Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment for Italian Students Attending an Irish Third Level Institute

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Abstract

Teaching to ensure diversity and inclusion, to include all learners, is a key focus at TUS (Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands). Globally, internationalising education is a priority for higher education institutes. "Educators are challenged with balancing the business model that prioritises growing international student numbers, with providing quality learning experiences for all students" (Markey et al. 2023, p.1). TUS hosts international students on Erasmus and various other exchange programmes annually and there is an onus on faculty to play a role in creating an inclusive environment for learners (Knox et al., 2019). Forty-nine students from Politecnico di Torino in Italy are on transfer to Business programmes in the Faculty of Business and Hospitality, TUS, in the current academic year (2023/2024). They are studying a range of modules. One of those modules is Business Law, which is open to students in Year 2 of the Higher Certificate in Business.
The module introduces students to the sources of law, the structure and practice of the administration of law in Ireland. Bailey (2006) argues that low levels of English can be challenging in lecture theatres and in this module students attend three one-hour lectures each week in large lecture halls. There are 77 students taking the module, including 38 from the Politecnico di Torino. There are no tutorials and the class is not broken into smaller groups at any stage. I argue that the large group environment – and the limited scope to interact and ask questions – is a challenge for some students whose primary language is not English. While students are generally positive in their views on the module, a substantial challenge for the Italian students is lack of familiarity with the Irish legal system. Through lecturer observations and informal class discussions with learners, two main recommendations are made, based on the findings, which focus on inclusivity: 1. A supplementary resource (and not a replacement for live delivery of lectures) in the form of audio content should be made available on the virtual learning environment Moodle and 2. Weekly tutorials for small group learning should be scheduled, in an effort to cultivate a greater understanding of the Irish legal system. Such recommendations will be made to Faculty management.

Keywords: *Inclusivity; diversity; international students; additional learning resources; TUS (Midlands)*

Introduction

There has been, in recent years – with the exception of the height of Covid-19 – a "rapid increase in the global movement of students" (Felton and Harrison, 2017, p. 88) pursuing third level education. More than six million students in universities globally are international students (UNESCO, 2022). In Ireland, more than 10% of all enrolments in third-level institutes in Ireland are international students (Higher Education Authority, 2018) and it is the government's policy to develop a high quality international education system (Department of Education and Skills, 2016).

Amid growing numbers of international students globally, Markey et al. (2023) argue that educators strive to achieve a balance between a successful business model that focuses on increasing international student numbers and the provision of a quality learning experience for all learners.

Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands (TUS) prides itself on the range and quality of academic programmes it offers to international students and also the supports provided for international students who study at the institute on an annual basis. TUS hosts hundreds of international students on Erasmus and various other exchange programes annually. TUS is also keen to ensure learners who visit the institute and the midlands region are supported as much as possible in an inclusive and vibrant learning environment.

This paper references one module, Business Law, which is taken by 38 students from Politecnico di Torino in Italy. These students are on transfer to Business programmes in the Faculty of Business and Hospitality, TUS, in the current academic year (2023/2024).

In total, there are 77 students in the module (the remaining half are Irish students). The module, open to Year 2 Higher Certificate in Business students, introduces learners to the sources of law in Ireland and the structure and practice of the administration of law in Ireland. The module covers the following five main topics:

1. Introduction to the Irish legal system and administration of justice

2. The Law of Tort

3. The Law of Contract

4. Employment Law

5. Introduction to Data Protection

The assessment strategy consists of two components: a written examination (80%) and a continuous assessment (20%) in which all five topics are examined.

A wide range of elements relating to Business Law are included in the module and learners are generally engaged. Attendance is solid and each year there generally are high levels of satisfaction overall with the module content. And while international students and learners whose first language is not English generally provide positive feedback on the module, a lack of familiarity with the Irish legal system is a challenge for many of them. The twin challenge of grasping various concepts relevant to the Irish legal system, allied to the challenge of English not being the learners' first language, presents difficulties for some learners. While ensuring that the learning outcomes are met and also ensuring that all students – Irish students and international students – are treated fairly, the goal of inviting feedback from learners was to enhance their overall experience in this module where possible.

Diversity and Inclusion in Third Level Teaching

The learning needs of all students must be recognised and every effort must be made to ensure they are accommodated. Knox et al. (2019) argues that faculty should play a key role in ensuring learners are facilitated in an inclusive environment; in reality it is often faculty members who recognise challenges faced by individual learners and start the ball rolling to ensure those challenges are addressed. In Ireland, the Higher Education Authority's National Access Plan 2022 – 2028 prioritises six main student-centred goals, one of which is inclusivity.

According to the TUS Equality, Diversity and Inclusion department, "Our TUS EDI vision is to be recognised as a leader in advancing equality, diversity and inclusion. TUS promotes and supports a culture where diversity is celebrated and is a driver and influencer of cultural and societal change locally, regionally and nationally" (TUS, 2024).

Dunn and Olivier (2011) argue that third-level institutions – an institute-wide approach is important – have an important role to play in creating welcoming and inclusive communities for international students and integrating them into campus life, amid concerns over "lack of integration" (Dunn and Olivier, 2011, p. 35). Individuals need to share this responsibility; I argue that integration in the classroom is invaluable in this regard and the social constructivism approach to teaching, as employed by this lecturer, is an excellent way of engaging students in small groups. Dunn and Olivier (2011, p. 36) contend that "formal institutional structures including programs, events and practices can provide opportunities for students to access informal interaction". I argue that by inviting students to provide feedback on their studies is one important way of including students, listening to their feedback and where possible addressing their concerns in relation to the academic side of the experience.

Tackling Challenges Relating to Language in Third-Level Education in Ireland

Stipanovic and Pergantis (2018) argue that international students can struggle with the language and this can impact negatively on their understanding of a topic and can also make it difficult for them to communicate with native English speakers and lecturers should be mindful of this.

Knox et al. (2019) contend that some students struggle with understanding colloquial terms in lectures. Felton and Harrison (2017) make the point that language competency issues are a challenge for many international students. In TUS, English language classes, open to international students, and individual writing support provided by the Academic Writing Centre are two important supports that should be embraced by international students.

Xu (2023) contends that one of the ways students attending third-level institutes can be best supported is by understanding their challenges regarding language and providing options for support, including speaking more slowly and giving students time to think; and also providing clear, detailed written feedback and highlight areas where they can improve. While the latter is currently in place in the module Business Law, Xu's (2023) point on speaking more slowly and repeating points where there are technical terms is relevant and can potentially greatly assist learners facing challenges in relation to the English language.

The Perspectives of Key Stakeholders

In this research, feedback was gathered through lecturer observations and feedback from learners through class discussions. Prior research (Xu, 2023; Dunn and Olivier, 2011) has highlighted the importance of taking measures to ensure inclusion and diversity for international students and the first step in this regard was to gauge students' perspectives.

Twenty students from Politecnico di Torino took part in an informal discussion in week 10 of a 12-week semester. Learners were invited to discuss their views on the module – one of the topics covered was inclusion, from the perspective of an international student. All students agreed that the module Business Law was interesting and the learning experience was rich. However, there was general agreement that because there was so much content in the module specific to Ireland, international students found it difficult to grasp it all and the large class size made it difficult for them to ask questions or clarify any issues or queries.

Asked how the learning environment could be improved, the students suggested smaller groups i.e. tutorials, and more focus on explaining key concepts relevant to the Irish legal system. Research shows that students are less comfortable in large classes to ask questions (Beykont and Daiute, 2002) and the learners from Politecnico di Torino expressed similar sentiments. Some stated that their command of English made it difficult for them to ask questions and to follow all content covered in the weekly lectures.

Lecturer observations were similar. Learners were engaged and attendance levels were excellent (attendance levels were, on average, 90% overall). However, all 20 students stated that they faced challenges grasping some concepts relevant to the legal system in Ireland. Some learners asked questions in class, but they made the point that this was difficult in a large lecture hall. Four learners said that they were using translator applications in class, but found it difficult to listen whilst doing this. On a positive note, the lecture notes posted on the virtual learning environment Moodle prior to class were of immense help for students who all stated that they reviewed them in advance of attending each class.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The cohort of students from Politecnico di Torino in Italy who are attending TUS are very focused. They engage in their classes and are very enthusiastic about their studies. Overall, their attendance levels are high and in other modules where there are tutorials, their engagement is generally of an excellent standard. It is important that their concerns and challenges faced are taken into consideration and changes are made where possible, with a focus on an inclusive learning environment, whilst ensuring learning outcomes are met and all students taking the module are catered for.

Dunn and Olivier (2011) rightly assert that there is a collective responsibility on all stakeholders i.e. third-level institutions, academics, international offices and administrative staff in creating an inclusive learning environment for international students; in this case students from Politecnico di Torino.

Stipanovic and Pergantis (2018)'s point that lecturers should be aware of challenges faced by international students in relation to the English language is important and every effort should be made to support students in this regard, or point to existing supports available institute-wide i.e. English language classes or academic writing support.

Based on lecturer observations and class discussions with the students, two main recommendations are made which will potentially benefit students taking Business Law and other similar modules in the future.

The first is the provision of supplementary resources on Moodle. This would take the form of clear audio explanations – supported by subtitles – of key concepts relevant to the Irish legal system. Additionally, where relevant, there should be a more detailed explanation of concepts discussed in class each particular week. This should address unease from students regarding the English language and also disquiet that there is no opportunity to hear details of content relevant to the Irish legal system more than once, particularly where learners are not familiar with a particular technical word or phrase. It is important to note that this potentially invaluable resource on Moodle is supplementary and not as a replacement for live class delivery.

The other key recommendation relates to the provision of weekly tutorials for small group learning. It is recommended that the three one-hour lectures will be replaced by two one-hour lectures every week and an additional number of one-hour tutorials (with a maximum of 10 students per class), with each learner timetabled to attend one per week. This should allow for more in-class discussion which ideally should prioritise inclusivity, particularly providing learners with the chance to ask questions and participate in a smaller group setting. The social constructivism approach, where facilitation is important (Jordan et al., 2008), is an approach which the lecturer embraces; this is ideal for small class sizes i.e. tutorials.

This, coupled with the provision of audio content online, should help to support students and address individual questions students are not given the opportunity to ask in a large lecture hall. The recommendations are not exclusive to international students; in reality many Irish students may have similar concerns in relation to this module.

This is a small-scale study and these recommendations will be made to Faculty management. It is hoped that the relevant changes will be approved which will, in turn, benefit future cohorts of students taking this and similar modules across the TUS institute. Similar studies on a wider scale are recommended, so that an inclusive approach benefits a wide range of learners.

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