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LIdIA Policy Forum

Position Statement 02:
Managing the multilingual university

UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have seen an increase in the numbers of students from a wide range of non-traditional, **multilingual** and **multicultural** backgrounds in recent years.

This increasingly diverse range of student backgrounds is often perceived as causing difficulties for the students themselves and for teaching staff, with different approaches to learning and language use resulting in tension in the classroom. Subsequently, opportunities to convert students' diverse linguistic and social/cultural capital are lost, with negative consequences for learning within our academic disciplines and for the students whose capital is ignored or rejected.

HEIs have a responsibility to address such issues and to work towards improvements in the experience of all students by:

- making students and staff aware of, and able to benefit from, their **multicultural**, **multilingual** university environment;

- re-considering how **academic literacy** support is provided to students and whether better alternatives to current practices exist.

Note

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POSITION PAPER

Executive Summary

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK are becoming increasingly diverse places of study, in which large numbers of International students are taught together with Home students (in itself a diverse category, including, for example, mature students and those who may be the first in their family to attend university) on the same programme of study. Group work and active class participation are increasingly commonplace on a wide range of UK university programmes, with guidelines for approaching written work differing between staff members and often adhering to a prescriptive and implicit agenda unfamiliar to students entering HE.

Students are expected to adapt to these diverse environments and approaches to learning and teaching in order to succeed, but not all students who embark upon their studies arrive equipped to face these challenges, and support in acquiring the necessary skills is often limited or perceived not to address the specific needs of students on a variety of programmes.

While UK HEIs may claim to promote equality of opportunity, the deficit model that operates in many institutions requires students to identify their own weaknesses (according to new, often implicit guidelines that contradict their own previous experiences) and then to seek out extra-curricular support, often devised and provided by departments or individuals situated outside of their programme of study. For many reasons, student engagement with such support varies.

In view of these challenges and subsequent issues, we present a number of recommendations for Higher Education institutions. Our recommendations are intended to ensure that support is provided which: specifically addresses student needs; takes the wide range of student backgrounds into account; moves towards an actively **multilingual**, **multicultural** university model that embraces the range of student and staff backgrounds; and supports the genuine **internationalisation** of the curriculum and institution, creating benefits for all students.

Issue

Higher Education Institutions in the UK are becoming increasingly diverse places of study, in which large numbers of International students are taught together with Home students (in itself a diverse category, including, for example, mature students and those who may be the first in their family to attend university) on the same programme of study. These categories are so heterogeneous as to be worthless. Unfortunately, they also have the potential to limit our thinking about the benefits of the language(s) (including varieties of English) that our students bring with them, and to undermine our efforts to support the development of their linguistic resources and cultural knowledge.

While UK HEIs claim to promote equality of opportunity for students from all backgrounds, they require students to self-diagnose the ways in which their use of language differs from the kind of writing (and speaking) in English that they may be encountering for the first time. Where extra-curricular support is provided, it is often devised and led by departments or individuals situated outside of academic programmes, and students are required to know how to seek it out. For many reasons, student engagement with such support varies, creating challenges for staff and students alike.

Where academic writing is concerned, the guidelines for approaching written work that are provided by subject specialists often adhere to a prescriptive and implicit agenda unfamiliar to many students entering UK HE. Academic staff members may possess good writing skills, but may not be able to explain the processes they employ to students yet to learn these

(Lea and Street, 1998; Chanock *et al*., 2012). Furthermore, the guidelines that are issued often differ between staff working on the same programme of study. In spite of these difficulties, students are expected to adapt to these diverse environments and approaches to learning and teaching in order to succeed. Not all students who embark upon their studies arrive equipped to face these challenges, and support in acquiring the necessary skills is often limited or perceived not to address the specific needs of students on a variety of programmes.

In **multilingual** classrooms there is often a lack of spoken interaction between Home students and their educationally mobile peers, a situation that is described by Volet and Ang (1998, p. 5) as 'the most disturbing aspect of the **internationalisation** of higher education'. Problematic **classroom interaction** may be the result of a general lack of goodwill on the part of both Home and International students, in terms of making themselves understood and making efforts to understand one another. Problems may also be caused by unfamiliarity with the varieties of English that are used in their new environment and their lack of practice in the negotiation of meaning that is necessary in linguistically diverse contexts. The dichotomous categories of 'Home' and 'International', as well discrimination against lower status varieties of English, reinforce unhelpful thinking about where the responsibility lies for successful communication.

For all these reasons therefore, opportunities to convert our students' diverse linguistic and social capital are lost, with negative consequences for learning within our academic disciplines and for the students whose capital is ignored or rejected. Institutions of Higher Education have a responsibility to address such issues and to work towards improvements in the experience of all students.

Discussion

In the following sections, we consider how varieties of language(s) found in UK HEIs can and should be viewed as a resource rather than a problem, review both unsuccessful and successful approaches to teaching **academic literacy** skills, explore staff expectations of students' written assignments, and assess the ways in which interaction in the classroom can hinder or enhance students' learning. We begin with a critique of the categories 'Home' and 'International', used/assumed by universities for very heterogeneous groups of students. We consider how these over-essentialised labels limit our ability to benefit from the language(s) our students bring with them and undermine our efforts to support the development of their linguistic resources and cultural knowledge.

Issues in the categorising of students

The implicitly dichotomous categories 'Home' and 'International' student are commonly used both in UK HE policy documents and research. Simpson and Cooke (2010, p. 59) define Home students as those 'who have received years of socialisation in the English education system', with three years being a number commonly used by university Admissions and Finance departments to classify applicants. The term 'International' student, on the other hand, identifies nothing more than a student's ordinary country of domicile as non-UK, and, at least at the time of writing this position statement, non-EU. In fact, both Home and International students may have been educated/socialised in an English-medium education system, either in the UK or in schools outside the UK/EU which use a UK-based curriculum. EU students also may have had very different educational experiences from those educated in the UK. More accurately then, Carroll (2014) refers to International students as 'educationally mobile students', a choice of term that more adequately reflects the diversity within the international student population and contrasts this group with UK (though not EU) students who are continuing to study in their ordinary country of domicile.

There are parallel problems in attempts to categorise the expertise of uses and users of English, for example, as seen in the information for IELTS (International English Language

Testing System) test-takers about the listening component of the test, in which 'You will listen to four recorded texts, monologues and conversations by a range of native speakers' (IELTS, 2016). The achievement of a particular score, on the four IELTS components, as well as overall, is frequently set as an entry criterion for International students applying to UK universities. No further detail about the actual 'range of native speakers' is provided on the IELTS website, but the use of the term 'native speaker' implies that expertise is simply a matter of country of domicile; 'native-speaker' countries being those whose governments and HEIs require International students to take an IELTS test including the UK, Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the USA (see for example Rampton, 1990 and Selvi, 2011).

What is clear is that the use of these categories to describe two very diverse groups of students (in relation to their prior experience of English medium education, the extent of their understanding of 'UK-style' education, their expectations of HE generally, and the varieties of written and spoken English and other languages that they bring with them to university), is extremely problematic. The practice of categorising students as Home/International, or native/non-native speaker elides, and therefore functions to conceal, issues of social class, (degrees of academic) literacy, language/dialect discrimination and (degrees of) language awareness (of staff and students). Such practices ignore the fact that subject experts in UK universities may themselves be **multilingual**, so-called 'non-native speakers', and that access to languages other than English has the potential to open up global professional networks and research findings. Moreover, the conflation of expertise in English (however we decide to define 'English' and measure 'expertise') with the achievement of understanding in specific contexts is, at best, linguistically inaccurate and, at worst, discriminatory and divisive.

This focus on 'expertise' in 'English' has the additional drawback of undermining the importance of other languages. In fact, there is great potential for linguistic diversity in the classroom to be viewed as a resource (Ruiz, 1984) and it is essential that an academic environment recognises **multilingual** skills as enhancing the potential of the user and contributing to the development of the discipline. Martin (2009) refers to guidelines proposed in the European Action Plan which suggest that it is university policy makers who hold a degree of responsibility for effecting institutional decisions that promote and develop language learning and linguistic diversity. Whilst many UK universities describe themselves as promoting international and intercultural learning, more must be done to truly establish HEIs as **multilingual**, **multicultural** spaces. Diverse educational environments have the potential to allow for the exchange of information, skills and knowledge across national borders, but the existence of **multicultural/multilingual** cohorts alone is no guarantee of intercultural learning (Carroll and Ryan, 2005; Pandian, 2008).

Common approaches to teaching academic literacy skills

It is widely recognised that individuals become literate (including *academically* literate) through processes of interaction and observation, 'until the ways of speaking, acting, thinking, feeling and valuing common to that discourse become natural to them' (Boughey, 2011, p. 281). Perhaps because many academic staff see themselves as content specialists, and see content as separable from discourse, they are not always willing to contribute towards the development of students' written skills (Haggis, 2006; Mitchell and Evison, 2006). A common solution to this problem is for academic programmes to include an obligatory, credit-bearing Study Skills module in first year, usually for the duration of one semester. Carried out and assessed separately to other modules, the intention of such Study Skills modules is to convey all of the academic skills necessary for success in students' academic programmes. However, as the above quote from Boughey (2011) implies, study skills modules taught over the course of one semester and separated from students' other academic courses are not an effective way in which to teach these skills: acquisition of **academic literacy** skills is not a matter that can be 'fixed outside the discipline' (Wingate

and Tribble, 2012, p. 481). Academic staff members who participated in Hedger and Wicaksono's (2015) study did indeed find that the teaching of **academic literacy** skills limited the time that could be spent in class on the teaching of what they consistently described as 'content'. In spite of these concerns about time constraints, some staff members made special efforts to incorporate certain **academic literacy** skills during their classes, saying that they did so after having discovered gaps in their students' knowledge. Whilst the good intentions of these staff members are clear, this approach to squeezing in essential **academic literacy** skills does not constitute teaching 'with' **academic literacies** (Dunham, 2012, p.687). Instead, this approach treats this essential knowledge as an inconvenient addition to be covered in limited depth, only after the teaching of more important 'subject content', and largely with a remedial motive. Furthermore, Gunn *et al.* (2011, p. 3) point out that 'qualifications from disciplines other than education may leave [teaching staff] ill-equipped to address [academic literacy skills]'. Whilst academic staff members are likely to have honed their own writing skills in a way that best allows them to present their academic ideas (Lea and Street, 1998), they may be capable of *performing* a range of academic skills without necessarily being in a position to talk about *how* these are performed in a way that is accessible to those yet to learn. As Chanock *et al.* (2012, p. 4) comment, this aspect of their disciplinary knowledge may have become 'transparent with use'.

Academic literacy skills should be **embedded** within programmes, and should be planned and executed in partnership with **academic literacy** experts who are able to advise on how best to introduce key **academic literacy** concepts within the curriculum as a whole. The literature demonstrates that this is regarded as best practice for students, allowing for 'explicit instruction, practice, and assessment of these [skills] into the curriculum of their degree' (Chanock *et al.*, 2012, p. 2), meaning that students are better able to effectively bridge the gap between the theory and application of **academic literacy** skills. In turn, this prevents these skills from being relegated to a separate module. **Embedding academic literacies** into the curriculum need not present an additional challenge to conveying existing course content, but can instead provide 'an added lens through which to view the subject content' (Chanock *et al.*, 2012, p. 10). This also provides greater equality of access to essential skills for all students, rather than operating a deficit model that requires those perceived to lack the necessary skills to attend additional, non-credit-bearing, extra-curricular sessions. Those students most in need of help are likely to prioritise work for which they will receive academic credit (Chanock *et al.*, 2012; Warwick, 2006), and it is therefore reasonable to suggest that **embedding** skills allows students to pick up subject knowledge and **academic literacy** skills whilst ensuring equality of access to all and avoiding the stigmatisation of certain student groups.

Expectations of students' written assignments

Increasingly **multilingual**, (incipiently) academically literate students entering Higher Education face a challenging task; their acquisition of the ways of writing and speaking that academic staff value is essential to their success. There is research to suggest that the types of written assignment at the core of many programmes of study in UK HE present potentially unanticipated problems for students who are accustomed to different educational cultures, despite the fact that that 'subject lecturers are not intentionally keeping their expectations hidden, nor are they unwilling to articulate what they are looking for' (Hunter and Tse, 2011, p. 228). For example, Chanock *et al.* (2012, p. 5) report that the paragraph structure of 'anglo-academic' writing can be challenging for students from different academic cultures. Without a detailed explanation/demonstration of the structure of 'good' academic writing, many students are likely to experience difficulties with this aspect of their assessment. Nonetheless, the literature also suggests that lecturers in a number of studies were unable to explicitly describe the features of a 'well-structured' or 'well-argued' student assignment. Gunn *et al*. (2011, p. 3) point out that 'qualifications from disciplines other than education may leave [teaching staff] ill-equipped to address

[academic literacy skills]'. Whilst academic staff members are likely to have honed their own writing skills in a way that best allows them to present their academic ideas (Lea and Street, 1998), they may be capable of performing a range of academic skills without necessarily being in a position to talk about how these are performed in a way that is accessible to those yet to learn. As Chanock *et al*. (2012, p. 4) comment, this aspect of their disciplinary knowledge may have become 'transparent with use'.

In the majority of cases, students interviewed as part of Hedger and Wicaksono's (2015) research did report receiving some guidelines from staff to assist them in the completion of their written work. One student described this as helpful but went on to clarify that, in her view, such guidelines can prove misleading for some students: while some members of the student cohort demonstrate an awareness of implicit understandings around the use of guidelines, others strictly adhere to these, unaware of the possible 'unwritten' rules of doing so. In addition, Bowl (2003) comments on discovering inconsistencies in the advice and assistance offered to students in their assignment completion, a situation that is likely to cause further confusion.

The completion of written assignments also raises questions about language for students from diverse backgrounds. One UK student interviewed as part of Hedger and Wicaksono's (2015) research touched upon the academic style of writing she felt was required, stating that university writing 'is a lot more… superior, almost'. Her comments echo some of the experiences outlined in research by Bowl (2003), in which a UK student was reported to be 'aware of dialect differences between her own writing style and accepted academic style [and] blamed herself, rather than the limitations placed on her by academic conventions' (Bowl, 2003, p. 91). In research conducted in **multilingual** educational institutions in London, Martin (2010) argues that universities must develop approaches that are more successfully inclusive of 'non-traditional' students and the diverse linguistic repertoires and skills that these students bring to their studies.

Interaction in the classroom

It is widely acknowledged that teaching diverse cohorts can present challenges, and increasingly recognised that successful teaching of such groups requires skilful approaches to ensure successful intercultural exchange and communication across dialects and languages. Volet and Ang explore the lack of interaction and engagement between Home students and their educationally mobile peers, describing this as 'the most disturbing aspect of the internationalisation of higher education' (1998, p. 5) and suggesting that there is a general lack of goodwill from both Home and International students in terms of making themselves understood and making efforts to understand one another. A case study by Cathcart *et al.* (2006) echoes these findings, whilst research by Hedger and Wicaksono (2015) highlights the tension *between* International students of different nationalities, with several students reporting dissatisfaction at what they perceived to be other students' inadequate proficiency in English to perform to the required standard on the course.

Many International students arrive in the UK hoping to make friends with Home students on their programme, later reporting this as one of the more difficult aspects of their time in the UK. Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) specifically mention the difficulties encountered by International students in integrating with Home students, both in the classroom and in more informal settings outside of the learning environment. Sovic (2009) suggests that International students perceive Home students to represent an impenetrable group in which they are not welcome, with one participant commenting that Home students 'will be nice to you, exchange pleasantries, but they will not bother at all to get to know you better. […] they don't want to mix with international students' (ibid., p. 755).

Home students' perceived lack of willingness to interact and engage with International students is undoubtedly more complex than it might appear, with Sovic (ibid., p. 759) pointing out that '[Home students'] general lack of language awareness when talking to

non-native speakers is clearly a contributing factor to the problems and isolation of international students.' Similarly, Turner and Robson (2011) suggest that so-called 'non-native' English-speaking students who lack fluency in English 'may miss the subtlety of a particular discussion point, [or] feel embarrassed that their English is not adequate to contribute to the discussion, which leads to frustration and reduced participation'. In a study by Wicaksono (2012), in which interactions between Home and International students were recorded as students carried out assigned tasks, it was found that successful navigation of classroom-based tasks was best achieved through communicative adjustments by both the 'native' *and* 'non-native' English-speaking students, needing all parties involved in the interaction to assume responsibility for overall successful communication. In spite of this, findings from research by Hedger and Wicaksono (2015) suggested that some students were unwilling to make such adjustments when interacting with students whose English proficiency they felt did not meet the required standard. One International student from South-East Asia, for example, made frequent mention of his struggle to work with Chinese students who do not possess what he perceived to be a 'sound' knowledge of English.

In contrast to the frustrations expressed by some students in **multilingual** classrooms, other students reported an awareness of the advantages. For example, Young and Schartner (2014) highlight their participants' understanding of the potential mutual benefits of increasingly **internationalised** university environments for graduates set to enter the global workforce. Students must be suitably equipped to deal with professional environments beyond university in which cultural and linguistic diversity is increasingly promoted, and often an essential requirement for effective business activity (Ledwith and Seymour, 2001), and experiences of this kind hold numerous benefits in pursuit of developing the necessary skills and attributes for success in the global marketplace. Those participants in Young and Schartner's study (2014) reported that 'exposure to a **multicultural** environment and subsequent interactions with peers from different backgrounds had led to increased self-confidence, and to a greater understanding of others' (Young and Schartner, 2014, p. 558).

In order to realise the benefits of **internationalisation** for all students, and to avoid entrenching negative interpretations of differences, academic staff need to consider how they label groups of students, their approach to teaching **academic literacy** skills, their expectations of students' writing, and how **classroom interaction** is managed.

Recommendations

Accordingly, in line with the conclusions above, we offer the following recommendations.

Promoting the university as a **multilingual**, **multicultural** space:

a. Students should be encouraged and supported (including financially) to study or participate in short projects abroad, in order to enhance their employability skills and, potentially, their intercultural understanding. Such experiences also serve to offer Home students an insight into the challenges faced by their educationally mobile peers.

b. Opportunities for students to have 'international experiences' in the UK should be explored, including for example, classroom-based activities that require information in more than one language to be shared, elective foreign language modules and liaison with relevant local community groups.

c. Students should be encouraged to use and develop their own linguistic skillsets, for example: sourcing research reports or case studies written in languages other than English; recruiting research participants from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds; and considering the impact of research (including their own) on a wide range of language users and community groups.

d.   Students and staff should be helped to develop an awareness of their shared responsibility for successful communication with their international and local counterparts, and students with additional language skills should be encouraged to incorporate these into their studies (see for example Wicaksono and Zhurauskaya, 2011).

e.   Universities should aim to employ international and/or **multilingual** staff members, in order for students to benefit from their varied backgrounds, knowledge and experience. **Bi-/multilingualism** should be listed as a desirable characteristic in new academic post person specifications to encourage this type of diversity in recruitment practices.

2.   **Embedding academic literacies**:

a.   **Academic literacy** skills should be **embedded** into 'content' teaching as part of a situated developmental process, providing an extra way of approaching the subject-specific content. Seminar activities which are designed to easily adapt to varied subject matter and to introduce key concepts/language are an example of how this can be achieved (see for example Hedger and Wicaksono, 2015).

b.   Subject teaching staff who remain reluctant to **embed academic literacies** into the curriculum must be provided with support from **academic literacy** experts who can assist them in introducing key **academic literacy** concepts within the curriculum as a whole. Co-delivery of lectures/seminars can be a useful model, but only where there is shared investment, including joint preparation of the session and joint delivery.

Combatting a deficit approach to **academic literacy** development and realising the potential of our **multilingual** universities will involve long-term, multi-level efforts. Without such efforts, however, we risk holding back the ongoing development of our students, our institutions and our academic disciplines.

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