Teaching international students at UCN
An analysis of how lecturer’s achieve agency (or not) in the international classroom
Simonsen, Berit Elsebeth; Miller, Tanja; Hammershøy, Anna

Publication date:
2016

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

• Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
• You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Download policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 15. jan. 2020
Teaching international students at UCN: An analysis of how lecturer’s achieve agency (or not) in the international classroom

Berit E. Simonsen

Anna Hammershøy

Tanja Miller

B.E. Simonsen, besi@ucn.dk

A. Hammershøj, anmu@ucn.dk

T. Miller, tnm@ucn.dk

Corresponding author: B.E. Simonsen, besi@ucn.dk

Abstract

This study draws on data collections undertaken as part of a broader pilot study “How international is the international education at UCN?” which is currently carried out under the research programme “Inequality and disadvantaged people”, at University College of Northern Denmark (UCN). The data has been collected among the lecturers who teach at one of the international two-year Academic Professional (AP) programmes that UCN currently offers. Within the Study program, the education is offered in two streams, Danish (with Danish as the teaching medium) and international (with English as the teaching medium). The study investigates factors that either promote or inhibit the lecturer’s achievement of agency, in the wake of the Bologna declaration of 1999 that opened up for a massive increase of international students in Danish education institutions. The immediate findings show that a number of existing structures and complex social systems severely inhibits this achievement of agency and that the lecturers to a large extend have been left fending for themselves in order to find new and flexible ways to cope with daily issues caused by the strength and speed of internationalisation at UCN.
Keywords
Teacher agency, Inequality in education, Internationalisation of higher education, internationalising the curriculum, intercultural pedagogy

1. Introduction

In the wake of the Bologna declaration of 1999, higher education institutions in Europe began experiencing a significant growth in student mobility. In a Danish context it has been noted that any “self-respecting” Danish university either has implemented, or is in the process of implementing, an internationalisation strategy (Mortensen, Haberland & Fabricius, 2012).

This international mobility of students, who often stem from poorer countries and travel abroad to obtain qualifications in more affluent countries, has truly transformed higher education into a global phenomenon in many respects. The substantial increase in participation in higher education, in individual countries as well as globally, together with a more diverse student composition, represents a significant structural change to the educational institutions affecting both the entire student cohort as well as their lecturers.

The overall growth in international students in Denmark also reflects in the number of international students at (UCN). As such, roughly, 50% of the students follow the international streams offered at the two-year AP study programme ( internal UCN statistics). The overwhelming majority of these students fall under the definition of international students, in this study defined as:

“[…] all students “who have their pre-university qualification from a country other than their tertiary place of study” (Vinther and Slethaug 2015).

One of the reasons for the massive increase of international students at UCN could be that UCN has a strong focus student recruitment, i.e. “for-profit international student recruitment” (Luke, 2010 in Killick, 2015 p. 20). Such a focus quite often effectively divorce internationalisation from the interests and engagement of academic staff as well as alienating those concerned with providing a quality learning experience to their students (Killick, 2015). The reason for this being that no immediate attention is given to the fact that such a radical change in international and educational dynamics, tends to severely affect
the staff as well as the students’ academic practice, cohesion, retention, and workloads. From the students’ point of view, previous research shows (e.g. Tange & Jensen, 2012) that as flows of international students’ move into educational cultures, framed by specific national and institutional histories; this might increase their risk of misunderstanding, marginalization and academic failure. Data from previous research in UCN auspice (e.g. Hammershøy, 2014a) supports this, as do the findings from the pilot study (see abstract). As such, a higher frequency is e.g. detected for international students to use multiple attempts in order to pass examinations, they experience a lack of motivation due to weak study structure and they overall demonstrate a lower grade point average (GPA) in their final examinations than their Danish counterparts (internal UCN statistics).

In order to investigate the underlying causes for this, as well as investigating the issue from another perspective, the researchers find it relevant to focus this study on the lecturers. This approach fills the gap in literature on internationalisation as it applies to lecturers in higher education settings, in terms of their knowledge and skills when working with internationalised curricula as well as in terms of their personal and professional attitudes (Sanderson, 2011). In a Nordic context scholars such as Tange and Jensen (2012) and Vinther and Slethaug (2015) further support our view and find it important to consider the situation on the receiving side, i.e. from the lecturers’ point of view, as they (among other) have a great deal of power in the process of helping students undertake their own formation (Marginson & Sawir, 2011, p. 61). Furthermore, they act as the interface between institutional demands and student expectations (Tange, 2015). This study therefore investigates how the participating lecturer’s act in their daily working context with international students, against the backdrop of the introduction of the Bologna process and not least the introduction of the new management style in public institutions; New Public Management (NPM) (Rienecker, Jørgensen, Dolin, & Ingerslev, 2015). The aim is hence to identify factors that either support or inhibit the lecturers in their actions and as such present a more nuanced picture of how the lecturers experienced teaching international students.

2. Theoretical framework: Teacher agency

For the purpose of this study, we move beyond the extensive theorized concept of agency as defined in the pilot study and elaborate with the concept of teacher agency. The
rationale for this is motivated by the fact that this concept has been subject to little explicit research or theory development (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007 in Biesta, et al., 2015, p. 624), whereas agency per se, has been extensively theorized, primarily with a focus on student agency. We follow the same line of understanding as put forward by e.g. Margaret Archer who has developed further on the concepts of structure and agency from a realist social theoretical perspective (Case, 2013). As such, structure refers to and it is understood as the existing social order, as in different roles in society and in the institutions that support them, as well as the distribution of material resources in the society. This renders an understanding of structure as the objective conditions which form and shape individuals. Agency on the other hand is defined as “[…] the space where the individual acts with intentionality” (Case, 2013). Agency as such represents the actions of a person (Ibid). The interest of the researchers in this study however, lies with the phenomenon of agency itself and in how agency is achieved in concrete settings as well as in and through particular ecological conditions and circumstances (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015). This understanding is rooted in action-theoretical approaches, particularly those stemming from pragmatist philosophy (Dewey, Mead), where agency is concerned with the way in which actors ‘critically shape their responses to problematic situations. This falls perfectly in line with the argument presented in the introduction, that no immediate attention is given to the fact that radical changes in international and educational dynamics tends to severely affect academic practice, cohesion, retention, and workloads as seen from the lecturer’s point of view. How the individual lecturer responds to these changes would likely affect their role as change agents in learning and with that, potentially severely affect student agency.

The action-theoretical approach to the concept of agency highlights the notion that actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment. The achievement of agency will hence always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always-unique situations (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015). The following model (figure 2) is based on Biesta et.al´s ecological conception of agency-as-achievement combined with ideas from Emirbayer and Mische and this model has guided the data-collection and subsequent data-analysis.
The model has prompted questions about the origin of the lecturer’s perceptions and beliefs (the iterational dimension) as well as how those perceptions and beliefs motivates action (the projective dimension). From previous research carried out in a Nordic context, scholars such as Tange and Jensen (2012) has found that respondents (university lecturer’s) reliance on a simplified image of self and other leads them to a construction of a deficit perception about international students (p.181). This finding is further supported by Biesta et.al (2015) when they argue that teachers beliefs about e.g. a particular student, is affective, narrative in nature and relying on correspondences with evaluations from the past. Embedded in this understanding we might discover some inherent barriers for equality between native learners (i.e. Danish students) and non-native learners (i.e. International students) as suggested in Tange and Jensen’s research from 2012:

“Because the Danish educational system has provided native lecturer’s and learners with shared experiences of attractive and deviant practices, this good student is often, if not exclusively, found among the Danish students, who are set up as a benchmark against which any alternative conduct can be assessed” (Tange & Jensen, 2012, p. 188)
Within each of the three dimensions depicted in figure 1, a number of aspects are likely to contribute to the achievement (or not) of teacher agency. In this study and in relation to the Iterational dimension we explore general comments about the lecturer’s accumulated international experience and experience with teaching international students with a focus on how this has shaped their beliefs about these students. In relation to the projective dimension we explore the lecturer’s immediate aspirations of their work and how they ultimately view the long term and short term educational development of international students as well as the overall purpose of providing international education at UCN. In relation to the practical-evaluative dimension, we explore narratives about the day-to-day working environment within which the lecturer’s work. This involves examining their daily decisions in the preparation as well as the actual teaching, which might prove:

“[…] difficult, involving compromise and at times conflict with their aspirations, feeling coerced by what they might see as arbitrary and unnecessary intrusions into their work” (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015)

As argued by Biesta et.al (2015), the practical-evaluative forms a major influence on agency, powerfully shaping (and often distorting) decision making and action, both offering possibilities for agency (for example by providing available resources) and inhibiting it (for example by creating perceptions of unacceptable risk) (p.627).

3. Methodology

Over a period of two years, a series of classroom observations, questionnaires and follow up semi-structured interviews with lecturer’s has been conducted, following a mixed methods sequential explanatory design and as such the findings in each phase has guided the following phase.

The initial qualitative data has been analysed using a number of codes derived manually from the theoretical and conceptual framework. The process resembles Thematic analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke, 2008) and by applying this method, we have been able to sort the various field notes from observation into themes relating to this framework. Descriptive data from the questionnaires were then further analysed using an open coding process, a process identified within Grounded Theory (Bryman, 2012). The ensuing semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) with the lecturers were conducted at the
respondents’ institution and lasted between 30 – 60 minutes. The data processing (transcribing of the interviews) was carried out simultaneously allowing for a continuous integration of emergent themes in to the interview guide. Where relevant, questions were then formulated in order to explore whether or not a specific topic or issue was unique or of a more general nature. This allowed us to interpret in-depth how the lecturer has shaped and developed the learning environment through definite classroom decision-making and ultimately how a number of factors relating to context and structure as well as own beliefs (e.g. Wallace & Priestly, 2011) shaped the lecturer’s agency and performance in the classroom.

4. Analysis
The following analysis is structured around the three overall themes derived from the latter process; Perceptions about the international student; Perceptions about the international education at UCN; Perceptions about own performance in the international classroom.

4.1 Perceptions about the international student

    By accident, I am who I am (Appiah, 2005 in Killick, 2015)

From the international students point of view, their social identity and evolution hereof rests upon a fundamental division within their constructions of self vis-à-vis others (Killick, 2015) which in return is largely depending on how they are viewed and possibly identified as “Othered” and thereby members of the out-group (e.g. Turner & Tajfel, 1986). In an educational context, this places a large responsibility with the lecturer’s. As noted by Killick (2015), internationalisation sets its gaze largely upon the global and the international, but works in the same arena as those who advocate for equality and diversity agendas (p.49). The lecturer hence become a key actor, partially (together with the entire academic staff) responsible for the socialisation of international students into a new academic system and the evaluation of their performance (Tange & Jensen, 2012).

When asked how the lecturer’s view their international students the statements immediately show a somewhat peculiar distinction between a “real international student” and what is referred to as an “Eastern-European student”: 
“Ehh, well it is actually quite funny because my experience with international students are quite different than what we typically see here (at UCN)[…] then we could sit there with half a class of Bulgarians and the other half Rumanians. And that was as International as it got” (10)

It further appears as though some lecturer’s link skills with nationality:

I felt at bit that Czech Republic and Poland they were very skilled and the Baltic countries were quite good. But it turned out that some of the most skilled were actually also from Rumania and Hungary, so it is not like I can say that one country is better than the other, it is not like you can point it out, but perhaps you can though” (6)

From the above excerpts it is possible to suggest, that the lecturer’s in question draw on previous international experience e.g. from being an international student themselves (10) or by past experience with teaching international students (6) in which it was found that students from Rumania and Hungary appeared to perform badly in comparison to other nationalities.

Dividing and talking about international students based on their national culture seems to be a widespread general tendency among lecturer’s who teach international students, at least it is also noted to be the case in Tange´s research (2015, p. 123). Stereotyping can be rather problematic in this regard for a number of reasons. For one, stereotypes often come loaded with normative positions concerning what is “good” or “bad” (e.g. Tange & Jensen, 2012; Killick, 2015). Further, stereotypes can lead us to characterize an individual based on what we believe to be true of a group. Another aspect is that stereotype schemas are not amenable to being easily dis/reassembled, as dis-confirming evidence tends to be unseen or explained away as anomalous (e.g. a student perform well even though they are from Rumania). Conversely, any behaviour interpreted as congruent with a held stereotype tends to assume prominence and act to reconfirm a stereotype (Killick, 2015, p. 90). It means that any issue or pedagogical problem in the international classroom can be coupled to culture rather than for instance, student agency (Marginson & Sawir, 2011, p. 126).

---

1 Example extracts (participant assignment number), (N=13)
Many respondents hence explain e.g. silence in class and a lack of interest or engagement in debates and discussions in class, as being due to cultural background:

“They have difficulties with being critical or asking questions etc. The Eastern-European students don’t do that in the beginning[…] a discussion that might last half an hour in the Danish class, take 8 min. in the international class” (3)

Another respondent report similar understanding about differences in cultural background:

“They come from a more totalitarian system based largely on on-rote learning” (10)

When it comes to e.g. deference to authority, many lecturers equally describe this as a typical “international” trait:

“Well, these students they do not particularly trust systems and authorities, over and over again they talk about how they come from a corrupt country which relates to both politicians as well as lecturer’s” (5)

“They are much more polite and formal and call me Mr. and such, which I really appreciate, because they come from educational systems that are very formal” (9)

Based on the latter excerpts, it seems that most international students are being grouped into one, and then they are largely described as non-reflective, passive, and with a great distance towards the lecturer, at least when they first come to Denmark. This further supports the argument, that largely the lecturer’s base their perceptions about the international students on previous experiences and discourses about the international students, inspired by conversations with other lecturer’s and academic staff. This in itself is natural and does not immediately raise concern. However, when asked about the general discourse about international students at the institution (UCN) the responses vary:

[…] I think that previously there has been a tendency to view the international students from a negative point of view; Oh, the international students never show up for class and they are only here because their parents tell them to” (7)

Or:
“I think that I have heard some talk about them (international students) negatively” (11)

These statements or frames of reference of the problematic “Other”, might therefore negatively affect and influence the professional environment in which the lecturer’s act, and heavily influences their agency affecting how they act in the practical-evaluative dimension (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015).

A stereotypical view framed by the professional environment as well as the professional and educational background of the lecturer’s might also result in a rather narrow and limited understanding of the international student. As such, it might be forgotten or overlooked that there can be various reasons for the student’s different behaviour in the classroom and that they might be a product of the learning environment as much as it is culture bound (Marginson & Sawir, 2011, p. 126) as previously argued.

When it comes to Danish students, the narratives immediately show a greater acceptance of the fact that various issues could be caused by e.g. personality, academic weaknesses or simply lack of knowledge about academic conventions. It is hence considered crucial for the lecturer’s to apply a similar nuanced perspective on their international students, more than maintaining a limited focus on e.g. national cultural differences (Tange, 2015) or describing them as coming from “an international system”.

This understanding is also showing in some of the lecturer’s responses, e.g. in the following considerations:

“I believe there is a tendency to talk about international students as one big group, when in reality they come from a number of different educational systems and from a variety of different backgrounds. […] we tend to accept, that the Danish students come from a “Danish” system and the internationals come from an “international” system.” (5)

4.2 Perceptions about the international education at UCN

The original objective with the Bologna Process was to develop a common European Higher Education Area (AHEA), where researchers and students could move freely across borders. The individual participating countries have interpreted the requirements for
competence descriptions somewhat differently. From the international Bologna qualification framework from 2005, the main view of which competences university students should acquire from their education is broad. As such:

[… ] in addition to preparation for the labour market, it is made explicit that students should continue to have a broad, advanced knowledge base, a democratic position and undergo a process of development (EHEA 2005 in Rienecker, et al., 2015, p. 36)

This view is not immediately reflected in the Danish Accreditation process. As the only country in Europe, Denmark lists labour market relevance as the primary criterion for approval of education (Ibid.). This understanding also reflects throughout UCN, with perhaps an added emphasis on relevance for the Danish labour market?

The lecturer’s in this study hence largely demonstrates similar perceptions and beliefs about the purpose of the international education at UCN. These perceptions tended to coalesce around a few key themes, such as the degree to which international students adjust to the system (i.e. the Danish educational system) and how the lecturer’s adapt their teaching and learning goals to the international classroom.

Addressing the theme of internationals students’ adjustment to the education system at UCN, one respondent offers the following comment:

“I don’t have any data to support it, but it is my experience that they get better at understanding what it is we want them to do at the third or fourth semester”

(8)

Several other respondents support this understanding. The question remains however, whether or not adapting or adjusting to a system is the same as learning and it offers no immediate understanding of what exactly it is the students learn. According to Archer’s morphogenetic cycle, human interaction is at the very heart of this (Case, 2013). As such, the interaction between the student and the lecturer would appear to be absolutely central to student learning and the lecturer, as the more knowledgeable other, is in a strong position to assist students (or not) in mediating the challenges of the curriculum (Ibid., p. 141). Here, we adhere to the theoretical frameworks put forward by e.g. Bernstein (2000, in Case, 2013) which provides a clear understanding of the relationship between
curriculum (the intended curriculum) and pedagogy (the enacted curriculum). Ashwin (2009 in Case, 2013) notes the distinctive space of higher education, where it is quite possible to find the same set of people engaged in generating knowledge, re-contextualizing it into curriculum, and teaching and assessing in courses. This renders the pedagogic device as a site of struggle, particularly so if these same people are all schooled in the Danish educational system and teach based on a curriculum developed solely in a Danish context, which is a fact for the majority of the respondents in this study. Hence, within the Study program at UCN, the international education is subject to the same curriculum as the Danish stream, UCN being a public educational institution, the curriculum is nation-wide and designed by the Danish Ministry of Education, with only insignificant variations possible. It requires a further look at the curriculum and more importantly, how it is enacted in the international classroom.

4.2.1 A Danish context

Many respondents report that the educational environment at UCN is largely a Danish environment. Among the respondents only two lecturers are non-natives, the rest of the lecturer’s primarily hold their education from a Danish university and as such are socialised into a national educational tradition. When asked to what extend they adapt their teaching and the curriculum to their international classes’ one respondent offer the following response:

[…]" whether or not I take this into consideration? Ehh I don't know. You know in relation to the learning goals, then that is a learning goal. I see that as an objective thing. So I do not think that I consider this more with the international than with the Danish, you know they all have to go through the same right? The have to reach the same goal… Ehh then maybe that is the question. Our learning goals are they Scandinavian or are they international?" (10)

Another respondent addresses the same issues in relation to incorporating examples and case studies that matches the cultural diversity in the classroom and thus responds:
[...] it is obvious for me to use examples from Aalborg because I can relate to this myself. I would find it difficult to relate to examples from Turkey or Slovakia” (9)

A third respondent address this issue as a deficit, not from own point of view, but from the international student’s point of view:

"well, I think that in relation to for example economy, they just don’t follow the news the same way the Danish students do, so we cannot discuss the same issues and that can be a challenge even when I try to find articles about Danish news in English [...] Well, they are just not as updated on the news as many of the Danish students" (10)

This immediately supports the arguments put forward by Tange and Jensen (2012) that because the Danish educational system has provided native lecturer’s and learners with shared experiences, the “good student” is very often found among the Danish students and this creates a gap in which the Danish students and the International students are compared, very often with the result of categorizing the international student as less proficient. In the realm of structural properties, it is then presumed that a student from a different national background should enter the programme with the same resources at hand as e.g. the Danish student and if they do not possess these, they are immediately placed in a deficit.

Basing the international education and curricula on competences applicable for the Danish labour market, as it seems to be the case at UCN, obviously inflict structural issues that affects the lecturer’s agency in enacting this curriculum. With that follows a risk of marginalization of the international student, by placing them in deficit from the beginning of their education.

As previously argued, lecturers are change agents in education, but in order to act proficiently as such, even when it comes to international students, their capacities must be continuously developed and they must act in an environment that reflects the cultural diversity of the student body. As such, the lecturer’s interactions and beliefs must be considered as structurally conditioned and hence very much depending on the

---

2 Geographical situation of UCN
environment in which they function. When asked about UCN as an “International” institution, the majority of respondents argue that a predominant Danish culture is prevalent:

“I don’t think UCN is very international, besides from the fact that we teach in English, it is largely a Danish context” (10)

This statement is further supported by another respondent:

“well, everything we do is in Danish, the only thing that is in English is really when we enter the classroom and sometimes when we prepare slides. Other than that we do not acknowledge the fact that we have international students, as far as I am concerned 85% is Danish and 15% is English and I believe that that is a challenge if you have to be proficient in English, when all other considerations and discussions are in Danish […] we sometimes forget we have international students” (1)

Yet another respondent argues:

“The first semester when I taught these Danish and international classes, I primarily used the same material, you know the same examples because I had already made them. Maybe my rationale was that this is a Danish educational institution that just happened to offer courses to non-Danish students” (3)

In the process of internationalising of higher education (IHE), Denmark and other Nordic countries are not the first to experience the global flow, other English speaking countries such as Australia, Canada and USA were first-movers in this area. However, as suggested by e.g. Vinther and Slethaug (2015) the Danish respondents in their research from 2015 indicate little distinction in recognizing and understanding the cultural and educational implications of the “stranger” in the international university (p. 96). When it comes to internationalisation of the curriculum in order to make it more inclusive in nature, it involves incorporating a range of values. Teaching hence needs to be enriched by cross-cultural communication skills, teaching materials appropriate to a culturally diverse audience and modifications to the curriculum in order to incorporate case studies from other cultures etc.
(Marginson & Sawir, 2011, p. 177). The ability to implement this in return requires strong teacher agency within the individual lecturer.

4.3 Perceptions about own performance

“Teacher capacity is undoubtedly important and high-capacity teachers are essential for an effective education system. However, while this is a necessary condition, it is not sufficient, as it neglects issues around the structures and cultures of schooling. [...] schools, as complex social organisations set within even more complex social systems, can seriously limit teacher agency, even where the teachers concerned are experienced, high-capacity individuals” (Priestly, 2015)

As argued by Killick (2015) all professionals in higher education with opportunities to influence the student experience has a responsibility to review and reshape their practice to better support such lifeworld changes (p. 181). This requires, among other, an ability and willingness to construct a formal curriculum which:

[...] draws upon and critically engages with diverse sources for its content; articulates clearly the attributes of the global student, suggested to encompass the dimensions of global relevance and inclusivity[...] (Ibid.)

In the same vein, equal requirements exists, when it comes to delivering the formal curriculum (i.e. pedagogy). So far, the lecturer’s in this study has largely shared a professional discourse about how they perceive their international students as well as a discourse that frames their understanding about what international education at UCN is and should be and how they subsequently plan for and teach the students in the international classroom. As shown in the above analysis, these discourses immediately appear to be somewhat restricted in scope, lacking the long-term goals (i.e. what is the long-term perspective for our international students?). This in return, raises a number of questions about what resources the lecturer’s actually have available in order to fulfill their role as change agents in (international) education.

As argued by Case (2013), when a lecturer enters the international classroom, they are also entering a world of enablement’s and constraints (p.47). In the following section, the emphasis is on the structural, cultural and material influences that affects the professional environment in which the lecturer achieve agency (or not). Throughout the data-collection,
the entire respondent group have shown a high degree of professionalism, competence and dedication as well as a high degree of empathy for and understanding of, their international students. It is therefore important to emphasize that their agency is profoundly affected by factors which are often beyond their immediate control and is not directly related to their capacities as professionals, which the introductory quote in this section also illustrates.

For the purpose of this study, two themes seemed to dominate the factors that act as part of the practical-evaluative dimension of teacher agency. The first concern cultural influences and entails pedagogical issues affected by language and communication. The second concern material influences and entails the pressures from of a new reform and management style i.e. New Public Management (NPM)

4.3.1 Cultural influences

Pedagogical issues

With the establishment of international study programs at UCN, it has become necessary for the lecturer’s to change from Danish into English-medium instruction and this potentially poses: “[…] a three- or four sided language problem” (Vinther & Slethaug, 2015, p. 100) since very few lecturer’s at UCN are native English speakers or even expert English speakers. For the international students this is equally likely to pose a problem for knowledge sharing and understanding as the overwhelming majority speaks English as a second language. As argued by Dahl and Troelsen (in Rienecker, et al., 2015) one of the greatest challenges of lectures as a teaching method is the inherent unidirectional communication, i.e. the idea is that the student learn by seeing, hearing and experiences the lecturer. One-way communication by nature leads to limited options in matching teaching to the individual student (p.179). At UCN the formal learning approach is called Reflective Practice-Based learning (RPL) and it immediately rebels against the notion of one-way communication and hence invites the students to learn through critical reflections and discussions in class as well as working with practice-based case studys. This pedagogical approach has however proved somewhat difficult to implement in the international classes.

As one respondent argue:
you might have a mix of international and Danish students and I would really try to get the international students to talk, they just will not while the Danish students are there. The Danish students, they respond all the time and then it is mainly they who get a lot of speaking time… of course I need to be better at engaging them you know, point them out or something.. Eh I don't know if that is a good idea or not” (3)

And another follows:

“In the beginning I found it difficult to explain our methods of teaching and what it is we wanted them to do, I mean it was clear to me what we wanted but not so clear for the students” (9)

The fact that the lecturer's struggle with this pedagogical dilemma and that it immediately affect their agency is portrayed in the following statements. As such, one repsondent states that:

“I feel a bit stupid sometimes, when I struggle to find relevant examples that they can relate to” (7)

Different perspectives about how to handle these struggles also arise:

“And then we can discuss, but should we really be better at including the majority. Or should we rather exclude the passive ones and then primarily focus on those who offer something active or who engage so to speak. And that I do not know, we might still have some challenges here. We might lose a lot that we would have liked to include much more than we have” (5)

The difficulties that some lecturer's experience with using the RPL-approach in their international classes appears to affect their agency in such a degree that it may lead to international students being seen as a burden, once again marginalizing them in the education. This is further illustrated in the following quote:

“I will actually go back to this issue with self-confidence that I mentioned earlier. I remember in the beginning, I was EXTREMELY irritated and frustrated because; why doesn’t this work and why cant you (the students) just, you know. It was just
you know aargh, it was just annoying. They were also never prepared and bla bla bla and they were just sitting there, never engaged you know. […] I think basically it is about confidence really and you know both professional and personal confidence” (9)

4.3.2 Material influences
Throughout the past 20-30 years, public sector reforms in Denmark share a number of features. As such, in Denmark we are dealing with a well-documented and global reform trend within the public sector, generally referred to as New Public Management (NPM) or neo-liberal management (Voetmann Christiansen et.al. in Rienecker, et al., 2015). There are many features involved in this new managerial style, however some affect the educational institutions more profoundly than others. One of them being that the public sector, like the private sector, should utilise its resources better and manage them more efficiently. The overall assumption is that competition fosters both financial efficiency and improved quality. At the same time, the government tries to control the public sector through so-called out-put management, i.e. the government defines the objectives, but the specific problem-solving is left to local actors (Ibid. p. 27) This is also the case at UCN and has immediately resulted in a number of institutional changes. As such, as of August 1st 2014, UCN changed their working paradigm, so that “standard work time” was replaced with “incurred hours”, affecting all lecturer’s.

4.3.3 Resources

The fact that some lecturer’s feel overburdened when the teaching community is subjected to change, such as it has the massive flow of international students and the consequences of NPM, is illustrated in the following quotes showing that they to a large extend feel they have to compromise their independence of teaching and learning:

“Well, there is not so much time to consider things and do much other than fulfill the established learning goals. It can also be difficult, because just because I have told them does that mean that they have learned it? I don’t know, but at least I have covered the material and then that would be the goal” (5)
Another lecturer states that:

“It’s beautiful, things like time for preparing for class that is simply abolished. So you can say there is just no time, this I can actually say very clearly, there is no time for that and then you have to be pragmatic about it. And that is also what the work paradigm dictates, when there is no time for preparing, then you will have to do the things you have time for and that means taking the easy road sometimes and that means no differentiation” (9)

Another lecturer does however recognize positive effects of the new paradigm and hence argue:

“I think that the good thing about the new worktime paradigm is that we have room for so much more. But it also means that we have to really plan for time to prepare, because there are simply so many other things that is part of your job now” (3)

5. Conclusion

By combining a theoretical discussion of teacher agency achievement in the international classroom with both quantitative and qualitative data collected among lecturers at the international stream of the AP-program at UCN, we have examined to what extent lecturers agency are inhibited by existing structures and complex social systems.

Eventhough the data presented in this paper only refers to one particular, albeit interesting case, it strongly indicates that in the strength and speed of internationalisation of higher education, lecturer’s to a large extend have been left fending for themselves in order to find new and flexible ways to cope with daily issues caused by this development. It further shows that topics relating to; Discourse about international students, the “Danish” working environment of the institution as well as the restriction in resources, appears to affect the lecturers achievement of agency to a strong degree. As previously argued this might in return severely affect the learning conditions the lecturers create for their international student and with that, knowingly or unknowingly they are partially posing a hindrance for the international student’s achievement of agency.
6. References


