They Don't Really Want to Know Us: Experiences and Perceptions of international Students at the Dublin Institute of Technology

Almut Schlepper
Technological University Dublin

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'They don't really want to know us': experiences and perceptions of international students at the Dublin Institute of Technology

Author - Almut Schlepper

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the experiences and perceptions of international, non-EU students at the Dublin Institute of Technology.

My interest in the subject derives from my work as a lecturer at a college with an increasing number of international students and from my participation as a student on a course which made me appreciate the value of a diverse student and lecturer body.

The sample of the survey I carried out included international students and lecturers at one campus of the Dublin Institute of Technology.

While the results indicated that international students are just as heterogeneous as Irish students, they are faced with specific problems deriving from difficulty with language, differences in academic culture and segregation from the Irish students. They are also subjected to discrimination and racism, which is often not expressed explicitly and therefore hard to challenge.

Because of falling numbers of Irish students, institutions of higher education have increasingly become dependent on the recruitment of international students, but do not appreciate the educational benefits of a diverse student population. The revenue generated by the international students does not correspond to an adequate infrastructure of support and services. The lack of acknowledgement by the institution corresponds with the failure to recognise the international students as an integral part of life on campus. As a consequence the international students expressed the feeling of being ignored and neglected. As Irish students were not part of the survey their attitude could be deducted only from how the international students perceived them.

The fact that the majority of lecturers regarded international students as an asset gives an indication of the hidden potential of diversity. The detailed suggestions of both students and lecturers could help to improve the situation and to create the conditions for an intercultural campus. In addition, the institution needs to develop policy guidelines and codes of practice for the development of awareness of diversity issues and recognition of the value of a diverse student population.

'Unless you conduct yourselves with more restraint and moderation towards them [overseas students], they will be driven into abandoning their studies and leaving the country, which we by no means desire'.
King Henry III in Cambridge, 1231 (Elsey and Kinnell 1990: 1)

The words of Henry III suggest that movement of students between countries is not a modern phenomenon. The internationalisation of higher education was promoted for centuries by the tradition of wandering scholars. Brennan (2003: 41) suggests that a true university cannot exist without multiculturalism, and refers to John Henry Newman for whom the university is the knowledge and genius gained from harnessing the talents of a diversity of people, from a

diversity of geographical locations and a diversity of cultural backgrounds, who apply their talents to a spectrum of subjects at the same institution. Therefore I would agree with Cohen (1995: 1) who holds that multicultural societies require multicultural universities. The Irish government made a commitment to inter-culturalism in the White Paper on Adult Education (2000) which it defines as 'the need to frame educational policy and practice in the context of serving a diverse population as opposed to a uniform one, and the development of curricula, materials, training and inservice, modes of assessment and delivery methods which accept such diversity as the norm' (Department of Education and Science, 2000: 13).

It seems, however, that the benefits of a diverse student population have not been the driving factor in the recruitment of international students. Because of falling numbers of Irish students, the higher-education sector third-level institutions have become increasingly dependent on the revenue generated by international students who pay an average fee of €10,000. The Dean of Medicine and Health at University College Cork, Professor Michael Murphy, states: 'The *only* reason we have brought in non EU-students is because we would have to shut our doors without their fees. They heavily subsidise Irish students' (Donnellan 2003, italics added). Ireland follows the path previously trod by Britain, where the complaint was made much earlier that international students were seen as remedying the financial situation rather than as a significant feature of future academic development (Elsey and Kinnell 1990: 17). In the debate about international students, little importance is given to the academic or cultural benefits the universities could gain from 'internationalisation at home'.

Apart from this degrading view of international students as revenue-generators, the institutions fail to provide for the practical implications of a diverse student body. The structures and support services are not appropriate to the high fees they are paying. The literature in the UK has identified and discussed the paradox that the international students were supposed to create extra revenue while at the same time the fees had to cover the additional support they need (Kinnell 1990: 40). Irish international students have complained about the exorbitant fees and unjustified increases, while there is no system in place for loans or scholarships (Horan, 2003). According to Dr Rebecca Hughes from the University of Nottingham, admitting a wider student body involves not only 'salivating over the benefits, but also meeting the costs. It demands a mature strategy in terms of internationalisation in contradistinction to straight international recruitment' (Hughes, 2004).

Racism in education

The death of the Chinese student Zhao Liu Tao following a racist attack in Dublin in January 2002 has shown that international students are not immune to the increasing xenophobia and racism in Irish society. Apart from reports about racist attitudes of Irish students (Union of Students in Ireland, 2003) the segregation of international students reflects the 'institutional and social tainting of "otherness"' that exists in Irish society (FitzGibbon 2003: 48). This 'everyday racism' with its patronising, marginalisation and passive tolerance is not a separate phenomenon but has to be seen in context with the institutional and ideological racism by which it is shaped (Essed 1991: 288). This racism and racialisation influence the experiences of the international students at the level of the institution and of interaction. One of the students interviewed expressed this connection explicitly 'Irish students - I cannot see myself fraternising with them if the situation outside is so bad. That is why I work alone in class and laboratory. It's inevitable.'
The lack of integration of international students with Irish students on the interactional level corresponds with a lack of policies and structures on the institutional level.

While adjustment *to* Irish society and educational system is expected from the international student, adjustment *by* the society and its institution is limited (Sinha 2003: 83).

Like many other third-level institutions, the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) has no policies addressing the issue of a multicultural university. There are no structures in place to give international students support by way of tutor or buddy system, and there are no organised places or events were they could meet with other students. There are no official channels through which they can make themselves heard or process complaints. There is no visual representation of 'non-white' students.