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To what extent can Technology Enhanced Learning help universities support International Students throughout their studies?

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Abstract

International students are a valuable resource, providing both financial and cultural benefits to many Higher Education Institutions. The additional support needed by these students is counterbalanced by the significant income that they provide to the institution.

This literature review identifies in which ways, and to what extent Technology Enhanced Learning can support international students through the three phases (presage, process and product) of their learning journey at the institution. Regular and early contact with students, sympathetic support at the start and throughout the teaching programme, and flexibility (within the boundaries of institutional regulations) combined with appropriate preparation during the assessment period are all areas where TEL can support international students.

Keywords: International Students, Higher Education, Technology-Enhanced Learning, TEL

Introduction

International Students are welcome in most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) worldwide, including the UK. The financial contribution that they make is significant, with an average fee of between £9,000 and £10,400 for a one year UK postgraduate qualification (Universities UK 2010), dependant upon the course and level of study, more than double the average fee level for home students. Student numbers have increased throughout the first decade of the 21st Century, with a 95% increase in international (non-EU) students in the UK in the period from 1998/1999 to 2007/2008 (BBC News 2009).

From the viewpoint of the institution, two perspectives with regard to the internationalization of the HEI experience (Schweisfurth & Gu 2009) are dominant. The experience of international students can be classified as 'transformative', with a bilateral process of enrichment of the institution and individual. As Knight (1999) describes –

> "The key motives which have been identified by the
> institution for internationalization should direct the goals and

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objectives which in turn shape the types of strategies which
are used to achieve these goals." (Knight 1999, p.22)

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The 'symbolic' view lies somewhat contradictory to this, and states that Universities perceive international students primarily as a source of income for the institution, and are "concerned primarily with the revenue generated by international students" (Schweisfurth & Gu 2009, p.464).

Whichever perspective is predominant within an institution, it is still necessary to provide additional support to international students, as they are generally deemed a vulnerable student population (Sherry et al. 2009). However, their needs as an individual will differ during their student journey. Arenas (2009) notes that the international student will typically experience a three phase process, that of presage, process and product.
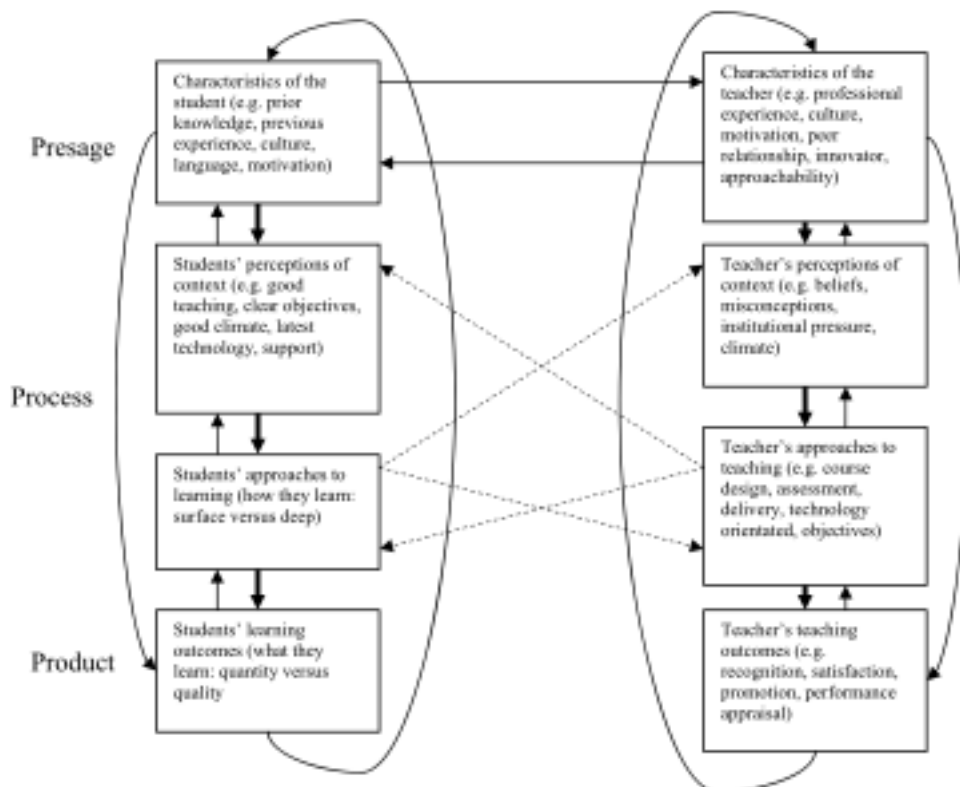

Figure 1 – The 3P model (Arenas 2009)

Regardless of the transformative or symbolic point of view of the university, international students require support through each of the phases. (Sherry et al. 2009)

Focus of the Research

This research focuses upon identifying to what extent Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) can help universities and tutors support international students throughout their studies. At each of the three phases, a separate research question is considered. Responses to these questions within the literature review have been considered from the perspectives of both the tutor (and where appropriate at the institutional level), and the international student.

Research Question – presage

Usually during the presage phase, students will not physically be on campus, therefore all support must be completed using some form of technology, be that via traditional postal correspondence, telephone or email. In addition bureaucratic, institutional information about visas, accommodation and any essential pre-reading will be sent to the student.

Research in the use of social networks for international students has focused on the process, and to a limited extent product phases, at the neglect of the presage phase. This issue has been explored by Montgomery & McDowell (2008) who specifically advocate the development of a Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger 2006) prior to arrival at the HEI. They support the view that a CoP is a valid term to use for the presage phase as there are –

> "…shared aims and interests, its sense of history and initiation of new members" (Montgomery & McDowell 2008, p.456)

Whilst this research is focusing on TEL, it is appropriate to note that the importance of social interactions in the wider context has been long-noted (Vygotsky 1978), which has also been identified when establishing a rapport with international students (Kinnel 1990).

The research question for this phase is –

> How can the use of Technology Enhanced Learning create a stronger sense of community before the international student arrives at the institution?

Research Question – process

The process phase is potentially the longest part of the student journey and comprises the induction period on campus, attending lectures, tutorials and all that is entailed in the delivery of material to the students. Within the UK, it is rare for international students to be segregated and experience different learning opportunities from home students, though many institutions recognize that due to the vulnerability of international students (specifically with regard to their high drop-out rate and difficulties in establishing themselves within a new culture) and their high financial worth, it is appropriate to have enhanced support mechanisms in place (Sherry et al. 2009). This is usually via an international office and by supporting student-focused organizations such as International Societies. Integrating international students into traditional learning mechanisms such as tutorials however is not without difficulty (Marlina 2009), and it is here that TEL could provide greater opportunities for participation; the question for this phase therefore is defined as –

> Which Technology Enhanced Learning methods can improve the learning experience and increase the participation in learning opportunities for international students?

Research Question – product

As a student completes the study of a module, thoughts turn to assessment, usually assessed against the learning outcomes of the module. By this point in the student's experience, it would be expected that many of the assimilative issues of international students would have been addressed. However, research has shown

that there are particular forms of assessment that are preferred by international students (Bartram & Bailey 2010), so even at this late phase in the student experience, guidelines can be developed to assist international students. TEL does not form a significant part of their discussion however, which leads to the question –

> To what extent can TEL provide appropriate methods of assessment in order to provide the best opportunities for international students?

Epistemology and Ontology

A literature review of this nature is constructivist in approach. Whilst an empirical literature review is possible, given the research questions postulated above, approaching the literature with regards to international students and TEL with a positivistic perspective would not yield beneficial results.

Given the grounded theory approach used within the literature review (see below), and noting the comments by Denzin (2003) with regard to a constructivist paradigm, I have deduced that the ontology used within this research was of a relativistic nature (recognizing that there are multiple realities, and the realities of home and international students, tutors, and other 'actors' within the environment are equally valid), and a subjective epistemology (in that I have created understanding through the literature review). This closely fits with my own evolving position as an educational researcher. Denzin, when discussing the constructivist paradigm, assuages my concerns held about the validity of qualitative research by noting –

> "Terms such as credibility, transferability and conformity replace the usual positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity." (Denzin 2003, p.35)

However, there is a subtle difference between *constructivism* and *constructionism* (Ackermann 2001). This is a complex area, and whilst this cannot be resolved within this brief discussion, the difference will be considered as an element of my development as a researcher.

Review of existing literature

Methodology

For this literature review, an 'informed' Grounded Theory approach (Parchoma 2010) has been followed, following on from the establishment of the research questions. There are many definitions of Grounded Theory, but selected extracts from research methods literature can provide useful snapshots.

Cohen et al. (2007) note that Grounded Theory supports the idea that –

> "… it is part of everyday living, and hence grounded theory catches the naturalistic elements of research and formulates it into a systematic methodology." (Cohen et al. 2007, p.491)

The Weltanschauung approach within Grounded Theory is also relevant to this study (Lancaster 2005). Whilst working within the constraint of the 3P model, there is a wealth of literature to consider, noting that –

> "Grounded theory […] represents essentially an inductive approach to research based on a much more holistic view." (Lancaster 2005, p.163).

Grounded Theory however is sometimes used as an umbrella term for what Lancaster (2005) defines as "Sloppy Research" (p. 126). Lancaster notes three indicators that indicate Grounded Theory is being used sloppily –

1. No clear basis of the research subject when starting out;
2. No selection criteria for the establishment of the sample size;
3. An informal approach. The terms used by (Lancaster 2005, p.126) include "try it and see" and "find out as we go".

The research being carried out does have a clear basis for the research subject, established from the research questions above. There is no attempt to gather primary data within this research, and the approach, whilst less formal than other methodologies, does include a critique of the articles developed further in this paper.

The reason that I have stated from the outset that this as an 'informed' Grounded Theory is that there is no hypothesis which can be tested from within the constraints of this literature review. Whilst the output for this research will be a series of recommendations for my own personal development and guidelines for the support of international students, there will be no opportunity to evaluate this as a *theory* subject to rigorous examination.

The perspective of tutors

Much has been written on the motivational aspects of student and tutor interactions. A pilot study carried out in 2002 (Visser et al. 2002) provides strong evidence of the positive motivational aspects of maintaining support during the process and product phase of the learning journey for the international student, from immediately following enrolment, to congratulatory messages for those who sat their examinations. In this study, a combination of letters and postcards were posted out to the students at eight particular milestones. The findings of the pilot study concluded that –

> "Student reactions to the motivational messages give clear evidence that these students appreciated receiving the messages as they took the course." (Visser et al. 2002, p.101)

Presage

| 1) Welcome Letter | 2) Study plan and information on colleagues |

Process

| 3) Encourage students to discuss problems | 4) Remind students of assignment deadline | 5) Reminder for students falling behind |

Product

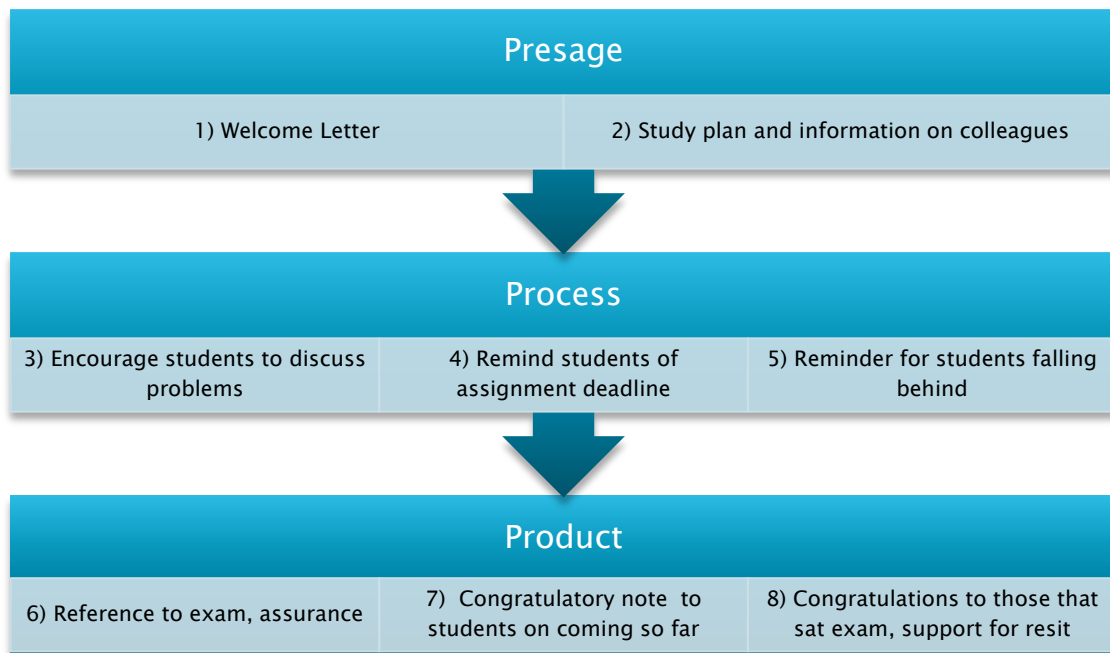| 6) Reference to exam, assurance | 7) Congratulatory note to students on coming so far | 8) Congratulations to those that sat exam, support for resit |

Figure 2 – Overview of the motivational messages sent out during the pilot study (Visser et al. 2002)

This pilot study however used traditional, asynchronous means of communication. It is unclear from the findings of this research alone whether similar findings would be obtained if developed using electronic alternatives (email or website links for example).

The use of Social Network Sites (SNS) has been embraced by students, and has also been used by some universities to provide support prior to enrolment. The difficulty however is selecting the correct SNS to provide this contact. The near-ubiquitous Facebook SNS within Western Countries has little penetration in Asia, where Cyworld (Korea), Orkut (India) and QQ (China) predominate (Donelan et al. 2010). Once studying within the UK however, international students should be encouraged to sign up to the SNS used by home students, in order to facilitate interaction and social cohesion between home and international students. Some open-source Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) allow 'plug in' social networking facilities such as those offered by Mahara (Kent 2010), or the tutor may encourage a specific, stand-alone environment such as Ning (Curry et al. 2009).

Within tutorials, many lecturers are frustrated by the lack of participation of international students. In a class comprising solely of international students, what was anticipated to be a multi-faceted discussion becomes a monologue, and many of the traditional small-group process techniques such as rounds, buzz groups, snowballing or fishbowls (Race 2001) will simply not work. Marlina (2009) however provides a robust defence of the international student within this context, arguing that "small culture" in the classroom can overcome "big culture" preconceptions, and that in many institutions there is still a strong tendency to teach to the examination-

> "[…] examination-oriented universities tend to have teachers teaching students strategies to pass the examination with an emphasis on

testing their ability to memorise and reproduce what they have learnt
in activities that reflect the final examination." (Marlina 2009, p.237)

There is also evidence that there is a preference by international students for coursework instead of examinations, even if examinations are the predominant form of assessment in their own country (Bartram & Bailey 2010), though coursework covers a multitude of different techniques, from written work to oral presentations and portfolios.

It is common nowadays for email to be the predominant form of communication with students outside of formally timetabled lectures and seminars. Whilst asynchronous communication can be beneficial for both parties, allowing the opportunity for reflection prior to writing a response (Lamb & Perrk 1995), the use of 'text speak' by the student and idiomatic language from the tutor can create a barrier to communication (Colby et al. 2004).

The perspective of international students

Many students arrive in their chosen country of study with high expectations of the adventure for which they are embarking upon, but with little practical experience of living and studying in a country that is literally 'foreign' to them. Lago & Barty (2003) identify a number of different issues that the international student has to contend with, but also demonstrates (through a series of practical exercises and associated video clips) the dangers of identifying 'international students' as a homogenous group, and warns against stereotypes.

Many journals, when considering cultural differences between countries refer to the work of Hofstede, and in particular his studies carried out in the 1970s (Hofstede 1980). However, this work has a strong American-centered bias, and in the intervening years, much has changed culturally and socially, not least because of the opportunities for globalization presented from use of the Internet. For example, of the forty countries analyzed within the paper, China, and the sixty-one countries that currently comprise Africa are omitted from the survey. In later years criticism of Hofstede has intensified (McSweeney 2002), (Williamson 2002), in particular focusing on his reliance on a small number of countries. In return, Hofstede himself has defended his original research (Hofstede 2002).

Before the advent of pervasive, high speed computing, international students could only maintain contact with home via asynchronous technologies. The same technologies that may be used within their TEL can also now be used to maintain contact with their home country, reducing the feeling of isolation. Greengard (2009) notes –

"Email, social networking applications such as Facebook, and low- or
no-cost calling services such as Skype make it possible for
international students to stay in touch with family and friends."
(Greengard 2009, p.18)

Within a traditional teaching environment, international students can also struggle with the use of idiomatic language and metaphors (Littlemore 2001). This can be exacerbated by the use of a VLE, terms that are in common use (for example "download the paper", "hook up with Skype") can cause issues for students who are

already struggling with a new way of learning in a new language. Littlemore (2001) notes that metaphors within lectures can cause particular problems for international students, the most common strategy of international students it to translate the metaphor directly into their own language and attempt to extrapolate from this meaning, which is frequently unsuccessful. Using TEL to provide a transcript (either audio, or a written transcript) of the lecture can provide the opportunity for students to consider these metaphors away from the lecture theatre.

Student guides and handbooks

During all phases of their learning, international students may be encouraged to turn to one of the many student guidebooks that are marketed specifically at the overseas learner. The materials within these books provide practical advice for the international student, usually combined with exercises and case studies.
Whilst some of the older guides do not specifically mention TEL or even email (Lowes et al. 2004), (Lago & Barty 2003), within their pages, later guides do embrace the concept of TEL. However, in an attempt to use non-technical language to explain terms, the definitions of TEL can appear over-simplistic (Davey 2008). Some guidebooks however do recognize that Information and Communication Technology is now commonplace amongst international students, and provides guidance at each phase (Reinders et al. 2008). At the presage phase Reinders et al. (2008) suggest playing computer games and interacting using online environments such as "Second Life and MySpace", and using chatbots (p. 39). The appropriate wording for an email discussion with a tutor is discussed (p. 162) could form part of the process phase, and at the product phase it is recommended that an online concordancer is used to identify complementary words when writing essays (p.57).

Discussion of Findings

The literature review above allows some answers to the three research questions asked above to be formulated –

1) How can the use of Technology Enhanced Learning create a stronger sense of community before the international student arrives at the institution?
The establishment of a link between the international student, and the HEI prior to the arrival of the student would appear to be relatively easy to create using 'traditional' technology such as email and websites. The use of Social Network Sites is somewhat more problematic, as across the world there are a large number of regional specific SNS, though international and home students should be encouraged to collaborate through an appropriate SNS during the process phase.

2) Which Technology Enhanced Learning methods can improve the learning experience and increase the participation in learning opportunities for international students?
Some students will be unfamiliar with the concept of TEL prior to embarking upon their studies, and therefore will need additional instruction upon arrival. This could be as simple as providing examples of appropriate and inappropriate forum postings, email etiquette between student and tutor, and expectations on response

times for email queries. Whilst synchronous communication such as Instant Messaging and Video Chat is well developed for distance learning courses (Donelan et al. 2010), in a traditional campus setting face-to-face tutorials and telephone calls are still the most common form of immediate contact.

3) To what extent can TEL provide appropriate methods of assessment in order to provide the best opportunities for international students?

There is strong evidence that regardless of the method of assessment that students are used to in their native country, the use of assignments is preferred by both home and international students as the best method of demonstrating skills and knowledge gained within the module (Bartram & Bailey 2010). For assignments, the full range of TEL resources, including Internet reference sites, citation managers, and resources generated by the module leaders are available. There are some subject areas, including those that lead to accreditation by external bodies, where closed-book examinations are an essential element that cannot be substituted. In these instances, there is little that TEL can provide, though revision notes, sample papers, the development of a course wiki, and model answers can be provided via a VLE (with appropriate forums for academic support).

Implications on my own Professional Practice

Implications on my own professional practice come from the recognition that international students are not a single homogenous group sharing the same motivational problems and experiences. Even attempting to categorize by country can allow prejudices from previous student encounters from the country to be carried forward to a new cohort. Associating all Chinese students with the philosophy and concepts of Confucianism for example, and therefore implementing the recommendations within the literature when teaching large groups of Chinese students (Marlina 2009) (Tait 2010) (Amsberry 2010) may not yield the intended results if the students are expecting a university learning experience more focused on Western principles (e.g. that of dialogue and questioning of the tutor).

The importance of the presage phase is predominant throughout the literature, and TEL provides an opportunity for myslef as a course director to make frequent contact with students before they arrive. Whilst there are university initiatives, they necessarily are impersonal and whilst fact-laden, they may simply be regarded as spam email – by the individual if not by the student's own ISP.

Within the process phase, I found that I could directly relate to the work of Littlemore (2001) with regard to the difficulties using metaphors with students. In teaching 'hard' or 'soft' systems methodologies within the area of Information Systems, I discovered that a cohort of mostly international students had incorrectly assumed that 'hard' systems related to hardware implementations, and 'soft' systems to software development. This error only became apparent when their first assignment was handed in. Understanding metaphor is an important skill for international students and I will develop this into my introductory sessions with a large cohort of international students, maybe using the Littlemore paper directly.

There is also an opportunity to look at the assessments in the process phase, the work of Bartram & Bailey (2010) runs counter to my own experiences, but simply because students in their home country have 'always' sat examinations, this does not mean that they are preferred – the case studies used within the research are persuasive. Subject to university regulation, I intend to provide a choice of assessment methods to international students in my module delivery, they can chose either an examination or an assignment, but need to be cognizant of the different approaches.

Further Work

A number of personal development issues have been identified. For a University to switch from a 'symbolic' to a 'transformative' perspective (Schweisfurth & Gu 2009) however requires a paradigm shift within the institution.

Regardless of the institutional perspective, the link between tutor and student is a vital relationship (Lago & Barty 2003) (Kinnel 1990). Using TEL to initiate and develop this relationship throughout the three phases of Arenas (2009) can be beneficial to both parties, and consequently the institution.

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