CHAPTER 8

International Postgraduate Students’ Perceptions and Experiences of Peer Assessment in a UK University: A Case Study

Meng Fan, Sue Robson, David Leat

Introduction

Internationalization of higher education brings both opportunities and challenges for internationalizing teaching, learning, and the curriculum and assessment experience of all students (Ryan 2013). Assessment determines student learning progression and completion, so international students (IS) who have made a significant investment to study abroad can be significantly stressed by the assessment practices they encounter (Brown and Joughin 2007). The IS from different cultural backgrounds have been influenced by different assessment systems in their earlier learning experiences, which may differ from those they encounter in the United Kingdom higher education (HE) assessment system (Robson 2011). As a result of a growing dissatisfaction with traditional forms of assessment, formative assessment, in contrast to summative assessment, has gained favor to encourage deeper engagement with learning and enhance learner autonomy and motivation; for this reason, it has attracted the attention of educational researchers. At the same time, various innovative assessment approaches, such as portfolios, peer assessment, and self-assessment, have been advocated to positively influence and promote student learning (Kvale 2007). However, there has been relatively little research on how IS perform in innovative assessment environments and how this affects them.
HE has become one of the biggest export earners for the United Kingdom; for example, IS contributed £7.9 billion to the UK economy in 2009 (HEA 2012). Therefore, the recruitment of growing numbers of IS is an important strategic objective for many UK universities (Altbach and Knight 2007), especially in a climate of budgetary constraints and cuts to government funding. However, there is increasing global competition for IS from English-speaking countries like the United States and Australia, countries in Europe offering programs through English-medium courses, and more recently from countries in the Asian region (OECD 2004; Gu and Schweisfurth 2011). Thus, UK universities have become more aggressive in competing for overseas fee-paying students. Along with the reputation of a university, ranking, fees, and the quality of teaching and learning are the main basis for marketing activities. Well-designed curricula and assessment can provide students with rich and active learning experiences, develop graduate competences for work and life in a global economy, and help their future careers. Hence, studies on IS’s experiences of assessment in UK HE could contribute to the future recruitment of IS.

As increasingly diverse student populations emerge on UK campuses, financial benefits are no longer the main motivation for the internationalization of HE. Academic staff may also wish to increase research and knowledge capacity across cultures and deliver a culturally inclusive curriculum for all students (Robson 2011). Internationalization at home has emerged as a key strategic aim in many institutions, with the intention that both staff and students can acquire international perspectives in their subject field and develop the ability to engage positively with cultural others in both their professional and private lives (Leask 2007). Although the notion of internationalizing the curriculum has been a growing topic in recent years, and there have already been articles discussing it at abstract and conceptual levels (e.g., Jones 2013; Ryan 2013), we need further empirical research on actual practices to internationalize the curriculum and assessment in real UK HE settings. Clifford and Montgomery (2011) suggest that the internationalization of the curriculum challenges current course design and pedagogy, and has the potential to offer a transformative education experience. With a growing interest in and advocacy for assessment for learning, we may also consider assessment for intercultural learning as a way of internationalizing the curriculum.

Ecclestone and Pryor (2003) argue that assessment has an important impact on learner identity. Thus, we may expect that UK assessment experiences are a way to develop or transform IS’s learner identity in order to help their adjustment to UK education and to develop their international perspectives, rather than merely providing challenging learning experiences.