

Enhancing the International Learning Environment: Insights from China-Engaged Colleagues

Lancaster University China Centre roundtable memo

29 March 2023

Executive summary

- LU should promote the idea of the “international classroom” and support teaching staff’s recognition and usage of clear and common English that all learners can understand.
- LU should provide selected support and orientation services in Languages Other Than English (LOTE), including mental health support/counselling, and core information on educational principles and academic practice at Lancaster.
- LU should establish a clear institutional point of contact to help staff appropriately navigate an expanding scope of “sensitive” political topics that could result in harm to individuals.

Background

Lancaster University China Centre (LUCC) brings together staff across all disciplines working on, in and with China. On November 26, LUCC fellows hosted “**Classroom Strategies for Engaging International Students: An Interdisciplinary Roundtable**” as part of a series of cross-disciplinary discussions on key topics for China-related research, collaboration and engagement.

International students – many of them from the Chinese-speaking world – have become a key part of the student body, contributing not only to tuition revenue but also campus vitality, diversity and research excellence over several decades. Yet the “international classroom” presents numerous complex EDI, pedagogical, and ethical challenges that need to be addressed in a focused manner.

LUCC convened this roundtable to draw together the experience and expertise of staff across disciplines with experience teaching international student cohorts – particularly, but not limited to, Greater China, i.e. Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Sinophone world more broadly. The goal was to identify practical lessons from international pedagogy across faculties and disciplines to improve student experience and educational and research outcomes.

This memo summarizes three outcomes of the discussion, which included more than 25 colleagues from across Education Research, Education Development, Learning Development, OWT, Computing, Engineering, DeLC, Sociology, PPR, Law, and the LUC-BJTU campus in Weihai, China.

(1) The importance of language

Staff’s use of English language is a common source of linguistic challenges. The variety of regional and international accents, including distinctive local idiom, is integral to Lancaster’s distinctive sense of place and multicultural community. But in the international classroom unconventional expressions and pronunciation exacerbate language barriers to the disadvantage of non-local students.

Participants noted this is especially so for Chinese students who commonly bring a background of learning in American rather than British English. Participants suggested that solutions to such problems start with approaching the classroom as an international learning environment, moving beyond the view that international students are a particular subcategory of students with special needs.

Recommendation: promote the concept of the “international classroom” to incoming and existing staff and students, and the associated need to pay attention to clear and broadly understandable usage of English in the classroom. A simple, short, and fun training exercise could identify different kinds of expressions likely to confuse some learners. Such measures would simultaneously advance the agendas of improving Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and Decolonising Lancaster University (DLU).

(2) Selected support services in languages other than English

Cultural differences regarding certain fundamental educational concepts such as study skills, plagiarism, group work, academic freedom etc., as well as mental health and wellbeing, can be a source of misunderstandings and particular pressure on international students. Mental health issues have been common among Chinese overseas student populations for many years – as they are for other student groups, but compounded by linguistic and cultural challenges.

Participants noted that even students proficient in English in the classroom may struggle to articulate personal issues in English, adding to mental health risks and deterring usage of services. Student ambassadors with LOTE can help, but a sustainable solution lies in support delivered in LOTE.

Recommendation: selected key student services, including orientation, counselling and pastoral support – perhaps extending to administrative advice e.g. regarding immigration issues – should be made available in LOTEs commensurate with the population of speakers among the student body. Key information on availability and nature of student support services, as well as LU's academic culture, avoidance of plagiarism, and other orientation materials, should be made available in LOTEs in the orientation process and throughout students' time at LU.

(3) Navigating sensitive topics and supporting academic freedom

Politically sensitive topics – those that have the potential to result in punishment or other harm – are a complex and dynamic source of risk that can arise unexpectedly in classrooms, including in subjects not directly related to politics. In a time of rapid social and technological change amid increasing geopolitical tension, external risks and constraints on free expression are intensifying, and the range of “sensitive” topics is shifting. China is just one salient example of domestic political environments where political sensitivities and risks have increased in recent years.

Participants noted that the university needs to provide appropriate support and training to enable international staff and students to navigate “sensitive” issues in and out of the classroom, having due regard for both safety and academic freedom. Participants flagged that support is particularly important for those staff who may be caught in the middle of such topics due to their international background, international teaching responsibilities, or international research activities.

Recommendation: establish a dedicated institutional point person to enable staff and students with concerns to obtain direct support and advice for navigating sensitive topics, gather experience from across the university and beyond, and underscore the university's support for all staff and students' equal opportunity to teach and learn in an atmosphere of academic freedom.¹

Summary

“What is our purpose of education?” asked one participant, pointedly highlighting a need for clarity to both students and staff about our own educational principles and practices in the context of the international classroom. As outlined above, China-engaged participants across disciplines and faculties broadly agreed that answering this challenge requires enhancing communication to ensure clarity for all learners, starting with clear and understandable use of English language; delivery of foundational material on educational principles and practices in languages other than English; enhanced support for students' mental health and wellbeing in languages other than English; and appropriate support for the navigation of an increasingly complex array of “sensitive” issues.

¹ *Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel*, UNESCO, 11 November 1997.