both of the approaches above is engagement of teaching staff with the strategic framework of internationalizing learning. Lecturers are directly involved in improving the student experience, and thus share significant responsibility in ensuring quality of teaching and learning. In this context, it is surprising that teachers' perceptions of internationalization and the practices adopted to provide support for culturally diverse students have not being explored in a more systematic manner. Previous studies have compared staff and student views on internationalization,[15–17] but with no specific focus on staff views or on health care HE.

The aim of the current study was to explore how teaching staff from a school of pharmacy, and three other health or social care disciplines at Cardiff university, perceive internationalization. Teaching staff views were sought on

1. awareness of cultural diversity and internationalization, related strategies, and available support;
2. perception of responsibility in supporting international students;
3. teaching practices toward providing an inclusive curriculum for international students.

Methods

To address the aims and objectives, a cross-sectional descriptive survey design was used.[18] A questionnaire was adopted as the research instrument, which had the ability to collect large amounts of anonymous data from a relatively large sample in a timely manner.[19] Responses could be cross-tabulated and an opportunity was provided for explanatory text.

Participants

The sampling frame consisted of all staff members with a teaching remit at Schools of Postgraduate Medicine, Healthcare Sciences, Pharmacy, and Social Sciences in

Cardiff University. Each of the four researchers identified all teaching staff in their own School, and their current e-mail address, through academic staff lists on the respective Schools' web page. In total, 205 eligible members of staff were identified. Each prospective participant received a group e-mail from the researcher within that School outlining the aims of the study, explaining the terms of confidentiality and anonymity and inviting participation in the survey (a link was provided to an online questionnaire). Staff involved in both undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) teaching were asked to choose either PG or UG teaching for the purposes of answering the questionnaire.

Data collection tool

A questionnaire was developed based on previous studies on experiences of HE teaching of international students.[14–16] The questionnaire consisted of a series of largely closed-ended questions of different types (Y/N, Likert scale and multiple choice) and was arranged into three main constructs that reflected the study objectives:

(a) Perceived responsibility in supporting international students academically. A set of statements explored the individual's perception of his/her role as a lecturer in a culturally diverse classroom. Responses were based on strength of agreement with each statement. Individuals were also asked for his/her views regarding where the primary responsibility for an improved learning experience for international students lies.

(b) Teaching practices influencing inclusive teaching and learning. A series of statements was presented relating to teaching practices that may alter the learning experience of international students, and participants were asked to state frequency of use (always, usually, occasionally, and never).

(c) Awareness of cultural diversity in the classroom. To explore links between involvement in teaching outside of the UK and increased engagement in the process of internationalizing teaching practices, lecturers were asked whether they had taught at the university level outside the UK (excluding guest seminars, guest lectures, or similar). Respondents were additionally asked whether the topic of international students is a regular agenda item in scheduled meetings in their school.

To provide context to all of the answers above, and explore the ethos toward internationalization, the survey provided participants with a list of seven features that the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education in the UK proposes would be included in a fully internationalized HE institution.[20] Respondents were asked to rank each statement in order of importance from 1 (most important) to 7 (least important). Participants were given the opportunity to

add free text in each of the three sections and at the end. A draft was piloted[21] by five volunteer staff members, and the questionnaire was adjusted accordingly before final circulation to improve its rigor and reliability.

Data collection

All eligible staff members were sent an email that contained a brief introductory statement outlining the rationale of the project. An embedded link to access an online questionnaire (Qualtrics Software) was included, ensuring anonymized responses. Clear instructions indicated how respondents could withdraw from completing/submit the questionnaire at any stage.

One reminder e-mail was sent universally, to encourage further responses. Records of all individual participants were held securely and confidentially on password-protected Cardiff University and Qualtrics servers. No identifying data were used in any project reports.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained by a University Research Ethics Committee.

Data analysis

SPSS version 18 was employed to analyze the quantitative data using the code and retrieve method described by Marks and Yardley.[22] The limited set of answers from the close-ended questions was appropriate for descriptive statistical analysis and comparison.

The researchers familiarized themselves with the qualitative data by reading the free-text responses. Codes were systematically produced, successive data were analyzed, and novel concepts were discovered.[23] During this process, the major themes began to emerge and a thematic framework was designed.

Results

Response rate and sample

In all, 102 teaching staff completed the questionnaire from a potential sample of 205 (response rate 50%). Of the respondents, 96 completed the questionnaire fully and were included in the data analysis; however, not all questions were answered by all participants. The participants' characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Quantitative data

Only 30% of respondents felt that the primary responsibility for supporting the learning needs of international students lay with the teaching staff. The majority felt that the main responsibility should lie with the host academic

Table 1
Summary of participants' characteristics

Characteristic	Numbers (% of respondents)
School	
MEDIC	14 (16)
PHRMY	22 (25)
SOCSI	20 (22)
SOHCS	33 (37)
Teaching level	
Undergraduate	46 (49)
Postgraduate	47 (51)
Time teaching in higher education (years)	
<6	16 (18)
6–10	11 (13)
11–15	24 (28)
16–20	11 (13)
>20	25 (29)
Gender	
Male	48 (55)
Female	40 (45)
Age (years)	
<30	3 (3)
31–40	20 (23)
41–50	35 (40)
51–60	23 (26)
>60	6 (7)

school (37%) or the wider university (25%). The remaining 8% selected the option "students."

In all, 70% of teaching staff ensure that course content is relevant to both international and home students, 81% integrate students of diverse cultural backgrounds where possible, when working in small groups, and 63% offer virtual or face-to-face opportunities to facilitate interaction between students outside the classroom (Fig. 1). Overall, 75% of the participants disagreed with the statement that their School supports internationalization by training staff teaching international students. Furthermore, the topic of international students is not a regular scheduled item at the participants' School meetings according to 43%, while 23% stated that it is.

The frequency of use of teaching practices that may alter the learning experience of international students is illustrated in Figure 2. Overall, 80% of lecturers stated that they were happy for their sessions to be recorded. Of the lecturers, two-thirds always or usually provide handouts, with 65% stating that they upload their slides to a centralized university virtual learning platform, 87% never provide podcasts of their sessions, and 9% occasionally do.

Table 2 presents perceptions of the relative importance of seven features of an internationalized higher education institution. The most important features were reported to be a substantial number of international students, an international curriculum, and social and academic integration
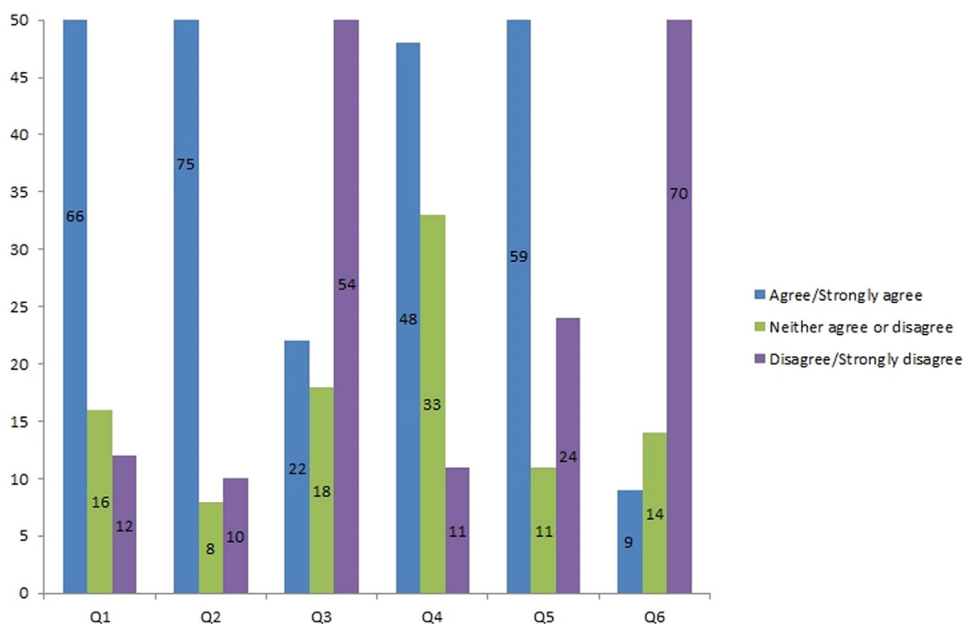
Fig. 2. The frequency of use of teaching practices that may alter the learning experience of international students.
X-axis
1 I routinely use examples from different cultural and educational settings to explain theories in my teaching.
2 I need to make particular efforts to encourage participation by international students.
3 I provide handouts outlining aims, content, and key learning points for each session.
4 I allow students to record my sessions.
5 I provide podcasts of my sessions.
6 I make my slides available on Learning Central in advance of the session.
7 In preparing students for assessed work, I give an example of a marked answer, based on the marking criteria.
8 I have to spend more time on formative feedback for international students.
S.9 I invite feedback on what additional support students might find helpful.
Y-axis—frequency of responses.

system and culture: it was seen as a "two-way street," not being the sole responsibility of the lecturer to broaden student's cultural knowledge. Self-reflection on needs and conscious effort to integrate socially were identified as areas in which international students could be proactive.

Staff preparedness

Inclusive teaching was reported by some staff who did not consider that they needed to adjust their teaching practices to account for international students (Table 5). A conscious effort from a few participants to accommodate the different learning styles/educational/cultural differences of individual students was reported. Of the participants, three admitted that teaching international students could be challenging at times.

Staff members who had taught abroad stated that teaching outside the UK made them appreciate the different learning styles of international students and also increased awareness of language, social, and cultural issues that may impact on student learning.

Table 2
Rankings of the relative importance of features of an internationalized higher education institution

Features of internationalized higher education institution	Least important				Most important			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Significant % of international students	45	22	15	7	3	3	5	100%
Social and academic integration of students	19	19	16	12	16	13	5	100%
An international curriculum	21	17	9	14	18	12	9	100%
International collaboration in research	6	17	26	22	14	7	8	100%
Academic staff from many nationalities	2	4	13	19	22	21	19	100%
Staff and student mobility abroad	6	12	13	15	15	20	19	100%
Delivery of offshore teaching	1	9	8	11	12	24	35	100%
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	

Table 3
Themes from analysis of free-text comments—perceived value

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative quote
(1) Perceived value	Value of an international cohort of students	International students make a positive contribution to the value of the taught experience of home students by exposing them to different views and perspectives. I think there is a danger that we pathologise our overseas students. They nearly always bring examples and experiences which can be effectively used to illuminate key issues. In general, I find overseas students more committed and better contributors than home students.
	Scope of internationalizing the curriculum	All students must be practising in the UK to be eligible for the program, yet we do have overseas students…who have studied in the UK as undergraduates… the course is focused on Pharmacy Practice in the UK. It is therefore not a true International program. We do not have a lot of international students as we are a professional program; we do have students coming to us on ERASMUS exchanges. Difficult to integrate examples from different cultures as content subject specific but possible if I put the effort to it (e.g., communication skills).
	Dangers of positive discrimination	I actually think that the UK students have felt disadvantaged by the extra effort you have to make to ensure the material is accessible for overseas students. The current drive on enhancing "student experience" seems to be focused less on true enhancement and more on standardization so that one size is being forced to fit all. It does not take a rocket scientist (no offense to rocket scientists) to realize that the drive toward the lowest common denominator is not an approach that enhances anything.

UK, United Kingdom.

Of the participants, two stated that they had attended a university half-day course that aimed at raising awareness of some of the challenges that students may have and how these could be overcome. There was limited awareness among participants about this half-day course or any other formal means of support. Almost all agreed that a more structured input from the School or University about the particular difficulties faced by international students and the support services that are available more widely in the university would be helpful.

While lecturers were aware of the need for more inclusive teaching, a major aspect that was seen to influence their perceived levels of preparedness for teaching international students is the limited time available to spend on understanding international students' backgrounds and educational culture, as well as supporting them outside of the classroom.

Discussion

Perceived responsibility and practices in supporting international students

Only 30% of respondents felt that the primary responsibility for supporting the learning needs of international students lay with the teaching staff. The majority felt that the host School or the wider University bore the responsibility.

Despite ambiguity about the role of the individual lecturer, the majority of staff perceived a positive value in a culturally diverse classroom, and report adopting inclusive

Table 4
Themes from analysis of free-text comments—preparedness of students

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative quote
(2) Preparedness of students	Impact of language and learning culture on engagement	I find it very difficult to make sure that international students participate. I am not sure whether this is a language problem (although I know it is sometimes) or whether it is cultural. I sense that they expect facts not debate/discussion. We are encouraged to be innovative in our teaching methods but many of these require student participation. Many international students are unwilling or unable to participate actively due to cultural or language issues.
	Awareness of expectations	As well as academics being aware of cultural sensitivities, students need to be aware of expectations when studying in this country too. I think the uni supports them as well as it can, but international students tend to choose to socialize and work with other international students rather than home students. To better understand the aim of the degree we are teaching, i.e., professional qualification and competency or more philosophical training.

Table 5
Themes from analysis of free-text comments—Staff preparedness. UK—United Kingdom.

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative quote
(3) Staff preparedness	Inclusive teaching	I make no distinction between home and international students. I try and teach at an equally high standard to both, so no concessions are needed.
		From my experience, international students have been very diligent interested, engaging and have never required specific attention or help.
		I did not usually place students in specified groups in my workshops because I think they work best when they are with their friends; however, international students benefit from being mixed, so I have started doing this during this term.
		Language is crucial, ensuring no colloquial phrase/terms or popular culture references.
	Awareness of challenges	I wasn't aware of many of the issues around the differences in e.g., learning styles/educational culture until attending a day for Uni staff on the topic
		In a peer reviewed session, international students were rated very differently to UK students. This highlighted the need to review the teaching activities I set to ensure fairness, whilst still teaching the skills required in a UK setting. International students have reported to me comments they have received from the workplace about limitations in their employability
	Barriers to internationalizing teaching resources	Time dedicated to discussing the needs of and challenges faced by international students when they commence their studies and how to improve their experience—this should be at School level.
		More tutorial time to spend with individuals and groups of students.
	Impact of prior exposure	Much better awareness of the challenges faced by students and how I need to adapt my teaching style accordingly (and also some of the assumptions I was making about background knowledge of UK culture). Means I have adapted my style back in the UK to take this into account for international students studying here.
		The classroom overseas was different—more technology as an example, more questions and more interaction but there was a need to slow down and give alternative explanations of concepts. This slowing down, analogizing and developing alternate explanations has been useful in UK teaching.

teaching practices that suggest an awareness, accommodation, and embracing diversity. Kreber[24] argues that such attitudes are essential for enriching HE for all, as home students are not themselves a homogeneous group: the cultural gap between minorities and local communities can be greater than the gap between the latter and international students.[25]

A number of participants' free-text responses reflected on the issue of "internationalization at home"—the idea that teaching practices should be universally adapted for the needs of both international and home students, regardless of place of domicile/origin. It was reassuring that most lecturers reported ensuring that their course content is relevant to both international and home students. Practical steps toward inclusivity were also evident, such as ensuring that allocation of small groups/seminars included a mix of diverse cultural backgrounds. Such personal awareness is regarded as essential in developing relationships with individuals who are perceived as "different" according to Haigh,[25,26] Sanderson,[27] Hernandez,[28] and Trahar.[29,30]

Many lecturers felt that early social and educational integration of students was essential to an optimal learning experience. A high level of competency in the English language and an understanding of the host nations'

University learning culture were viewed as key promoters of this aim. Certainly, limited interaction between students of diverse cultures has previously been reported.[12,16,31,32] Groups that coalesce, both within and outside of the classroom, may be linked by language and a lack of English proficiency may discourage socializing outside the language group. On the other hand, there may be more complex cultural barriers that prohibit socializing and/or learning.

The lack of proficiency in language skills has frequently been reported as a pedagogic barrier.[27] In the current study, most lecturers stated that they provide handouts, upload slides to a virtual learning platform, and are happy for sessions to be recorded. This practice should assist international students whose first language is not English, but can assist all students who wish to re-visit the content beyond the classroom.

A University-level initiative to overcome language barriers is to offer open-access support focussing on skills such as pronunciation, reading strategies, and academic writing skills. This vital support is less accessible for students who are undertaking e-learning/distance learning courses, an area that needs further development as more graduate and postgraduate programs embrace this mode of learning.

Less tractable cultural barriers may be more readily addressed in the classroom. In our study, and others,[33–35] lecturers reported deliberate assignment of culturally diverse members during group work in an attempt to overcome communication issues and promote equality between members. Whatever the success of such practices, students report valuing this approach.[12,36,37]

Awareness of internationalization strategies

Our survey explored lecturers' perceptions of the relative importance of established features of internationalization.[36] These data enabled an evaluation of staff perceptions against the institutional strategy in this area. UK University strategy has been shaped by the influential Prime Minister's Initiative 2 (PMI2) report (2006).[12,14] This strategic policy significantly broadened the focus from the earlier PMI 1 (1999),[12–14] which was solely concerned with increasing the number of international students in UK HE.

Our data do not appear to reflect this strategic shift, revealing that teaching staff remain primarily focussed on numbers of international students. This apparent misalignment between policy and front-line attitudes has been previously mentioned in the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education guide for "Getting to Grips with Internationalization."[20] Respondents with no experiences of teaching abroad considered features of "internationalization abroad," such as staff and student mobility and offshore teaching, as being the least important, as opposed to those who had taught abroad, who perceived the experience as having a significant positive impact on teaching practices.

Pertinent to a misalignment of policy and attitudes is the challenging nature of internationalizing vocational curricula, such as pharmacy, governed by an external professional body—a fact acknowledged by several respondents. In such cases, internationalization could focus on incorporating experiential learning into the curriculum rather than using international case studies, with the goal of producing "global citizens." Graduates would acquire the skills and competencies required to make them independent thinkers and ready for global employment. Trahar and Hyland[16] mention this as a theme in their study, with a participant stating that although the curriculum itself might not be appropriate in the global sense, the people involved in the teaching/learning can bring personal flavor in order to enrich methods of study and delivery.

Staff preparedness and support

Some of our respondents clearly felt underprepared for teaching international students and were keen to receive training and increase awareness and understanding of different cultural learning styles. What was evident from the free text is an awareness that the students' approach to learning may, in part, be influenced by their own culture and how they have been taught prior to entering the UK.

Cardiff university is provides teaching staff with an awareness session on "linguistic and cultural challenges faced by international students," available upon demand. Feeding forward from this study, such support could be made available to teaching, managerial, and administrative staff.

Building effective "internationalization at home" will not happen automatically. Otten[37] reports the challenges ahead, warning that without careful planning, staff resistance to diversity leads to a compromised student experience. Proactive staff support may counteract this negative outcome and thereby promote institutional reputation.[34] The need for flexibility in the format of assessments, and modes of delivery, in order to facilitate international mobility and collaboration is recognized.[17] This would suggest an increasing need to use a range of different platforms to ensure that courses offer inclusivity.

Limitations

A longitudinal study could have tracked views over time, as the institutional internationalization strategies and global influences occupy a more prominent place in University Schools.

Our response rate was 50%. Although this rate compares favorably with those in the literature on online studies,[38] we do not know whether non-responses are random or not, and we do not know if the variation in responses between the different Schools reflects selection bias. It may be that those most interested in the issue, or with firm views on internationalization, were more inclined to participate.

The four schools were deliberately chosen as diverse providers of vocational health and social care programs. However, the extent to which our findings generalize to other settings and countries is unclear.

Finally, although there was a qualitative element to the study through the responses to the open-ended questions, a more comprehensive study would augment the questionnaire with a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews in order to provide depth and breadth to the data collected. The coding and the themes drawn up by the researchers are subject to the possibility of reflecting personal bias.

Conclusions

We explored the views and attitudes of teaching staff related to the internationalization of HE. Lecturers are broadly positive toward the concept of internationalization and are adopting some teaching practices that reflect this. Many lecturers feel unprepared to teach students with diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, and show limited awareness of Cardiff University's internationalization strategy.

The findings of the survey indicate the relevance of a strategic redesign and delivery of the curriculum, in collaboration with lecturers. Teaching staff share significant

responsibility in ensuring quality of teaching and learning; it is crucial that their perceptions are explored in a more systematic manner.

The findings from this study can help universities worldwide reflect on the extent to which institutionally perceived benefits of internationalization are aligned with the challenging reality of teaching. Our results elucidate the critical issues affecting staff and inform the design of support to positively engage staff in fully internationalizing HE, so that it becomes a truly culturally diverse learning environment. This will in turn increase health care students' confidence and abilities in addressing patient care issues related to cultural diversity.

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