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2016-17 Pilot project
supporting the international
student experience in the UK

Global Voices in science
Nottingham Trent University



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This project was highly commended for the Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education 2017.

Background

This project piloted a scheme to establish a Global Voices programme at Nottingham Trent University. The programme was designed to involve a select team of international students to deliver formal and informal curriculum activities on subject-specific issues relating to their home country and/or culture. The programme was piloted in five modules across the Schools of Science and Technology, and Animal, Rural and Environmental Sciences.

The project was designed to address a number of issues that impact on international students studying in UK higher education, while also recognising and engaging with the rich and diverse knowledge and experience international students bring to the sector. Evidence suggests that international students in UK higher education often feel disadvantaged in the classroom as they must come to terms with the same new ideas, approaches and concepts as other students while also grappling with new cultural references and UK-focused case studies and examples (Ramachandran, 2011). At the same time, UK students can perceive international students as needing extra support, particularly in activities such as group work, resulting in resistance



to co-working in case it detrimentally affects their assessment marks (De Vita, 2002). While academic staff are mindful of these issues, they often feel inadequately prepared or insufficiently experienced to modify their teaching and learning activities to effectively respond to the increasing diversity of student backgrounds and experiences (Leask and Beelan, 2010). The diversity that international students bring, therefore, to UK higher education is often seen as a challenge rather than a benefit.

This project sought to redress this perception by creating opportunities for international students to work in partnership with academic staff in delivering curriculum-based activities. There have been numerous calls for academic staff to consider international students as a learning resource, offering opportunities to mobilise student diversity for the educational and social benefit of all

students (see, for example, HEA, 2014). This is especially significant as it is increasingly recognised that all students need to develop the global competencies and intercultural awareness necessary for success in an increasingly globalised society. Turning a perceived 'problem' into an 'asset', the pilot was designed to:

- Improve the learning experience of international students by validating and valuing the specificity and diversity of knowledge and learning styles from outside the UK.
- Promote peer interaction and learning across cultural groups.
- Enhance the access of all students to first-hand experiences of issues and perspectives from other countries.
- Enable students to engage in critical and ethical consideration of the application of disciplinary knowledge in specific geographical contexts.
- Facilitate debate and the development of comparative

UK student feedback

“It’s interesting to see someone who lives there share their point of view. If we were to visit, we wouldn’t get this point of view”

“It’s good hearing the positive side of things. Normally, what you hear about that part of world is always negative.”

“It shows how our countries are similar but sometimes there are kind of cultural twists.”

perspectives that can raise student awareness to issues of social justice and social responsibility.

- Support academic staff to internationalise their curricula by providing country-specific insights and reflections on course material and activities.

The pilot project focused on STEM subjects, where international students are widely represented but curriculum internationalisation strategies are often less well developed.

Summary of outcomes

The Global Voices pilot demonstrated that providing recognised spaces for international students to contribute to the formal curriculum had positive impacts on the learning experiences of both international and home students. Global Voice students reported feeling

valued for their contribution and, as a result, more confident in their English language communication skills. All students felt they gained from hearing diverse viewpoints and both staff and students reported evidence of better integration of home and international students, both within the classroom and beyond. All students and faculty said they would like the opportunity to participate in the Global Voices programme again in the future.

Project design and evaluation

The pilot project ran from December 2016 to June 2017. A call for an indication of interest in the pilot study was sent out to the faculty members in the two academic schools in December 2016. Interested faculty members were asked to complete a short form providing details of the module content, the specific activity

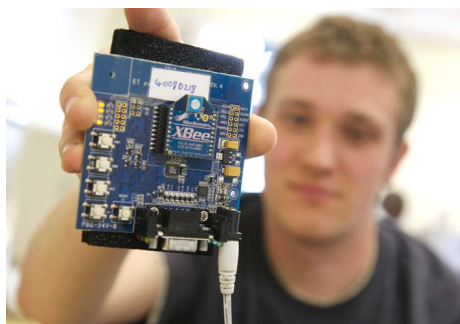
they would like a Global Voice to participate in, and any specific country or subject knowledge they required. The information provided was then used to invite international students from the specified countries/regions who had the relevant lay or subject knowledge to volunteer as Global Voices.

A total of five modules were included in the pilot from four subject areas: Sports Science, Pharmacology, Geography and Wildlife Conservation. Four were undergraduate modules while the fifth was a postgraduate taught module. Four international students (two undergraduates and two postgraduate taught students) participated as Global Voices in the four undergraduate modules. These students were invited to share views from their own countries on specific topics: for example, in Sports Physiology the Global Voice contributed insights into living at high altitudes, while in Wildlife Conservation they presented details of local conflicts between wildlife conservation and human habitation. In the postgraduate taught module the member of staff opted not to use a single ‘Global Voice’ but rather to make use of the multiple voices already present in the class. In this module a total of 15 home and international students engaged in a debate on global ethical practices within their discipline, reflecting views from 10 different countries.

In January 2017 a preparatory workshop was held for all staff and students scheduled to participate in an in-class activity. This involved sharing the aims and objectives of the Global Voices programme, exploring different approaches that might be adopted, and detailing plans for evaluating the project.

During the workshops, participating students were able to indicate the types of examples they might bring to the discussion, allowing staff an opportunity to confirm how these





could be embedded most effectively, giving students more confidence in the value of their contribution. It also created space for staff and students to reach agreement on the most appropriate method of delivery, such as debates, role plays, panel discussions, or simply presentations on their countries/culture.

Evaluation of the project was enabled through a set of interviews, surveys and focus groups. Pre- and post-class activity, interviews were conducted with all the Global Voices and faculty members. Pre-activity questions focused on exploring why individuals volunteered to participate and what their expectations were for the project, while those delivered post-activity solicited reflections on what was learnt and what could be improved for the future. Short surveys were administered in three of the undergraduate modules, prior to the activity, to understand the level of intercultural understanding among class members. Two focus group discussions were held after the activities to understand if and how having a Global Voice in class had made a difference.

The project ran according to schedule, but there were some challenges in maintaining the planned timescale and ensuring maximum participation. For example, for specific topics, such as Living at High Altitudes and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project, it was difficult to find suitable times in the teaching schedule when the appropriately experienced Global Voice was available.

Global Voice student feedback

"My contributions were valued. After my presentation, the students were eagerly asking me questions. There was enthusiasm to know about my town and that gave me more happiness because they understood my presentation. The lecturer asked me some questions and I answered them. I gained lots of confidence first of all, more communication skills."

"Before the debates in class there were segregation of people, UK people sit together and I am sitting with 2 or 3 of my friends from the same country. Before the debate we don't interact that much, we don't talk much. In class we say hi and that's it. After the debate, if it's in the bus, in the Pavilion, in the canteen if we see each other we try to talk to each other...we are friends on Facebook, so if our countries are playing any sport together we prank each other now!"

"I feel more valued by participating because I got enough space to talk. They never laughed at my English, they never tried to laugh at my idea, they never tried to laugh at my knowledge. So in all aspects I think they valued me – every class member as well as the lecturer, even with my broken English."

Project sustainability

Responses from the evaluation indicate that there is appetite from both staff and students to continue with the programme. In the postgraduate course, the tutor recognised the value of the unique perspectives and knowledge that international students brought to the classroom and, as a consequence, set aside two further sessions, leading to discussion on areas of disciplinary relevance and interest that were not initially part of the curriculum.

The School of Science and Technology has already put in place a plan to extend the programme in 2017-18 as part of the school's commitment to the effective integration of home and international students, and to ensuring that all courses encourage students to develop international perspectives.

All departments have been asked to identify suitable sessions for Global Voice students to participate in, with the aim that all students will have the opportunity to attend at least one session during the 2017-18 academic year in which a Global Voice student is present. A training programme will be delivered, for staff and students, during term 1, followed by a suite of activities in term 2.

Reflections on project implementation

While the pilot was effectively implemented at NTU, there are a number of areas that were challenging and that require further consideration as the programme is extended:

- Timetable and deadline clashes can stop recruited Global Voices from participating in the class activities for which they are best matched. Flexibility on the part of all

Teaching staff feedback

“International students show some of the things we talk about in science are a lot more complex, it [Global Voice programme] will help my students break out of their Eurocentric, British centric way of looking at things.”

“The value of this is that we can bring somebody who has the experience first-hand. Though we can bring colleagues who work in other places but it would still be second hand, they are not living 100% in the same conditions as people who live there like the citizens of that country.”

participants proved important in managing such scheduling issues in the pilot.

- To maintain high academic standards, academic staff need to provide clear guidance to the Global Voices as they prepare for their activities, such as the need to balance personal experience and reflections with public perceptions, government policy and research evidence. This was particularly important for undergraduate Global Voices.
- Only the Global Voices were asked to prepare for the sessions in the pilot, however, their contributions seemed to have greater impact in classes where they were building on work students had already undertaken. This suggests there is benefit in all students undertaking appropriate reading and preparation.
- The dedicated and informed support provided by Dr Oluwaseun was instrumental to the success of the pilot. Recruiting, training, co-ordinating and supporting the Global Voice students is important

to the smooth running of the programme but also to building student confidence and a sense of being valued. Staff with a dedicated responsibility for overseeing the programme will be important as it expands.

Recommendations for other UK institutions

The Global Voices project targets ambitions and initiatives that are shared across the sector, including: the positive integration of international students into university life; addressing common difficulties experienced in diverse classrooms; raising student confidence in intercultural and international interaction; and developing all students' international perspectives. The inherent flexibility built into the programme means it can be implemented across a variety of subject areas and institutional contexts; however, a conscious effort is required to mainstream the approach and to provide administrative support to ensure the smooth operation of the programme. In particular:

- Advanced planning and an early start are vital to ensure available Global Voices are matched with relevant modules, schedules are mapped, and any preparatory work built into the module study programme.

- A single point of contact for the programme is important for managing communication about multiple events.
- Training for the Global Voices is necessary to ensure they feel confident on entering the classroom and assured they have delivered something of relevance.

It is particularly important to guide Global Voice students on the academic standard expected, especially when students are participating in groups at levels different from their own. This might include guidance on the use of data, reference to literature and suggestions for enhancing impact and engagement (eg, use of visual aids or interactive break-out sessions).

- Teaching staff should manage expectations and actively oversee any discussions. Global Voices should not be positioned as 'experts' or as representing particular policy positions associated with their home countries. In classes where multiple country perspectives are presented, sensitivity is needed to ensure that no culture or country's perspective is marginalised.

Attention should also be given to off-setting feelings of 'guilt and shame' some Global Voice students may experience when an issue under discussion portrays their country/culture as somehow 'backward', 'corrupt', or otherwise inferior/lacking.



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