

International students in the Department of Political Science: Teaching and Learning experiences and hopes for the future

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Introduction

The student body known as the 'international students' at the Department of Political Science has not received any systematic scrutiny as a distinct body of students with specific experiences and wishes when it comes to teaching and learning. This short report tries to shed light on this understudied group of students in order to gain knowledge about how the 'international student' should be received and taught at the University of Copenhagen, Department of Political Science. The report ends with a set of conclusions and recommendations for future teaching of international students.

The report asks three main questions:

1. What is the students' main reasons for studying (Political Science in Copenhagen?)
2. What are their teaching and learning experiences? How familiar are they with student involvement?
3. How do they value the learning potential of activities that involve students actively?

By focusing on these issues, I decided to exclude a focus on culture, language and religion amongst the international students, which has been a topic studied elsewhere.¹ As a consequence, I chose to focus on the students as a largely homogeneous group. This was partly for pragmatic reasons: the data was limited to a relatively small group of students (117) of which 47 replied. Drawing conclusions about cultures would have been vague at best, highly problematic at worst. Research has also shown that students' participation in e.g. Australian tutorials is influenced by the classroom context in which they learn, and not by

¹ See e.g. Gabb, Diane (2006) "Transcultural Dynamics in the Classroom", *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10: 357-368; Volet, Simone (1999) "Learning across cultures: appropriateness of knowledge transfer", *International Journal of Educational Research* 31: 625-643; Volet, Simone & G. Ang (1998) "Culturally Mixed groups on international campuses: An opportunity for inter-cultural learning" *Higher Education Research and Development* 17(1): 5-23; Marlina, Roby (2009): "I don't talk or I decide not to talk? Is it my culture? – International students' experiences of tutorial participation", *International Journal of Educational Research*, 48: 235-244.

their culture.² If culture was a factor, on the contrary, the international students that we receive in Copenhagen are largely from the Western world. Difficulties with students from non-Western countries are thus largely not encountered by teachers at the Department of Political Science.³ In my survey, only one student reported being from Bangladesh, the rest can be said to come from countries belonging to a Western tradition. Treating the international student body as one group was therefore possible, in my view. And it did not exclude me from getting diverse responses which are interesting for the Department of Political Science in their planning of teaching for international students.

In order to get data to answer these questions, I carried out an electronic survey amongst the international students in the Department of Political Science in the academic year 2012/2013 in February and March 2013. The survey was distributed to 117 people out of which 47 responded, corresponding to a response rate of 40%.

Reasons for studying Political Science (in Copenhagen)?

When researching for this report, I came across a lively debate in the UK, which has a huge international student body in their universities. One of the articles that had drawn a lot of attention was based on a survey carried out by a market research firm called i-graduate amongst 25.000 international students, 80% of which were enrolled in British universities. It asked the students what made them choose their university and country of study. The controversial – and interesting part – was that the market research firm then grouped the responses into five different ‘tribes’.⁴

² Marlina. Roby (2009) “I don’t talk or I decide not to talk? Is it my culture? – International students’ experiences in tutorial participation”, *International Journal of Educational Research*, 48: 235-248

³ Diane Gabb (op cit.) reports quite gloomy results about the psychological well-being of students from non-Western countries as opposed to Western countries in her research about trans-cultural dynamics in the classroom.

⁴ “The New Seekers”, *The Guardian*, 18 March 2008: 1

Table 1: i-graduate's "Tribes"

Tribe	Driver	Disciplines	Portion of international student body
The seekers	Driven by parents' wishes to secure a good job.	Engineering, science, business degrees	24%
The gekkos	They care about one thing: cash	Creative subjects, business and engineering	23%
The bonos	Idealists. Want to make a difference.	Languages, science, and creative degree courses. Postgraduates.	22%
The kids	Lack focus. Looking for something easy to steer them.	Undergraduates Engineering students	20%
The surfers	Just looking for fun. Less ambitious	Language degree courses	11%

As can be seen from the table, the five tribes are driven by different factors when choosing their discipline and country of study. *The seekers* are driven by their parents' wishes, *the Gekkos* are driven by money (Gekko referring to the film "Wall Street" in which Michael Douglas stars as the money-hungry finance boss Gordon Gekko), *The Bonos* – referring to the lead vocalist in the rock band U2 who has taken it upon him to be the spokesperson of many 'lost causes', e.g. the eradication of poverty in the campaign "Make Poverty History" initiated in 2005⁵ – are driven by an ambition to make a difference. *Kids* are not driven by anything in particular and generally lack focus. *The Surfers* are just looking for fun.

Given the degree of controversy this typologisation created in the UK⁶, I decided to focus on which type of tribe we find amongst the international students in Copenhagen. As explained above, I did not want to categorize my students by culture or religion. Asking them about their own motives for studying political science seemed a much more interesting topic. By asking them (Q12) "*What is your most important reason for studying political science?*" and giving them the

⁵ <http://www.makepovertyhistory.org/takeaction/>

⁶ Not least because i-graduate also attached nationalities to their typologisation, Seekers (Hong Kong), Gekkos (Poland), Bonos (Netherlands, US), Kids (Pakistan), Surfers (Spain and Japan).

following options. A) My parents thought it was a good idea, B) I expect to earn a lot of money with this education, C) I think a political science background can help me make a difference in the world, D) Political scientists have more fun, E) Other, I wanted to shed light on the different tribes described above at the Department of Political Science.⁷ This would give me an idea of the commitment of the international student body and perhaps – relatedly – an idea of the effort they were willing to put into studying here.

A very clear picture emerged: 64% of the respondents were “Bonos”, answering *C) I think a political science background can help me make a difference in the world*. 30% responded “Other”, with explanations generally revolving around versions of “I was interested in the subject”. Only 2% indicate that they expect to make a lot of money as their primary reason, and 2% indicate that they do not know why they chose political science.

So in general, the Political Science Department is populated very strongly by a tribe that seeks to make a difference in the world, and an international student body that seems committed to their chosen specialization.⁸ This type of information will most likely also be important when evaluating the wishes that these student have when it comes to teaching and learning.

Teaching and learning experiences amongst international students

One of the main stereotypical understandings of international students – and of students in general – thriving amongst university teachers is that students do not think it is valuable to listen to their fellow students during class. I decided to let this assumption be put to the test through a series of questions in my questionnaire. What were the students’ experiences from their home universities? And what did they expect from their stay in Copenhagen?

⁷ Clearly, it was not possible to reproduce a lengthy questionnaire in the present survey which could have mimicked the survey of i-graduate. I therefore opted for posing rather direct questions and also including questions about teaching and learning experiences in my survey. The results are therefore not directly comparable to i-graduate’s results.

⁸ It should be noted that people participating in surveys are often also very interested in the topic.

I asked (Q 4) “What is the most commonly used type of teaching at your home university?”⁹ And (Q7) “At your home university, how common is it to include students during teaching by e.g. organizing group discussions/group work and student presentations?”

For question 4 (most commonly used type of teaching) 56% replied that they were mostly used to lectures in big groups (more than 40 people) where the primary activity was that the teacher talked. 16% responded that they were mostly used to lectures in smaller groups, 11% responded that they were used to seminars, dominated by dialogue, and 11% responded that they were used to classes dominated by student presentations. So the student body has heterogeneous experiences when it comes to teaching. Most, however, are most familiar with lectures in big groups where it can be expected that student inclusion will be of a minimum.

Asked about the inclusion of students during teaching (Q7) this was further detailed¹⁰. The most commonly experienced type of student inclusion was group discussions in class. 38% responded that this happened “very often” and 20% that is “always” happened. Including students by making them perform student presentations also scored high with 22% responding “always”.

Learning between classes

Learning between classes focuses on stimulating the students’ preparatory phase before coming to class by e.g. posing puzzling questions for next week’s literature towards the end of one class or by encouraging students to work on a

⁹ For question 4 (most commonly used type of teaching) the options were: A) “Lectures in big groups (more than 40 students) (primary activity: teacher talks)” B) “Lectures in smaller groups (Less than 40 students) (primary activity: teacher talks)” C) “Seminars (primary activity: dialogue)” D) “Classes dominated by student presentations” E) “Group work assisted by teacher supervision”, F) “Individual work assisted by teacher supervision”, G) “Online teaching/virtual learning”, I) “Other - please indicate which”

¹⁰ On a scale seldom-sometimes-Often-Very Often-Always, the respondents were asked to rate the following activities: Student presentations, Group discussions in class, Group work in smaller groups during class, Group work in smaller groups outside of class, Online contributions during class (polls etc.), Online contributions on course website, Other.

case or a project throughout the semester.¹¹ The focus on selecting a specific case has the advantage of not only letting the students have concrete empirical data through which to understand complex theory in class, but also supports their preparations for exams be they written papers or synopses. In my own experience, the individual selection of concrete cases helps students reflect on higher taxonomical levels.¹²

Focusing on the questions dealing with learning that takes place in between classes¹³, the results of the survey showed that the students were not that familiar with activities to support that. Q7 asked about the prevalence of “group work in smaller groups outside of class”, the majority answered either “seldom” (31%) or “Sometimes” (33%). But on the other end of the scale, 18% responded “very often”. So the International student body represented in my survey have mixed experiences on this point as well.

When asked about the prevalence of making contributions to a course website as part of the learning experiences, the large majority of the respondents were not used to this feature. 42% responded “seldom” and 27 % responded “Sometimes”. On the other hand, 11% responded “always” and 16% “very often”. This could signify that some universities are not yet up to speed in e-learning, but could also indicate that a focus on learning between classes is not on the agenda amongst our colleagues abroad (as it seldom is in Denmark, I should add.) This might turn out to be a possible focus point for future teaching of international students. I will return to this in the conclusion.

¹¹ Op cit.

¹² Especially from my experience in teaching the MA class “Capturing Security Expertise: When Science Meets Practical Politics” at the Department of Political Science in Copenhagen, Spring 2013.

¹³ Von Müllen, Rikke (2011): “At forberede forberedelsen. Fra den pædagogisk-didaktiske værktøjskasse”, *Dansk Universitetspædagogisk Tidsskrift*, Årgang 6, nr. 10: 64-65

The value and perceived learning outcome attached to student inclusion

When asked about the value the students themselves attach to teaching formats that include students, the picture was very clear. 27% value them “very highly” and 49% value them “Highly”. None marked the categories “low” and “very low”. So the conclusion that I can draw from my data is that the international students in the survey are very keen to be included in the teaching formats in University. This runs contrary to many stereotypical conventions about the high value attached to lectures where the focus is primarily on the teacher and a conception of international students as primarily “surfers” (to refer back to i-graduate’s survey).¹⁴ However, when asked about which type of teaching the students feel they learn the most from, the conclusion changes a bit. While Seminars (primary activity: dialogue) scores the highest (40%), Lectures in smaller groups (primary activity: teacher talks) scores 36 %. So the students are divided in their evaluation of which type of teaching they “learn the most from” (Q5).

This is interesting compared with the value the students attach to student inclusion. Of course, seminars are pivotally about dialogue and thus about inclusion. But 40% still feel that lectures (in smaller groups) are of high value to their learning.

Digging a little deeper on this point, the voluntary comments of the respondents give some indication as to the rationale behind this blurred picture. On the positive side about seminars with student/teacher dialogue, one student offered this comment: *“I think that the seminars are more efficient because you have to have done the readings before in order to interact. Also the fact that the classes are much less crowded facilitates the interactions between students and teachers”* . This is of course also the intention behind having seminars: That learning outcomes will be higher when the students can interact with each other and with the teacher. It encourages what has been termed a “deep approach” as

¹⁴ In an informal talk with a mentor for international students, I was told that there is a substantial group of international students who would fit the description of the surfer tribe in i-graduate’s survey. Apparently, and not surprisingly, these students did not find the time to respond to my survey. This should of course be taken into account when judging the strength of the conclusions in this report.

opposed to a “surface approach” to learning,¹⁵ meaning that the students learn at a higher taxonomic level¹⁶ when exposed to dialogical and inclusionary teaching formats. That the students feel that they learn from this type of teaching and value it highly should only encourage us to include more of this type of teaching in our planning. Seen in light of the discussion of the value attached to ‘research based teaching’, this format is also highly relevant. Brew & Boud (1995) argue that: *“The learner develops a personal understanding of a phenomenon by interacting with conceptions within the literature, ideas presented by the teachers and others and by personal experience”*.¹⁷ This is a mimicking of the research process and promises an output at a potentially very high taxonomic level. As Biggs and Tang (2007: 21) put it: *“...education is about conceptual change, not just acquisition of information”*.¹⁸ Dialogical seminars promises to deliver exactly that, and the respondents in my survey seem to agree to a large extent that the seminars have this potential.¹⁹

However, this puts demands on the teacher. One student remarks: *“In dialogue seminars, it’s often not so easy to understand what other students say because some often speak quiet[ly] or very fast and the lecturer gives sometimes an unclear response if what the student said had been the answer he was looking for. Often a discussion leads off the topic. Therefore I think, a lecture in a smaller group would be more effective and you also get to know, what is important from the lecturers point of view”*. This is a very clear expression of the dilemmas attached to including students and having extensive discussions: the teacher must spend a lot of time making clear what the literature says and in what way the students’

¹⁵ Biggs, John & Catherine Tang (2007): “Teaching according to how students learn”, in *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*: Chapter 2. See also Ramsden, Paul (2003) *Learning to teach in Higher Education*, chapter 4.

¹⁶ Bloom’s taxonomy is reproduced and discussed in Biggs, John & Catherine Tang (2007): *Designing Intended Learning Outcomes* in *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*: pp. 79-82.

¹⁷ Brew, Angela & David Boud (1995): “Teaching and research: Establishing the vital link with learning”, *Higher Education*, 29: 261-273

¹⁸ A related discussion concerns so-called “Threshold Concepts” Cousin ,G. (2006): “An Introduction to Threshold Concepts”, *Planet* no. 17: 4-5. Threshold concepts are meant to focus the teaching on specific concepts which require both an ontological and an a conceptual shift in the students’ understanding of a particular issue area. It is demanding for the students to grasp, but will change their outlook when captured fully.

¹⁹ Further positive comments by respondents include: *“Applying what we learned helps conceptualize the concepts”* and *“Active, not passive learning”*.

responses are relevant or adds to that literature. To keep a “good sense of confusion” is perfectly alright and part of the process of grasping e.g. “Threshold Concepts” (see note 11 above). However, a balance has to be struck. It can be done, but it is demanding – and sometimes time consuming. And apparently, The University of Copenhagen has not been all that great in supporting this type of learning. One student remarks: *“This is only really effective in small groups, however. The system of teaching in Copenhagen for Masters degrees does not reflect this sort of teaching, however, and is not something I have been impressed by during my exchange here”*. Again, this is a very precise observation: The inclusionary teaching format is limited to a large extent when the number of students go up. Diminishing the number of students is, of course, a political decision which is not likely to be taken in the near future. Therefore, in my view, a combination of lectures and student inclusion/group work between classes could be a solution in future planning of courses for international students. But the seminars for a smaller group of people are also highly valued, and should be continually used for international students.

Conclusion and ways ahead

The ideals are in place – the international students like inclusionary formats - but the practice in class does not always live up to these ideals. Interestingly, the students seem forced to prefer lectures where the primary activity is that the teacher talks because of external variables such as class size and ability to hear properly what people are saying.

The focus on learning between classes thus seems an ideal place to put emphasis in light of the fact that class sizes are not likely to diminish in the future at the University of Copenhagen. Organizing learning activities that encourage the students to work in smaller groups, or to work on problem solving exercises between classes could help the learning outcome in a positive direction. And it would accommodate the wishes of the students as well as support the teachers in achieving a higher level of understanding amongst the students.

Pivotaly, the chosen format of teaching depends on what learning outcomes, we want our students to gain from our teaching. Do we want students that can cite the textbook or do we want reflection? In other words, on what level in Bloom's taxonomy would we like the students to learn? Being a University, the answer to that question should follow automatically.

The respondents in my survey answered quite clearly that they expected the teaching and learning experiences to be different in Copenhagen from their home university. 69% answered affirmatively to this question (Q9). The reasons they gave were e.g. "Here are more small classes based on student discussing"; "More discussions"; "I expect greater emphasis on student input"; "More classes of seminar-format in smaller groups than at home" and "By having the opportunity to focus more in the student part of the learning process". These are all great expectations that we should take seriously. However, one student wrote: "Whereas teaching in the UK is done by way of a lecture and a seminar per topic, KU seems to try to squash the two things into one class, which does not work – it is impossible to have a proper debate when in a class of 50 or 60 students." This observation could be the starting point for thinking about how to apply teaching formats – such as learning between classes – which could accommodate our students' wishes while at the same time balancing learning outcomes and politically decided externalities.