The contexts for student learning: international students in Denmark

Abstract

The paper focuses on Service, Hospitality and Tourism management education programme at the University College of Northern Denmark. The English-taught international stream is developed in a local context, following a Danish curriculum and employing Danish instructors. The students originate primarily from Eastern and Central Europe and are not socialised in the North European educational culture. It takes these students more attempts to pass examinations compared to the Danish students, and their GPA is lower compared to the Danish students. The paper addresses the immediate learning context of the programme as well as the wider context. The international students report challenges in adjusting to, and fulfilling such of the programme’s curriculum requirements as Problem-based learning techniques and securing internships with learning value. The wider cultural contest can also be seen as constraining the international students’ opportunities for learning.

Key Words
Internationalisation of higher education, learning contexts, Eastern- and Central European students, Problem-based learning, Reflective practice-based learning

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Introduction

Internationalisation has been an increasingly popular topic for Danish universities during the last decade (Vinter and Slethaug 2015). In 2013 there were 23,945 international students pursuing a full study programme in Denmark, a number which has doubled compared to 2007 (Ministry of Higher Education and Science 2015a). In 2015, the Ministry of Higher Education and Science commended the growth in international students’ numbers, as the Danish labour market needs highly-qualified, specialised workforce (Ministry of Higher Education and Science 2015b). However, in the Danish context the research on international students is relatively new and is limited mostly to university education (Tange and Jensen 2012, Kastberg and Tange 2014, Vinter and Slethaug 2015), and, to our knowledge, is virtually non-existent within the field of applied higher education.

In this study we are focussing on the University College of Northern Denmark (UCN), and specifically on a two-year Academic Professional (AP) programme in Service, Hospitality and Tourism management (UCN 2017a). The programme is offered in two streams: Danish, with Danish as the language of instruction, and international, with English as the language of instruction. The students in the international stream originate from Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic countries, namely: Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia (internal UCN statistics). The streams have equal student intakes, so about half of the student body in the programme are non-native. Both streams follow the same curriculum developed in the Danish context, and the majority of the lecturers are Danes who are socialised in the Northern European teaching and learning practices. This way, the international stream of the programme is in fact created in a local context.

An earlier Danish research by Tange and Jensen (2012) suggests that “[…] as international students move into educational cultures that are framed by specific national and/or institutional histories, this increases their risk of misunderstanding, marginalisation and academic failure (p. 182). Internal programme statistics show a higher frequency for international students to use multiple attempts in order to pass examinations, and a lower grade point average in their final examinations than their Danish peers (internal UCN statistics). In a study of Danish university lecturers’ discourses, Kastberg and Tange (2014) conclude that non-native exchange students are often constructed from a deficit perspective and described as more: “[…] dependent, imitative and submissive than the native learners” (p.190). Such portrayal of non-native students as ‘the problematic Other’ fails to acknowledge that there can be various reasons for the difference in the students’ performance. Although the cultural backgrounds play an important role in the students’ values, beliefs, behavioural patterns and routines, a number of studies attach greater importance to contextual factors and socialisation within the education (Hill, Puurula and Rakowska 2000; Barron and Arcodia, 2002; Cruickshank, Chen and Warren, 2012). Therefore, it seems essential to investigate the context of the study programme in an attempt to see whether it supports or constrains the international students’ opportunities for learning.

Theoretical background

Learning is here understood as a social practice, where the learner constructs his or her identity in the process of meaning-making (Wenger, 2009). A number of authors (Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007; Williams, 2012; Killick 2015; Vinther & Slethaug, 2015;) indicate that students entering higher education are going through a period of transition which entails profound identity change. Jarvis (2009) furthermore argues that learning is intertwined with culture, with learning being not only a social, but also a cultural phenomenon (in Williams 2012: 306). Being a social activity, learning takes place in a context (Ramsden 2003; Case 2013). There are many elements which constitute the context, i.e. the teaching, the curriculum and the assessment (Ramsden 2003). The academic practices in the programme make up the immediate context of learning, but it is also shaped by the wider cultural regional and national contexts, as university culture “is still embedded and adapted to national culture, though the national ‘platform’ may be fraught with regional, ethnic and gender differences” (Vinther and Slethaug 2015: 94).
International students are here defined as: “[...] all students “who have their pre-university qualification from a country other than their tertiary place of study” (Vinther and Slethaug 2015:98). In the first months of their international stay the students acculturate to new educational practices, as they establish new behavioural, psychological and social patterns in the process of psychological adjustment (Lin 2009). The negative aspects regarding the international students’ adjustment can include language barriers, academic demands, homesickness, loss of social support and status, decreased self-esteem, and a lack of necessary study skills, which may have an impact on the students’ academic performance, psychological welfare, and the effectiveness of the educational institution in retaining these students (Lin 2009: 702). In order to succeed in their education, the international students are expected to learn the institution’s academic environment as well as familiarise themselves with the cultural practices and survival strategies in the wider community in the regional and national contexts, which is described as “an uphill battle on two fronts” (Kastberg and Tange 2014: 44).

At UCN the formal learning approach is called Reflective Practice-Based learning (RPL) (UCN 2017). It presupposes that the theoretical education of the classroom is combined with the hands-on practical learning during the three-month internship period. Internships are a common element of the hospitality and tourism curriculum, and give the students the opportunity to understand how the theoretical knowledge gained in a classroom can be applied in practice in the industry (Stansbie and Nash 2016:72). Another premise of RPL is student learning through critical reflections and discussions in class as well as working with practice-based case studies (Pjenggaard, 2016). As such, this learning approach has its foundations in Problem-Based Learning. The latter challenges students to seek solutions to real world problems and includes such elements as project work, group work, critical thinking and self-management (Dawson and Titz 2012). Critical thinking and responsibility for own learning is characteristic of the Northern European teaching and learning context, and stems from the views of von Humboldt, who believed that “learning should not be rote but rather should focus on independent, autonomous critical thinking for both teacher and student” (Vinther and Slethaug 2015:102).

The findings of an earlier smaller-scale study in the context of the programme (Hammershøjy 2014) suggested that it takes time for students from Eastern and Central Europe to understand and start applying the principles of Problem-Based Learning, as it is not a natural element of the didactic approach in the students’ home education systems. In this study we investigate the international students’ perceptions of being an international student in the programme and in Denmark. We will address some of the RPL and PBL elements as they are the integral part of the curriculum and thus the immediate learning context, as well as the elements in the wider regional and national contexts can have a negative effect on the student learning.

**Research design**

The current paper is based on an exploratory pilot study investigating both on the lecturers’ and the students’ perceptions carried out in the programme in 2015-2016. The study employed a sequential mixed-method approach (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011: 58), and included classroom observations, focus groups, individual interviews and surveys. In this paper only the findings of the research carried out with the student population are addressed. The research focussing on the student body included two phases: first, three in-depth semi-structured focus group interviews were carried out with 21 international students in the second and fourth semester of the programme. The focus group as a research method was selected as it allows the researcher to “study the ways in which individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meanings around it” (Bryman 2008: 476). The focus group sessions were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings were further used to develop a quantitative survey among the first-semester students in order to test the focus group results in a broader and more representative sample, which was the second phase of the data collection from the student population.
The online questionnaire has been distributed to the first-semester students in the autumn of 2015. The number of students in the 2015 academic year intake was 116; 104 students completed the questionnaire. Out of the completed questionnaires, 80 were usable, making the response rate 78%. The majority of the respondents originated from Romania (n=17), Slovakia (n=16), Bulgaria (n=10), Czech Republic (n=9) and Hungary (N=9), while the remaining students were from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Croatia. 85% of the respondents were 18-21 years old, 7% between 22-25 years old, and 5% are over 26 years old. Based on the findings from both research phases, four key areas have been identified which can be seen as hindering the international students in their learning opportunities. These four key areas are presented below.

**Findings and Discussion**

1. **Immediate context: academic acculturation**

With regards to the academic acculturation, the current findings confirm the earlier results that the students find the teaching and learning approaches used in the programme as different from their home counties (Hammershøy 2014). Although the students enjoy the practice-based education, which they clearly prefer to the rote learning in their home countries, and see the value of project work and case-based teaching and learning activities, the focus group participants report that applying some RPL and PBL principles can be initially challenging. Group work is often seen as a demanding process. The first months in the programme also require adjustment to studying in English as a foreign language, and mastering academic and professional terminology. Although the survey respondents claim that taking responsibility for own learning and self-motivation are easy for them, coming to class prepared and active participation in class discussions gets a lower score (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measurement</th>
<th>Mean value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13B. It is easy for me to take responsibility for my own learning.</td>
<td>3.9*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13C. I almost always attend the classes.</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13D. It is easy for me to be self-motivated.</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13E. I almost always come to class prepared.</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13F. I almost always actively participate in class discussions.</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13H. The study approach at UCN is similar to the one in my home country.</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13I. I am not used to actively participate in class discussions.</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*On a five-point Likert scale, where 5 is strongly agree, and 1 is strongly disagree

**Table 1** Self-assessment of self-motivation and classroom behaviour

Considering that the international students come from academic-cultural backgrounds which do not prepare them for RPL and PBL practices, it requires time and socialisation within the programme to understand the requirements of the programme curriculum. Although the Danish students would also need to acculturate to the new academic environment of a higher education, they do not have the same language and academic-cultural adjustment challenges as their international peers.

2. **Immediate context: internships**
Another theme related to RPL which surfaced during the focus groups was the three-month internships, placed in the semester in the education. Although the curriculum allows the submission of a written assignment as a substitute to the internship, this alternative is not recommended as it offers “limited opportunities for learning” (UCN Internship Guide 2016). The focus group participants report the following challenges related to internships:

- Finding an internship in the local town is problematic for the international students, as the local tourism, hospitality and event businesses expect the interns to speak Danish.
- Leaving the town to take up an internship elsewhere requires the students to give up their apartments and student jobs, which were difficult to obtain in the first place (elaborated in the next section).

Having to give up the student job brings an additional financial challenge to the international students, as non-Danish nationals without a part-time student job are denied access to the State educational grant. In Denmark, the non-Danish EU citizens are eligible for the grant if they have “effective and genuine work (in Denmark) to a minimum of 10-12 hours a week” (State Educational Grant and Loan Scheme 2016). The Danish students, on the other hand, can still benefit from the monthly grant while they are in their internships, both local and international. Due to the resulting financial constraints, many students opt for low-skilled summer jobs in the industry (as waiters, dishwashers or housekeepers) instead of pursuing internships which could enhance their education-related practical skills, and through exposure and networking increase their chances of future employment (Stansbie and Nash 2016). The inability to carry out internships with learning value considerably limits the international students’ possibility to engage in Reflective Practise-based learning.

3. The wider context: part-time student jobs

Apart from the immediate constraints in the context of the programme, the students are affected by the wider regional and national contexts. The students invariably find Denmark an expensive country to live in. Both the focus group participants and the survey respondents stress the necessity to hold a student job to afford studying in Denmark (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measurement</th>
<th>Mean value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17B. I cannot complete this study programme without finding a student job.</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17C. It puts financial pressure on my family to support me during this study programme.</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17F. I feel stressed that I cannot find a student job to support myself.</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18C. As an international student, I find it relatively easy to find a student job in Aalborg.</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

As can be seen from the findings, the financial struggle and the necessity to find a part-time job are a stress factor for the students, which can affect their psychological wellbeing. Furthermore, since the jobs are scarce, the students take on jobs, which often directly interfere with their studies, if they have to work during school days or take night shifts. Those who actually succeed in securing a student job try to keep it “at all costs”, which often results in non-attendance of classes or coming to class late or unprepared. Internal statistics confirm that in the academic year 2015-2016 the average attendance among the international students dropped from 79.5% in the first semester to 54.1% in the second semester. Non-attendance is detrimental for such PBL principles as group
work and peer learning. The focus group respondents comment that the quality of group work suffers when some of the group members fail to attend classes and scheduled group meetings. It undermines the principle of collaborative and peer learning and results in frustration for the students who take on the entire workload. The students who fail to participate in the group activities obviously learn very little in the process. Hence, for some international students the necessity to work while studying becomes a negative factor in their commitment to their studies and the learning they acquire.

4. The wider context: negative cultural perceptions

The students attribute the difficulties in finding a part-time job to not only to language barrier, but also the perceived unwillingness to hire “Eastern Europeans”. One respondent recalls an incident when she was refused a job on the ground that she was Romanian:

“They actually said that. <…> They said because everybody who comes from Romania steals, or are involved in crime” (FG 3, I)

In the participants generally share the perception about prejudiced attitudes towards “Eastern Europeans”, even though they may not have experienced it personally:

“I didn’t experience prejudice or xenophobia personally, but once I was reading on a forum, and somebody wrote their bike was stolen, and there came a comment, for sure it’s in Poland already (FG3, P)

This topic was also addressed in the survey. Overall, the results give an indication that the international students feel welcome both at UCN and in the local town. At the same time there is also evidence of negative cultural perceptions and prejudiced remarks about “Eastern Europeans” in the wider community (Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measurement</th>
<th>Average score</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18A. As an international student, I feel welcome at UCN.</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18B. As an international student, I feel welcome in Aalborg*.</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18D. In Denmark I sometimes hear prejudiced remarks about international students.</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18F. In Denmark I sometimes hear prejudiced remarks about Eastern Europeans.</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Town where UCN is located

Table 3 Perceptions about being an international student

Although the wider regional and national contexts are outside the influence of the programme, the perceived prejudices against foreigners who come from Eastern and Central Europe and the Baltics can make the international students from these parts of Europe feel marginalised and unwelcome in the wider community outside the college. Such perceptions can be threatening to the students’ cultural identities, impeding integration into the society, and instead giving way to separation or segregation (Berry 1989 in Marginson and Sawir 2014). Such a process can also have a negative effect on the students’ intention to stay in Denmark after completion of their studies. The intention to stay in Denmark to work after completing the education was also measured in the survey and received a relatively low mean value of 2.2). This counters the intentions of the Ministry of Higher Education to retain more international graduates in the country.
Based on the results presented below it can be concluded that the students’ challenges in the education programme, i.e. academic acculturation and the challenges with securing an internship with learning value, as well as personal financial struggles and negative cultural experiences are seen as the contextual factors which can have a negative effect on the learning of the international students in the programme.

Limitations and further research

The study has a number of limitations. Although the survey sample was representative of the 2015-2016 student population, a longitudinal study comparing the international students’ perceptions throughout their studies and replicated on other student populations from subsequent academic years would increase the reliability of the study and give a better understanding of the immediate and wider learning contexts. However, considering the limited research in the field of applied university education in Denmark, this study can help similar education programmes in Denmark acquire a better understanding of how the immediate contexts of the education curricula as well as the wider context can be affecting the learning opportunities for the international students enrolled in their respective programmes.
List of References


State Educational Grant and Loan Scheme (SU), www.su.dk/english/state-educational-grant-and-loan-scheme-su/


