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CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY INTERNATIONAL TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY STUDENTS IN LARGE CLASSES

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INTRODUCTION

Active marketing, greater globalisation, and the increasing mobility of students have led to changes in both the demography and size of tertiary classes worldwide (Grawe, 2021; Maringe & Sing, 2014). According to data released by Education New Zealand, polytechnics have seen a rebound in international student numbers since 2023 (Education New Zealand Manapou ki te Ao, 2024). At Toi-Ohomai Institute of Technology (hereafter, Toi-Ohomai), there has been a significant increase in student numbers on the Bachelor of Applied Hospitality and Tourism Management (hereafter, BAHTM), especially from the international markets of India and Nepal. The current classes are predominantly international in composition. This means that for the majority of students, English is a second language and most newly arrived students are unfamiliar with the New Zealand style of teaching and assessments. Given that the BAHTM degree seeks to provide students with 'hands-on' experience of the local tourism and hospitality community with assessments that link to 'real-life' scenarios, the teaching team is faced with the task of delivering an applied programme, meeting industry needs, and seeking positive student learning outcomes.

Although large classes with over 40 students are not unusual in a university setting, it has been observed that students attending a technical institute often bring with them multiple learning challenges (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). An increase in class size has been argued to lead to less effective teaching and learning outcomes (Nyagope, 2023; Xu & Harfitt, 2018). As educators we aim to achieve fairness and inclusion. We want to witness our students grow and be successful. This research is based on the delivery of the 2024 BAHTM papers in a lecture style with between 50 and 100 students. Its purpose is to identify and understand the challenges faced by international students in large-class learning environments. In doing so, we aim to help tutorial staff and management in technical institutes to understand these challenges while enabling them to facilitate and deliver more effectively on similar kinds of applied programmes.

METHODOLOGY

Our research followed an interpretivism paradigm focusing on understanding the meaning-making processes and experiences of individuals within the context of tourism education (Okamoto, 2021). The project employed a qualitative approach to explore international students' learning experiences. Positioning this research project as exploratory, we used semi-structured interviews to capture students' thoughts and perspectives through open-ended questions. This article addresses the research question: What challenges did the students face in large-class learning environments? Ethics approval for this research has been obtained from the Toi-Ohomai Ethics Committee.

To recruit participants, we distributed research information sheets to our Level 5 and Level 6 students who had been in both large classes (over 40 students) and small classes (fewer than 40 students). Fourteen international students expressed interest and signed the research consent form to participate. The face-to-face interviews were conducted by a tutor who had recently joined the programme. They had not taught or interacted with the students, which, to some extent, overcame the power imbalance that may arise from a student being interviewed by tutor they know. The average duration of each interview was about 30 minutes. After transcribing the interviews verbatim, the research team adopted Richards and Hemphill's (2018) six-step guide to collaborative qualitative data analysis. Using such a method of analysis, every transcript was coded and analysed independently by two members of the research team, followed by discussions to reach consensus. In doing so, the trustworthiness of research findings was enhanced through peer discussion and researcher data triangulation.

FINDINGS

Fourteen international students participated in this research, with a population comprising of five females and nine males, across Level 5 and Level 6 papers. The qualitative data collected was collaboratively analysed.

Table 1 highlights the major difficulties experienced by international students studying in large classes. Four significant themes have been identified with corresponding sub-themes. It was found that interruptions and distractions caused by certain students in class were a considerable challenge. They impacted the tutor's rhythm of delivering the lecture or diverted some students' attention away from the lesson.

Additionally, teaching and assessment practices were also affected by class size. This meant the tutor's ability to accommodate various students' needs, cultivate a positive class learning environment, and ensure students met the learning outcomes was compromised.

Another challenge that students expressed was related to the provision of feedback, whether this referred to the method tutors adopted to provide feedback, or the involvement of multiple tutors in the delivery of the feedback. From the student perspective, it was apparent more individualised one-on-one feedback with the tutor who delivers the lectures and marks the assessments was desired. The above three challenges were amplified because English was the students' second language and they were new to New Zealand's curriculum style.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this research is to understand the specific challenges that our international students have faced in the large-class learning environment. As the findings demonstrate, large-class environments bring a series of challenges for both international students and tutors to tackle during the learning journey. With the study being contextualised within our own institute, the main strength of this research is that it enables us to examine and review our own pedagogical practices based on the student voice (Murtagh, 2012). Moreover, it also allows us to reflect on our teaching practices, identify implications for the future, and thus make improvements to our programmes to meet the needs of our current and future students.

To enhance international students' learning experiences, three approaches have been identified with specific procedures to consider for the years ahead, and which may also be applied to other international student-dominated programmes in other institutions.

Pre-programme preparation

The research findings spotlight the importance of preparing international students for this applied bachelor's programme. By implication, this means a need to introduce information and skills in the early papers that will form the basis of all subsequent papers. At present, one springboard course on professionalism and core skills is

THEMES	DEFINITIONS	SUBTHEMES	EXAMPLES FROM PARTICIPANTS
Interruptions and distractions in class	Various sources that impact the effective delivery of lessons or divert students' attention away from the lesson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Murmuring and whispering; •Side conversations; •Late arrivals; •Digital device use. 	<p>"... hard to hear what the teachers are saying in big class because of lots of talking and mumbling from other students." (P4)</p> <p>"... other students are disruptive – talking during class and arriving late – difficult to hear tutor and [I] miss information." (P14)</p> <p>"As the majority of students are International, they talk in their own language during the class, they talk a lot, they disrespect the teacher and each other. They have no discipline." (P8)</p> <p>"There are many, like more than 30 percent of the class, getting distracted by their phones, like me too, sometimes." (P10)</p>
Impacted teaching and assessment practices	Changes occurred to approaches to class teaching, student engagement, and assessment in large-class environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Repetitive delivery of information; •Time spent on class management; •Reduced attention to each student; •Less interactive in class activities; •Group-based assessment. 	<p>"In larger classes there is not much interaction between the student and the tutor because in the larger classes the students don't interact as much." (P1)</p> <p>"Big classes [are] frustrating because the tutor spends a lot of time trying to make people stop talking or talking about AI and repeating over and over again ... Students pay a lot of money for the course and don't want to spend the limited time waiting ..." (P4)</p> <p>"Having to do group work with students who do not contribute to the assessment." (P6)</p> <p>"... group assessments were challenging because of the different nationalities and the same effort was not made by all." (P13)</p>
Tutor-student feedback support	Approaches and practices used to support students and provide feedback on assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Time slots allocated to one-on-one feedback; •Multiple support tutors for workshops on assessments. 	<p>"... have to wait for feedback during workshops because there are a lot of students in [a] big class." (P5)</p> <p>"Different tutors come to the same paper to give feedback but may have different perspectives ..." (P11)</p> <p>"Tutor feedback makes it easier for the students to work on the assignments as they [course tutors and learning facilitators'] view[s] differ ... We need to utilise the facilitators when the tutors are busy." (P7)</p>
New Zealand-based student challenges	Language barriers, cultural considerations, and academic expectations and requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Second language; •Assessment-based courses; •Academic requirements; •Less engagement with course materials such as Moodle, library databases, and class activities; •Limited student diversity. 	<p>"In the beginning, I couldn't understand like English so much ... I also failed two of my courses in first semester just because I was lacking [proficiency] in English language. And also the forms of assignment that we submit in here are very different from what we used to do back in India." (P3)</p> <p>"Learning and assessment here are very different. It takes time to get used to NZ academic requirements." (P14)</p> <p>"Don't feel like I am respected because I am not Indian or Nepalese and struggle to communicate with them [other students]." (P4)</p> <p>"Starting the course in the second semester is tough because a lot of content has been missed, due to being taught in the first semester." (P6)</p> <p>"... researching is a new concept to many of us from Nepal, so we don't really know what that means and how to do it." (P9)</p>

Table 1. Challenges faced by international tourism and hospitality students in large classes.

delivered concurrently, and the students struggle to learn these essential skills in a large classroom environment. One possible way forward is to provide and elaborate all relevant and requisite information in a student orientation, particularly for a predominantly international cohort. One key aspect of orientation is academic preparedness for independent learning in tertiary education (Murtagh, 2012) and setting clear expectations around what students can expect in terms of student feedback. Building on Wright and Schartner's (2013) study on international students' interactional engagement, we argue that such an orientation also provides international students with opportunities for social interactions which facilitate language proficiency and sociocultural adaption. As such, orientation should be thoughtfully designed to ensure that international students can develop a comprehensive understanding of their learning journey and gain academic preparedness, in a preferably smaller class setting.

Classroom management

To resolve the challenges faced in the large class environment, students have expressed the need to split big classes and create a smaller learning space. Such a practice can help reduce the tensions on tutors when interacting with students and facilitate student engagement.

As an important part of classroom management, clear parameters and expectations around attendance and attentiveness should be elaborated to international students. We also recommend a set of holistic and consistent team practices for student management, ensuring that all classes adhere to the same classroom management strategies. This approach could, over time, foster a positive and productive classroom climate and improve student productivity.

Assessment support and feedback

Given the fact that completing the BAHTM requires passing assessment and achieving all the learning outcomes, one of the major needs for international students is to access and gain tutors' guidance and feedback on their assessments. As with other studies (for example, Gray et al., 2022), this research also recognises the potential for feedback to enhance students' performance on tasks and improve their learning. However, providing one-to-one feedback outside the classroom has proven impractical for large classes. One pedagogical practice that has been implemented by some of our tutors, and which has been demonstrated to be effective, is incorporating workshop or feedback sessions as part of the class lesson. Such sessions with verbal face-to-face feedback centre on the student's needs (Gray et al., 2022; Olave-Encina et al., 2020) and encourage them to come with drafts or work that has been completed. By doing so, students can have close interactions with the tutor (Olave-Encina et al., 2020) and receive specific advice on the assessment.

However, as mentioned earlier, it is also important to manage students' expectations of feedback prior to the course beginning. We agree with Gray et al. (2022) that the alignment of expectations between students and tutors requires a shared responsibility, which plays a significant part in achieving success together. As such, making sure students have accurate expectations of assessment support, and providing tutors' verbal face-to-face feedback via class workshops and other channels, can enable them to better understand their progress, identify areas for improvement, and engage more effectively in their learning process.

Limitations

Considering the fact that this research is exploratory in nature, and contextualised within Toi-Ohomai, the findings cannot be specifically applied to other polytechnics or tertiary education providers. Furthermore, the sample included only undergraduate students from Asian countries who were studying overseas for the first time and whose first language was not English. Thus, the findings are not generalisable to all international tourism and hospitality students. However, this study offers valuable insights into the learning experiences and challenges faced by this specific group. Future research using a similar approach would be welcome, and could scrutinise various factors influencing student learning journeys across different demographics, institutions, and regions.

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Michael Rodriguez has worked in a myriad of hospitality enterprises from airlines, motels, resorts, cruise lines, and everything in between, at various levels of management including at senior managerial level. After moving to New Zealand in 2013 and becoming a part of the Rotorua tourism and hospitality industry working in motels, hotels and luxury accommodation, he made the move to teaching. He has been sharing his passion for hospitality over the last six years helping to shape the future leaders of this amazing industry.

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