

From Learning to Teaching: Incorporating Cultural Familiarity to Enhance GTA Support for International Students' Learning

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Abstract

[The Inclusive Education Model \(IEM\)](#) is stated as one of the priorities of the Education Strategy at the University of Warwick, and is aimed at enhancing students' learning experience. Although significant progress has been made in the development of inclusion in education, there are still challenges to overcome to ensure that all students, regardless of their diverse backgrounds, abilities, or circumstances, have equitable access to quality education and are fully included in the learning environment.

To better support inclusive education, the Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) scheme at Warwick was implemented with the aim of providing various types of teaching support to postgraduate taught (PGT) students. While carrying out our GTA jobs, the authors noticed that the international postgraduate taught (PGT) students in Education Studies were experiencing some challenges during their studies, often caused by the mismatch/incompatibility between students' previous education experiences in their home countries and the pedagogical approaches adopted in the UK context. Arguably, these challenges could lead to various barriers that might hinder the students from the current educational environment.

Through this critical reflection, we aim to raise awareness of hidden/invisible challenges that may have been overlooked. As international students are among those who may not feel fully included when pursuing studies in a host country, our objective is to raise awareness of hidden or invisible challenges that might have been overlooked through critical reflection. Our intention is to contribute to establishing an equitable and supportive educational experience for international students with diverse needs and backgrounds. We intend to contribute to the establishment of an equitable and supportive educational experience for international students with diverse needs and backgrounds.

Keywords: Postgraduate taught students, international Graduate Teaching Assistant, hidden challenges, equitable student experience

Introduction

The Inclusive Education Model (IEM) is a strategy that Warwick prioritises to provide funding and support aimed at helping students engage with diverse communities. The Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) is a widely used teaching scheme in universities that aims to engage postgraduate students by providing various types of teaching and learning support. The Inclusive Education Model (IEM) is a strategy that Warwick prioritises to provide funding and support aimed at helping students engage with diverse communities. With the growing momentum of IEM, the Department of Education Studies (DES) is also strengthening its GTA scheme through the Enhancement Tutor Scheme (ETS) by allocating extra support hours for students who need additional assistance for their academic progress. These students include those with failing assignments and those who need to improve their grades. In this piece, the two authors reflect on their GTA roles as ETS Enhancement Tutor and as MA Dissertation Supervisor, focusing on how their own experience as international students deepens their understanding of the specific needs of the international Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students and improve their pedagogical approaches accordingly.

This reflective piece first reviews some literature on how GTAs supervise international PGT students in UK institutions, followed by section 3 explaining how this piece is informed by cultural learning theories and the concept of hidden curriculum. Section 4 illustrates the identified challenges shared by all some international students and some specific challenges related to different GTA responsibilities. This reflective piece also makes some practical recommendations for addressing the identified challenges in section 5.

GTA supervising international PGT students

Overview of the GTA role

There exist previous studies investigating the role of GTAs in UK Higher Education (HE) institutions within the entire teaching and learning system (Park, 2002; Muzaka, 2009; Cho, 2011). These studies explore the responsibilities, rights, work patterns and various concerns about GTAs through empirical case studies conducted in different UK universities. These studies identify the 'deficiency' narrative around GTAs in the department, as non-experts who have to routinely deal with the 'donkey' job (Park, 2002). On the other hand, these studies provide implications for better supporting the development of GTAs through well-planned programmes, such as shifting away from deficiency concerns and moving towards growth concerns through promoting GTA efficacy and recognizing GTAs' value of teaching practices (Muzaka, 2009). This reflective piece builds upon the existing literature, focusing on what international GTAs could offer in

terms of effectively supporting international PGT students' learning experiences and outcomes.

Challenges of International Students

International students' challenges in UK institutions have been well documented in previous studies, mainly represented in following the academic norm that they are less familiar with, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF). This situation can be attributed to factors such as a lack of prior academic writing training in their educational background and the process of adapting to the UK education system. As an important aspect of learning, academic writing poses various difficulties for international students, impacting students' achievement in HE (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010; Cennetkuşu, 2017; Singh, 2019). For example, a fundamental aspect of academic writing involves students' capacity to locate pertinent references and assess them, and the ability to integrate diverse viewpoints to cultivate their unique perspective (Al Fadda, 2012). However, these criteria do not work equally across different student populations. Referencing and citations are reported in the list of the challenges commonly encountered in academic writing (Al Badi, 2015). The consequences of failing to cite sources properly can be severe, it could lead to suspicion of plagiarism beyond assignment failure.

Another challenge arises from assessment criteria poses another challenge, which requires students to adopt a specific writing style for their learning process to be acknowledged (Northedge, 2003; Bloxham & West, 2007). For international students, unfamiliar academic language, vague terminology, or expressions open to interpretation may cause misinterpretation or incomplete comprehension of the expectations of the assessment criteria. The authors notice that linguistic, educational, and cultural differences all contribute to the challenge of adapting to a new academic community for international students.

The context

In the DES at the University of Warwick, ETS, a new GTA scheme, provides additional academic support and guidance to individual students through one-on-one meetings to help them with their further studies. A particular challenge, for many PGT students, is tackling a resubmission for a failed assignment whilst trying to complete their dissertation. Noticeably, international PGTs require additional learning support due to their underperformance in both module assignments and dissertation writing. Arguably, GTAs offer students more specific help in terms of flexibility, less formal approach and more recent postgraduate experience (Muzaka, 2009). These are all particularly valuable to international students.

Cultural learning theory and hidden curriculum

Our reflection on the challenges international students encounter through our tutoring process is informed by two teaching/learning theories in HE: culture learning theory and hidden curriculum.

Cultural learning theory, as a concept advanced by Pacheco (2020) and often referred to as 'cultural-based immersive experiences', includes sociocultural adaptation and psychological adjustment. This theory has been found to have a positive effect on promoting beneficial personal growth and identity development. Sociocultural adaptation pertains to the competence to blend in a different cultural environment, and effectively manage daily tasks. Psychological adjustment encompasses the emotional and psychological well-being during the process of transitioning across cultures (Wilson et al., 2013).

The hidden curriculum can be described as 'informal tacit learning through socialization' (Elliot et al., 2016, p.738). They argue that the hidden curriculum serves as a valuable resource not just for international students to manage and survive in academia, but even more significantly, to excel in it. As a concept, hidden curriculum complements the formal curriculum and informal curriculum, serving as 'the various unintended, implicit and hidden messages sent to students—messages we may not be even aware we are sending' (Leask, 2015, p.9). Both theories pertain to the discussion of international student experience as they recognize how the 'third space' (Elliot et al., 2016) and globalization shape learners' experiences.

It is noticed that the challenges shared by international students, such as language barriers, task and criteria comprehension, academic integrity, critical thinking skills, and analytical thinking skills, could be better understood through culture learning theory. Other challenges are more closely tied to the concept of the hidden curriculum, including effective communication, time management, institutional awareness, and independent learning.

Reflections on identified challenges

Shared challenges

The two authors found that the challenges of international students described in the literature are reflected to varying degrees while tutoring and supervising their students.

Maintaining academic integrity is a shared difficulty for international students. The challenge is multifaceted and can be attributed to a lack of understanding of the assessment criteria and a lack of appropriate literature citations to support ideas. International students may face challenges with unfamiliar academic language, vague terminology, and open-to-interpretation expressions, which can result in misinterpretation

and incomplete comprehension of assessment criteria. Meanwhile, some international students may inadvertently fail to attribute credit to the original authors. Referencing and citations are reported in the list of the challenges that international students commonly encounter in academic writing (Al Badi, 2015). The reason for this could be their continued adherence to the citation habits acquired during their undergraduate studies in their home country, without awareness of the variations in citation norms and practices in the host country. However, the consequences of failing to cite sources properly can be severe, it could lead to suspicion of plagiarism and possible assignment failure.

Lack of critical thinking is another shared challenge affecting international students' academic performance. The absence of critical thinking is a primary cause of their grade deductions while their assignments/dissertations are evaluated. Many international students come from countries whose education system is exam-oriented. In such systems, achieving good exam scores often requires strong memorization of the knowledge they have learned, and they are expected to provide standardized answers rather than demonstrating their critical thinking abilities. Language barriers may also add challenges to students' critical analysis, as they may not be able to express their thinking as coherently as they would in their mother language.

The two authors reflect on how their own experiences of being international students make them able to identify with the challenges mentioned above, as they have experienced or are still experiencing similar challenges themselves. The following section illustrates how the two authors with different responsibilities incorporate their own experiences as international students to better comprehend the reasons behind the challenges encountered by international students they have tutored.

Specific challenges for different tasks

ETS tutoring

'Don't take it for granted that they should know.'

--Hong Song

The ETS students who need to resubmit assignments are those who have failed their first submission. They indicated that it was difficult to fully understand the expectations for each grade level, and they did not understand how to properly cite the literature or demonstrate a deeper understanding through synthesizing and critically analyzing existing literature. Some students were even unaware that they could find relevant information, such as citation formats available on the library website. It is also found that international students might hesitate to express uncertainty or seek clarification from their professors and lecturers regarding the criteria due to various reasons from motivation to institutional awareness.

ETS tutoring is necessary in terms of providing students with individualized support in terms of signposting them to relevant resources. Considering the effort the department has put in through the welcome week and through the introductory module sessions, this information could be taken for granted that students know what they are and how to make use of them. ETS tutors could help students specifically in terms of reminding them of required tasks and available resources, including key dates for submission and who they can turn to seek help from. From our own experience, some international students might hesitate to express uncertainty or seek clarification from their professors and lecturers regarding the criteria due to various reasons, ranging from motivation and different cultural expectations to institutional awareness. As a result, students might not get the help in time and effectively.

Dissertation supervision

'You have to be an efficient multitasker keeping an eye on your calendar.'

--Bing Lu

Supervising MA dissertations is a comprehensive task which requires developing a professional/supportive supervisory relationship, mediating between the students and the department, as well as understanding the projects themselves and providing advice and guidance. We have noticed that international students, including the various challenges described in 4.1, often struggle with time management and independent learning.

As for time management, international MA students find it difficult to coordinate various deadlines regarding their thesis and other assignments in a relatively short period of time. As have been mentioned in 4.2.1, some students even have to manage to resubmit the failed module assignment within the last few months in the third academic term, described by some students as 'a rollercoaster experience'. For international students, due to their lack of various 'literacies' in a new country, including digital and social, reasonably managing their time to accomplish required tasks can be daunting. Procrastination is common, but the extra challenges involved in doing degrees in a new country add extra tasks for students, for which they might not have developed strategies yet.

The other observation is issues around independent learning, by which we mean how much PGT students are expected to manage some learning on their own with the guidance of academic staff. In other words, students might be less familiar with concepts such as self-directed learning, self-efficacy in learning, and problem-based learning, which have been discussed immensely in the UK HE. A lack of understanding of the host countries' educational approaches could affect international students' independent learning development.

Practical recommendations

As international GTAs, we have all experienced, through our won Master's studies, the challenges that our international tutees encounter while studying in unfamiliar cultural environments, alongside the ensuing anxiety. This shared experience shapes our understanding of the specific needs of international PGTs and motivates us to explore more practical solutions to help international students more effectively. In addition to helping students in the sociocultural adaptation aspect, the two authors also recognize the importance of assisting them in the psychological adjustment aspect through their different roles.

Outputs from EST tutor

As enhancement tutors, we accompany international students to go through their resubmission journey. Approachability, accessibility, trustworthiness, humility, and genuine concern, are the traits listed as characteristics of students' favorable tutors (Li, et al., 2018). To build a good rapport with the students, we assure the students that they are not alone and that they can seek help whenever needed from the very first meeting. We feel that pastoral care is a significant aspect of delivering support to international students, which is expected to make them feel more comfortable and assured when asking questions and seeking assistance. As international GTAs, we can offer more specific help to assist international students to blend in the new cultural environment by sharing our own experiences. It is also evidenced by my own students' improvement throughout our work together.

Outputs from dissertation supervisor

As discussed in 4.2.2, we recommend that improving international PGT students' time management skills and independent learning awareness are of significant concern. To address the two interrelated areas, we need to figure out the mechanisms involved in students' overseas learning, especially for a relatively short program, such as the 10-month MA study. We feel that a reflection on our own PGT experience, as a recent experience, could help us to forge a nuanced understanding of the development of time management strategies for PGT students per se. In terms of independent learning, the department could offer additional sessions focusing on academic writing to improve students' pedagogical literacy skills. Arguably, improving these two aspects immensely could help international students manage their learning in other relevant areas, such as understanding task specifications, supervisory relationships and learning from feedback.

Conclusion

With our unique position as both tutors and researcher students, the international GTA job allows us to play an important role in fostering inclusive education for international students in various ways. We facilitate to generate a conversation that promotes cross-cultural understanding and empathise with the academic difficulties encountered by students, which helps to bridge potential communication gaps. Finally, we recognize our relatively limited experience of working with mainly Chinese PGT students, the experience may not be generalized to the wider international PGT students. This reflective piece is to serve as a resource informing our future practices. Additionally, we hope that the insights gained here can potentially help other GTAs in developing effective mechanisms for working with international students who do not share previous educational training in the UK HE system.

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