

Learning Difficulties faced by Indian International Students at Bangor Business School, Bangor University, North Wales, UK

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Abstract

This present paper is the part of a mini research project which was completed and submitted to Bangor University, UK for the fulfilment of M.A. Education Studies in 2010. Paper is based on the primary data collected from the Indian students studying at Bangor Business School, Bangor University, North Wales U.K. Paper finds out the differences in learning styles in India & U.K and learning difficulties faced by Indian students in U.K. The major problem faced by Indian Students in UK is the different examination and evaluation pattern. Most of the Indian students reported plagiarism and English language as the biggest problems.

Key words: *BBS (Bangor Business School), HE (Higher Education), Plagiarism, learning style.*

1. Introduction

The education system of a country is closely linked with its national culture (Chan and Drover 1997; Ballard, B. and Clanchy, J. 1994), hence it is to be expected that academic culture shock will be experienced by most international students in the preliminary stage of the academic sojourn. For international students, much tension is caused during their stay by the differences between the academic conventions of the students' origin country and those of the UK. As stated by Persaud (1993), all students are challenged by the demands of Higher Education, but international students are chiefly placed under pressure by conflict with an alien academic culture. Students enter university with expectations shaped by their previous learning experience. As different cultural traditions represent different attitudes to knowledge, the most significant difference is not just language but also the education system. Thus academic difficulties may arise not just because of linguistic differences but due to a failure to understand or communicate at a cultural level.

When International students come to UK for higher education they face culture shock and learning shock. Indian and most Asian students come from a culture which has a collectivistic tradition in which education is measured in terms of reproducing knowledge. But UK has a much more individualistic culture in which educational success is measured through critical analysis and the extending of knowledge. Thus due to non-familiar teaching and learning methods, international students face difficulties in learning. The present mini project is an attempt to study the learning experiences of Indian International students who finished their Masters (MBA or M.A.) in December 2010 from Bangor Business School (BBS), Bangor University, UK.

2. Review of Literature

There is a general perception that Asian students bring with them cultural variety in methods and style of learning, and are thus inefficiently prepared for critical and analytical thinking in western universities (Dunbar 1988; Reid 1989; Ashman and Conway 1997). It is broadly accepted that 'inadequate language skills and social interaction problems interweave' (Burns 1991, p. 62). The main criticism of Asian students is that they are rote learners and don't attempt to understand the material. They view the teacher

or the text as the definitive source of knowledge. They lack in critical thinking, unable to reference correctly and often are guilty of plagiarism (Kember, D. and Gow, L. 1991; Robertson et al. 2000; Samuelowicz, K. 1987).

The standard portrait of students from South Asia as ‘surface learners’ and ‘passive non-participants’ has been challenged by Chalmers and Volet, who argued that these stereotypes ‘have sometimes been used as an excuse for not addressing the fundamental issue of student learning at university. When the “problem” is attributed to the students, teachers can avoid examining their own attitudes and practices’. One of the common misconceptions, especially about South-East Asian students, is that they ‘stick together and do not want to mix with local students’ (Chalmers and Volet 1997, p. 92).

In a comparative study of native (Australian) and non-native (Chinese) English speakers, Jones examined that the determining factor was not cultural background but a clear explanation of what was expected (Jones 2005). Other researches (Okorochoa 1996; Li, Clark et al.1997; Nishio 2001) state in the same direction, i.e. towards the need for special clarity in briefing international students about the learning environment which they are entering. Several researches show that, for international students who come from different teaching and learning traditions, most notably those favouring rote-learning and teacher-centred approaches, it is essential to promote and facilitate extra learning support at the beginning of their studies (Beasley and Pearson 1999). Although language is often identified as a major obstacle for international students in their adjustment to university life, many studies suggest that students’ understanding of academic expectations, conventions and standards at the host university is of equal importance (Samuelowicz 1987). The academic staff’s understanding of the educational background of their students will further improve the overall experience of students at university and in turn mitigate mismatches between student and staff expectations (Mullins, Quintrell et al. 1995).

Objectives of the study

The two major objectives of the study were:

- to examine the differences in learning experiences of the respondents in their home country (India) and UK and;
- to identify the learning difficulties faced by Indian students at BBS, UK.

Delimitation of the study

Within the constraints of available resources and time the present study is limited to the Indian international students who completed their Masters (MBA or M.A.) in December 2010 from Bangor Business School, Bangor University, UK.

2. The Methodology

Sample

This mini research adopted a qualitative as well as a quantitative approach to investigate the learning experience and difficulties of Indian international students who studied for their Masters (MBA or M.A.) at Bangor Business School (BBS). Keeping in mind about the time, money and availability of the respondents 25 Ex-students of BBS were selected as a sample of the study. On a later stage five students refused to participate in the research since they were busy in their work and living far from Bangor. Thus only 20 students were agreed to participate in the interview and to respond to the questionnaire.

Research Tools and Techniques

Primary data were collected direct from the students while books, research journals and magazines were used as secondary sources of data collection. Data were collected with the help of a small questionnaire followed by a personal interview. Respondents were assured that the given information would be used only for the purpose of the research work. All the twenty respondents willingly participated in the study.

As De Vaus (1993) has said: '*Do not take risk, pilot test first*'. Pre-testing of the questionnaire was done to discard the unnecessary questions and to add relevant questions.

Questionnaires were filled by the researcher himself in the month of January 2011. Due to the use of the Likert Scale, an indication of agreement and disagreement relating to learning styles was determined for each student. An interview permits the researcher to express the question in such a fashion that the respondent can understand it most easily. The researcher may probe more deeply when the occasion demand. So to get information in detail in-depth interviews were carried out just after completion of the questionnaire. Interview diary was used to note the key information because all respondents refused to audio-record their statements. All informants were asked to sign an 'informed consent document' immediately prior to interview.

Data Analysis

The data was manually coded and processed on computer at Bangor University, UK, during the third week of January 2011 and frequency, percentage and measurement of central tendency were obtained.

Major findings of the project

All of the 20 respondents were full-time masters' students during Sept. 2009 to Sept. 2010 and had completed their degree from BBS, Bangor University UK at the time of interview in Jan. 2011. All were from India, eight from North India and twelve from South India ranging age 22 to 33 years. The average age was recorded 25 years. In terms of gender, there were six female students and fourteen male students. Three respondents had already had a master degree from Indian.

Number of important points emerged from careful analysis of the data. Many (80%) students perceived the education quality they had received at the BBS very positively. They had to work very hard to adapt well to the academic life at the Bangor University where they experienced many difficulties deriving from lack of knowledge of academic norms and conventions, insufficient learning support, unfamiliar teaching methods, and cultural differences in classroom interactions.

Most respondents (80%) reported a relatively high level of satisfaction with their study at the BBS. Their satisfaction derived from their academic adaptation, language skills development, intellectual growth, academic achievements, development of academic, social, intercultural and interpersonal skills, confidence in learning, learner independence, and gradual changes in their learning conceptualizations. They were happy with quality education, practical programs, favourable learning environments, quality services, and effective learning support systems.

The role of the lecturer was different in India, according to all 20 respondents, as one said: "*The lecturers (in India) go through every chapter by chapter, their aim is to complete the syllabus, teaching is based on text books and students have no scope to learn independently. You just accept whatever the teacher teaches you. But in UK, the situation is totally opposite*". A further difference was the greater use of group working in the UK as opposed to India.

All of the students interviewed considered the lecturing staff to be good, intelligent and very friendly. Study shows that 60 per cent of the respondents admitted that they were satisfied when their ideas were accepted by classmates. Eighty per cent reported that this style was more interactive than their own learning style. A majority of the students (60 per cent) also reported that this system allowed them to learn on their own.

The respondents were very uncertain on the accuracy of the knowledge acquired (80 per cent of students admitted their uncertainty). This was supported by the fact that 80 per cent of respondents were not sure if they had understood the material content and were not sure about what do for the problems (60 per cent). Four respondents (20 per cent) claimed that time was wasted in class, and it was also felt by two (10 per

cent) that teaching was not focused. Meanwhile, 20 per cent of the respondents also complained that the workload was very heavy and required extra effort and hard work outside class.

All the six female respondents realized that they had changed a great deal, from being dependent to independent. They also found that their newly acquired independent skills gave them empowerment both in their academic studies and social life. This mini research project found that most Indian students (60%) were happy with the programs for their relevance, practicality and currency. They described these programs as practical, useful, flexible, and work-related.

With regard to comparing the UK's HE system to India, all participants were agreed to the greater freedom students are allowed in the UK. One participant stated that, *"At home (India) the teachers feed me with lot of information or knowledge, but in the UK they help me pick up the spoon and learn to feed myself. They give me more chance to interact in the class."* The majority of participants pointed out that in the UK the teaching and learning styles are more active, friendly, practical and open and therefore more attractive than in India, a conclusion supported by Hills and Thom (2005).

Language was singled out by Indian international students who were not native English speakers as the biggest obstacle to their adaptation to the educational setting at BBS. The current study has investigated the concern of international students that high IELTS test scores do not guarantee success with study. It is identified that students are taught 'how to pass the test' rather than how to understand and communicate in 'real life' situations with fast-talking native speakers. Many students reported that they had never been exposed to anything like these situations before, and stated that they consequently found it extremely hard to understand what was expected of them in their new environment.

This study confirms early research findings that English language is one of the biggest barriers for international students (Li, Baker, & Marshall, 2002; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Fifty per cent participants reported that the language barriers prevented them from effectively communicating with lecturers and other students, listening to lectures, following instructions, understanding assessment criteria and procedures, writing assignments, doing exams and tests, and socializing with other residents.

Pedagogy is context-dependent and value-laden (Ellsworth, 1997). It is shaped by the particular cultural values and ideology suited to the society where it originates (Barrow, 1990). In this small project respondents reported that writing critical reviews and essays, business and field reports, research proposals, case study analysis, and making references were the most difficult tasks. All the informants told that they had listened about plagiarism and referencing first time in their life in UK. They had no previous experience of referencing, critical writing, report writing and reading of research journals. One of the female students stated, *"in India most of the time we have to write in the examination what we learn from teachers and text books and we are given good marks if we write as per the books. But in UK writing 'as it is' considered as an academic crime i.e. plagiarism. We are familiar with the examination system in which we memorise and write the exams but here in UK we have to write critical with strong evidences"*.

3. Suggestion

Beasley and Pearson (1999) suggest that innovative course design and effective student support policies enable students to develop better communication skills, critical thinking and independence and this in turn improves their integration with local students and makes the whole transition process easier. The opening of extra learning support such as interactive workshops, peer learning and support groups can reduce failure rates, and is beneficial to all students. Rees and Porter (1998) suggested that those providers who take an ethnocentric approach, who do not take account of the special needs of

international students, and who do not fulfil their sales promises are likely to be just as much at risk as exporters in any other market.

In the process of intercultural communication, Indian international students were seesawing between contradictions, inconsistencies, and conflicting ideologies. They lived in a world of paradoxes that could be managed and minimized only. The study suggests that in the age of globalization, it is important that lecturers and host institutions are professionally responsible to make adaptations to help Asian international students cope with these paradoxes, to equip them with adequate knowledge of academic discourses, and to transcend the culturally framed borders and subjectivities.

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