



Teaching, Research and Development Projects 2010/11

International Staff in UK Business Schools: Difficulties and Student Perception

Magda Abou-Seada & Michael Sherer
University of Essex

Final Report

Introduction

Business schools in the UK have witnessed an increase in the number of international staff in recent years. For the purpose of this project international staff are those from non-UK origins. According to HESA figures, the number of international staff increased from 8.6% in 1996/97 to 21.8% in 2007/08 (HESA, 2009). We believe that the current figures are much higher in some business schools. In Essex Business School, for example, about 40% of staff are from overseas. The official figures might not capture the actual number of international staff as some might have British nationalities. The British nationality, however, does not conceal the fact that they are from overseas. As one of the international staff interviewed for this project indicated:

“The British nationality is just on paper. Once you get a British passport it facilitates travelling and also you no longer need a work permit so it facilitates your mobility. But from the point of view of students you will always be international, someone from overseas. You are not going to hold your passport and tell students I’m a British citizen.”

This study aims at identifying the difficulties faced by international staff teaching in UK business schools and how such difficulties are dealt with by HE institutions. The study also aims at investigating students' perceptions of international staff and how this in turn affects the performance of staff. The following sections of the report will include the method of data collection, information about participants, findings of the study and finally some recommendations.

Data Collection

Data were collected via staff interviews and student focus groups. Interviews were carried out with 27 members of staff from six UK business schools; Bedfordshire Business School, Brunel Business School, Edinburgh Business School, Essex Business School, Middlesex University Business School and Oxford Brookes Business School. All interviews with staff were recorded, except one who did not agree. The interviews were then transcribed and analysed.

Focus groups were held with students from three of the above Business Schools; Bedfordshire Business School, Essex Business School and Middlesex Business School. We depended on staff recommendations and emailing groups of students to recruit our participants.

Participants

Staff

As mentioned above, interviews were carried out with 27 members of staff from six UK business schools. The following table includes information about the interviewees.

Table 1 – Information about staff participants

	Pre-1992 universities	Post-1992 universities	Total
<u>Gender</u>			
Male	7	8	15
Female	6	6	12
<u>Position</u>			
Lecturer	10	3	13
Senior lecturer	3	10	13
Professor	-	1	1
<u>Experience in higher education in UK</u>			
Less than one year	2	2	4
1-3 years	2	4	6
4-6 years	3	2	5
7-9 years	1	4	5

10 years or more	5	2	7
<u>Experience in higher education outside UK</u>			
No experience	6	7	13
1-3 years	-	1	1
4-6 years	2	4	6
7-9 years	2	1	3
10 years or more	3	1	4
<u>Studied in UK prior to working</u>			
No UK studies	4	1	5
Undergraduate	-	1	1
Undergraduate, Masters & PhD	1	4	5
Masters & PhD PhD	8	7	15
<u>Country of origin</u>			
Europe	4	2	6
Far East	3	6	9
Africa	-	-	-
Middle East/North Africa	3	6	9
Other	3	-	3
Total	13	14	27

Students

Six focus groups were carried out with students from three UK Business Schools. Two focus groups were with undergraduate students, two with Masters and two with PhD students. The following table includes information about participants.

Table 2 – Information about student participants

	Undergraduate focus groups	MSc focus groups	PhD focus groups	Total
<u>Gender</u>				
Male	3	6	5	14
Female	5	3	3	11
<u>Age group</u>				
Less than 20	3	-	-	3
20-23	5	5	-	10
24-27	-	3	-	3
28-30	-	1	4	5
Over 30	-	-	4	4
<u>Country of origin</u>				

UK/Europe	2	2	1	5
Far East	4	6	1	11
Africa	2	-	2	4
Middle East/North Africa	-	-	4	4
Other		1	-	1
Total	8	9	8	25

Findings

The findings of the project will be presented in this section. First, the difficulties or challenges that face international staff, as identified by our interviewees, will be presented. This will be followed by student perception of international staff based on the findings from the focus groups.

Difficulties Identified by International Staff

The international members of staff we interviewed highlighted a number of difficulties or challenges they face, or faced when they started their careers in the UK. Perhaps the most important issue is communication. Other issues include marking and the British grading system, lack of mentoring and cultural and social difficulties.

Communication Issues

Communication has been identified by our interviewees as the most important issue or challenge that face international staff in UK Business Schools. It has been clear to us that those interviewed who have good command of the English language face fewer difficulties and are generally more able to adapt to working in the UK. As one of our interviewees indicated:

“If your language is good, you have no problem especially in the beginning. You feel more confident and are more able to interact with your colleagues and students. My language was good when I started so I had no big problems but I know some of my friends who worked here and their language was not very good, in fact it was so poor and they faced lots of problems. I know at least one who eventually decided to resign and went back to his country.”

A number of our interviewees explained how language has affected them; the following are some examples of what has been said:

“When I started working in the UK that was some time ago and after I finished my PhD. My English was, according to most people, very good. There were some words that I knew I didn’t pronounce correctly but my accent was clear and I was understandable. I was, however, very disappointed, it was almost like a shock to me when I received my first feedback from students. Some of them wrote comments that made me feel very down. There were comments like ‘this lecturer couldn’t pronounce properly’ or ‘this lecturer doesn’t know English, you have to

fire her'. This was very hard on me. No one spoke to me about this, not even the Head of Department and I didn't want to speak to anyone about it, I preferred to keep it to myself."

"My language was very poor when I started working in the UK and I was totally aware of this. I knew they employed me because of my research. When I started teaching many students complained and I was taken off the module and this really affected my self-esteem. The Business School I was working for at the time didn't try to help much, I didn't get any support and this was very disappointing."

"I think it's the perceptions and attitudes of students when we come from different countries. I mean, obviously we have different accents and so they expect us to speak in the Queen's language so it's, which won't happen ... But we can control our things, like we can speak slowly and then, you know, try to always concentrate on more issues and, you know, simplify the things ... Sometimes we use, not the simple words; we use more like textbook type, more difficult terms and things. So that can be improved, of course, but you can't change the accent 100% you know. So then it's not that they won't understand everything. It's their attitude. They think these people are from other countries so they can't do it. But you will find that they compare someone not with the knowledge and other things, another colleague or someone maybe British educated or British born or English, whatever, them, and not the content and them as a person."

Induction and Staff Training

Most of the staff interviewed agreed that the general university induction they received at the start of any job was useful. Some, however, commented that this was too general and that more specific induction was needed from the School/Department. They explained that subject-specific induction for international staff is, for example, needed in using British terminology. This is better given on a one-to-one basis. As one of our interviewees commented:

"I think this maybe was a slight mistake from the school not having realised that they should have given me some training more with the technical language."

The British Grading System

Some of our interviews explained that they found marking, especially coursework, difficult in the beginning due to the grading system. They explained that 'the British grading system is so different to the grading system in my country.' For example, in some countries a first class grade starts from 90% so staff coming from certain regions, such as the Middle East, would tend to give very high grades.

Lack of Mentoring

Most of our interviewees indicated that having a good mentor would be beneficial especially to new inexperienced members of international staff. Some of our interviews explained how they benefited from their mentors as follows:

“I had the mentoring, yes ... it was very useful to me. And he supported me ... to plan my things and then created a good pressure to deliver, you know, good outputs. Yes, I mean, I was very happy with the support given to me.”

Other interviewees indicated that they wished to have a mentor. As one interviewee indicated:

“I’ve worked in two institutions in the UK. In the first one, I had a mentor but it was only on paper. I knew who he was and he was a very nice person but that was it. We didn’t have any meetings and he never asked me if I had any problems. It would have been good if I had someone to talk to. In my current institution I can’t remember but I don’t think I had a mentor, perhaps because they thought I was experienced enough and didn’t need one.”

Difficulties with administrative duties

A number of the staff we interviewed are currently doing administrative duties such as undergraduate directorship/programme leadership. Some of them were given the responsibility of administrative duties very early on in their careers, which they found to be a big challenge.

“I came to the UK to study for my PhD, but this does not give a big idea of the British higher education system or how universities and business schools are run. When I started working in the UK after I had finished my PhD I was asked to be programme director and I was very excited about it, I didn’t for a second to say no. But then no one told what is expected of me or what my responsibilities are. I think they thought I knew everything but the fact is I didn’t. There was no written job description and I had to figure out everything myself. This was so difficult.”

“I was also director of studies from the beginning... which I think was not the right thing... I found a lot of difficulties because the undergraduate system is very different from the one in [my home country] so it was a complete different system. I did a Master’s here but when you do a Master’s it is very different than undergraduate. It was hard at the beginning because, you know, my teaching was starting and then there was fresher week and the second week with students when you had to advise them for courses so it was a lot to take in in a very short time period... I thought about it two years after and I thought that’s not fair especially when there was a new lecturer coming in ... I thought well that was not fair, that was really mean. But maybe they learnt, I don’t know.”

Cultural and Social Difficulties

Most of the staff interviewed indicated that they were generally able to adapt to the British culture and had no social issues that affected their work. Some indicated that they do not socialise enough with their colleagues and wish more social events are organised at work.

We became aware, however, before the end of this project that one of our interviewees decided to go back to her home country because she wanted her children to be brought in their own culture. This is an issue that we aim to explore further. About 74% of our interviewees came to the UK to study for their Masters and/or PhD and then decided to stay on. Most of them have no current plans to return to their home countries. We aim to further explore this 'brain drain' phenomenon and the 'push-pull' factors that make staff decide to stay in the UK or go back to their home countries.

Student perception

Most of the students who participated in the project focused on communication issues. The other issues identified by our focus groups include the difference in teaching style between international and British staff and PhD supervision preferences.

Communication issues

Students are generally more acceptable of international staff whose language is good. Some students did not, however, expect to be taught by international staff "I never thought about it, having international staff over here, as it is first time outside my country". Most students viewed this as a positive point as evidence from the following quote:

"I didn't, I expected there to be quite a few international teachers, I mean from different backgrounds, but not as many as we have here, which is a good thing because it kind of makes you feel more at home and not, you know, you don't feel so British. I mean the system doesn't feel so, you know, English. It seems like it's very multicultural. So you can also get along with teachers as well because you always tend to get on with their backgrounds."

If an international member of staff has good command of the English language, it does not matter to students if he/she is from overseas.

"For me, it doesn't matter, both are, as long as I can understand them very well, they give good understanding, I mean the way they teach, like for example, one of my teacher teaching management accounting is from overseas, but he has started very well, I mean, I can understand clearly everything. So I think whether from overseas or local, as long as I can understand them, so it doesn't matter."

"... before coming here I had a lot of expectation from here, at first, you know because this is the first time I am studying in overseas, and I thought that teacher

here try harder than my country, and you know, yes, I had high expectation. About the teacher at first, yes, I thought we have just native teacher, but after that, now I saw that we saw international teachers, we have international staff and for me, I am so satisfied with the international staff, because I saw that they are trying hard here, and you know, for me I can understand them very well and I don't have any problem with international staff and I am enjoying."

Some students, however, explained that they found it difficult to understand some international lecturers with strong accents, which made learning difficult for them. They clearly acknowledged the fact that with globalisation nowadays it would be difficult not to recruit international staff but suggested that "people who are not from the UK shouldn't teach people in their first year of coming here to the UK."

Teaching style

Some students preferred their international staff and thought their teaching style was better.

"If I will compare, I will compare this bit on my own experience in this, in my university, yes. We have two different teacher, one from overseas and one is considered as native, yes, and international teachers, international staff, he teach more, give more, like help for the students and really push more, and then he explain everything very well, and maybe he was from overseas before...the international staff is better, based on my experience."

".. native teacher thinks we are native and we can't understand very well, but I think international staff experience this situation before. For example, for the first years, year that they came here, maybe they had all problem, and they couldn't understand very well, so I think they experience this situation, and they can understand us better. But native staff, no, they think we are native ... they speak so fast..., so for this reason, international staff I think is better for me."

In our interviews with staff, we had the impression that international staff tend to be more formal in their teaching. One of our interviewees commented on his teaching style:

"It's quite formal. It may be that I'm showing line by line everything that I'm talking about, but the slide would typically contain a concise and precise definition, some bullet points explaining the main differences or main difficulties about the concept, and some examples of application."

Another member of staff explained that:

"I think international staff are more formal in their teaching. They use more slides, you tend to write more in your slides, perhaps to avoid students not understanding you. But this is my own perception. I don't know how students feel about it."

Some students, however, indicated that teaching style depends on personality not nationality. Some native British staff are better than others and are more helpful and similarly some international staff are better than others.

PhD supervision

In the two focus groups with PhD students, we discussed students' supervision preferences. There were mixed views on this issue. Some students indicated that they did not prefer their PhD supervisions to be from their same home country. Others found supervisors from their home country to be more helpful and more understanding of their cultural issues. We find that the following quote sums up the dominant view of PhD students:

“To me I don’t consider it as an issue as to whether I’ll be given a supervisor from my native country or elsewhere, but if I was to be given an option of selecting one of them, I would choose a person other than the one from my home country because I believe ... my personal perception of knowledge process is to acquire a lot more so once I am given someone from elsewhere to me, I think I would gain a lot from that process instead of someone from my country whom I think maybe we might be used to a whole lot of cultural similarities. I would prefer someone outside my country, but then if I want to seek ... if I think there is someone in my country with expertise in the area I am researching, I can seek further help from that person... I’ve always been saying this if I would want a supervision from my country, I would have done my PhD at the University of ... whereby the professors are there to do it in the country. But whilst I’m abroad, what is the purpose of being outside my country ... one of it is to seek it from someone outside from what I know.”

Recommendations

Based on the interviews we carried out with international staff and focus groups with undergraduate and postgraduate students we make the following recommendations:

1. Business schools should be more supportive of their international staff. As one of our interviewees indicated, international staff should be treated as ‘assets’ and business schools should “value that international staff can bring in the new thinking and knowledge into...the current system.” The managerial team should try to design specific training programmes for international staff based on the requirements of each member of staff. Such training programmes would be better done on a one-to-one basis.

2. Schools should try to avoid assigning administrative duties or module leadership responsibilities to international staff at least during the first term of starting their job and, if possible, the first year.
3. International staff who are given administrative duties should be given sufficient induction about their responsibilities. We also recommend that business schools have written manuals that include clear descriptions of responsibilities of administrative duties.
4. The mentoring system in business schools should be improved and appropriate mentors assigned to new staff, especially international ones. It would be helpful if staff were assigned to mentors who shared similar research interests.
5. The peer observation system needs to be improved especially for inexperienced international staff. We find a suggestion made by one of our interviewees to be useful in this regard. He suggested videoing about 20 minutes of an actual lecture given by the member of staff and then showing this video to a number of peers who are asked to give confidential feedback to the lecturer.
6. A final recommendation, suggested by one of our interviewees is to have student representatives attending the presentations given by applicants for staff positions as part of the recruitment process. The role of student representatives would be to give feedback to the selection panel on the presentation skills of applicants. This should be useful when recruiting staff regardless of their nationalities or origins.

References

HESA (2009) Resources of Higher Education Institutions 2007/2008. Cheltenham: Higher Education Statistics Agency.