Engineering Student Voices on Intercultural Integration: Harmony or Discord?

Abel Nyamapfene (A.Nyamapfene@exeter.ac.uk), Alice Bond (ab488@exeter.ac.uk), Guy Pearce (gp244@exeter.ac.uk) and Katrina Pamatmat (kp275@exeter.ac.uk)

University of Exeter, UK

Abstract: It is widely accepted amongst educators that increased internationalisation within universities has led to greater intercultural diversity amongst the student population. This, in turn, is helping to foster greater intercultural understanding amongst both host culture and international students. However, despite higher education institutions becoming increasingly multicultural, there is considerable evidence, both factual and anecdotal, that the level of intercultural interaction between international students and host culture students remains disappointingly low. The research reported in this paper explores the extent and depth of intercultural interactions amongst engineering students at a research intensive institution in the South West of England. The research is conducted by students drawn from the engineering body, and comprises interviews and focus group meetings. The nationality of the student researchers reflects the diversity of nationalities in the student body. Whilst the bulk of the findings are consistent with the literature, the research looks at the issues from the perspective of the student. This student-led approach has led to a number of suggestions as to the causes and solutions to the barriers to intercultural integration amongst the student body that, whilst in the main show consistence with the literature, are in some respects at variance to the widely held assumptions. Following this research, a student-led intervention program aimed at enhancing intercultural integration within the engineering student body is currently being developed. The lessons arising out of this project are expected to be important to other higher education institutions, both in the UK and abroad.

Project Background

University campuses in the UK, and elsewhere, are increasingly becoming multicultural as students drawn from all over the world come to study together. According to a study by Universities UK [2011], in the ten year period from 2000/01 to 2009/10, the proportion of non-EU students studying in UK universities rose from 6.5 per cent of the total UK student population to 11.3 % students. This trend is not unique to the UK, but is mirrored in several other countries, including South Africa, Australia, Canada and the United States of America.

The presence of international students at UK universities has brought with it important financial benefits, especially with the cutbacks in public funding being experienced throughout the higher education sector. There is therefore a huge financial incentive for universities to bring in and maintain international students on their campuses. For instance, whilst fees from non-EU students constituted 5% of total university income in the UK (William, 1987), by 2009/10, this proportion had increased to 9.6% of total university income (HESA, 2010). Indeed, a recent report in the Guardian newspaper has suggested that overseas fees have now become the lifeline for most UK universities (Shepherd, 2009)

From a pedagogic perspective, it is also felt that the presence of international students on UK university campuses introduces students to multicultural environments, thereby reflecting more

accurately the work environments of today (Vickers and Bekhradnia, 2007). Graduate engineers are now expected to communicate effectively with employees from diverse cultural backgrounds. The ability to do so is referred to as intercultural communication competence, defined by Chen and Starosta (1998) as "the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other's cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment". Internationalised university campuses are therefore important environments for the acquisition of intercultural communication competences (Penbek, Yurdakul, and Cerit, 2009).

However, the simple creation of multicultural campuses through recruiting international students has not led to the much expected intercultural interaction that fosters the acquisition of intercultural communication competences. For instance, a study on intercultural contacts at a multicultural university in the United States of America revealed that different ethnicities basically keep to themselves except when in class or at work (Halualani et al, 2004). A 2004 UK survey (UKCOSA, 2004) and an Irish study by Dunne (2008) also produced similar findings. This is despite the fact that in all these studies students viewed intercultural interaction as important to them and therefore something to be embraced.

Conceptualisation of the Project

The objective of the project was to establish the extent and depth of intercultural interaction amongst engineering students in the Department of Engineering at the University of Exeter. Factors that facilitate or hinder intercultural interaction between host and international students were explored and documented. Following this study, a student-led intervention program to ensure that intercultural interaction takes root and flourishes within the Department of Engineering at the University of Exeter will be implemented.

During the period 2007 to 2009 when the drive to increase international student numbers in Engineering began in earnest, the general expectation within the department was that enrolling students from different cultural backgrounds would lead to the students acquiring intercultural team-working skills. However, the much-hoped-for intercultural interaction did not materialise. Rather, it was observed that when given the opportunity to form groups on their own, home students tended to gravitate towards other home students, and international students, likewise, tended to gravitate towards other international students. Cursory observations of student interactions in the departmental canteen and during lecture breaks also indicated a clear divide between home and international students.

This lack of intercultural interaction amongst engineering students at Exeter is consistent with research findings that the mere presence of international students in an education institution is not a sufficient condition for promoting intercultural interactions or developing intercultural friendships (see Ward, 2006, for a review). Ward (2006) posits that significant intercultural interaction is unlikely to occur spontaneously and that interventionist strategies are necessary in order to foster and develop cross-cultural interaction. It is on this basis that this project was mooted.

As Grey (2002) observes, whilst university departments are faced with the prospect of having to design and implement an 'internationalised' curriculum, there is a general lack of awareness and engagement with cultural diversity and the politics of difference. For instance, whilst group work is the common curricular vehicle for equipping students with team-working skills, Dales et al (2011) suggest that group formation within a multicultural environment can be a challenge as it can give rise to unforeseen cultural and intellectual perceptions amongst the students. To guarantee success it was felt that the project should involve active participation from both academics and students within the department.

Methodology

Like all physical science based disciplines, engineering is primarily a quantitative discipline rooted in the principles of mathematics, and research within the discipline tends to be deductive, empirical scientific research. In deductive research, the researcher develops a hypothesis based on an existing theory (Gilbert, 2008). Experimental procedures are then carried out to evaluate the hypothesis, and based on experimental observations, the existing theory is modified and another hypothesis formulated and evaluated. This cycle is repeated until a sufficiently robust theoretical framework has been developed to guarantee the delivery of the expected objective. A similar deductive, empirical scientific approach could be used to research on intercultural interaction within the engineering

student body. Adopting such a quantitative scientific approach is typical of the positivist paradigm. Gilbert (2008: p.82) defines a paradigm as "a set of assumptions about how we know the world and what we do when we conduct research."

In a positivist paradigm, social reality is construed as an objective entity, and it is the job of the scientist to uncover this entity methodically and objectively (Fink, 2000). Adapting a positivist paradigm to intercultural interaction assumes that the relations between the students will be concrete and deterministic. Given such a perspective, a model of intercultural interaction can be created, and this model will be applicable to every conceivable situation. An example of a positivist approach to cross-cultural studies is the work carried out by teaching staff at the University of Sheffield to assess the cultural perceptions of a cohort of Engineering Management students comprising students from different countries (Rodriguez-Falcon et al, 2012). In this study, the Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck Cross-Cultural Framework (KSCF) (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961) was used to assess student cultural values in terms of relationships to nature, time orientation, activity orientation, nature of people and relationships between people in their countries of origin. The study found that there were a number of areas where students' perceptions did not match the expected cultural norms of their countries of origin. Other aspects were seen to be actually contradictory to the ones predicted by the KSCF framework. Their findings agree with the findings by Yeganer et al (2004) that whilst the positivist approach emphasises the importance of generalisation and universal laws, such generalisations in cross-cultural research are usually inaccurate and are dependent on the particular social context within which the study takes place.

Interactions between people are not deterministic. Yeganer et al suggest that cultural interactions are best understood by focussing on the actors' interpretations and constructions. Consequently, it was decided that an interpretive approach involving such methods as interviews, narrative enquiry, observations and questionnaires would be the most appropriate approach to understanding the intercultural interactions amongst the students in the Department of Engineering. Since this approach involves getting close to the participants, engaging with them and winning their trust, it was necessary to put ethics into consideration. According to Gilbert (2008), ethics is a "matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others" in which researchers have to take account of the effects of their actions upon the participants in their research and act in such a way as to preserve their rights and integrity as human beings. The intercultural interaction project was therefore set up to comply with the College of Engineering, Mathematics and Physical guidelines on ethics.

Narrative enquiry, augmented by focus groups, was adopted as the research method. Narrative enquiry is a form of qualitative research that involves the gathering of narratives – written, oral and visual – focussing on the meanings that people ascribe to their experiences (Trahar, 2009). This involved recording and transcribing interviews and conversations with students. From these transcriptions recurring themes were identified, and further explored through focus group meetings.

Adopting a Collaborative Action Research Perspective to the Project

Since the aim of the project was not only to seek an understanding of intercultural interaction amongst the students, but to use the lessons learnt to improve intercultural interaction amongst the students within Engineering, we adopted a research approach that involved both students and academic staff in research design, data collection and analysis, action implementation and action review. This is an example of action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). Action research arose out of Kurt Lewin's work on improving intergroup relationships in the United States of America after realising that research without follow-up action which he termed "research that produces nothing but books" - is insufficient (Lewin, 1946). The research on intercultural interaction that has been carried out over the past decades has yielded results that have been collaborated across different studies. Despite this, problems associated with lack of intercultural interaction between students from different cultural backgrounds still remain. As various research studies have confirmed, both students and academic staff are aware of these problems. However, just as in Kurt Lewin's research on intergroup relationships in the aftermath of the Second World War, what is missing is transforming these findings into appropriate actions. Action research can go some way in addressing this.

Students are increasingly involved in research activities aimed at improving their learning environments. Fielding (2001) describes several projects carried out at a UK school in which the students and their teachers were invited to improve various aspects of the academic environment in their school. This work affirms that students are competent, when adequately trained in appropriate research methods, to carry out research on aspects affecting their environments. The University of

Exeter has a "Students as Change Agents" scheme which promotes student-led research and evaluation to improve the curriculum and student experience (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011). This scheme was adopted as a reference framework around which the intercultural interaction project was based.

Project Team Composition and Conduct

A team of three engineering students were recruited to investigate perceptions of intercultural integration amongst the engineering student body at the University of Exeter. Each of the three students brought a unique perspective to the research team. The son of a career diplomat, Guy has lived all over the world and has been to countless schools and been immersed in many fascinating cultures, including African and Asian cultures. He was born in Thailand but has lived across so many countries it is difficult for him to say where he really belongs. He in in his fourth year of a Civil Engineering degree and of late has spent much time designing the water system for a new eco-city. Katrina is one of the few women studying Electronic Engineering and is in her third year. She has recently moved to the UK from the Philippines and brings an international student perspective to the team as her background has given her unique sensitivity to the many different cultural aspects of living in England. Alice is a self-confessed fanatical traveller, inherited from her parents whom are passionate about the importance of understanding different societies. She has a special interest in foreign cultures and environments and is a second year Civil Engineering student born and raised in England.

The students began by reading and reviewing existing literature related to the field. They also received training on questionnaire design, interview techniques, and focus group meeting organisation as well as data transcription and data analysis. The students were given full responsibility for the research project. They were responsible for formulating the research design, carrying out the interviews and organising the two focus group meetings. The focus groups allowed student's ideas to bounce back and forth which developed their opinions further, allowing greater ideas to be created. The students later transcribed and analysing the data. An online project repository was created, and weekly project meetings throughout term-time with the academic staff member ensured that the project time table was adhered to and that the student researchers had the necessary guidance and support.

Each student researcher has personal contacts amongst both the home and international students. Because of this close affinity with the engineering student body, students being interviewed were in a position to express their opinions in an open, unbiased and relaxed manner. Other students outside the research team's circle of contacts were also interviewed to allow a more rounded perspective. This also included the representatives of student societies within engineering.

Project Findings and Outcomes

The project's findings on intercultural integration generally echoed the findings that have been reported in the literature. A significant difference was that this project had the added impact of galvanising the whole student body into thinking about internationalisation and generating relevant solutions. The project has been highly advertised and promoted within the College of Engineering, Mathematics and Physical Sciences (CEMPS). In this section we will focus first on the general project findings. After this we will discuss the impact the project had within the Department of Engineering as a whole.

In line with previous research, both home and international students generally felt that internationalisation had positive benefits (see Dunne, 2008; Mckinven, 2011; Montgomery, 2009). In the opinion of the students, an internationalised learning environment such as the University of Exeter's Engineering Department, brings about greater cultural diversity and an expansive knowledge of how Engineering merges into the wider, global context. They felt that this is increasingly essential in a vocation that may, and most likely will, be practised abroad at some stage by home students. Additionally, students felt that internationalisation promotes the ability for students to work with a range of people from different backgrounds who approach tasks in their own unique, separate ways. As a second year civil engineering student observed: "th*ere's always, no matter where you are from, that mixing and feeding off each other's differences."*

Home students felt that the Engineering Department, compared to other departments within the university, was missing out on the benefits of internationalisation owing to smaller international student numbers in Engineering. They cited the example of the Business School where international students make up approximately 40% of the student population in contrast to Engineering, where the figure is

around 15%. The students felt that the low figure of international enrolment within Engineering should be addressed given the fact that Engineering is a global subject widely regarded as a strong academic discipline within the UK and hence would be favourable with International students. However, they also observed that there was a general tendency by international students, particularly amongst the Chinese population who make up a large proportion of International students, to focus more towards the financial and business sectors rather than the sciences.

In line with previous research, both home and international students also observed that students tended to stay apart in their cultural groupings (see Ippolito, 2007; Dunne,2008; Mckinven, Harrison and Peacock, 2007; Rose-Redwood, 2010). Language competence amongst international students was perceived by home students to be a major barrier to intercultural integration. As a second year civil engineering home student noted: *"A couple of foreign people were a bit split up because I think they were quite shy and their English wasn't perfect, so they kind of split up from everybody else ..."* This was reinforced by a third year mechanical engineering student from Hong Kong who observed that although English is an official language which people learn from a very young age in Hong Kong, many students arriving from Hong Kong felt uncomfortable talking to English students because they feel embarrassed of their accent. International students also felt that English students speak too fast, hence making conversation difficult. In turn, home students also shied away from conversations with international students because they felt that they might inadvertently say the wrong thing which may be viewed by the international student as an insult. This lack of confidence in initiating conversations across the home student – international student divide is best summed up in the words of a fourth year civil engineering student *"…it's not an 'I don't want to talk to him because he's from a different country' mentality, it's just a bit of a lack of confidence from each side."*

Another barrier to intercultural integration that both home and international students observed was the tendency for cultural groupings to maintain their separation. For instance, home students tended to keep to themselves, whilst Chinese students tended to stick together. In the words of a second year home student: *"The Chinese students all seem to hang out together and not really mix."* A number of international students felt that there was very little common ground between home students and international students. This, according to a number of international students, was exacerbated by what they observed to be the home students' drinking culture: *"It's not the party culture as such but it's more the drinking culture. The" lads" forcing people to drink for initiations…I don't think they like that."*

Another issue hindering intercultural integration cited by both international and home students was the demanding nature of the Engineering curriculum which left little time for socialisation. This, in the opinion of the students, was further exacerbated by the layout of the Engineering building, a utilitarian structure built in the 1960s that offered very little in the way of space for socialisation. In contrast, students felt that the Business School buildings offered a more welcoming environment, with a number of large café areas which allow students to meet and talk between lectures. In contrast, the Engineering building has one social area in the whole building on the ground floor. In the words of a second year home student, *"the Engineering building is obviously an academic building, but it's important to allow students to have space to unwind".*

Improving intercultural integration through curriculum changes

In the focus group meetings, students suggested that whilst intercultural integration was generally poor within the department, this tended to improve as students progressed through the degree programme. They observed that international students tended to become more comfortable with time at integrating as they got to know more people. This observation is consistent with the findings by Gu et al (2010) that international students experienced a marked growth in intercultural and academic confidence over time. However, in line with the findings by Harrison (2011), students felt that integration could be improved if the university made appropriate changes to the way learning is delivered within the departments as well as ensuring that intercultural contact is enhanced outside the class through practices such as putting students in multicultural accommodation and putting in place more multicultural social activities.   We will focus on the learning and teaching activities within the direct control of the department which students felt could be improved.

With regard to learning and teaching, students suggested that classes could be more integrated if academic staff made their lectures more interactive. They also suggested that course material should be more international, rather than focussing on UK-based examples only. For instance, group based projects in civil engineering could focus with disaster management in a developing country. Students would then get to know more about the country as well as using their Engineering knowledge to work together to come up with an appropriate solution. In addition, they also felt that modules could be

redesigned so to include more group work where students could discuss material and do problem solving in multicultural groups. They also suggested that within each module, student groups should be rotated so that each student gets to meet and work with a different set of people in each group coursework or class activity. It is interesting to note that these suggestions are in line with widely acknowledged suggestions for improved learning and teaching in higher education.

Students also identified the personal tutor system as a place in which intercultural integration could be encouraged. For instance, they gave the example an academic staff member within the department who requires his tutees to take turns in making presentations during the weekly tutor group meetings. They felt that this was good for intercultural integration since it helps international students to practise their language skills in a safe environment and improve their confidence. They also felt that this helped the tutor group members to get to know each other and this promotes a sense of community amongst the group members. They also suggested that team-building amongst the tutor group members could be improved by having inter-tutor group competitions which could include graded academic work. Students also suggested that the personal tutor system could be augmented by a "Buddy scheme" in which first year international students are paired with second year home students.

Students also pointed out that the personal tutor system used an alphabetical system to organise students into tutor groups. For instance students with surnames starting with the letter "a" would be place in the same tutor group and so on. However, in some nationalities, the initial letters of most surnames tend to be concentrated around a few letters of the alphabet. This has resulted in international students being distributed unevenly within the various tutor groups, thereby slowing down intercultural integration.

Students also pointed out that the department should provide more opportunities for students to meet and mingle within the department. This could be done through increasing study places where students from different year groups and different backgrounds could meet and meet and discuss. In addition, opportunities should be availed to students to participate more in the life of the department through organising events such as student-led conferences, seminars and employer-meeting events. In particular, most students felt that students should be encouraged to take the lead in organising Engineering social events, especially non-drinking based events so as to attract more students, including those who are put off by drink-related events. Such activities can include lunch, dinner, mountain climbing, walks and trips to the beach. Groups could also be organised around sports that are popular with international students. For instance team competitions could be organised in badminton, table tennis and other sports activities popular with students from Asia. Since students make friendship groups within first two weeks, it was also felt that organising social events such as a barbeque for first year engineering students would help with intercultural integration.

Impact of the project

The project has led to increased awareness of internationalisation amongst both staff and students. It has also led to increased staff-student collaboration in finding solutions to issues affecting not only the department but the College of Engineering, Mathematics and Physical sciences as well. For instance, the student researchers on this project have been invited to work alongside staff to improve international student recruitment as well as improving the international student experience within the entire College. As the project draws to a close, a number of workshops between staff and students are being arranged to disseminate the project findings as well as to draw up plans to improve intercultural integration within the department. In addition to addressing intercultural integration, we anticipate that this project will encourage other students within the department to be actively involved in addressing other issues that the department is faced with.

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