

The Educational Experience of ‘African’ Students at London Metropolitan University – a Case Study

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Introduction

Every year hundreds of ‘African’ students invest a great deal of money in education at London Metropolitan University. They come to this very large, complex institution, with typically high expectations from the courses onto which they enrol onto, often with well-considered career goals and the motivation to work hard and succeed. But, however well intentioned and welcoming the university is in trying to provide induction into their studies, during the first semester particularly there is a great deal ‘African’ students must quickly learn and assimilate if they are to realise their ambitions for success.

This case study examines what studying at LondonMet was like for a small number of students coming from different ‘African’ backgrounds, i.e. from African countries and ethnic communities. It describes and evaluates how they experienced and coped with a range of features associated with their new environment. In particular, it examines the impacts of teaching styles and teacher expectations, methods of assessment, learning styles and access to technology and wider sources of information.

The experiences of ‘African’ students may of course not be unique in what is a highly diverse multicultural environment, as all students must adjust to and develop new ways of living and studying. So the lessons from this small group of students may well have implications for the other students who come here to study, whether they are ‘foreign’ or not. At the same time, there may be aspects of the ‘African’ experience which are in some ways unique to people from that continent. The study employed ‘globalisation’ theory as an evaluative framework to explain the differing rationales driving what is the migration of many of the ‘African’ students who arrive to study for globally accredited education qualifications.

This paper provides a summary of the findings and recommendations from the research conducted among a sample of 30 ‘African’ students at LondonMet,

focussing on issues related to pedagogy as these were considered to be the most important by participants. In one sense they considered that their integration into academic studies here in LondonMet was more important than understanding and integrating into the wider social and economic life of the city.

Main findings

European powers, notably the UK and France, have left an historical educational legacy in many 'African' countries, and this is manifest in the ways in which educational systems are structured and organised and how many students are still taught. An example of this legacy can be seen in the 77% of respondents in the study who said they had experienced a didactic teacher-centred form of education, compared with 33% who said that they had experienced some form of learner-centred 'discovery' method of teaching. This experience therefore has an important impact on the way that students from countries where schools operate in this way function in the university setting.

What was clear from the data was that many of the participants in the study said that they had found it difficult to adapt when they were confronted with a non-didactic pedagogy including the more student-focused, discussion-based seminar format. Many courses still run extensive lecture programmes, and while it is recognised that these are not particularly successful vehicles for learning in some ways, at least they were familiar to many 'African' students. But elsewhere many experienced difficulties with changing expectations and roles in the classroom.

The views of two students (from interviews transcripts) epitomise a much wider view among those interviewed. 'Ahmed', an undergraduate student reflecting on his previous experiences, said:

"...in Somalia we are taught using the 'chalk and board' method, where teachers are the 'givers' of knowledge and students are the 'recipients'. Teachers and authorities provide almost everything, all we as students are expected to do is to listen, copy, memorise and reproduce during exams".

And P, a postgraduate Zimbabwean student said;

"...though we are allowed to go in search of literature on topics taught...when it comes to exams we are expected to reproduce or give back what our teachers have given us ... and failure to do that may earn you an average or even a failing grade".

Together these comments sum up a more widespread experience for many 'African' students.

While it is accurate to say that many courses employ a variety of pedagogic methods, 63% of respondents said that the teaching methods at LondonMet catered for their learning styles, that is, courses still employ predominantly 'didactic'

methods. Where students encounter non-didactic methods they clearly struggle to understand how to engage with the content and format of the sessions. Nevertheless, although they are familiar with didactic methods students feel that they don't necessarily learn a great deal from the lessons themselves. What was valuable for many students was that they learned from each other – through social engagement – not necessarily from tutors.

The majority of respondents felt that a 'key' to success at LondonMet, and perhaps other UK universities – and especially for postgraduate students - is how well they could perform in essay writing, which some described as the standard academic format. The study reveals that 60% of the participants came from countries in which academic essays are an uncommon feature of teaching and learning, and therefore are very different from what they are required to do when they come to LondonMet. Though much has been done by LondonMet to support academic writing skills, the study shows that three quarters of respondents (23 out of the 30 interviewed) expressed concern about their writing skills and tutor expectations. These students also still wanted additional support as part of their courses. They believed that as long as they struggled with writing, their grades would not accurately reflect their capabilities. This was summed up by a postgraduate student from Kenya who said:

“Essay writing should be incorporated into all our courses... this will oblige us to attend and quickly improve the way we structure and analyse questions. At the moment, the essay writing sessions are not only limited... they are most times at odds with our free time or study time”.

The question for the University, therefore, is how far it can provide continuing integrated writing support in all areas of the curriculum. Some courses, notably in languages, have developed 'e-packs' – integrated technology-based programmes which can be accessed individually by students, and there is also a great deal of material available through the VLE platform, 'WebLearn'. The problem is that there is no coherent pattern of provision across the university. Progress is being made but it is recognised that it will be a long time before there is any sense of parity in educational experience across the university.

One important way that the University helps students is by providing feedback on assignments. But again in such a large organisation the pattern is very uneven and lacks coherence. Three-quarters said that they did receive feedback of some kind from tutors on their work. However, many of the students were concerned that they did not receive it 'promptly', so that it could inform the way they undertook their next assignments.

About half of the students also said that it was a case of too little and too late - a point of view that was summed up by B, an undergraduate from Ghana who said:

“Lack of prompt, honest and sufficient feedback from tutors... makes me disappointed, unsure, frustrated and wanting to quit altogether at the onset of my course”.

While this may be a somewhat extreme reaction in one way, the frustration that students feel is very widespread.

Recommendations

In response to the data, the study makes a number of suggestions and recommendations for change:

- LondonMet to conduct research on the prior educational experience of students, in particular in relation to their ‘learning styles’, since the experience of this small sample of ‘African’ students clearly shows that they are hindered because of their previous experiences of pedagogy. The main motivation and purpose of coming to the UK is to study, but since every international student is coming from a different culture, history and economic background a greater level of resource should be given to help overcome the disadvantages rooted in pedagogy.
- Learning development in essay writing in particular would be advantageous, especially if it could be integrated into the structure of courses, rather than being some kind of remedial provision in addition to course work.
- The nature and quality of feedback to students about their work needs to be considered. At present what is provided is idiosyncratic and dependent on a very wide range of practice among tutors. This may be seen as an inevitability in such a large institution, but feed-back on performance and areas for improvement should be made in relation to all students on a personal basis.

Biographical note

Formerly a secondary school science teacher in West Africa, Mohamed Augustus Kanu, is a Sierra Leonean who recently completed an MA in Education at London Metropolitan University. He is presently enrolled on a PhD research programme at LondonMet; his topic is ‘An evaluation of the social and educational experiences of ‘African’ students’.

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