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Readiness assessments, portfolio and peer support – a panacea for achieving the EDI agenda and student engagement? A reflection and preview

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Having taught and supported international students in higher education (HE) for several years, I continually observe the uniqueness and dynamism of every new cohort. My role spans being an Induction tutor to offering pastoral support as an Academic and Personal Tutor (APT) Lead, a Module leader, an Academic Conduct Officer, and a Course director. I know you will say – isn't that so much to do? Well, it is. However, these roles have offered me the opportunity to appreciate the diversity that exists within higher education in the UK and reiterates the need for equality and inclusion within my teaching practice. The Advance HE's (2020) Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) agenda advocates support for all students irrespective of who they are and where they come from, a call to minimise the widening attainment gap which was actually negatively impacted during the Covid-19 pandemic (Goudeau et al., 2021).

Teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic struck, and there were a flurry of activities within the higher education sector, rewriting modules and converting content/activities for online delivery to ensure a minimal negative impact. At this time, innovations and diverse teaching styles emerged – from online, asynchronous, synchronous, flexible and flipped learning (Ogamba, 2021) – all in a bid to ensure students were not disadvantaged. As time went on, and the pandemic was being controlled, more innovations emerged which prompted more teaching and learning terminologies around Hy-flex and hybrid, and students being

offered choices as to how they wished to study (so much to learn for academic staff too!). However, there was no doubt the pandemic brought in so many innovative practices which now support the Equality, Diversity, and inclusion (EDI) agenda, and even offer the opportunity for working professionals and full-time parents to engage in study. However, with all these innovations, it appeared there was a group of students who were massively disadvantaged – particularly international students from low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) (Rashid and Yadav, 2020).

International students and the attainment gap

Studying in the UK as an international student is not new; however, having to study from one's home country having previously opted to study on campus is not entirely normal. Some challenges noted were internet connectivity challenges, economic and financial risks, unstable electricity, unconducive learning environments, geographical differences and time zones (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). This situation was created by the pandemic, which affected visa applications, travel, student engagement, teaching and learning. Having observed the rate of student engagement between 2020 and mid-2022, and noted feedback from student surveys I carried out, there is evidence that, although the innovative practices around teaching and learning have been one of the excellent innovations within the teaching and learning development, it has widened the attainment gap and, rather than individuals feeling included, they have felt excluded (Goudeau et al., 2021). The question thus should be: with all the diverse innovations around teaching and learning development, do we all feel included? This calls for further research.

What did we do, including work in progress?

Working in an institution whose strategic framework is centred on inclusion, flexibility and authentic learning, ensuring a high rate of student engagement and positive student experience is paramount and top of the list (Coventry University, 2015). Well, we innovated, as expected of academics!

- **The portfolio module***: pre-Covid, my colleague and I had already started thinking about strategies to ensure that we minimise the attainment gap and improve employability skills. In the course periodic review/approval, we introduced a new portfolio module meant to guide, support and track the students' journey from the beginning to completion of the course. It supports students in setting SMART goals and action plans from enrolment, while linking them to the course learning outcomes and employers' need. This has ensured that students are clear on their goals and begin to actively engage in the course curricular and extracurricular activities from the outset.

- **The readiness assessment**: due to travel restrictions, many (international) students could not arrive in person for induction sessions and classes at the beginning of their programme. Hence, we set up a readiness assessment to help us identify individual student needs as soon as they enrol. Then we share the outcome with a team of 'success coaches', who then support the students to adapt and minimise any gap that could be created by late enrolment and arrival.

- **The peer support approach**: we started the peer support approach as co-creation with older students to support new students at induction sessions based on the themes that the students themselves have identified to discuss to ensure that, in real time, we are able to address identified challenges rather than using feedback from current students to address past issues and then use it for new students.

Although these practices appear to have yielded positive results in terms of improving student engagement, I am on the path to conduct empirical research to explore the following:

- From student voices, what exactly do international students say are the major challenges that hinder their engagement and attainment right from enrolment to achieving the module/course learning outcomes?
- What is the impact of the above innovations/strategies on student engagement, attainment and achievement?

Due to limited space, I cannot provide the step-by-step details of the process and strategies we implemented in the above. However, I am very happy to be contacted by those interested in hearing more. I am also open to collaborations on research to explore the above questions.

In summary, not only have I thought about student engagement and minimising attainment gaps, I have also championed embedding the sustainable development goals (SDGs) within teaching and learning with a focus on SDG 4 and 10 (United Nations, 2022), as they are linked to quality education and reducing inequalities. I was just having a conversation with my daughter on creating an awareness of the SDGs, and her response was: '2030 to achieve these? That's almost impossible'. My response: 'we can all do something individually and collectively to help rather than wait for time to run out', and that is what I do daily in my teaching and professional practice as a way to embed the EDI agenda and minimise the attainment gap.

I hope this inspires you to reflect on and review your practice, especially around EDI in the context of international students in HE.

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