Bringing back the classroom: the experience of international students in the neo-liberal university

Liz Marr, Open University
David Woodman, Roehampton University
Richard Huggins, Oxford Brookes University
Aims

• To present findings from ‘New Demographics’ project
• To consider political and strategic imperatives impacting on UK universities at sectoral, institutional, and classroom levels
• To advocate a re-conceptualisation of ‘the student experience’
• To re-imagine the notion of student/tutor ‘contact-time’
Background and Context 1

- Increase in net migration to UK
- 28% increase in non-UK students over last 10 years
- 23% increase in non-EU students over last 5 years.
- General increase in participation
- International student fees now a significant income stream for universities all over the world
Background and context 2

• HE – a trade-able commodity
• Promotion of neo-liberal ideology and politics which has given rise to:

‘the emergence of philanthro-capitalism and private sector control over civil society institutions and the elision of difference between public interest driven scholarship and for-profit-led research’ (Lynch 2009)
Background and context 3

• Major challenges:
  Language  Culture
  Politics  Ethics

• Academic imperialism/increasing homogeneity

• Balancing competing needs of economic realities with perception of university as public good
The research

• “Gravesend is a Sikh and Christian community”

• “We are all international students now”
Method

• Three institutions: small teams of undergraduate and post graduate students researchers in each
• Interviews with social science academics at different career stages in each
• Three student focus groups in each HEI
• Final focus group of researchers themselves
• Visual images of environments
Findings – student views

• Student attitudes
  – Lack of mixing
  – Lack of opportunity for social engagement
  – Orientation towards one’s ‘own group’
  – Seating divisions in lectures and seminars
  – ‘otherness’ as burdensome – communication, group work
  – ‘hidden prejudices’
Student perceptions of staff attitudes

• ‘I think ... some of them just seem very stuck in this, “Well, when we went to university it was like this” and they’re now expecting that that’s how they teach - like that and everything will stay like that. But it won’t. Life isn’t like that. It moves on. And there are some of them just don’t want it to move on.’

• ‘I’m shocked at how unprepared the staff are for helping out international students.’

• ‘And then there was the shifting of the blame to the Admissions. And it just felt like whenever you approached somebody about this question, it was, “Well, it’s not my fault. Somebody else needs to deal with this and then give me that strategy or give me that staff development to go to and make sure I go to it”. And then it’ll all be okay.’
Problematising internationalisation

• “... the paradox is that international students want to come here to get a British education, but if you make the place too international, they’re not getting that British education they come for and they might as well stay in their own country to make their universities more international. You see the problem?”
Disjunctures

• Between academy and external world.
  – Institutions and the mono/multicultural world
  – Formal v. informal multiculturalism

• Between rhetoric and reality
  – Strategies and the realities of the classroom
  – Assumptions about the academy
  – Assumptions about the social sciences

• Between student expectations and experiences
What does this mean?

• The student experience is more than just what happens in uni – it includes what we all bring from outside
• Seeing internationalisation as including non-British examples glosses over cultural difference. Assumes diversity can be addressed through content rather than interaction
‘Knowledge and Control’ revisited

• Sociology of higher education focuses on access
• Social class/ethnicity/culture determine educational outcomes
• Discourse of inputs/outputs provides defensive rationale for status quo
• Need for attention on the ‘classroom’ as site of higher learning
Flexibility and Class Contact

• Modularity – standardisation - measurement
• Timetabled time and assessment function in relation to credit weighting
• Pedagogical initiatives – pbl, resource-based learning, individualised learning - need flexibility
• Home-based students and those living off campus experience the university through the classroom
• Student criticism of low class contact time
The University as Classroom: Some Questions and Issues

• Should foundation year/level 1 students spend longer in class, per credit, than those in later years?
• What would be the likely impact on academic staff of an increase in contact time? How can this be addressed?
• Assessment in the classroom - enhances quality of learning and immediacy of feedback (and cuts down on marking outside the classroom). What are the possibilities?
• The classroom need not be a room – how can we re-conceptualise ‘contact’.
Group activity

• Consider your own institution's international strategy:
  – How was it developed?
  – What consultation was there?
  – Is there mention of pedagogy?
    • If so, how much?
  – What changes would you make?

• What is the gold standard?
  – Does UK HE deliver it still?
  – Would re-conceptualising the classroom help?
Conclusion

• Students’ education is not fashioned by their background alone but the classroom can become the place where those backgrounds enrich the process of education without placing limits on it.

• We are (even as academics) all international students now.